

JULES MICHELET: NATIONAL HISTORY, BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY¹

By Lionel Gossman

Echoes of lived experience are to be found in the work of many historians. Writing about the past is usually also, indirectly, a way of writing about the present. The past is read through the present and the present through a vision of the past. It has often been noted, for instance, that the author's reaction to the world around him is reflected in the work of Jacob Burckhardt, the great nineteenth-century Swiss historian, who was born into one of the leading patrician families of the old free city of Basel at a moment when these merchant families, rulers of the little city-state since the Renaissance, were coming under increasingly uncomfortable pressure from the political movements of the time. As examples of such reflections of personal experience one could cite Burckhardt's often severe criticism, in the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, of the ancient Greek polis and in particular of ancient democracy, and his portraits of talented and distinguished citizens who either fled their city after the coming of democratic rule or, like Diogenes and Epicurus, took the path of inner exile. In Burckhardt's writing, however, the personal experience is not intentional or programmatic. With Michelet, in contrast – whose work, as it happens, Burckhardt knew and admired – history is explicitly presented, in the historian's reflection on his craft, not only as a form of bio-graphy, of writing about a living being (France), but of auto-bio-graphy, of writing about a living being that is identified as oneself.

“De quoi l'histoire est-elle faite, sinon de moi” [“What is history made with, if not me”], Michelet exclaimed in the spring of 1842. “De quoi se referait-elle, se raconterait-elle, sinon de moi?” [“What would it be reconstituted with, narrated with, if not me?”]² One is taken aback

¹ Adapted from the article "Jules Michelet: histoire nationale, biographie, autobiographie," *Littérature*, 102 (May, 1996), pp. 29-54.

² *Journal*, ed. Paul Viallaneix and Claude Digeon (Paris: Gallimard, 1959-1976), vol. 1, p. 382 (18 March, 1842). Cf. “Préface de 1847” in *Histoire de la Révolution française*, ed. G. Walter (Paris: Gallimard, 1952) vol. 1, p. 1: “Vivant esprit de la France, où te saisirai-je, si ce n'est en moi?” (“Living spirit of France, where shall I take hold of you, if not in myself?”)

For the sake of readers who know French, Michelet himself has been quoted in his original language throughout,

today by this open assertion that, as the historian is himself inseparable from the past that he resurrects in his – “l’histoire,” in Michelet’s own words, “est résurrection” – his work is to be seen as autobiographical in nature. Such an idea had never, to the best of my knowledge, occurred to any historian before Michelet. Even today, despite the erosion, already well under way in the 1920s and 1930s, of the positivist ideal of a completely objective “scientific” history, it still appears fanciful, even freakish.

A quick overview of national history as it was written before Michelet would show that in the 16th and 17th centuries and even into the 18th, national history was generally dynastic. In France it was promoted and subsidized by the ruling house, its main function being to legitimate the ruler’s authority by establishing an unbroken succession from earliest times to the current occupant of the throne. As Philippe Ariès has demonstrated, the traditional *Histoire-de-France* was marked by characteristics commonly found in oral narratives, notably an invariant structure, along with constant accommodation and adaptation to changing publics.³ In the 17th and 18th centuries, for instance, many readers had been affected by the critical spirit of rationalism and the Enlightenment and different criteria of historical validity from those current in the Middle Ages or even the Renaissance had become widely accepted. Certain episodes of the earlier history that had come to be considered highly “improbable” or too close to popular legend and belief were thus quietly dropped for fear that their continued presence would discredit the entire narrative. Some room was even made for the history of civilisation advocated by the progressive spirits of the time – such as Voltaire, Hume, and Turgot. Above all, an effort was made to provide the narrative with the support of authentic documentary evidence, a feature considered by then indispensable to any history that expected to be taken seriously. As in the case of popular oral tales, however, the essential structure of the narrative remained intact through all its adaptations. The traditional history-of-France was never anything other than a *Historia regum gallicorum*, a history of the kings of France.

Cosmopolitan, bourgeois, and eager to get rid of every remnant of the old feudal world, the writers of the Enlightenment, as was to be expected, were not interested in national

with accompanying English translations. Other French writers are quoted only in English translation. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by L.G.

³ Philippe Ariès, *Le Temps de l’histoire* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1954), p. 194.

histories of this kind. Pierre Bayle, a Protestant who had had to flee his native France and had found refuge in Rotterdam, produced a remarkable critical methodology of history, but he did not write a single history. His publications include long critical commentaries on histories written by others, in particular, as one might expect, histories written by Catholic authors, and a celebrated, often republished, several times updated, and widely translated *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1695-1697), in which seemingly coherent and convincing historical narratives are seen to fall apart as they are subjected to detailed critical analysis. Like all readers of Bayle (i.e. virtually every Enlightenment historian), Montesquieu is visibly suspicious of narrative history and refrains from writing one himself. He is not interested in turning out a well constructed narrative, less still in stitching old narratives together to form a new one. He is interested in “philosophical” (i.e. critical and reflective) commentary on historical texts and on the political and economic questions to which they give rise, that is, in the action of the mind and the intelligence *on* the historiographical tradition, in the manner of Machiavelli’s Commentary on the first ten books of Livy. Whence his *Considérations sur la grandeur et la décadence des Romains* (*Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*) and *Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle* (*Reflections on Universal Monarchy*).

If the continuities established by traditional history began to be undermined as a result of the Enlightenment writers’ application of critical analysis and careful evaluation of sources, an even more rending discontinuity was experienced by the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary generations as a result of the massive changes brought about by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Until then, it might have seemed that history was made by a minority of outstanding leaders, whereas the mass of people either suffered it or lived on its margins. In the everyday life of the vast majority, change was in fact very slow, almost imperceptible. Distances were still measured, as they had always been, by the amount of time it took to cover them on foot or on horseback, and communication and exchange, whether involving goods or people, was correspondingly rare. *Nihil sub sole novum*, the idea that history is constant repetition and that there is a limited repertory of roles and scenarios – as in French classical theater or *commedia dell’arte* – corresponded fairly well to the experience of most people. One could almost say that there was little or no general consciousness or experience of history.

Suddenly, with the Revolution and then the Empire, history imposed itself on the consciousness of everybody. Unprecedented new phenomena produced the feeling of a radical break with all previous experience: the political organization of the popular masses and the exercise of power by their leaders; the influence of the popular press and the mobilizing of public opinion; the promotion of patriotic and nationalist passions in the people; the conscription of huge citizen armies motivated by ideology in place of the relatively small professional or mercenary armies of the Ancien Régime; the prosecution of war on a scale hitherto unimagined; and, at the same time, as if in contrast, the demonstrably decisive importance in the modern world of economic power, of trade and industry. The Revolution itself pronounced itself a radical transformation, an absolutely new beginning.

At the same time, however, as everything appeared to have irreversibly changed, the defeat of Napoleon, the Restoration, and the provisions of the Congress of Vienna seemed, in contrast, to bear witness to profound, underlying continuities. It was not unreasonable to think that there had not, after all, been a radical rupture with the past. Still, there could be no question of repetition or smooth, unbroken continuity. In the circumstances, an effort was made to conceive, instead, of a continuous movement that included and was in fact produced by violent crises and revolutions – just as, in certain geological theories of the time, the continuous, obstinate work of nature was accomplished by means of violent volcanic eruptions. Discontinuity was thus integrated into and made subordinate to continuity; the subversive criticism of the Enlightenment and even the violent upheaval of the Revolution became part of the necessary evolution of the political and social order. Support for such a vision of things was provided by leading thinkers of the period, notably Hegel, whom Victor Cousin, one of Michelet's mentors, had known personally in Berlin in the early 1820s and studied carefully.

In France the essential problem had become that of the legitimacy of the post-Revolutionary political regime. Was the continuity of the nation's history sustained and carried forward by the Restoration of the Bourbons or by the bourgeois regime put in place by the Revolution and confirmed by a second Revolutionary act, that of July 1830? Could the Revolution be integrated into the continuity of the nation's history? The regime of Louis XVIII accorded it virtually no place, that of Louis Philippe, the *roi bourgeois* placed on the throne as a

result of 1830, was understandably more accommodating. Those who favoured attributing a substantial role to the Revolution had to replace the idea of dynastic continuity – already denounced as irremediably superficial by the historians of the Enlightenment – with a continuity of another kind, a *national* continuity, less striking, less obvious but far deeper than dynastic continuity, a continuity as profound and obscure as the eventless history, once advocated by Voltaire, of “les fourmis qui se creusent des habitations en silence tandis que les aigles et les vautours se déchirent” (“the ants that silently dig dwelling places for themselves while the eagles and vultures are tearing each other apart”).⁴ In short, they had to make the people – which, in the eyes of the bourgeoisie of the first half of the nineteenth century, is not a social class, but the entire Third Estate, that is, the nation itself, suffering, toiling, productive and profound, as much “female” as “male” in character – the permanent subject of history, instead of the kings and great captains of traditional history. This substitution was explicitly justified as early as 1825 by Augustin Thierry’s *Histoire de la Conquête de l’Angleterre par les Normands*. Thierry envisaged his immensely successful work as a model for the histories of all the nations of Europe, inasmuch as in *all* European countries, and not just in England, he claimed, the authority of kings and nobility stemmed from an original act of violence, a conquest, so that the ruling dynasties and most of the great noble families, as descendants of foreign invaders, are not integral to the nation they dominate but elements thrust on to it, illegitimate and rapacious. The history of the nation is not their history alone, but the history of the people over whom they ruled and of the enduring struggle between conquerors and conquered. As will be noted later, Michelet did not accept for France Thierry’s vision of national history as a continuous conflict of races and classes, but he did share Thierry’s desire for a history of the people and for the people, rather than a celebration of the *gesta* of the people’s rulers. He would have agreed with Thierry that the history of popular virtues and achievements “shines but dimly in the minds of Frenchmen because history which should have transmitted them was in the hands of the enemies of our fathers.”⁵

⁴ *Essai sur les mœurs*, ch. 81, in Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Louis Moland, 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885), vol. 12, pp. 53-54.

⁵ Augustin Thierry in *Censeur Européen*, 7 (1818): 250, quoted in his *Dix Ans d’études historiques* (1834; Paris: Garnier Frères, 1867), p. 5.

In sum, the new bourgeois regimes were also to be legitimised by history, but by a different history from that on which the *anciens régimes* overthrown by the Revolution had sought to found their legitimacy.

For Michelet, as for all who wanted to justify the Revolution and the changes it had wrought, the most pressing task was thus to show how complex internal and external forces had worked together progressively and ineluctably over the centuries to form the French nation and make it what it had become. The Revolution had unquestionably marked, for Michelet, the beginning of a *vita nuova*, as he liked to put it, but only in the sense that, not unlike that inaugurated, in the eyes of Christians, by the passage of the Son of God on earth, there had been a revelation, a promise, a call. It had been an epiphany, an awakening, an extraordinary “miraculous” episode in a centuries-long process, not an absolute beginning, nor an end and fulfilment.⁶ Michelet was the more convinced of this as he had no illusions about what the Revolution had actually accomplished. (The brutal repression of the Lyons silk workers by the soldiers of Louis-Philippe in 1831, followed by the massacre of Republicans in the rue Transnonain in Paris in 1834, did not encourage the harbouring of illusions.) The full realization of the Revolutionary promise would be brought about, in Michelet’s view, only gradually and progressively, in a future passionately longed for and yet distant, necessarily always deferred. Michelet understood that realization of that perpetually receding future would mark the end of history and that it had a quasi religious character. What mattered, he repeatedly observed, was not the moment of arrival and fulfilment, but the long, hard road stretching endlessly into the future, constantly improved and constantly obstructed by new difficulties, that the living nation had to travel.

The idea of organic continuity – that is to say, of a continuity that embraces the painful ruptures of birth and death – pervades the entire oeuvre of Michelet, both the historiographical work proper and the numerous writings on natural history to which he turned his attention after Napoleon III came to power and he was dismissed from his chair at the Collège de France

⁶ On the religious terms in which Michelet describes the Revolution, see my “Michelet and the French Revolution,” in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 3: *The Transformation of Political Culture 1789-1848*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), pp. 639-63, on pp. 641-42; also “Michelet’s Gospel of Revolution” (a slightly revised version of the preceding), in my *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 201-24, on pp. 203-205.

and from his position as head of the historical section of the National Archives. *La Mer* (1861), one of the historian's natural history books, is typical. "La Mer" (The Sea) designates here not only the liquid element in which the earth is bathed, but also, by a virtually inevitable transposition, "la mère" (the mother), *magna parens*, the immense maternal body of nature and, no less, the maternal body of history, of the past – the body that both brings forth life and imposes death, that is both "womb" and "tomb." (Michelet uses the English words.) It is not by chance that the most necrophageous crustacians are seen by Michelet as at one and the same time the most cruel and the most beneficent and salutary creatures of the ocean depths. It is they that by clearing away all waste, everything diseased or dying, facilitate new birth. Death and destruction, in short, are essential to life, they are the condition of all birth, of all rebirth.

Admittedly, Michelet almost always views the endlessly repeated process of giving birth, degeneration, and death that governs the natural (and maternal) world with something close to horror.⁷ And it is also true that, for him, woman and nature represent imprisonment in the cyclical "fatality" of matter. However, just as for the Christian the coming of Christ marks the possibility of transcending the material determinism of the sinful, corruptible flesh, Michelet attributes to the spiritual principle that emerges from but also liberates itself from pure materiality – that is, in his vision, to the male, to the principle and power of revolt, to the son who frees himself from the woman that gave birth to him in order to become her master, her guide and educator, husband or father (but in no circumstances her violator or tyrant), and not least, to the historian – the power to accomplish over time the redemption of woman, of matter, and of history.⁸ The coming of the masculine or paternal order of society – now no longer natural but founded in law and justice (in no circumstances in violence or repression) – brings with it, in Michelet's eyes, the liberation of woman herself from the natural determinism programmed into her body. Likewise, the coming of the historian – that is, of the capacity to rise above the passive experience of history in order to take cognizance of it – signals a progressive liberation of the nation from material fatality, from geographical and ethnic

⁷ See on this my "The Go-Between: Jules Michelet, 1798-1874," *MLN*, 89 (1974): 503-41, especially 515-19.

⁸ Thus, for instance, the sea (la me[è]r[e]) is tamed and transformed, thanks to the American naval officer Matthew Fontaine Maury's discoveries of its "laws" (the patterns of ocean-wind and sea currents), and to the construction of (all too obviously phallic) lighthouses on its shores, from a terrifying productive womb and a graveyard, into a means of human communication and exchange, a major contributor to civilisation.

determinism. The process of giving birth, degeneration, and death is no longer simply cyclical. It has become evolutionary and progressive.

Clearly, Michelet's evolutionism is not materialist. On the contrary, it involves the spiritualisation of matter. It is, in fact, in terms of such spiritualisation that Michelet conceives of biological evolution. Biological evolution leads, for him, from the simplest and most material forms of life to ever more complex and, in his view, more spiritual forms – that is to say, ultimately, to Man. As Michelet understands it, the process of evolution is one in which spirit invades, penetrates, and gradually takes possession of matter, constantly approaching what can be realized only at the end of the process: its complete presence to itself, absolute transparency, the collapse of all dualisms – Self and Other, subject and object, male and female, human and divine, past, present, and future – that is to say, of all those “eternal conflicts” which, according to the Michelet of the *Introduction à l'histoire universelle*, constitute history. In this context, death is no longer simply the condition of new physical birth, a new turn in the eternal cyclical movement of nature's wheel, but the condition of a *vita nuova*, a higher form of life.

It was most probably because of the crucial role he attributed to continuity and organic development that Michelet conceived of the nation, and the French nation in particular, as a “person,” to borrow the term he himself was to use. On the very first page of the magnificent preface he wrote for the 1869 edition of his *Histoire de France*, he related what he claimed was the genesis of his great work. In the midst of the July Revolution of 1830, he explained – that is, as he had put it in the *Introduction à l'histoire universelle*, at the zenith of the day and of the year, indeed of world history – there was a sudden illumination.

Une grande lumière se fit, et j'aperçus la France.

Elle avait des annales, et non point une histoire. Des hommes éminents l'avaient étudiée surtout au point de vue politique. Nul n'avait pénétré dans l'infini détail des développements divers de son activité (religieuse, économique, artistique, etc.) Nul ne l'avait encore embrassée du regard dans

l'unité vivante des éléments naturels et géographiques qui l'on constituée, Le premier je la vis comme une âme et une personne.⁹

There was a burst of brilliant light and I saw France.

Annals she had, but no history. Eminent men had studied her from a political point of view. No one had penetrated to the infinite detail of the various manifestations of her activity (religious, artistic, etc.). Nor had anyone obtained a full view of her as the living, unified embodiment of all the natural and geographic elements that together constitute her. I was the first to see her as a being with a soul and as a person.

"I was the first to present France as a person," he repeated several pages later. Looking back over the first volumes of his *Histoire de France*, he again emphasized that his vision of France as a "person" had been his most original achievement as a historian. In it "for the first time, in her lively personality, the soul of France was revealed."¹⁰ What was made visible to him in that intuition or sudden illumination, Michelet claimed, was an autonomous, whole, and distinct entity. The famous "Tableau de la France," placed at the beginning of Book III of the *Histoire de France* was said to have been the result of a vision in which the historian suddenly perceived France emerging from the Carolingian Empire and beginning to breathe and to move like a living person. The limbs of this great body, that is to say, of the *mère patrie*, the mother-fatherland, he wrote, organized themselves into a single living being:

Les membres du grand corps, peuples, races contrées s'agencèrent de la mer au Rhin, au Rhône, aux Alpes, et les siècles marchèrent de la Gaule à la France.

Tous, amis, ennemis dirent "que c'était vivant." Mais quels sont les vrais signes bien certains de la vie? Par certaine dextérité, on obtient de l'animation, une sorte de chaleur. Parfois le galvanisme semble dépasser la vie même par ses bonds, ses efforts, des contrastes heurtés, des surprises, de petits miracles. La vraie vie a un signe tout différent, sa continuité. Née d'un jet, elle dure, et croît placidement, lentement *uno tenore*. Son unité n'est pas celle d'une petite pièce

⁹ "Préface de 1869," *Histoire de France*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Viallaneix, 21 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1971-1987), vol. IV, p. 11

¹⁰ "Préface de 1869," pp. 19, 16. The notion of the "body politic" was, of course, well established and anatomical metaphors such as "the head" of state, were often used in political discourse long before Michelet. In Michelet, however, the nation, as "une personne," is infinitely more than the state.

en cinq actes, mais (dans un développement souvent immense), l'harmonique identité d'âme.¹¹

The limbs of the great body — peoples, races, and countries from the sea to the Rhine, the Rhone and the Alps — came together and organized themselves, and the centuries moved forward from Gaul to France.

Everyone, friends and enemies alike, said that "it was alive." But what are the true and certain signs of life? By clever technical means it is possible to create animation, a kind of warmth. At times galvanism, with its starts, efforts, swift changes, surprises, and little miracles seems even to surpass life itself. But real life has a very different distinguishing sign: its continuity. Created in a spurt, it endures and grows placidly, slowly, *uno tenore*. Its unity is not that of a little five-act play but (through an often immense development) the harmonic identity of a soul.

While in Michelet's eyes, France more than any other nation was a "person" and while that distinguished her from other nations — "England is an empire; Germany a country, a race; France is a person"¹² — and justified the leading role he assigned to her in world history, the significance of the new conception of the nation as an organism, as *bios*, and as a "soul," was as revolutionary for historical consciousness and for historiography in general as the significance of Rousseau's project, in the *Confessions*, for individual self-consciousness and autobiography.

To whoever accepts it, everything is now connected with everything else and nothing can be set apart or isolated from the whole. In Michelet's own words:

La vie [...] n'est véritablement la vie qu'autant qu'elle est complète. Ses organes sont tous solidaires et ils n'agissent que d'ensemble. Nos fonctions se lient, se supposent l'une l'autre. Qu'une seule manque, et rien ne vit plus. On croyait autrefois par le scalpel isoler, suivre à part chacun de nos systèmes; cela ne se peut pas, car tout influe sur tout.

Ainsi, ou tout, ou rien.¹³

Life [...] is truly life only in so far as it is complete. All its organs work together and act only in concert. All our functions are connected and interdependent. Let a single one be out of commission and nothing is alive any more. At one time people believed that by the application of a scalpel each one of our systems could be cut off from the others and studied separately: but this is not possible, for everything affects everything else.

So it is either all, or nothing.

¹¹ "Préface de 1869," p. 12.

¹² "Tableau de la France," in *Histoire de France*, Book III, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. cit., vol. IV, p. 383.

¹³ "Préface de 1869," pp. 11-12

A quarter of a century earlier Michelet had already committed this idea to his personal Journal: “Plus de classifications, plus d’histoires spéciales” (“No more classifications, no more special histories).”¹⁴ Critical analysis, the preferred method and instrument of the Enlightenment, was deposed in favour of a kind of intuition of wholes.

I would like to point to three consequences for historiography of the idea that the life of a nation is continuous and indivisible and that the task of the historian is “résurrection de la vie intégrale”¹⁵ – to comprehend and represent this indivisible continuity in its totality. The first concerns the subject matter of history, the second the forces animating and driving it, and the third the proper method of studying it. In all three cases a close relation will be found between questions of historiography and questions of autobiography.

First, then, concerning the subject matter of history, the idea that the aim of the historian is to comprehend a living, indivisible totality would seem to have very little to do either with traditional historiography – the genealogy of a nation or province or institution and of its leading representatives – or with the Newtonian ideal of a science of society pursued by certain scholars of the Enlightenment, such as Montesquieu, in whose efforts to define the “spirit of the laws” the history of law had an important part to play, or Smith, whose *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* made extensive use of historical data, or Malthus, who likewise supported the argument of his *Essay on the Principle of Population* with lessons drawn from history.

As far as I have been able to determine, representing the past as a living totality had not been the ambition of any historian before the Romantics. In pursuing this ambition, the Romantics came up against a difficulty that earlier historians had not had to contend with, namely the inadequacy of any representation realized by the use of discrete or discontinuous

¹⁴ Jules Michelet, *Journal*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 381, 18 March 1842. “La méthode historique du Michelet de 1840,” in Lucien Febvre’s words, “est totalitaire, et elle est synthétique.” (*Michelet et la Renaissance* [Paris: Flammarion, 1992], p. 108)

¹⁵ “Préface de 1869,” p. 12.

signs, such as the signs of language, with respect to a *representandum* which is considered to be infinite and indivisible. Some of the philosophers of the Enlightenment – Hume, Rousseau, Diderot – already had a keen sense of the disjunction between the fluidity of our experience of empirical reality and the discontinuities of the language we use to represent that experience both to others and to ourselves. In a celebrated passage of his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751), Diderot noted:

The state of our soul is one thing, how we represent it to ourselves and to others is quite another. [...] Our soul is a moving picture from which we paint unceasingly. We devote a lot of time to achieving a faithful rendering. But it exists as a whole, all at the same time: the spirit does not move with single steps as the expression of it does.¹⁶

There was no expectation, in the Age of Enlightenment, that a project to capture the fluidity of experience could succeed. But for most eighteenth century writers such a project did not seem essential. Most of them were convinced that the fundamental structure of reality, the laws of nature and of human behavior were intelligible, invariable, and in the end more real than the bewildering variety of their passing empirical manifestations.¹⁷ Voltaire's friend Cideville expressed this neo-classical point of view when he complimented Voltaire on the art with which he succeeded in animating an essentially repetitive and monotonous structure:

History is only a longer tale than most. I lose the thread of it when it is encumbered with too many useless details. But I stay with it when it is a narrator like Xenophon, Thucydides, Sallust, Tacitus, Bossuet and you, who is painting the events and the main actors on the world's stage; yet, even though I get pleasure from the telling of these actions and admire the art by which the cords and pulleys of the machinery are hidden from view, still, I see everywhere the same weak or wicked princes, barely differentiated by the wearing of a helmet, a turban, or a simple hat [...]; everywhere, priests are self-interested scoundrels,

¹⁶ Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, ed. H. Meyer (Geneva: Droz, 1965; Diderot Studies, 7), p. 64.

¹⁷ Thus drawing, in one of the great debates of the age, retained its privilege with respect to colour, despite the growing importance of the latter; and instruction, revealing fundamental truths, retained its privilege over pleasure, the only proper function of which is to sustain the search for and love of the true.

everywhere, peoples are deceived or oppressed. Enchanting writer that you are, you sensed the defects of the genre [i.e. of history], and to avoid the monotony of the simple facts you added the far more varied history of the heart and the mind, of customs and usages, the rise and decline of the arts, their revival and their progress.¹⁸

Understandably, the clichés used to identify and describe historical characters did not strike the historians of the Enlightenment as unrealistic. Those cliché-epithets communicated the essential character and role of the character in question, the general category to which he belonged, not his or her live, empirical individuality. When Voltaire referred to the Duke of Holstein, one of the secondary characters in his youthful *Histoire de Charles XII*, as “jeune prince plein de bravoure et de douceur” (“a gallant and gentle young prince”), the reader did not have the impression that anything truly important about the prince had been passed over. The two heroes of this history – Charles XII of Sweden and Peter the Great of Russia were given more elaborate portraits, but they were still of the same basic kind. Communicating the richness and plenitude of empirical reality or having the reader imagine it as a temporal process was not the aim of the neo-classical portraitist. His portrait was always a particular version of a general model. And that, as noted, was because, to the Enlightenment historian or reader, the general model seemed more, not less real, more, not less certain than the most exhaustive empirical description. Voltaire himself warned against delving too deeply into the complexities of individual lives: “The soul is nothing but a continuous series of ideas and emotions that follow one after another, each one destroying the one that preceded it. [...] A writer who attempted, after the passage of centuries, to find order in this chaos would only create more chaos.”¹⁹

That, however, was precisely the goal Jules Michelet set himself: to find the order in the seeming chaos of what, to him, was most real in the past – its inner, living and lived reality, its “âme” or *soul*, as he always said, using the same term as that used by Voltaire and Diderot to

¹⁸ Voltaire, *Correspondance*, ed T. Bestermann, vol. 31 (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1958), p. 101, letter 6507 (17 March 1757).

¹⁹ *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), vol. 2, pp. 340-341.

designate what, in the last analysis, in their view, lay beyond the power of language or, as Rousseau claimed, needed a new language for its comprehension. The goal, for Michelet, was no longer to understand the individual as a particular manifestation of a general category, but to evoke a unique personality and to portray that personality in its becoming, in its progressive self-realization, rather as Rousseau had sought to comprehend and depict himself in his autobiography.

Starting often from visual representations (portraits, busts, tombs) and from multiple aspects of these (bodily form, clothing, carriage and bearing, eye color, etc), Michelet attempted, in virtue of what he called the “véridiques harmonies du dehors et du dedans” (true harmonies of outer and inner),²⁰ to divine, as Jean Pommier put it, “the entire person [...] from his or her age, past life, health or sickness, race, family, social origin, to his or her thoughts and state of mind.”²¹ It did not bother him that the painted or sculpted image he was interpreting was already itself an interpretation, that his representation was in short a representation of a representation. On the contrary, Michelet believed that the artist often discerns and makes visible aspects of his or her subject that are not clearly exhibited by nature herself: the artistic sign, in other words, is no less authentic than the “natural” one; *both* are visible signs of an invisible reality.

Pommier had no difficulty demonstrating that Michelet often composed his portraits of historical personages on the basis of pictures that had been wrongly attributed or whose subjects had been wrongly identified and subsequently revealed by art historical scholarship to have been in fact images of quite different historical personages from those Michelet took them to be. Equally he had no difficulty showing that while claiming to “decipher” directly a given artistic image, Michelet in fact projected on to the artistic image ideas taken from other sources. But Michelet does not conceal or think he has to justify the confusion of subjective and objective in his interpretations, or his free, “poetic,” and – from the point of view of historical and philological scholarship – naïve and sometimes ill-informed relation to his sources. Returning from a trip to Germany he once admitted: “How much more I journeyed in Jules

²⁰ Jean Pommier, *Michelet interprète de la figure humaine* (London: Athlone Press, 1969), p. 27.

²¹ Jean Pommier, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Michelet than in Germany.”²² Pommier readily concludes that “Michelet tells us more about himself than about his historical actors. He is a poet more than an historian.”²³

To Michelet, however, the historian’s subjectivity is not an obstacle in the way of understanding the historical object. Quite the opposite: it paves the way for such an understanding. If, in the Romantic vision of the universe, there is complete continuity and everything is connected to everything else, then the historian cannot be separated from the object of his research. The descent into the hidden depths of history is at the same time the discovery of the hidden depths of the individual psyche; correspondingly, descent into the depths of the psyche, whether in introspection or in dreams is at the same time discovery of a hidden history, a history unwritten by any previous historian. In his inaugural lecture at the Sorbonne in 1834, Michelet had compared history to the old institutional building in which he was speaking, and the old building, in turn, to the human heart. The passage (which, incidentally, discloses the Romantic ideas underlying both modern psychoanalysis and *völkisch* views of ethnic community) is worth quoting at length:

Cette maison est vieille; elle en sait long, quelque blanche et rajeunie qu’elle soit; bien des siècles y ont vécu; tous y ont laissé quelque chose. Que vous la distinguez ou non, la trace reste, n’en doutez pas. C’est comme dans un coeur d’homme! Hommes et maisons nous sommes tous empreints des âges passés. Nous avons en nous, jeunes hommes, je ne sais combien d’idées, de sentiments antiques, dont nous ne nous rendons pas compte. Ces traces du vieux temps, elles sont en notre âme confuses, indistinctes, souvent inopportunes. Nous nous trouvons savoir ce que nous n’avons pas appris; nous avons mémoire de ce que nous n’avons pas vu; nous pressentons le sourd prolongement des émotions de ceux que nous ne connûmes pas.²⁴

This building is old; it knows a lot, touched up and whitewashed to look new as it may be. Centuries have lived in it and each one has left something of itself. Whether you perceive them

²² Jean Pommier, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

²³ Jean Pommier, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁴ “Discours d’ouverture à la Faculté des Lettres » (9 January 1834), in Jules Michelet, *Introduction à l’histoire universelle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1834), pp. 235-36.

or not, the traces are there, never doubt it for a moment. Just as in a human heart! People and buildings, we all bear the imprint of ages past. As young men, we carry within us innumerable ancient notions and feelings of whose presence we are unaware. These traces of ancient times are mixed up inside us, indistinct, often inopportune. We turn out to know things we never learned, to have memories of things we never witnessed; and we feel the dull reverberations of the emotions of those we never knew.

How are we to unravel these jumbled memories, these traces of times long past that are deposited in objects and in us? How are we to release them from the dark prison in which they have been locked up, how are we to bring them up to the light of day? Michelet's *Journal* tells us that, as he journeys to the land of the dead, the historian needs to be guided by "le rameau d'or" ("the golden bough"). "D'où l'arrachera-t-on? De son propre coeur. C'est par les douleurs personnelles que l'historien ressent et reproduit les douleurs des nations" ("But where will he pull it from? From his own heart. It is through his own suffering that the historian feels and can represent the sufferings of nations").²⁵

Many passages in Michelet's writing do indeed indicate that in attempting to resuscitate the past, in evoking the France of the Middle Ages or ancient Italy (his "nourrice" ["wet-nurse"], as he liked to call her) in his work as an historian, Michelet was pursuing a deeply personal goal: the redemption and resurrection of the Mother. Had he not always proclaimed himself the son, as well as the advocate and even the savior of France and her people, who are at the center of his work? With France, that old mother, and with her suffering, labouring people, however, Michelet in his imagination, associated first and foremost his own mother, Angélique Millet, serious, hardworking, often sick and suffering, embittered and exhausted by her husband's irresponsibility and insolvency, and so "exasperated by sorrow and deprivation," in the words of her seventeen-year-old son,²⁶ that she was driven to a premature death. Michelet was always convinced that his brilliant career as a professor and national historian was built on the sacrifices made by his mother and that she paid with her life for her son's happiness and success.

With the image of France were associated also other feminine figures whose sacrifices contributed to the making of the future professor: the three maiden aunts in Renwez in the

²⁵ *Journal* (30 January 1842), vol. I, p. 378.

²⁶ Jules Michelet, *Ecrits de jeunesse*, ed. Paul Viallaneix (Paris : Gallimard, 1959), p. 184.

Ardennes whose savings helped finance his education; his first wife, Pauline Rousseau, whom he married, according to an entry in his *Journal*, because she was older than he and reminded him of his mother, because, to get ahead in his career, he had to be married and always be dressed in a clean shirt (so, at least he told his aunts, feeling no doubt that he had to give a reason for having made a less than brilliant match), and finally, after all, because she was pregnant, but whom he then neglected, after failing to educate her as he wanted to, and who, having borne him two children, died wretched and disfigured by excessive drinking; and Mme Dumesnil, the mother of one of his students, who became his mistress, whom he watched dying of cancer, while still a relatively young woman, and whose son he made into his favourite disciple, his son-in-law, and his successor.²⁷

It was not accidentally, in short, that the historian who had come from the people and been appointed to a professorship at the Collège de France, evoked with tenderness and compassion the Middle Ages, overtaken by the modern world to which they had given birth (*Histoire de France*); the old Catholic Church, set upon by the reforming children she had carried in her womb (*Mémoires de Luther*, 1835); ancient Alba, whose children founded Rome, only to be attacked and conquered by the inhabitants of the new, young city sprung from her womb (*Histoire romaine*, 1831); the Witch persecuted by her son, the Doctor (*La Sorcière*, 1862); or the “people,” on whose backs the bourgeoisie had climbed to power and which was then oppressed by the very regime it had brought into being (*Le Peuple*, 1846). The themes that run through Michelet’s historical writing are in fact the themes he considered essential to the

²⁷ There are many other examples of Michelet’s propensity to identify his own history with that of his country. Plunged into despair by the class war that erupted in 1848, the historian is “saved” by the unexpected appearance in his life of the virginal Athénaïs Mialaret, who had returned to France from Romania with the intention of becoming his student and disciple and who was destined in fact to become his second wife. To Michelet the grim days of 1848 were like the darkest years of the 15th century, he himself was France, and Athénaïs was Joan of Arc come to save him. A little later, on the Ligurian coast, where he had gone into exile, he watches a lizard searching for the little food it supports itself with; the lizard makes him think of the Ligurian peasant who, thanks to his hard work and patience, manages to scratch a bare living from the poor, thankless soil, and also of himself, the historian, exiled and ill, reduced to bare essentials, yet trying to recover health, hope, and the ability to write. For suggestive comments on the connection between Michelet’s writing about his own life and his writing of history, see the now classic little study by Roland Barthes, *Michelet par lui-même* (Paris: Seuil, 1954) and Edward K. Kaplan, *Mother Death: The Journal of Jules Michelet 1815-1850* (University Press of New England, 1984); see also my own articles, “The Go-Between: Jules Michelet 1798-1894,” *MLN*, 89 (197): 503-549, “Michelet and Romantic Historiography” in Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 152-200, and “Michelet’s Gospel of Revolution,” *ibid.*, pp. 201-24.

story of his own life and confided to the pages of his extraordinary *Journal*. (This Journal is a unique document: at once an unedited autobiography in which the historian, with astounding candour, has deposited his most intimate personal fantasies and obsessions, and a professional file in which are found the first drafts of many texts subsequently incorporated into his published writings on history and natural history.)

The idea of the nation as *bios*, a living body, whose every limb, linked organically to all the others and to the whole, is a key to that whole, implies a virtually unlimited expansion of the historical field, its embrace of topics hitherto considered unworthy of the historian – rather as, in Rousseau, the idea that the slightest movement, the slightest gesture, the most seemingly insignificant experience throws light on the development of a personality justifies the author’s including in his autobiographical writings details previously considered unworthy of being recorded. (Alert to the implications for the social and cultural order of Rousseau’s disregard of literary conventions and hierarchies, contemporaries like Voltaire and La Harpe did not fail to decry the vulgarity and triviality of these details.) In the same way, for Michelet, the history of the nation was made up not only of political history, but of the history of the family and of sexual practices, the history of the foods we eat, the history of medicine and the body, the history of what we today call “mentalities.” In *La Montagne* (1868), for instance, he notes that a history of the house and of the furniture in it, in particular a history of the bed, would throw significant light on the development of manners, families, and modern societies. With Michelet, political history, the privileged position of which had already been challenged by the historians of the Enlightenment, was definitively dethroned. It could even be claimed that political history, the history of wars, changes of regime, the decrees of power, “le grimoire officiel” (“the scribbles of officialdom”), in the words of Michelet’s friend Edgar Quinet,²⁸ was the least revealing part of the history of the nation.

“What is visible to the eye is the least part of what is there,” Rousseau noted in one of the drafts of his *Confessions*.²⁹ Instead of, or at least alongside political history, the Enlightenment historians wanted to write the history of civilisation, the history of literature, the history of the

²⁸ Edgar Quinet, *Philosophie de l’histoire de France*, in his *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1857), vol. III, pp. 385-386.

²⁹ *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 1149.

sciences and the fine arts, even demographic and economic history, albeit these different historical series tended to be kept strictly separate. Michelet was interested in still humbler aspects of existence: what people ate in different social classes, the tools they used in their work, the design and construction of their dwellings, their beliefs and their practice of religion or of magic. These things were inseparable in his mind from the character of nations, their destiny, and their political history. “The body” – to invoke a favourite term of today’s younger scholars – reclaimed its rights in the work of the historian of the people. To be sure, the new domains opened up by Michelet’s imagination often seem to have been suggested to him by his personal obsessions rather than conceived as part of a scientific hypothesis. And he explored them in a rather poetic manner, guided by the analogies resulting from his holistic view of the world or from the highly speculative philosophies of life that never ceased to engage him. Nevertheless, in many instances, they have come to be the preferred domains of a more rigorous and less personal historiography. It is not surprising that distinguished historians of the “Annales” school, such as Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel, have acknowledged their indebtedness to Michelet.

Here, for example, is how eating habits enter into the history of that “guerre des guerres” (“war of wars”) that in Michelet’s work designates the relationship, intimate and hostile at the same time, of France and England, the Continent and the Great Island (the female and the male, one is tempted to add).³⁰ As all his readers know, the English, for Michelet, are a heroic and satanic people, a people of violent rebels, robbers, rapists and parricides – feudal barons, aggressive capitalists, captains of industry pitilessly exploiting a hate-filled working class; even their womenfolk are masculine, amazons. This image of the English is confirmed by the reputation of these “red men,” as Michelet calls them, as voracious meat-eaters. “A people of butchers” is his term for them.³¹ Michelet cites no documentary source in support of his description, and he provides no empirical evidence. The description is not based on statistics of beef production and consumption or even on a hypothetical relation between economic

³⁰ Michelet, “Tableau de la France,” *Histoire de France*, Book iii, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. IV, p. 377: “La guerre des guerres, le combat des combats, c’est celui de l’Angleterre et de la France; le reste est épisode.”

³¹ “Une race de bouchers” (*Journal*, vol I, p. 131 [14 August 1834]). On the Englishman as “l’homme rouge [...] nourri, surnourri [...] engloutisseur de viande et de sang,” see Michelet, *Bible de l’Humanité* (Paris: Chamerot, 1864), p. 16.

prosperity and meat eating but on the requirements of a rhetorical antithesis, a traditional repertoire of national stereotypes and a simple association of ideas linking bloody butcher's meat and ruddy-faced or red-haired men. And if the English are big meat-eaters, the French, being gentle, sociable and far more closely linked to the feminine and maternal element in history, to the democratic and plebeian element, rather than to the exclusively masculine, that is to say aristocratic and industrial element, are necessarily in principle vegetarians, consumers of cereals and milk products.³²

Towards the end of his life, however, after France's catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Germans in 1870-71, Michelet turned to his country's old enemy England as an ally against those very Germans about whom he had been enthusiastic in his younger years – i.e. as long as he had thought of them as poets, philosophers, and dreamers. Now, most opportunely, he discovered that for some time the English had been eating more cereals and the French more red meat.³³ Michelet's version of the history of food and eating habits was obviously not what we would consider "scientific." Food clearly functioned for him as a metaphor, as did all other material phenomena. Thus in the celebrated "Tableau de la France" at the beginning of Book III of the *Histoire de France*, the rich soil of "l'aimable et vineuse Bourgogne" ("the pleasant province of Burgundy, rich in vintages") is said to produce not only superb red wines but also their verbal equivalent, "la pompeuse et solennelle éloquence" ("the solemn, stately eloquence") of Saint Bernard, of Bossuet and of Buffon, whereas the "plaines blanches et les maigres coteaux" ("the chalky plains and poor slopes") of "la naïve et maligne Champagne" ("artless and shrewd Champagne"), the source of "le vin léger du Nord plein de caprices et de saillies" ("the light wine of the North, capricious and scintillating"), is the native ground not of eloquence but of the fabliau.³⁴

³² The contrast of French vegetarians and English carnivores recalls the antithesis, in Rousseau, of cyclopean miners violating the maternal body of the earth to rob it of its treasures, on the one hand, and innocent gatherers of fruits and nuts, wandering over its surface and contenting themselves with the nourishment freely offered them in woods and fields, on the other. Michelet's ideal, to be sure, was neither the rapacious miner nor the nomadic food gatherer, hanging like a helpless babe on its mother's breast, but the peasant lawfully wedded to the earth, ploughing it, sowing his seed in it, and taking care of it, cultivating and domesticating it, and retaining due respect for it, on account both of the service it renders him and of the power it has to do him harm.

³³ *Histoire du XIX^e siècle*, vol. II, Préface and vol. III, Préface in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. XXI, pp. 272, 462-63.

³⁴ "Tableau de la France," *Histoire de France*, Book iii, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. IV, pp. 369-72.

The fact is that, although the body has a greater presence in Romantic historiography than in that of the Ancien Régime or the Enlightenment, Romantic historiography is in the end less materialist than that of the Enlightenment. The body, like everything else, quickly becomes the visible symbol, for the Romantics, of an invisible reality of the spirit. (In this connection, it is characteristic of Michelet that he was won over by a fanciful theory – expounded in Prosper Lucas’s *Traité philosophique et physiologique de l’hérédité naturelle* [1847] – according to which children bear a physical resemblance not to their biological father but to the first husband or lover of their mother.)³⁵ Thus the history of food and eating habits was a poetic invention before it became a branch of modern “scientific” history. It is as though the new territories later colonized and cultivated by science had first to be discovered by the imagination.

The second consequence – perhaps deliberately pursued by Michelet – of the idea that history is about totalities and that it is essential to see the nation as a living person, was to diminish the importance of class struggle as a motivating force in national history. The idea of class struggle as the most fundamental aspect of history had been sketched out in French Romantic historiography, before Marx, by Augustin Thierry. (Marx in fact paid tribute to Thierry as “der Père des Klassenkampfes in der französischen Geschichtsschreibung” [“the *père* of the class struggle in French historiography”]).³⁶ According to Thierry, it first takes the form of a struggle between two peoples or “races” (the term referred at the time to an ethnic group, not to a biologically defined one), the race of the conquerors and the race of the conquered, the race of the invaders and the race of the invaded. In the course of time, this struggle is transformed into a struggle of social classes: Germanic barons and Gallo-Roman serfs in France, Norman aristocracy and Saxon populace in England, English lords and Celtic peasants in Ireland. At the same time, Thierry – who defined himself as the “adopted son of Saint-Simon” and who had indeed been for a number of years the collaborator of the celebrated Utopian Socialist and

³⁵ See Pommier, *Michelet interprète de la figure humaine*, 2nd lecture.

³⁶ Letter to Friedrich Engels, 27 July 1854, *Marx-Engels Briefwechsel* (Berlin, 1949-50), vol. II, pp. 56-58.

champion of “industry” – had argued that with the triumph of the true and universal principles of justice proclaimed by the Third Estate, the time of class struggle had passed. It soon became difficult to sustain this optimistic view, however, or even to maintain the hope that the ideal of the Revolution – the unity of all the elements constituting the nation – would be realized in the near future. Shattered by the “catastrophe of February, 1848,” Thierry confessed, “I suspended my work from a feeling of despondency that is easily understandable.”³⁷ Michelet, no less demoralized by the hostility that had set the bourgeoisie and the working people of France (who, to his chagrin, were coming more and more to resemble an English-style proletariat, instead of the people of independent peasants and artisans he admired) against each other, was also, by his own account, temporarily reduced to silence. He soon responded, however, by renewing his efforts to demonstrate that class divisions were not fundamental or structural. The nation, the *mère patrie* (motherland and fatherland), the essential personality or “soul” of France became for him a principle of unity straining to realize itself in history: at one and the same time a loving, labouring and nourishing mother and a legislating, protective father committed to maintaining law and order and to educating his children and womenfolk (literally leading them out of their imprisonment in primitive matter), at one and the same time people and bourgeoisie. This unity, Michelet insisted, is worked out and established progressively through the conflicts of the social classes, which should therefore be regarded as never more than temporary phases in the process of realizing an essential and fundamental unity. One is almost inclined to evoke, in connection with the great republican historian, the notion so dear to the Right, of “la France profonde.”

It is thus difficult not to consider the possibility that in promoting the notion of the nation as a “person” or a “soul” Michelet was responding to the idea (which he found deeply disturbing) that class struggle is the essential moving force of history – the more so as that idea underlay the *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1847-1862) of his contemporary, the Socialist Louis Blanc, which was commercially as well as ideologically in competition with his own *Histoire de la Révolution*. In the Preface to the 1869 edition of the *Histoire de France*, Michelet

³⁷ *Essai sur l'histoire et la formation et des progrès du tiers état* (1853), quoted here from the English translation, *Formation and Progress of the Tiers Etat* (London: T. Bosworth, 1859; 1st ed. 1855), p.7.

states his position clearly: the task of the historian is to reveal the unity and identity of the nation, and thus promote social harmony, rather than to encourage class consciousness and promote social discord:

Contre ceux qui poursuivent cet élément de race et l'exagèrent aux temps modernes,³⁸ je dégageai de l'histoire elle-même un fait moral énorme et trop peu remarqué. C'est le puissant travail *de soi sur soi*, où la France, par son progrès propre, va transformant tous ses éléments bruts. [...]

La vie a sur elle-même une action de personnel enfantement, qui, de matériaux préexistants, nous crée des choses absolument nouvelles. Du pain, des fruits que j'ai mangés, je fais du sang rouge et salé, qui ne rappelle en rien ces aliments d'où je les tire. – Ainsi va la vie historique, ainsi va chaque peuple se faisant, s'engendrant, broyant, amalgamant des éléments [...] qui sont bien peu de chose relativement à ce que fit le long travail de la grande âme.

La France a fait la France, et l'élément fatal de la race m'y semble secondaire.³⁹

In opposition to those who pursue this factor of race and exaggerate its importance in modern times, I drew from history itself an enormous, and too little noticed, moral fact. It is the mighty labour of the self on itself, in the course of which France, by her own progress, keeps transforming all her raw elements. [...]

Life acts upon itself in a process of self-gestation, by which absolutely new things are created from pre-existing materials. From the bread and the fruit I have eaten I make red and salty blood, which in no way recalls the foods I made it from. The historical life process, as well as every people, works in the same way, as it forms itself, engenders itself, grinds and amalgamates elements, which doubtless remain in it, in some obscure and mixed-up state, but are quite insignificant compared to the long, slow travail of the great soul.

It is France herself that has made France and the deterministic element of race in this process seems to me secondary.

³⁸ Michelet refers here in a note to his "savant ami," the historian Henri Martin, but he was almost certainly thinking also of Louis Blanc.

³⁹ "Préface de 1869," p. 13. In fact, Thierry was no less vehemently opposed than Michelet to those who "suppose that the third order then [before 1789] answered to what is now called the bourgeoisie, and that it was a superior class among those classes which were beyond the pale of the nobility and the clergy and in differing degrees inferior to them." This opinion, says Thierry, is not only false, it "has the evil effect of making an antagonism that is in reality an invention of yesterday and that is destructive of all public security appear to have its foundation in history." (*Formation and Progress of the Tiers Etat*, p. 2; see my *Augustin Thierry and Liberal Historiography* [Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976; *History and Theory*, Beiheft 15], pp. 27-30.)

The third consequence of the idea that history is a representation of totalities and that France must be seen as a person whose history resembles a biography or even an autobiography, is a strong tendency to treat as irreconcilably opposed the spontaneity, the authenticity, the primary and immediate quality of organic life on the one hand, and the abstract, inanimate and always secondary products of intellectual analysis, on the other. Inevitably the living organic whole takes precedence over the amputated, inanimate part. Like most Romantics, Michelet associates the critical and analytical practice of the Enlightenment with the clumsy operations of “inept surgeons,” who, as he explains in the section of the beginning of the Third Book of the *Histoire de la Révolution française* entitled “De la méthode et de l’esprit de ce livre” (“Of the method and spirit of this book”), “in their profound ignorance of all medicine, believe they can save everything by plunging the knife randomly here and there into the patient’s body.” “Tailler, et couper encore,” he flings at them, “c’est toute votre science” (“Clip and cut and cut again, that is the alpha and omega of your science”).⁴⁰ Whatever the critical and cleansing value of Enlightenment historiography, in other words, it is incapable of grasping LIFE, since its analytical methods require the isolation of particular elements of the past from the totality of which they are part, and the subjection of reality, which is continuous, to abstract, discontinuous concepts. The real in its infinite, live totality is thus reduced to a collection of inanimate objects and mechanisms. It is hardly surprising that biological images predominate in Michelet’s writing – whereas in Montesquieu, for example, the dominant images and models are taken, in contrast, from mechanics and hydraulics – or that Michelet’s “scientific” curiosity, as was the case with many Romantic writers, was stimulated by speculative German *Naturphilosophie* and the often quite fanciful biological theories that proliferated in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Throughout all his writing, Michelet develops the opposition of scholarly and scientific abstraction on the one hand, immediate and living experience, on the other. In the *Histoire de la Révolution*, this opposition takes the form of a contrast between the epiphanic moment of Revolution – the irruption of an immediate and indivisible experience – and the destructive

⁴⁰ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, vol. I, p. 301.

debates and disputes of ideologues. In *Jeanne d'Arc*, it appears as the superiority of the pure, innocent, spontaneous virgin to those charged with judging her – hairsplitting, quibbling doctors of theology who condemn her and whom Michelet compares explicitly to old Jewish rabbis, devoted not to the living Spirit but to the dead Letter.

If the historian's aim is to evoke a totality, the limbs of which cannot be detached from it or considered in isolation from it without doing violence to it, the work of the historian cannot be, as it often was for the historians of the Enlightenment to search in history for an answer to a more or less precise question, as, for instance, that debated in the middle of the eighteenth century at Edinburgh by David Hume and the Reverend Robert Wallace, namely: which supported the greater population, the ancient world or the modern world? (In the eyes of contemporaries, the question was important inasmuch as the answer to it was expected to determine whether history was to be considered a narrative of progress or a narrative of decline.) The idea that history can – indeed should – be part of a science of man and society, an idea that Enlightenment writers such as Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Malthus embraced and wanted to promote is thus rejected in favor of something closer to hermeneutics. Let us recall Bachelard's definition of science:

The scientific spirit does not permit us to have an opinion on questions that we have not clearly formulated. Above all else, one has to know how to state problems. And [...] in a scientific existence problems do not state themselves. It is precisely the ability to identify and state problems that is the mark of the true scientific spirit. To a scientific spirit knowledge is always the answer to a question. If there is no question, there is no scientific knowledge. [...] No knowledge is ever given to us, we always have to construct it.

"Science," one of Bachelard's disciples added, "is not representation. The mind reaches truth not by contemplating but by constructing. It is by continually revising and rectifying, by perpetually exercising its critical faculty, by argument and debate, in a word, by acting aggressively that reason discovers and makes truth."⁴¹

⁴¹ Gaston Bachelard, *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, 7th edition (Paris, 1970), p. 14; Jean Lacroix, "Gaston Bachelard: la vie et l'oeuvre," *Economies et Sociétés*, 1 (1967): 129-40, quoted by G. Massicotte, *L'Histoire-problème: la méthode de Lucien Febvre* (Québec: Edisem; Paris: Maloine, 1981), pp. 30-31.

Such a method was explicitly rejected by Michelet when he ranked critical analysis, the Enlightenment moment of negativity, far below immediate comprehension and re-presentation of totalities.

Rejected as an analytical and scientific activity (in the Bachelardian sense at least), historiography is not a rhetorical practice either for Michelet; it is not the presentation of a narrative which, as d'Alembert and Rousseau had pointed out, is in many respects indistinguishable from a moral or political fiction. Michelet did not like to be complimented on his writing style or regarded as a writer. The historian, in short, was no longer to be thought of either as the Newton of the social and moral world in the manner of Montesquieu, or as a man of letters, like Gibbon. He was rather to be compared – as Michelet did not fail to compare him – to the figure of Orpheus descending into the Underworld in order to find Eurydice and bring her back to the world of the living. “I have defined history as *Resurrection*,” Michelet writes in the Preface to the 1869 edition of his *Histoire de France*.⁴² The historian’s goal, he declares, is “résurrection intégrale du passé” (“resurrection of the past in its totality”). “Recréer” (re-create), “revivre” (re-live), and “résurrection” are indeed the keywords of the great 1869 Preface. Michelet was certainly not insensitive to the religious connotations of these terms. There may even be reason, in my view, to conclude that the function he attributed to history was religious and mythical rather than scientific, intellectual or literary. As written by him national history became the Gospel of a new faith uniting all French men and all French women in a secular Church dedicated to the worship of the *mère patrie*, that is, of an immanent divinity, at once male and female, which the Revolution had finally substituted for the old transcendental God-the-Father of the Jews and Christians. In worshipping the *mère patrie*, French men and French women in fact worshipped themselves. Heaven was brought down to Earth and a fundamental duality of existence erased.⁴³

⁴² “Préface de 1869,” p. 22.

⁴³ Cf. *Histoire de la Révolution française*, ed. G. Walter. Vol. I, pp. 88-89: “Un député de la Noblesse avoue qu’il pleurait de joie: ‘Cette France, ma patrie, je la voyais [...] nous dire: Etouffez vos querelles...Des larmes coulaient de mes yeux. Mon dieu, ma patrie, mes concitoyens étaient devenus moi-même’” (“A deputy of the nobility admits that he wept for joy: ‘This France, my country, I saw her say to us: Set aside your quarrels...Tears streamed from my eyes. My god, my country, my fellow-citizens had become myself’”). The final chapters (xi and xii) of Book III of the *Histoire de la Révolution française* are in fact entitled “De la religion nouvelle” and the Fête de la Fédération on the Champ de Mars on July 14 is presented as the supreme festival of the “new religion.”

The method appropriate to a historiography that claims to resemble a resurrection rather than an autopsy, a judicial investigation or a narrative epic is, in the end, imaginative, intuitive, sympathetic, closer to that, interior and immediate, of the seer than to that, external and successive, of the empirical observer and analyst or to the art of the fabulist; closer, perhaps – this was Michelet’s own suggestion – to attentive listening than to aggressive looking.⁴⁴ The image of Rousseau “applying the barometer” to his soul comes to mind. “Je suis la France” (“I am France”), Michelet proclaims.⁴⁵ If he understands and is able to write the history of France, in short, it is because he is continuous with her, because he is part of her, because he is the son of the people, the child of his mother. In his own words:

Je me sens profondément le fils de la femme. À chaque instant, dans mes idées, dans mes paroles (sans parler du geste et des traits), je retrouve ma mère en moi. C’est bien le sang de la femme, la sympathie que j’ai pour les âges passés, le tendre ressouvenir de ceux qui ne sont plus.⁴⁶

I feel profoundly that I am the son of woman. At all times, in my ideas, in my words (not to mention gestures and physical characteristics), I discover my mother in me. My sympathy for ages past, my tender remembrance of all who are no more is truly the blood of woman in me.

The subject, in sum, is at once distinct from and inseparable from the object he is describing or recounting; the self is at once distinguishable from and identical with the other that he is trying to understand. It was only to be expected that in these conditions history would present itself as a form of autobiography. While still a student, Michelet had developed an enthusiastic interest in Vico, to whom he had been introduced by Victor Cousin and whose

⁴⁴ See Augustin Thierry, *Dix Ans d’études historiques*, Preface, p. 19. Michelet likewise refers to “la seconde vue” (“second sight”) and in his *Journal* (30 January 1842) he describes the historian as “quelqu’un à qui Dieu a donné un coeur et une oreille pour ouïr, du fond de la terre, la triste voix grêle et le faible souffle” (“someone to whom God has given a heart and an ear to hear, coming from the depths of the earth, the small, sad voice and the feeble breathing of the past”). (*Journal*, vol. 1, p. 378) My thanks to my friend Frank Ankersmit of the University of Groningen for having drawn my attention to the metaphors of hearing and seeing in discussions of historical understanding.

⁴⁵ Letter to Eugène Noël, 2 January 1856, *Lettres inédites (1841-1871)*, ed. Paul Sirven (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1924), p. 233. See likewise Michelet’s comment on his method: “Méthode intime: simplifier, biographier l’histoire, comme d’un homme, comme de moi. Tacite dans Rome n’a vu que lui, et c’était vraiment Rome. Byron dans la Suisse n’a vu que lui, et l’a trouvé la vraie poésie de la Suisse, à laquelle elle-même n’avait pu s’élever.” (*Journal*, vol. 1, p. 161)

⁴⁶ *Le Prêtre, la femme et la famille. Les Jésuites* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, n.d.), Preface to the 3rd edition (dated 1845), pp. xxii-xxiii.

Scienza nuova he translated into French in 1827. In Vico's view, it is easier for man to understand history than to understand nature for the simple reason that man makes history and thus has an intimate, internal knowledge of it, whereas of nature, the creation of God, he can have only external knowledge. Whereas nature will always remain foreign to man, and impenetrable, history and the historian are consubstantial.

In all probability, it is this almost autobiographical conception of history that accounts for the important place occupied in Michelet's writing by the authorizing preface. The traditional History-of-France was self-authorizing. The historiographer was at bottom only its instrument, rewriting and adapting a narrative that, like popular stories and folktales, belonged to no one and everyone.⁴⁷ His aim being to subject tradition to critical scrutiny, the Enlightenment historian wanted to encourage the reader to make use of a faculty of judgment deemed common to all men. The function of the preface was therefore to establish a relationship of complicity with the reader in confronting everything that had been simply, absurdly, and unjustifiably taken as given. The Romantic historian, in contrast, neither re-tells a traditional history nor seeks to demolish a tradition and demystify and enlighten his readers. On the contrary, his purpose is to do what no one has done before him and only he can do: "faire parler les silences de l'histoire" ("give a voice to history's silences") in Michelet's memorable phrase,⁴⁸ that is, descend into the dusty underground cellars of the archives and the depths of the individual and collective soul in order to discover a past – integral, authentic, invisible, and mute – that is known to none and that did not know itself. The mission of the Romantic

⁴⁷ In contrast, the Enlightenment historian rejected traditional histories and the justificatory preface, in all likelihood, begins with him. On the other hand, if the Enlightenment historian felt the need to justify a *critical* history, a history different from that handed down by tradition, he made no claim to be writing as an individual with a special gift – Augustin Thierry's "second sight" – which he placed, in the manner of the seer or the prophet, in the service of the public, but presented himself rather as a simple member of an enlightened public or of one that wished to be enlightened. Between the writer of the Enlightenment and the reader of the Enlightenment, the relationship was, in principle, one of equality. The writer simply expressed ideas and raised questions that the reader, as an enlightened individual or a *philosophe*, would have expressed and raised himself, if, like the historian, he had had an opportunity to study the evidence. In the prefaces that precede his historical writings, Voltaire typically used the pronoun "nous" ("we") and this "nous" referred to the reader as well as to the historian. The reader retains his independence, to be sure; the writer has to persuade him, to convince him. But that is a matter of reasoning and rhetoric, of dispelling the errors, illusions, and prejudices that cloud the reader's vision, as in the celebrated cataract operation by which Réaumur restored sight to a blind man and which became, in Diderot's *Lettre sur les Aveugles*, a key metaphor of Enlightenment.

⁴⁸ Michelet, *Journal* (4 April 1842), vol. I, p. 392.

historian is to awaken the ghosts of the past to a *vita nuova* by rescuing them from the darkness of the tomb, restoring to them the power of speech and providing them with a self-understanding they never had before. For the past that is recovered by the historian in its totality and brought back into the light of day is not, in the end, the feminine body of history, the dangerous Circe, the natural *Urmutter*, representing the infernal, endlessly repeated cycle of physical birth and death, but the feminine body raised by the son to the plane of the spirit, Joan of Arc rather than Diane de Poitiers. What is rescued in short is not the body of history as an irreconcilable alterity, illegible and inscrutable, in which the historian is in danger of finding himself engulfed, nor is it the dismembered body contemplated with smug satisfaction by the Enlightenment historian-anatomist and judge; it is a body at once living, readable and intelligible, to which the narrative of the Romantic historian promises eternal life.

To play this role of mediator and redeemer – which the Romantic historian considers (and which, in my opinion, is indeed) different from any role previous historians imagined for themselves, it is not enough to have a deep familiarity with tradition or a keen critical intelligence or superior narrative and rhetorical skills or even, important as that is, to have discovered hitherto unknown and unexplored sources and documentation. It is a special gift that is required, an extraordinary gift, a *poetic*, even a prophetic gift. The Romantic historian has to justify undertaking the writing of history on different grounds from the traditional or the critical historian. Whence the multiple prefaces, often enough long and autobiographical in character, in which he presents to the reader the qualifications intended to accredit him.

What are, according to Michelet, the personal qualities that history, as he conceives it, requires of those who feel called to practise it? First, as in the case of the priest: renunciation, self-sacrifice. Augustin Thierry emphasizes how he came to withdraw more and more from the political passions and ambitions of his youth and from all personal and immediate pleasures. Afflicted by blindness at a relatively young age, his historical vision grew progressively deeper, he claims, as his physical vision deteriorated.⁴⁹ Michelet strikes a similar note when he writes that, like Christ, the historian sacrifices his own life in order to redeem and resurrect the past. “Je me perdis de vue, je m’absentai de moi-même,” he notes. “J’ai passé à côté du monde et

⁴⁹ *Dix Ans d’études historiques*, pp. 14-15, 19.

j'ai pris l'histoire pour la vie" ("I lost sight of myself, I withdrew from myself. I let the world pass me by and I took history for life"). Or: "Ma vie fut en ce livre, elle a passé en lui. Il a été mon seul événement" ("My life went into this book and passed within its pages. This book has been the only event in my life"). Or again, when he points to "cette identité du livre et de l'auteur" ("the identity of book and author").⁵⁰ History, it would seem, is literally autobiography.

The second quality the historian must have is innocence. The historian must have the clear eye, innocent of all ideology and all intellectual convention, of a Parsifal or a Joan of Arc.⁵¹ The third quality is courage. In descending into the tomb, which, as we have seen, is at the same time a womb, in poking around in the archives that hold the secrets of the past, the historian is crossing a sacred boundary. He is committing a dangerous act of transgression. In refusing, of his own free will, the weapons of domination and the instruments of violent penetration and cutting analysis – the sword, the scalpel – by means of which the historian of the Enlightenment planned to master the past, while in fact, according to Michelet, he captured only amputated limbs, anatomical samples, in approaching the immense maternal body of history trustingly and without weapons, the historian succeeds in passing into the realm of origins and the sacred. If he identifies too closely with the shades of the past, to which he feels deeply attached, like a son – as Michelet puts it himself – to his mother, the historian faces the danger – again according to Michelet himself – "de devenir un des leurs" ("of becoming one of them"), of losing himself. It takes exceptional courage on his part, Michelet maintains, to put his individual identity, his virility (for there is never any question for Michelet that the historian is a male and the past a female), and, in the end, his reason itself at risk.

⁵⁰ "Préface de 1869," pp. 26, 14. Cf. *Journal* (6 April 1843), vol. I, p. 502: "J'ai jeté ma vie à pleines mains dans mon livre, dans mon cours ma vie intime" ("I threw my life by the handful into my book; I poured my private life into my course"); *Journal* (12 November 1847), vol. I, p. 677: "mon livre m'a fait entièrement oublier ma vie" ("my book made me completely forget my life"); *Journal* (2 August 1860), vol. II, p. 544: "Je voulais [...] n'être pas toujours machine à écrire, mais vivre" ("I tried not to be always a writing machine, but to live").

⁵¹ "L'Héroïsme de l'esprit," in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Viallaneix, vol. IV, pp. 31, 34-35. See also "Préface de 1869," p. 19. "Cela me fit un autre homme. Une transformation étrange s'opéra en moi: il me semblait que, jusque-là âpre et subtil, j'étais vieux et que peu à peu, sous l'influence de la jeune humanité, moi aussi je devenais jeune. Rafraîchi de ces eaux vives, mon coeur fut un jardin de fleurs, comme dans la rosée du matin. Oh! l'aurore! Oh! la douce enfance!" ("I became another man. A strange transformation took place in me: it seemed to me that, up until then sharp and artful, I had been old, and that, little by little, under the influence of youth, I was growing young. My heart, refreshed at these spring waters, became a garden of flowers as in morning dew. Oh, dawn! oh the sweetness of childhood!")

The last and most important quality the historian must possess, in Michelet's view, is imagination, the ability to sympathize and identify with the other, to recognize himself in the other and the other in himself. "In the genius," he once declared, "the two sexes of the spirit are reunited."⁵² For the knowledge sought, as we have seen, is not an external knowledge of facts, mediated by abstract concepts and categories, but something closer to the immediate knowledge we feel we have of ourselves. Let us recall Michelet's amazing statement, already cited: "Je suis la France" ("I am France"). The history of France, the history of the mother, the history of woman are inseparable parts of the historian's own history. Nevertheless, as we have just seen, even as the historian proceeds on his way back to his fundamental unity with the object of his study, he must maintain a certain distance in relation to that object – in the same way that the narrator of an autobiography has to keep a certain distance from his. The imagination required of the historian is a disciplined imagination, as the Preface to the 1869 edition makes clear:

Des sages me disaient: "Ce n'est pas sans danger de vivre à ce point-là dans cette intimité de l'autre monde. [...] Toutes ces figures pacifiées et devenues si douces, ont des puissances étranges de fantastique illusion. Vous allez parmi elles prendre d'étranges rêves, et qui sait? des attachements. [...] Faites au moins comme Énée, qui ne s'y aventure que l'épée à la main pour chasser ces images, ne pas être pris de trop près (*Ferro divererat umbras*).

L'épée! [...] Quelle funeste sagesse! ... Oh! que les philosophes ignorent parfaitement le vrai fond de l'artiste, le talisman secret qui fait la force de l'histoire, lui permet de passer, de repasser à travers les morts!

Sachez donc, ignorants, que sans épée, sans armes, sans quereller ces âmes confiantes qui réclament la résurrection, l'art, en les accueillant, en leur rendant le souffle, l'art pourtant garde en lui sa lucidité tout entière. Je ne dis nullement

⁵² *Le Peuple*, ed. Lucien Refort (Paris: Didier, 1946), p. 190. Cf his description of Athénaïs Mialaret in his Journal (2 March, 1856): "Société féminine et virile, avec un esprit des deux sexes." (*Journal*, vol. II, p. 297)

l'ironie où beaucoup ont mis le fond de l'art, mais la forte dualité qui fait qu'en les aimant, il n'en voit pas moins bien ce qu'elles sont, "que ce sont des morts."⁵³

Wise men told me: "It is not safe to live to this extent in such intimacy with the other world. [...] All these figures which have been pacified and become so gentle possess strange powers of fantastic illusion. Among them you will dream strange dreams and – who knows? – form attachments. [...] At least do what Aeneas did. He did not go forth without a sword in his hand to drive away those images and avoid being brought too close to them. (*Ferro diverberat umbras*)."

The sword! [...] What disastrous wisdom that is. Oh, how completely ignorant these philosophers are of the true essence of the artist and of the secret talisman that is the power of history and that enables the historian to pass time and again among the dead!

Be it known then, you ignorant men, that without a sword, unarmed, without provocation of those trusting souls that ask for resurrection, art, while welcoming them and letting them breathe again, retains its complete lucidity. I am not at all referring to *irony*, in which many have seen the essence of art. I mean rather that powerful duality which allows art, even while loving them, to see quite clearly what they are, "that they are the dead."

I shall try to sum up the gist of this short inquiry into Michelet's conception of the historian's relation to the history he is writing. The Romantic vision of history as bio-graphy or even auto-biography, as re-presentation of the living reality of the past in its infinite plenitude, rather than genealogy, political or legal argument, response to a specific question or problem, or simply narrative of interesting and memorable events, implied a new, hitherto unknown conception of the historian as a seer or prophet whose gaze is turned backward (to borrow a well-known expression of Friedrich Schlegel's), a new practice of historical writing and a completely original notion of historical knowledge and of the method of acquiring it. While based on vast, wide-ranging reading and erudition in several languages, as well as attentive study of artefacts,⁵⁴ this method has something of the magical about it. It rests on something Michelet himself described as the "magie naïve" of sympathetic identification, "le don des

⁵³ "Préface de 1869," p. 18.

⁵⁴ Michelet's familiarity with German scholarship and literature is well established and clearly visible in the "Notes et éclaircissements" of the *Introduction à l'histoire universelle*. But that his range of reading extended far more widely is demonstrated in the same text by the many references to and quotations from classical literature and Italian literature, as well as English literature (Byron) and recent British scholarship on the Orient (Robert Ker Porter's magnificently illustrated *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia* [London, 1821], Francis Gladwin's translation from the Persian of *Ayeen Akbery, or The Institutes of the Emperor Akber* [London, 1800]).

larmes” (“the gift of tears”).⁵⁵ Historical understanding, as Michelet conceived it, one might say, has a more erotic than scientific character. “En pénétrant l’objet de plus en plus,” he writes in the 1869 Preface,

on l’aime, et dès lors on regarde avec un intérêt croissant. Le cœur ému a la second vue, voit mille choses invisibles au peuple indifférent. L’histoire, l’historien se mêlent en ce regard.⁵⁶

Penetrating the object more and more deeply, one comes to love it and from then on to view it with ever growing interest. The heart that has been touched develops second sight; it sees many things that are invisible to those who are indifferent. In that vision, history and the historian become as one.

⁵⁵ Thus, for example, according to Michelet, scholars had not yet understood ancient Egypt (Michelet’s evocation of a civilisation generally associated with the feminine was probably not unintentional): “on avait [...] épilé, déchiffré l’Égypte, fouillé ses tombes, non retrouvé son âme” (Egypt had been spelled out and deciphered, her tombs had been thoroughly explored, but her soul remained undiscovered). This criticism of the scholars was doubtless aimed at Champollion, the great Egyptologist and decipherer of the Rosetta stone. While the “soul” of Egypt remained a closed book to Champollion, who had been touched by Romanticism but who remained essentially a man of the Enlightenment, what was it that opened it up to Michelet? Sympathy, identification, “le don des larmes” (the gift of tears). “Cette naïve magie avait une efficacité d’évocation infallible” (That simple magic had an infallible power of evocation), Michelet declared firmly. (“Préface de 1869,” pp. 17-18)

⁵⁶ “Préface de 1869,” p. 14.