

Michelet and Natural History: The Alibi of Nature¹

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IN HONOR OF PER NYKROG

The hard-working molluscs make up an interesting, modest people of poor, little workers, whose laborious way of life constitutes the serious charm and the morality of the sea. . . . Here all is friendly. These little creatures do not speak to the world, but they work for it. They leave it to their sublime father, the Ocean, to speak for them. He speaks in their place and they have their say through his great voice.

(Michelet, *La Mer* 1.iii)²

I had come to look on the whole of natural history as a branch of the political. All the living species, each in its humble right, came knocking at the door and claiming admittance to the bosom of Democracy. Why should their more advanced brothers refuse the protection of law to those to whom the universal Father has given a place in the harmony of the law of the universe? Such was the source of my renewal, the belated *vita nuova* which led me little by little to the natural sciences.

(Michelet, *L'Oiseau*, Introduction)³

¹This text replaces that which was published in 1999 by Editions Rodopi, B.V., Amsterdam (Netherlands) in a volume entitled *The World and its Rival: Essays on Literary Imagination in Honor of Per Nykrog*.

²"Peuple intéressant, modeste, des mollusques travailleurs, pauvres petits ouvriers dont la vie laborieuse fait le charme sérieux, la moralité de la mer. . . . Tout est ami ici. Ces petits êtres ne parlent pas au monde, mais ils travaillent pour lui. Ils se remettent du discours à leur sublime père, l'Océan, qui parle à leur place. Ils s'expliquent par sa grande voix." (All translations in the text and in the notes are mine unless otherwise indicated. L.G.)

³"Ainsi, toute l'Histoire naturelle m'avait apparu alors comme une branche de la politique. Toutes les espèces vivantes arrivaient, dans leur humble droit, frappant à la porte pour se faire admettre au sein de la Démocratie. Pourquoi les frères supérieurs repousseraient-ils hors des lois ceux que le Père universel harmonise dans la loi du monde?"

"Telle fut donc ma rénovation, cette tardive *vita nuova* qui m'amena peu à peu aux sciences naturelles" (*Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Viallaneix [Paris: Flammarion, 1971—in progress], 17:62–63; hereafter cited as O.C.).

The first chief point concerns the degrading of the animal element and its removal from the sphere of free pure beauty.

The second, more important, aspect concerns the elemental powers of nature, presented . . . at first as gods; only through their conquest can the genuine race of gods achieve unquestioned dominion; this concerns the battle and war between the old and the new gods.

But then, thirdly, this negative orientation becomes affirmative again after the spirit has won its free right, and elemental nature constitutes a positive aspect of the gods, one permeated by individual spirituality, and the gods are now girt with the animal element, even if only as an attribute and external sign.

(Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Pt. 2, sec. 2, ch. 1, i)⁴

I

BY THE MID-1850s, Jules Michelet's reputation as a historian was well established. The first seven volumes of the *Histoire de France* had been published (the seventh, the great volume on the Renaissance, appeared in February of 1855), as had the five volumes of the *Histoire de la Révolution*. Two polemical texts dealing with the issues of the day—*Le Peuple* and *Les Jésuites*—had confirmed the public's view of him as a writer whose interest in the past was inseparable from his engagement with the present. With the publication of *L'Oiseau* in 1856, however, Michelet inaugurated a new phase of his career. In the course of the next decade he brought out a series of natural history books that turned out to be among the most successful of his career as a writer. *L'Oiseau*, originally published in a popular format called "The Railway Traveller's Library," went through ten editions in eleven years and sold 33,000 copies—a remarkable figure at the time. *L'Insecte* went on sale in 1857 with a first printing of 8,000;⁵ there were six editions during Michelet's lifetime and by the time of his death in 1874 the book had sold 28,000 copies,⁶ while parts had been reprinted in the feuilleton pages of the newspaper *La Presse*. *La Mer* (1861), with a first print run of 24,000 copies, and *La Montagne* (1868), with seven printings in the first year of publication, were also best-sellers, far surpassing the *Histoire de France*. All four works were also widely translated. In English, *The Sea* appeared in the same year as the original French and went through four reprintings between 1861

⁴G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1:444–45.

⁵Subsequent editions in early 1858, early 1859, and again in 1860 had runs of four or five thousand copies each.

⁶Eric Fauquet, *Michelet ou la gloire du professeur d'histoire* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 385.

and 1883. There were seven reprintings of the English translation of *The Bird* between 1868 and 1879.

These works, written in collaboration with Michelet's second wife, Athénais Mialaret, are hardly read now, save by a few Michelet specialists. Understandably perhaps. The fate of any work of science, according to the historian's older contemporary, the celebrated naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, is to be made "antiquated" and "unreadable" by the progress of science itself.⁷ Michelet's natural history writing, in addition, is so idiosyncratic and personal, and at the same time so steeped in the ancient tradition of "mother" nature—nature as woman⁸—that, unlike the somewhat earlier works of Humboldt himself, for instance, which can still be consulted by natural scientists for the original data they contain, Michelet's works can now be read only for their extraordinary imaginative power and poetic language, though these are often mixed, it is only fair to say, as Buffon's or Humboldt's are not, with a good deal of sentimentality.⁹ While they also provide insight into the intellectual and affective roots of certain still prevalent ideas about nature and, in particular, into the roots of the modern ecological movement, the greatest interest of these four natural history books probably lies in the clarity with which they lay bare the essential ideas—perhaps obsessions is a more accurate term—of one of the greatest and surely the most imaginative of modern historians. As Linda Orr observed twenty years ago, Michelet's *imaginaire*—the basic elements and structures of his imagination—is probably more directly visible here than in any of his properly historical writings.¹⁰

There are several obvious explanations for Michelet's turn to natural history.

The first—put forward by the historian himself—is no doubt the catastrophe of 1848, from which History, as Michelet viewed it,

⁷Humboldt considered it "a subject of discouraging reflection, that while purely literary products of intellectual activity are rooted in the depths of feeling, and interwoven with the creative force of imagination, all works treating of empirical knowledge, and of the connection of natural phenomena and physical laws, are subject to the most marked modifications of form in the lapse of short periods of time, both by the improvement in the instruments used, and by the consequent expansion of the field of view opened to rational observation. Those scientific works which have, to use a common expression, become *antiquated* by the acquisition of new funds of knowledge, are thus continually being consigned to oblivion as unreadable" (Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858; orig. Ger. 1845–58], 1:xii).

⁸The topic of Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

⁹Positivist science, like positivist history, judged Michelet harshly; see Robert van der Elst, *Michelet naturaliste* (Paris: Delagrave, 1914) for some telling criticism.

¹⁰Linda Orr, *Jules Michelet: Nature, History, and Language* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), 95–96.

emerged wounded and bleeding. The historian of the nation, who had always argued for the unity of the people and had refused to accept that class struggle was essential to the movement of history (in Michelet's vision, which is closer to Herder or Ranke than to Marx or even Augustin Thierry, each individual nation is the product of a process of self-generation, an internal evolution) found himself reduced to irrelevancy as his beloved *peuple* was torn by a violent, cruel, and unforgiving class war. The very order of history, its progress toward ever greater freedom and the full realization of Humanity (the creation, in the same optimistic vision, of all the peoples and nations, each contributing a different force or spiritual principle) seemed to be contradicted by these events, the outcome of which, the restoration of "order" under Napoleon III, could only be seen by Michelet as a disastrous regression. On his own admission, he was "sick at heart" and in fact it was at this time that he began to suffer from various physical ailments, which Michelet scholars generally consider of psychosomatic origin. It was in "one of my darkest hours," as he himself declared in the first of the natural history books, that he sought as a refuge from "the thoughts of the time, the alibi of nature."¹¹

The year 1848 was also a personal disaster for the fifty-year-old professor, who had risen from the humble ranks of the artisan class to a brilliant position as professor at the Collège de France. After the collapse of the Revolution, he had been accused of turning his lecture course at the Collège into a focus of resistance to the regime of President Louis Bonaparte. He had been first suspended and then, after Bonaparte became emperor, expelled from the Collège by special imperial decree, along with his friends Edgar Quinet and Adam Mickiewicz. In June 1852, when he refused to take the oath of allegiance to the emperor, he had been dismissed from his position as director of the National Archives. Michelet never held another public position, and it was soon obvious that he and his young second wife were going to be increasingly dependent on the royalties from his books to support themselves. The *Histoire de France* was a *succès de prestige*, but not a best-seller. One of the appeals of natural history may well have been, therefore, its potential for selling in large quantities and generating substantial income. The historian's son-in-law, Alfred Dumesnil, noted that Michelet saw in natural history "une pépinière de volumes" and Madame "une nouvelle California."¹²

¹¹ *L'Oiseau* (Paris: Delagrave, 1936), 39.

¹² Letter to Eugène Noël, 27 September 1855, quoted by Edward Kaplan, introduction to his edition of *L'Oiseau*, O.C. 17:31. In fact, the Michelets negotiated hard to secure the most advantageous contract possible for *L'Oiseau* (Kaplan in O.C. 17:33).

It may be hard for us now to realize the immense popularity enjoyed by natural history writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries¹³—especially since even its most successful and celebrated productions are now almost completely neglected. Buffon, for instance, is rarely read in any college or university course on French literature now, and selections from his work, which in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were in common use in France as school texts, are currently hard to find. Yet the multi-volume *Histoire naturelle* may have sold as many as 50,000 copies in the eighteenth century alone, and by the last decade of the eighteenth century natural history had become a mainstay of educational literature, the new children's literature, and the literature for the feminine market.¹⁴ A glance at the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale will show that Buffon's popularity continued throughout the nineteenth century. Almost every other year between 1817 and 1860 saw a new edition of his *Oeuvres complètes* (in formats ranging from five to seventy volumes) along with countless volumes of selections, with titles like *Morceaux choisis de Buffon*, *Le Petit Buffon*, *Le Petit Buffon de la Jeunesse*, *Le Petit Buffon des Enfants*, *Le Buffon illustré à l'Usage de la Jeunesse*, *Le Petit Buffon illustré des Enfants*, *Le Buffon des Familles*, etc., each of which itself went through a number of reprintings.¹⁵

The popularity of natural history, moreover, was not a peculiarly French phenomenon, though, thanks to Buffon, it may have been greater in France than elsewhere.¹⁶ Alexander von Humboldt reckoned

¹³ *Les Sciences de la nature en France au XVIII^e siècle: un chapitre de l'histoire des idées*, a work published in 1911 by the once eminent Sorbonne professor of French literature Daniel Mornet, provides much valuable information on the prestige and popularity of natural history, and of Buffon in particular, in the late eighteenth century.

¹⁴ Mornet, *Les Sciences de la nature*, 179, 213–16.

¹⁵ The works of Buffon's editor and continuator Lacépède (*Histoire naturelle de l'homme*, *Histoire naturelle des cétacées*, *Histoire naturelle des poissons*, *Histoire naturelle des quadrupèdes ovipares*, *Histoire naturelle des serpents*) also saw many editions, as did the *Études de la nature* and the *Harmonies de la nature* of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. In addition, there were many popular series, such as the *Bibliothèque populaire, ou l'Instruction mise à la portée de toutes les classes, de toutes les intelligences, etc.* (1833), which was made up of pocket-sized volumes by eminent scientists like Arago, Bory de Saint-Vincent (*Instinct et moeurs des animaux*), Cuvier (*Histoire naturelle des mammifères*), Demezil (*Ornithologie ou Histoire naturelle des oiseaux*), Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, and Jussieu, as well as dictionaries, such as the *Nouveau Dictionnaire d'histoire naturelle* in 24 volumes in the edition of 1803–04 (expanded to 36 volumes in the edition of 1816–19), to which Lamarck contributed a famous article on "Nature," the *Dictionnaire classique d'histoire naturelle* in 17 volumes, which appeared in 1826, again with articles by the most eminent naturalists of the day, or the *Dictionnaire universel d'histoire naturelle*, under the general editorship of Charles d'Orbigny, which began publication in 1841 and contained contributions by Arago, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Alexander von Humboldt, Jussieu, Michelet's friend Milne-Edwards, and so on.

¹⁶ There is an excellent brief account of the fortunes of natural history as a genre in France in the review of Michelet's *L'Oiseau* by Louis de Ronchaud in the *Revue de Paris* 15.6 (1856) (reproduced in Michelet, O.C. 17:252–58, on 252–53).

that 80,000 copies of his *Cosmos* had been sold by 1851, when the third and penultimate volume appeared (the first had appeared in 1845),¹⁷ and the work was immediately translated into many languages. Michelet, for one, knew it well and refers to it frequently. Moreover, although the field naturalists, collectors, and taxonomists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been overtaken by “white-coated molecular biologists” and marginalized by laboratory science, the popularity of traditional natural history remains astonishingly live even in our own time, as the continuing appeal of books like Gilbert White’s classic *Selbourne* (more than two hundred editions between the eighteenth century and 1970) and of David Attenborough’s recent *Life on Earth* amply testifies.¹⁸

There were thus some very good practical reasons for Michelet to try his hand at writing natural history.

The third factor that may have turned Michelet in the direction of natural history was the death of two of his children. In 1850, the infant son born to Michelet and Athénais died, having survived for barely two months, and this was followed, in 1855, by the death of his daughter Adèle, at the age of only thirty-one, after a painful period of estrangement from him following his marriage to Athénais.¹⁹ Since his adolescence, Michelet had been haunted by death. In 1815, at the age of seventeen, he lost his mother, Angélique-Constance Millet; in 1821 the closest friend of his youth, Paul Poinsoy; in 1839, his first wife, Pauline; three years later, a woman with whom he had had a passionate relationship, and who was the mother of his favorite student, Alfred Dumesnil; four years after that, in 1846, his father, to whom he had always remained closely attached and who lived in the same house with him and even slept sometimes in the same room. “De tombeau en tombeau!” [from grave to grave] he had exclaimed after attending the funeral of his friend, the naturalist and doctor William-Frédéric Milne-Edwards, in 1842.²⁰ By Michelet’s own cele-

¹⁷ Douglas Botting, *Alexander von Humboldt and the Cosmos* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 259.

¹⁸ See Sir Keith Thomas’s review of *Cultures of Natural History*, ed. N. Jardine, J.A. Secord, and E.C. Spary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), in *TLS* 4875 (6 September 1996), 28–29. Sir Keith quotes T.H. Huxley describing the natural history of the past as early as 1875 as the study of “those phenomena which were not, at that time, susceptible of mathematical or experimental treatment.” Attenborough’s *Life on Earth* and *The Life of Birds*, first published by the B.B.C. in London in 1979 and 1998 respectively, are based on his popular television programs and have gone through several reprintings.

¹⁹ Michelet was to bury his last remaining child, his son Charles, also only in his thirties, a few years later, in 1862.

²⁰ *Lettres inédites (1841–1871)*, ed. Paul Sirven (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1924), 38, letter to Alfred Dumesnil, 2 October 1842.

brated account, a preoccupation with death had been at the very origin of his interest in history and had first inspired the enterprise of “giving a voice to history’s silences” and “bringing the dead back into the human community” “J’avais une belle maladie qui assombrissait ma jeunesse,” he wrote, “mais bien propre à l’historien. J’aimais la mort.”²¹

In 1850, when death struck once again, Michelet was already in despair over the outcome of the 1848 Revolution. For the first time, moreover, it laid hands, through his children, on his personal future. He must have remembered with bitterness the upsurge of defiant optimism with which, at a dark moment in the history of France and his own fortunes, he had given the child of his late middle age the name Lazare—“resurrection,” as he remarked joyfully in a letter to Alfred Dumesnil.²² As usual, he sought solace and a response in history. “I am exhuming the Convention,” he had noted just months before the birth of his son. “Even its bones have disappeared. I gather a little dust in the hollow of my hand and breathe into it to revive it.” “*Je souffle pour ranimer.*”²³ Two years later, in the face of the infant’s death, he reiterated his historian’s credo: “I have recovered far more in the catacombs than Cuvier ever found in his fossils: I have recovered souls. I will restore souls of gold which, without me, would have perished, ceased to exist.”²⁴

To the consolations of history, however, Michelet had always sought to add those provided by a comprehensive, totalizing view of the natural order. Reflections on the order—or disorder—of nature were by no means new with him. His amazing private journal, published a few decades ago in four large volumes, is full of them. In 1840, for instance, he noted a scene in which “my children gathered flowers, made them into posies and then discarded them. I am afraid that is how nature is too,” he commented. “She entertains herself making vital compositions, arranging harmonies of existences. Then she discards them by the wayside. But first she snaps the stems and tears the blooms apart.”²⁵ Michelet tried to overcome this vision of irratio-

²¹ “Préface de 1869,” O.C. 4:17. Cf. the comment in a letter of 17 October 1853 to Eugène Noël, referring to the Terror, about which he was writing at the time: “J’ai trop bu du sang noir des morts” (*Lettres inédites*, 208). On Michelet’s preoccupation with death, see *Mother Death: The Journal of Jules Michelet, 1815–1850*, trans. and ed. Edward K. Kaplan (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

²² *Lettres inédites*, 151, letter to Alfred Dumesnil, 3 July 1850.

²³ *Ibid.*, 146, letter to Eugène Noël, 25 March 1850.

²⁴ *Lettres inédites*, 186, letter to Alfred Dumesnil, undated (between 21 September and 18 October 1852). The 1869 preface to the *Histoire de France* is explicit. “J’ai défini l’histoire *Résurrection*”—“résurrection de la vie intégrale” (O.C. 4:12).

²⁵ *Journal*, ed. Paul Viallaneix and Claude Digeon (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–76), 4 vols., 1:329, 12 June 1840.

nal, meaningless creation and destruction, of a fragmented and incoherent universe, by seeking an underlying order in nature itself. On the eve of the death of Mme Dumesnil, there is an entry in his journal: "In the midst of this dying, I persisted in looking for new reasons for life . . . I was investigating the source of all life, nature, and I read the articles *Animal*, and *Cétacés*" (by Jean Reynaud in *L'Encyclopédie nouvelle*).²⁶ Like history, natural history became a way of reintegrating the most absolute and most terrifying of all othernesses into the continuity and orderliness of life. Arguing in one of his classes for what he called, in a striking feminization of the concept, the loving "motherliness of Providence," he notes in his journal, "a major objection remained: death. I treated it as also a giving birth." Two days later, he records with satisfaction what an auditor in that class wrote to him: "You have proved that death does not exist."²⁷ In the 1850s Michelet may well have found it especially necessary to go over his proofs of the non-existence of death. He appears to have convinced himself, for by 1861, in *La Mer*, he was again affirming, with Lamarck this time, that "tout est vivant. . . . Tout est vie, présente ou passée." "Who is truly dead?" he asked. The answer was immediate: "No one."²⁸ As history is ultimately governed by a telos that ensures order and meaning, according to Michelet, so nature is governed by "great divine laws," which "at the cost of a few shipwrecks, ensure the proper balance and salvation of the world."²⁹

Michelet's marriage to Athénais Mialaret provided an additional impetus to him to take up natural history. Athénais had first presented herself to Michelet as an aspiring writer. Soon after their marriage, her literary ambition focused on her earliest love: natural history. Michelet was pleased, perhaps relieved. There is not much doubt that he thought it was a more appropriate activity for a woman than history proper.³⁰ Exiled to the provinces, cut off, as he himself relates, from his lectures, his colleagues, his students, and the lively intellectual and political scene of the capital, where he had spent all his life, thrown

²⁶ Ibid. 1:405, 30 May 1842.

²⁷ Ibid. 1:402, 18 May 1842, 20 May 1842.

²⁸ *La Mer*, ed. Jean Borie (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 143.

²⁹ Ibid., 246.

³⁰ "In September or October" of 1854, he notes in his journal, "I was delighted to see her spread her wings, . . . and enter eagerly and, I think, decisively on the path that is the right one for her and to which she has been destined since childhood: the study of nature. As late as August and September she was still floating about in literary readings which did not fully satisfy her mind. But since then, Toussenel's delightful book [Alphonse Toussenel: *Le Monde des oiseaux: ornithologie passionnelle*, 1853] has given her direction and she has seen noble and tender aspects of those very same creatures, that Toussenel did not see" (*Journal* 2:287, 20 January 1855).

almost exclusively, when he was not working on his history of France, on the company of his wife, grateful to be “tous les soirs rafraîchi, renouvelé par elle,” as he said,³¹ Michelet was attracted by the idea of engaging with her in a collaborative literary enterprise. No doubt the death of the couple’s first and, as it turned out, only child also influenced his decision. In the spiritual offspring of their literary collaboration—the couple appears to have thought—the physical child would be reborn to eternal life. “Let this not be a book,” Michelet declared, “but a being!”³² For Mme Michelet, “The Bird, our first-born, was the creature of a movement of our hearts, an hour of ecstasy.”³³

Finally, it had long been one of Michelet’s goals, in politics as well as in literature and the arts and sciences, to achieve a synthesis of the feminine and the masculine, the popular or untutored and the educated or bourgeois, the descriptive and the theoretical.

All the reasons one can suggest for Michelet’s decision to take up natural history—the disastrous turn taken by political and social history in 1848, the blow not only to his historical optimism, but to his career, and the consequent need to shore up his finances, the deaths of two of his children, his marriage to Athénais, and his interest in a productive collaboration of “masculine” and “feminine”—are best seen, however, as occasions precipitating the decision. For Michelet had long been interested in natural history and had long reflected on it. His view of history—and, as a former professor of philosophy as well as history, he had a global view of history—had always also involved a view of nature.

II

The two genres of history and natural history, moreover, had a good deal in common. History, being about change, was essentially narrative, and natural history, being about what was considered permanent and immutable, essentially descriptive. But both were recognized literary genres, though natural history, as a descriptive genre, had an important pictorial component—which it still has to this day, as the enormously successful natural history programs on television testify. Handsome illustrations of plants, insects, animals, and natural phenomena such as volcanic eruptions and storms at sea were—and still are—an integral part of natural history texts, Michelet’s included.³⁴ In

³¹ *Journal* 2:287, 20 January 1855.

³² *L’Oiseau*, O.C. 17:48.

³³ O.C. 17:189.

³⁴ See the remarks of Edward Lueders in *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors*, ed. Edward Lueders (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 96.

the entry under *Mer* (the sea) in the *Dictionnaire classique d'histoire naturelle*, Bory de Saint Vincent gives a long description of a storm only to conclude with the remark that “a seascape by Vernet gives a better idea of the Ocean’s fury than anything that might be written.” Alexander von Humboldt explained in his *Physiognomik der Gewächse* of 1806 that “despite the richness and flexibility of our national language it remains an extremely difficult task to describe in words what truly belongs to the representational skill of the artist.” But these were commonplaces of the descriptive mode in traditional rhetoric and that was the mode appropriate to natural history.

Though they did not occupy the highest rungs of art, like epic narrative or tragedy, in sum, descriptions of the natural world were a literary genre in the way that landscape painting, marines, or so-called genre scenes were artistic genres occupying an established place alongside so-called “history painting,” albeit at a lower level. In some ways, natural history seems, like some accounts of exotic, unspoiled, or uncorrupted “primitive” societies, to have served as a version of pastoral, with idyllic accounts of mating habits and social organization among the animals standing in for the activities of shepherds and shepherdesses. Forms of behavior associated with prelapsarian innocence, such as free love or the community of goods, could be represented as natural to various animal species or plants, but descriptions of the natural world also endowed certain human institutions, like marriage, the care of offspring, and the family with the prestige of appearing to be grounded in nature. Certain species—whales, for instance—came regularly to represent conjugal fidelity and family organization as part of an Edenic way of life.³⁵

No one in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century thought that natural history should be dry, purely factual, or devoid of literary elegance, or that it was simply objective knowledge with no bearing on human life beyond the practical advantages to be derived from it. The Abbé Pluche, author of the popular nine-volume *Spectacle de la nature* in the first half of the eighteenth century, and Darwin’s grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, author of *The Loves of the Plants* and the long poem *The Botanical Garden* at the end of the century, believed that contemplation of the order of the Universe would elevate the mind and bring it closer to the Divinity. Rousseau considered Mme de Warens’s practical interest in plants for their pharmaceutical uses quite inferior to the scientific enthusiasm for botany awakened in him by Linné. Lamarck—“the blind Homer of the museum of Natural History,” in Michelet’s

³⁵ See on this Lacépède, *Histoire naturelle* (Paris: Furne, 1860), 2:12.

phrase³⁶—distinguished in his *Philosophie zoologique* (1806) between what he called an “economic interest” in nature and a “philosophical interest, quite different from the former,” the object of which is “to understand the processes of nature, her laws, and her operations, and to form an idea of everything that exists through her.”³⁷

The most glamorous and internationally celebrated scientific figure of the first half of the nineteenth century, Alexander von Humboldt, was no narrow collector of scientific data.³⁸ The aim of natural science writing, as he expressed it, was not merely to communicate useful knowledge—though any nation that neglected scientific education and research, he warned, would fall drastically behind those that promoted them³⁹—but to “embellish life.”⁴⁰ “Just as in nobler spheres of thought and sentiment, in philosophy, poetry, and the fine arts, the object at which we aim ought to be an inward one—an ennoblement of the intellect—so ought we likewise, in our pursuit of science, to strive after a knowledge of the laws and the principles of unity that pervade the

³⁶ *La Mer*, 142.

³⁷ *Philosophie zoologique* [1809], ed. Jean-Paul Aron (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1968), ch. 1, pp. 61–63. One Robert Hunt, the author of a work entitled plainly enough *The Poetry of Science*, which appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century, defined his aim as to show that “Natural Phenomena . . . have a value superior to their mere economic applications, in their power of exalting the mind to the contemplation of the Universe.” “Man,” he declared with apparent poetic intent, “endued with mighty faculties, but a mystery to himself stands in the midst of a wonderful world, and an infinite variety of phenomena arise around him, in strange form and magical disposition, like the phantasma of a restless night.” Nature, Hunt would have us believe, is a compendium of the aesthetic. The rich and beguiling feminine beauty of her physical appearances (“the phantasma of a restless night”) is complemented and corrected by the serious and sublime character of the fatherly laws by which these appearances are governed. “In the aspect of visible nature, with its wonderful diversity of form and its charm of colour, we find the Beautiful; and in the operations of these principles, which are ever active in producing and maintaining the existing conditions of matter, we discover the Sublime.” The universal laws of science, Hunt insists, are as “poetic” as particular sensuous appearances. “The poetry which springs from the contemplation of the agencies which are actively employed in producing the transformations of matter, and which is founded upon the truths developed by the aid of science, should be in no respect inferior to that which has been inspired by the beauty of the individual forms of matter, and the pleasing character of their combinations” (First ed. [1848]. There was a second edition in 1849. The passages quoted are from the American edition [Boston, 1850], preface, 9, 19, 22, 23).

³⁸ According to Benjamin Constant, who was no doubt thinking of Humboldt’s well-known liberal politics, “He did not seek in science, as many scientists do, a means of rendering himself indifferent to the interests of humanity and of relieving himself of the responsibility of having opinions and showing courage” (*Journal intime*, 12 February 1805). Humboldt was well known and admired in Paris, where he had spent long periods of his life, and which he always revisited with pleasure, and his writings are referred to many times by Michelet.

³⁹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858), 1:53.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 1:38.

vital forces of the universe.”⁴¹ The goal, he explains, is not so much utility and practical advantage, though those will inevitably follow, as “the nobler enjoyments attendant upon the contemplation of nature.”⁴² Humboldt’s goal of “noble enjoyment” or *Genuss*—the delight experienced by the human mind in the free exercise of its faculties—links him to Schiller, his own brother Wilhelm, and the entire neohumanist and classical generation of Germany in the Age of Goethe, down to Burckhardt, who subtitled his *Cicerone* of 1856 “Introduction to the Enjoyment (*Genuss*) of the Artworks of Italy.” Humboldt constantly emphasizes that the aim of all his endeavors as a scientist is to demonstrate “the existence of laws that regulate the forces of the universe” and so confirm “the order and harmony pervading the whole universe.”⁴³ Though circumstances and the range of his own curiosity have led him “to occupy myself,” as he said, “for many years . . . with separate branches of science,” he insists that “the actual object of my studies has nevertheless been of a higher character. The principal impulse by which I was directed was the earnest endeavor to comprehend the phenomena of physical objects in their general connection, and to represent nature as one great whole, moved and animated by internal forces.”⁴⁴

In Humboldt’s comprehensive vision of the whole, discord and conflict appear as ultimately illusory. “The knowledge of the laws of nature, whether we can trace them in the alternate ebb and flow of the ocean, in the measured path of comets, or in the mutual attractions of multiple stars, alike increases our sense of the calm of nature, while the chimera so long cherished by the human mind in its early and intuitive contemplations, the belief in a ‘discord of the elements,’ seems gradually to vanish in proportion as science extends her empire.”⁴⁵ Consistently with this view of order and harmony, Humboldt rejects as “phantoms of the imagination” “the supposed danger of a collision between the celestial bodies, or of disturbance in the climatic relations of our globe.” “The history of the atmosphere, and of the annual variations of its temperature, extends already sufficiently far back,” he notes reassuringly, “to show the recurrence of slight disturbances in the mean temperature of any given place, and thus affords sufficient guarantee against the exaggerated apprehension of a general and progressive deterioration of the climates of Europe.”⁴⁶ The study of nature, in other

⁴¹ Ibid. 1:53.

⁴² Ibid. 1:40.

⁴³ Ibid. 1:25.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 1:vii.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 1:42.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 1:43.

words, supports neither theories of historical decline (popular in some religious circles) nor theories of an apocalyptic end of the world.

While still calm, serene, and confident, as befits a writer of the great classical age of German literature, Humboldt's assertion of the unity and harmony of nature is not without a certain Romantic and post-Revolutionary pathos. For him, as for many prominent German thinkers and writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—Schiller, Hegel, Schelling, Hölderlin, Jean Paul—the immediate modern experience was one of estrangement, disruption, and fragmentation; the task of the writer, the artist, and the philosopher (including the natural philosopher) was to respond to that experience, to put the broken pieces of the world back together. Science was thus placed in a close relation to aesthetics, the sphere in which, for most German thinkers of the period, the disharmonies of experience are ironed out—even if there was disagreement as to whether the aesthetic offers a vision of underlying truth or simply a consoling image, whether it is a step on the way to the transformation of reality or a dream-like substitute for it.⁴⁷

It is not surprising, then, that Humboldt not only has literary ambitions for his scientific writings, but has reflected on the aesthetic problems faced by the scientific writer. “The very abundance of the materials which are presented to the mind for arrangement and definition,” he writes in the preface to *Cosmos*, “necessarily impart no inconsiderable difficulties in the choice of the form under which such a work must be presented if it would aspire to the honor of being regarded as a literary composition.”⁴⁸ To the degree that the writer attempts to do justice to a subject matter that is “inexhaustible and varied,” by respecting each particular item, the danger that awaits him is “the superficiality of the encyclopaedist.” To the degree that he attempts to highlight general and universal laws, the danger is that of “wearying the mind of the reader” with “mere generalities clothed in dry and dogmatic forms.” Both “diffuseness” (which might also be expressed as the anarchy of empirical particulars) and “undue conciseness” (the despotism of theory and order, not excluding narrative order) must be avoided. “Nature,” Humboldt insists, “is a free domain.” More precisely, like Schiller's realm of art, it unites freedom and order. The writer's task is to find “exalted forms of speech worthy of bearing witness” to nature's harmony of freedom and necessity.⁴⁹ There is a striking parallel, in other words, between nature and art.

⁴⁷ See Odo Marquard, “Kant und die Wende zur Ästhetik,” in his *Aesthetica und Anaesthetica: Philosophische Überlegungen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989), 21–34.

⁴⁸ *Cosmos* 1:viii–ix.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 1:23.

Humboldt also discerns a close similarity between natural history and what he calls civil history. The student of civil history, like the student of nature, he claims, has to combine and reconcile curiosity about and respect for particularity, the autonomy of individual empirical facts and free individual agents, with recognition of a larger totality—Universal History, or, indeed, any coherent story—embracing all the individual facts and arranging them in a larger pattern from which they derive intelligibility and meaning.

The unity which I seek to attain in the development of the great phenomena of the universe is analogous to that which historical composition is capable of acquiring. All points relating to the accidental individualities, and the essential variations of the actual, whether in the form and arrangement of natural objects in the struggle of man against the elements, or of nations against nations, do not admit of being based only on a rational foundation—that is to say, of being deduced from ideas alone.

It seems to me that a like degree of empiricism attaches to the Description of the Universe and to Civil History; but in reflecting upon physical phenomena and events, and tracing their causes by the process of reason, we become more and more convinced of the truth of the ancient doctrine, that the forces inherent in matter, and those which govern the moral world, exercise their action under the control of primordial necessity, and in accordance with movements occurring periodically, after longer or shorter intervals.⁵⁰

The totality of Nature, moreover, has a historical dimension:

We cannot survey the crust of our planet without recognizing the traces of the prior existence and destruction of an organic world. The sedimentary rocks present a succession of organic forms . . . which have successively displaced and succeeded each other. The different superimposed strata thus display to us the faunas and floras of different epochs. In this sense the description of nature is intimately connected with its history; and the geologist, who is guided by the connection existing among the facts observed, cannot form a conception of the present without pursuing, through countless ages, the history of the past.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 1:49–50.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 1:72. The passage continues as follows: “In tracing the physical delineation of the globe, we behold the present and the past reciprocally incorporated, as it were, with one another; for the domain of nature is like that of languages, in which etymological research reveals a successive development by showing us the primary condition of an idiom reflected in the forms of speech in use at the present day. The study of the material world renders this reflection of the past peculiarly manifest, by displaying in the process of formation rocks of eruption and sedimentary strata similar to those of former ages. If I may be allowed to

Nature, as represented by Humboldt (or by other well-known contemporaries, like Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire) turns out, in sum, to be not the Other of History, but itself historical, a sibling rather than a stranger. Moreover, the naturalist and the historian have the same task: they must both discover, behind apparent division and fragmentation, a concealed but no less real and essential totality, behind the chaotic plethora of phenomena, the order that regulates them all.

III

As a child and in many ways a beneficiary of the Revolution (he was born in 1798), a witness of the tumultuous events and transformations of the Directorate and the Empire, and a young man beginning to make his career during the Restoration, Michelet was more drawn to human history than to the calmer, seemingly repetitive world of nature. How to reconcile the disharmonies of experience, how to make sense of a world that appeared to have come apart under the pressure of revolution and war on a scale hitherto unknown, how to justify struggle and suffering, not just in the immediate Revolutionary and Imperial past but throughout the ages of history—these were the questions that most keenly engaged the young student and professor, and that he began to wrestle with as he followed the course at the Sorbonne in the late 1820s in which his teacher, Victor Cousin, presented a simplified version of Hegel's philosophy of history. At Cousin's urging, Michelet worked on a translation of Vico's *Scienza Nuova*, which he published in 1827. In the introduction he explained that Vico's intention had been "to separate regular phenomena from accidental ones and to determine the general laws governing the former; to trace the course of that eternal and universal history that is produced in each epoch in the form of particular histories; and to describe the ideal circle in which the real world turns."⁵² On the morrow of the July Revolu-

borrow a striking illustration from the geological relations by which the physiognomy of a country is determined, I would say that domes of trachyte, cones of basalt, lava streams . . . of amygdaloid with elongated and parallel pores, and white deposits of pumice, intermixed with black scoriae, animate the scenery by the associations of the past which they awaken, acting upon the imagination of the enlightened observer like traditional records of an earlier world. Their form is their history."

⁵² "Discours sur Vico," O.C. 1:288. Michelet had always considered the philosophy of history an essential part of history. "L'étude de l'histoire ne suffit pas," he noted in 1820 (*Écrits de jeunesse: Journal [1820–23], Mémoires, Journal des idées*, ed. Paul Viallaneix [Paris: Gallimard, 1959], entry for 7 May 1820). Like Grimm and Savigny in Germany, he was interested not in establishing historical facts but in the larger general trends of history. His early projects included the following: *Caractère des peuples trouvé dans leur vocabulaire* (1819), *Essai sur la culture de l'homme* (1822), *L'Histoire trouvée dans les langues* (1823).

tion, in 1831, Michelet came up with his own highly schematic account of universal history, an *Introduction à l'histoire universelle*, which traced the history of civilization from its origins in India to its culmination in the Paris Revolution of 1830 in the span of barely forty pages. In Michelet's grand vision of history Vico's classical cycles were redesigned according to the Romantic model of the spiral, which allows repetition to be reconciled with novelty, and permanence with continuous movement toward a goal.

There were obvious connections between human history as Michelet was engaged in thinking about it and natural history as it was understood by his contemporaries. In the *Introduction à l'histoire universelle* conflict and discord turn out, as in Humboldt's natural cosmos, to be not arbitrary and meaningless, but aspects of historical order and progress. In the opening lecture of a course at the Sorbonne in 1834, the historical world was compared to an old house so much repaired and rebuilt that it seems new until one begins to study it with the eye of the archeologist and discovers the layering beneath the freshly painted surface⁵³—an image not unlike the geological model of historical layering and sedimentation evoked by Humboldt. As a simple matter of historical fact, moreover, Michelet was interested in natural history. He counted many naturalists and medical men among his friends and he followed their work closely. Some of his most celebrated texts contain startling passages devoted to the natural world: the fine poetic evocation of the bird at the end of part 1, chapter 3 of *Le Peuple*, for instance, or the astounding chapter 6 of part 2 (“Instinct des animaux. Réclamation pour eux”). Above all, natural images are constantly used in Michelet's historical writings, as though there were a continuity between the natural and the human worlds. If Buffon and

At the Collège de Sainte-Barbe, where he started his career in 1822, Michelet was professor of history *and* philosophy; he occupied a similar chair at the Ecole Normale until it was divided in two by ministerial decree in 1826, at which point Michelet applied for either one, not specifically for the chair of history. The historian's interest in the philosophy of history thus antedates his acquaintance with Victor Cousin. In fact it was in the third volume of an *Histoire des sciences métaphysiques, morales et politiques de Dugald Stewart* (the chief representative at the time of the popular “Scottish Philosophy”) that Michelet came across the summary of a course taught by Cousin in 1817, just before the latter's departure for Germany, where he was to encounter Schelling and Hegel. Cousin presented the events and facts of history, in this course, as reflections or concretizations of a higher history of ideas. Michelet was attracted by Cousin's ideas and had his friend Poret arrange an introduction to him on his return from Germany. Cousin recommended that Michelet read Turgot, Condorcet, and Adam Ferguson, possibly Comte and the Saint-Simonians; in addition he may have communicated some of Hegel's ideas to the younger man. Though Michelet later denied that it was Cousin who had encouraged him to translate Vico, his student and biographer Gabriel Monod insists that he did.

⁵³ O.C. 3:217–18.

Lacépède often wrote of animals as if they were persons, Michelet's historical figures are frequently compared to animals, birds, and insects. "Tel l'animal et tel l'homme," "tel l'oiseau, et tel l'homme," "tel arbre, tel homme," he was to declare programmatically in *L'Oiseau*,⁵⁴ but he had been working on those assumptions for many years before. Likewise, different cultures and mentalities correspond in the historical writings to different geological formations, soils, flora and fauna. A connection is implied between the rich soil of Burgundy, for instance, the full bodied red wines it produces, and the great masters of high rhetorical prose associated with the province: Saint Bernard, Bossuet, Buffon; the flinty soil of Champagne, in contrast, produces both a lighter, sharper, sparkling wine and the critical, irreverent spirit of the medieval fabliaux.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, history, and not natural history, was the career chosen by Michelet. Moreover, he always regarded and represented nature—even after he began to write natural history books—with a degree of horror, fear, and suspicion almost never found in the naturalists of the eighteenth century, in the Goethean Humboldt, or even among most of his own naturalist friends and contemporaries.

The form of the *Introduction à l'histoire universelle* had already manifested a tension between the law of historical development, the anatomy of history outlined in the main narrative, the reason of things, and the things themselves in their simple existence—the innumerable individual persons, voices, events making up the whole body of history, and, above all, what to Michelet was most precious about the past, namely, man's dynamic striving, as expressed in particular acts and in individual works of art or literature, to transcend his "given" condition or, as some would call it, his "nature." Banished from the main narrative to the notes, that world of particulars filled more than twice the space allotted to the main text of the introduction. In Michelet's historical writing, as in that of other Romantic historians, the goal—and the problem—was to acknowledge the specificity of the people and events of the past, to save them from annihilation and oblivion, without letting them overwhelm the order and reason the historians claimed to have discovered in history; to discover the order and reason of history *in* the often unfulfilled aspirations and tragic struggles of past individuals.

The aim of the natural history writings was similar—to invent a

⁵⁴ *L'Oiseau* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1898), 47, 191, 224.

⁵⁵ *Histoire de France* 3, O.C. 4:369–72. *Introduction à l'histoire universelle—Tableau de la France—Préface à l'histoire de France*, ed. Charles Morazé (Paris: Armand Colin, 1962), 138–42.

science that would both acknowledge the individual animal or bird, the naturalist's specific encounters, and seek the general laws of animal or bird physiology and behavior, that would do justice, in short, both to subjective experience and to objective truth. Michelet's natural history texts move back and forth between specific, often precisely dated reminiscences by the writer of this or that particular animal or bird or storm—in which the observer's personal emotional response is freely recorded, and the animal or bird or insect, on its side, is presented as an individual, with experiences and a character of its own, and sometimes even words to speak—and general considerations of an entire species or large speculations concerning nature as a whole. Michelet distinguishes, in fact, between two kinds of naturalist: the observer and the theorist; and between two aspects of scientific work, which he associates, broadly speaking, with the “feminine” and the “masculine.”

The first kind of naturalist, the patient, attentive, loving observer and recorder of individual animal subjects, may be untutored, like Alexander Wilson, the simple Scottish weaver, who resembles a woman in that, being poor, propertyless, and unmarried, he has not yet broken with the original community of nature but still lives in peace with all her creatures—“the friend of the buffalo and the guest of the bear, living off the fruits of the forest.” Wilson does not establish the laws of nature. He “does not know the bird in general, but this or that individual bird. He knows him, observes him, revisits him, and he will tell you what he does, what he eats, how he behaves, adventures that befell him, anecdotes about him.”⁵⁶

However, just as civil history, in Michelet's view, must advance beyond chronicle and it is a mistake to try, as Prosper de Barante was currently doing, to deprive it of the philosophical ambition it had acquired during the Enlightenment, so too natural history requires, in addition to simple recorders of observed phenomena, bolder, more aggressive investigators. Michelet praises the intrepid explorers—“ardent lovers,” as he calls them—who dare to penetrate the untamed jungles in order to bring back specimens for dissection and analysis, classification and exhibition at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle.⁵⁷ The “héros . . . grands hommes,” who carry out this essential work of ordering nature—not only in the field, but in the scientific center to

⁵⁶ *L'Oiseau*, O.C. 17:91–92. For a good example of Wilson's lively, often anecdotal descriptions, see the entry on the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker (*picus principalis* in Linnaeus) in *The American Ornithology* (1808–14; Edinburgh: Constable, 1831), 1:132–38. Alexander Grosart's biographical sketch of Wilson, which serves as introduction to a two-volume Scottish edition of Wilson's literary works in prose and verse (Paisley: A. Gardner, 1876), includes large sections taken over unchanged from *L'Oiseau*.

⁵⁷ *L'Oiseau*, O.C. 17:79–80.

which all observations are reported—perform the same task in their scientific discipline as Paris performs for France: they gradually bring about “la centralisation de la nature,” the integration of bits of empirical knowledge into a comprehensive theory.⁵⁸

Children of a “siècle Titan, le dix-neuvième,”⁵⁹ Michelet’s heroic scientists may not therefore neglect the “feminine” aspect of science. It is not enough for the scientist—invariably construed as male⁶⁰—to stand outside nature and consider her as an object, an Other; he must also acknowledge and learn from being himself part of nature. Enlightenment analysis alone, in other words, will not result in a comprehensive theory; it must be completed by Romantic synthesis. Suddenly it is the “masculine” tendency to dominate nature by treating her as an object of pure analysis that appears fragmentary, and the “feminine” sense of the wholeness of things that alone is capable of ensuring comprehensiveness. “We shall always be children, we men of the West, subtle, facile reasoners that we are, as long as we fail to grasp, in a single comprehensive vision, the reason of things. To be a child means to grasp life only in fragmentary glimpses. To be a man means to sense its harmonious unity. The child plays with things, breaks them, has no respect for them: his pleasure is in undoing. And childish science is the same; it cannot study without killing, the only use it knows to make of a living miracle is to immediately dissect it. None of us, men of the West, yet brings to science that loving respect that nature rewards by revealing her mysteries.”⁶¹

Some have come close, however. All honor, therefore, to those giants of modern science, like the American Maury, who by patiently studying countless ships’ logs, was able to derive from those “informes documents” the laws of the ocean currents, “the harmony of the air and the water,”⁶² or the Scottish engineer Sir William Reid, who discovered order in seeming chaos (“ce qu’on avait cru un caprice”) by formulating “la loi des tempêtes” (*The Law of Storms*, 1838) or “those scrupulously exact observers of minutiae,” such as the Englishmen Nelson and Darwin, “normally timid in their assertions, but who having caught nature in the act and seen the mystery itself, have been the boldest of all.”⁶³

Michelet made exactly the same point about the historian in the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁹ *La Mer*, 238.

⁶⁰ Not only in Michelet, but fairly generally. See David F. Noble, *A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

⁶¹ *L’Oiseau*, O.C. 17:100.

⁶² *La Mer*, 74–75.

⁶³ *L’Insecte*, “Eclaircissements,” O.C. 17:443.

great 1869 preface to the *History of France*: only he who ventures into the underworld, trustingly, respectfully, unarmed (“sans l'épée”)—that is, the historian who embraces both the feminine and masculine aspects of himself—can hope to win the confidence of the shades. And is it not the same opposition of “primitive” analysis and more developed synthesis, objectivizing dissection and sympathetic insight, that underlies in Michelet's historical narrative itself what he calls the “war of wars”—the competition between England and France, that is to say, between an anarchic and cruel liberty that pits each individual against all others, and an inclusive, democratic, and egalitarian liberty grounded in sociability or, to use Michelet's term, “mutualité”? It is consistent with Michelet's whole outlook that a proper approach to nature “will exist only perhaps when woman enters science, from which until now she has been excluded,” for such an approach “supposes infinite love along with judgment and prudence.”⁶⁴ Because she is still integrated into the natural order and directly experiences continuity in the process of childbearing, woman, according to Michelet, has a keener sense than man of nature's continuities. Thus the celebrated seventeenth-century naturalist and illustrator Sibylla Merian, to whom he devotes several pages of *L'Insecte*, did not—he points out—simply place her illustrations one after another; she represented each insect in its changing forms (larva, caterpillar, butterfly, etc.), and also represented the vegetables and plants on which it feeds and the various forms of animal life, such as lizards, snakes, and spiders, that feed on it, in order to suggest “la mutualité, l'échange de la nature . . . sa circulation redoutable”—a complete ecological system.

What woman shrinks from portraying is the “other side” of nature, the “dramatic struggles” and sufferings that underlie her divine laws. Sibylla Merian was unable, in the end, to “penetrate further into

⁶⁴ “Cet art suppose une tendresse infinie dans la justice et la sagesse” (*L'Oiseau*, O.C. 17:168). See likewise the crucial chapter “Accouchement” in *L'Amour*, where Michelet insists on the special skills of the midwife in relation to the doctor. “La femme soigne bien mieux la femme. Pourquoi? Parce qu'elle est à la fois le malade et le médecin, parce qu'elle comprend aisément dans une autre les maux qu'elle a elle-même, les épreuves où elle a passé. Les médecins sont savants de la science, mais fort peu de la maladie. . . . Nos médecins sont une classe d'hommes extrêmement éclairée, et, selon moi, la première en France sans comparaison. . . . Mais enfin leur rude éducation masculine d'écoles et d'hôpitaux, leur dure initiation chirurgicale, une des gloires de ce pays, toutes ces qualités entraînent ici un grave défaut. Elles aboutissent en eux à l'extinction de la fine sensibilité qui seule pourrait percevoir, qui prévoit, devine les choses du féminin mystère.” Despite the celebrity of many French midwives, husbands are reassured only by the presence of the doctor. Understandably, Michelet concedes. But let the doctor be simply available if his special skills are needed. Otherwise, let the midwife deliver the baby. “Les femmes doivent être écoutées” and they prefer to be assisted by women (O.C. 18:129–30).

the life of nature, to tear open her models, turn their insides out, and subject her feminine brush to the lugubrious task of painting the anatomical detail." And that, according to Michelet, "is precisely the limit at which women stop in their study of natural history." Beyond that can proceed only those scientists who combine both the "masculine" and the "feminine"—"les deux sexes de l'esprit," in Michelet's words.⁶⁵

For a complete understanding of nature and of history alike, the opposition of observation and dissection must therefore be transcended in a larger synthetic vision of the whole. In *La Montagne* the narrator evokes the memory of the wonderful transparency of the Alpine air at Pontresina, which "eliminates the illusions caused by

⁶⁵ *L'Insecte*, note 17, O.C. 17:449–52. "La science, dans ces derniers temps, a marché par deux voies contraires: d'une part, démontrant par l'étude des moeurs et par celle des organes que les animaux ne sont pas un monde à part, mais bien plus semblables à nous qu'on ne l'avait supposé; puis, quand elle a bien établi qu'ils nous sont tellement semblables, donc très capables de souffrir, elle veut que nous leur infligions les plus exquises souffrances. . . . La science, par ces côtés terribles, se ferme de plus en plus aux femmes. La nature qui les invite à la pénétrer, les arrête en même temps justement par le sens trop tendre qu'elles en ont" (p. 452). On "les deux sexes de l'esprit," see *Le Peuple*, ed. Lucien Refort (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1946), 190.

In order to support his argument about the difference between male and female science, Michelet overlooked or concealed the fact that Maria Sibylla Merian did sometimes represent the violence and cruelty of nature, as in Plate 18 of her *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (Amsterdam, 1705), which depicts spiders devouring ants and was accompanied by the following commentary: The black spiders "are covered with hair all over and supplied with sharp teeth, with which they give deep, dangerous bites, at the same time injecting a fluid into the wound. Their habitual food and prey are ants, which find it difficult to escape them as they move over the tree. These spiders (like all others) have eight eyes: with two they see upward, with two downward, with two to the right, and two to the left. When they fail to find ants, they take small birds from their nests and suck all the blood from their bodies" (English translation by Natalie Z. Davis). But Merian reminds the reader that the victims are also cruel predators: "They burst forth once a year in countless numbers from their cellars. They fill up the houses, moving from one chamber to the next, sucking the blood out of any creature they meet, large or small. They gobble up a large spider in the blink of an eye, for so many ants attack at once that it cannot get away. They run through one room after another and even people have to flee" (See Natalie Z. Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995], 183). On the other hand, Michelet's claim that Merian had a more "organic" view of nature than her male contemporaries does appear to be supported by modern historical scholarship. Her contemporary Jan Swammerdam, for instance, had a more mechanistic approach to natural history in line with the most advanced Cartesian thinking of his time. Thus his plates, unlike Merian's, have no artistic quality but are intended simply to communicate information. "His plates contain clear and well organized anatomic illustrations, structured much like instructional graphics. . . . His illustrations of dissected animals reveal the insides of various insects. Swammerdam included no illustrations of the plants on which the depicted insects feed. His thoroughly scientific mode of thinking is most apparent in the fact that he, in contrast to Maria Sibylla Merian, did not produce hand-coloured copies of his book" (Kurt Wettengl, "Maria Sibylla Merian, artist and naturalist: between Frankfurt and Surinam," in *Maria Sibylla Merian: Artist and Naturalist 1647–1717*, ed. Kurt Wettengl [Frankfurt am Main: Historisches Museum/Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1998], 25).

mists, reduces distances, and enables one not only to see far, but at the same time to see much. The eye encompasses in a single whole what elsewhere is seen only in detail. A vast harmony, in which all the elements hold together and control each other, better ensures that there is no illusion and guarantees truth.”⁶⁶ Man’s dream, we are told in *L’Oiseau*, is “the immense happiness of comprehending in a single view the infinite variety of things which only yesterday had to be viewed one after another. Oh, the dark enigma of the detail, which becomes suddenly luminous to the viewer who perceives the unity of all things.”⁶⁷ The narrator envies the bird, he adds, which, thanks to the combined power of its eyes and wings, can “gather everything together in a single comprehensive view, traverse immense landscapes, vast stretches of country, whole kingdoms, not through a reduction like a geographical map, but through seeing a huge variety of objects in perfect detail.”⁶⁸

The relation of the individual and the general, the concrete and the abstract, the plethora of particulars and the principles that make sense of them—which Michelet often associates with the relation of the subjective and the objective, the feminine and the masculine—had not been notably problematical for the neoclassical historian or naturalist in his relatively stable and structured universe. Buffon could write of the horse or Lacépède of the whale without any sense that the individual was being left out in the account of the general—just as Voltaire could write of Charles XII of Sweden or Peter the Great of Russia in such a way that they were immediately perceived by the reader as different particular manifestations of general types. In fact, the “true” order of nature had often been evoked by the classically educated men of the Enlightenment against the allegedly “unnatural” order of medieval and modern history, against mere custom and tradition. To a post- and pro-Revolutionary historian, such as Michelet, however, the true order of things could not be a permanent and universal “natural” order established in some dim and distant origin; it had to be an order that was in fact being constructed *against* the given order and that would be realized progressively *in the future*. From the point of view of the historian writing in the period of the Restoration, nature itself appeared as an ancien régime that had to be combated in the name of freedom.⁶⁹ Man was likewise not a given, a pre-existing essence: on the

⁶⁶ *La Montagne* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1899), 351–52.

⁶⁷ *L’Oiseau* (Paris, 1936), 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁹ In turning to nature, Michelet explains in his introduction to *L’Oiseau*, he sought “la profonde solitude et le désert des anciens jours” (O.C. 17:47).

contrary, Michelet always insisted, he makes himself (“l’homme est son propre Prométhée”),⁷⁰ as do the nations (“la France se fait elle-même”).⁷¹ And this Promethean construction of man and history could proceed—so, at least, it seemed to Michelet in the late 1820s and the 1830s—only *against* “nature,” against every alleged origin, natural or historical. If the work of construction was not to be held up and possibly even undermined, all the elements of nature, that most ancient of *anciens régimes*, had to be subordinated to reason and law. Nature thus came easily to be perceived as an Other, an enemy, and not surprisingly there was constant fear that she might conspire or intrigue, like the forces of the political ancien régime, to subvert the hard won victory of the new spirit of freedom. Michelet shared a good deal of the optimistic progressivism the excesses of which—in the form of architectural restoration or the adaptation of old religious buildings to modern commercial purposes—he himself satirized in a striking journal entry for 5 August 1843: “Deliver us from the past. Force us to forge ahead, to seek in the future . . . I salute you, bold workers for the future, you who wipe the slate of the past clean.”⁷²

Fearfully vigilant against wiles and seductions that he readily associated with nature, woman, and the ancien régime—one recalls Stendhal’s aphorism: “Toute femme est d’ancien régime”—and, albeit far less explicitly, with certain elements of the “people,” in particular its more violent passions, Michelet also recognized the need to “placate those shades” of the ancient past, as he put it in a famous passage. Excluded from the *cité*, they represented a constant threat to their oppressors. No one was more acutely conscious than Michelet of the danger of a “return of the repressed.” The problem was to admit what had been repressed, while at the same time disarming and neutralizing it. To Michelet, that meant recognizing that it was not, after all, an Other, but an aspect of the Same—rediscovering, after the heroic effort of emancipation, the Self in the Other, and the Other in the Self, that is to say the continuity between past and future, the old regime and the new one, the female (representing man’s original nature) and the male, nature and history. Reconnecting the two, restoring the broken unity in a new harmony, was the work of specially talented mediators able and willing to venture into the underworld, negotiate peacefully with the past, and identify with the Other without “going native” or losing the “lucidity of reason,” as Michelet puts it—to risk madness, in a word,

⁷⁰ “Préface de 1869,” *Histoire de France*, O.C. 4:13. Cf. already “Discours sur Vico,” O.C. 1:299.

⁷¹ “Préface de 1869,” *Histoire de France*, O.C. 4:13.

⁷² *Journal* 1:516–17.

without succumbing to it.⁷³ As the task of the historian of civilization or culture, in the famous phrase, is “to give a voice to history’s silences,” to tell the story of the “barbarians, savages, infants, . . . simple people, who all have this in common . . . that, like mutes, they suffer and then pass from life in silence,”⁷⁴ so the task of the historian of nature is to mediate between speechless nature and man, to give words to the inarticulate, to interpret the past for the present. In a passage of *La Mer* (and the homophony of *la mer* and *la mère* is essential to the effect of this text), the coral formed by millions of madropores (again *madres* or mothers) is described in terms that might have been used to describe an unfamiliar, impenetrable ancient text, a marine Rosetta stone, that the naturalist struggles to decipher.

I like to observe trees in winter, when their delicate branches, relieved of the encumbering luxuriance of foliage, tell us what they are in themselves and shyly reveal their hidden personality. So it is with the coral madrepores. Bare now, paintings transformed into sculptures, more abstract, if I may put it that way, you have the feeling that they are going to tell us the secret of those little people whose monument they are. Some seem to speak to us in strange characters. They are coiled and entwined in complicated patterns that visibly would say something. Who can interpret them? And what words can translate them? . . . You feel strongly that there is a thought in them. . . . Slowly you spell out the characters, you are on the verge of understanding. Then suddenly the glimmer of light goes out and you strike your forehead. The beehive with its cold geometry is far less meaningful. The hive is a product of life. But the coral is life. This stone was not simply the ground and the shelter of a people. It once was a people.⁷⁵

At the time of the July Revolution and the *Introduction à l’histoire universelle*, Michelet held that history, in the very earliest stages of human development, is only geography. Or rather, that there is no history—only geography, only nature. Human beings at this stage, he argues, are part of a total ecology along with soils, plants, and animals. Geography, or nature, one might say, is destiny, pre-history, the remote past of history; and history detaches itself only gradually, painfully—and never completely—from that remote past, in analogy with man’s liberation from the fatality of natural conditions and from his remote origin in a kind of sexually undifferentiated phallic mother, who reproduces by parthenogenesis, who is at once female and male, *la mer* and *l’océan*. In Michelet’s writing, but especially in the earlier writing, his-

⁷³ “Préface de 1869,” O.C. 4:18.

⁷⁴ *Journal* 1:378, 30 January 1842; *Le Peuple*, 200.

⁷⁵ *La Mer*, 136–37.

tory represents man's creation and his freedom, geography and nature his origin and his bondage.

This is not to say that that time of bondage was not also in some respects a blessed, peaceful time of intimate community reminiscent of Rousseau's second stage of nature. "Thrice happy, thrice blessed world," we read in *L'Oiseau*, "in which death is not the price of the renewal of life, which in general is freed from all pain, always finds a milky sea (*mer de lait*) in its nourishing waters, never needs to exercise cruelty, and has not yet been weaned from the breast of nature."⁷⁶ In *La Mer*, the emblem of this thrice blessed world without cruelty or suffering is the whale. "There was a brief moment (maybe two thousand years) of great gentleness and innocence, when there appeared on earth excellent creatures that love their families, carry them on themselves or in themselves and take them back, when necessary, into their womb. The good giants appeared on the water."⁷⁷

Even nature, however, Michelet comes to assert, as he grows more familiar with the work of Lamarck, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Lyell, and Darwin, is not a given, but a project; it too, it turns out, must subject itself to the law of history, which requires constant separation and transcendence of the existing by the newly created. The thrice blessed world of the whale is not meant to endure. "The mother must will the rending of her own body, the caesarian operation; she must thrust the child out of her womb."⁷⁸ In Lyell's study of geology (1830), "livre puissant, ingénieux," the earth resembles man himself, or the nations. It is engaged in infinite self-creation: "the earth is like a female worker who manufactures herself by her continuous, calm, uninterrupted labor."⁷⁹ The Other thus, after all, resembles the Self; nature turns out to resemble history.

Within history, the weight of the past and of tradition constitutes another form of bondage, which is countered by the virile aspiration toward emancipation and the future. For the victimized body of the past, on which historical man in his "progress" toward self-determination inflicts immense pain and suffering, and which he then abandons

⁷⁶ *L'Oiseau* (Paris, 1936), 10.

⁷⁷ *La Mer*, 203. Cf. Lacépède's account of the blissful life of the whale who lives peacefully on the surface of the waters "sans rival redoutable, sans besoins difficiles à satisfaire, sans appétits cruels" (Bernard-Germain-Etienne Delaville, Comte de Lacépède, *Oeuvres* [Paris, 1836], 1:327; *Histoire naturelle de Lacépède*, ed. A.G. Demarest [Paris: Furne, 1844], 1:12).

⁷⁸ *Journal* 2:321, January 1857. At first the mother resists: "Toute séparation est contre nature: je garde en moi mon petit" (*Journal* 2:307, 8 August 1956). See also *L'Amour* (O.C. 18:144) on the separation of mother and son, the mother's attachment and the son's abandonment of her in his determination to free himself from her tutelage.

⁷⁹ *La Montagne* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1899), 123–25.

and leaves behind, is always, in Michelet, like geography and nature in general, a female, maternal body,⁸⁰ be it Imperial Rome's mother-city, Alba, or the Catholic mother-church of the Middle Ages, thrust rudely aside by her own sons, the freedom-seeking Reformers.⁸¹ In the *Introduction à l'histoire universelle* of 1831, the struggle between the two—between liberty and fatality, spirit and matter, culture and nature, the masculine and the feminine aspects of humanity—is presented as the very motor of history. Progress and freedom are achieved through the domestication of nature, the constitution of the family, and the subjugation of the (female) Other by the (male) Self. At the same time, however, the negative value that attaches, in this combat, to the Other, to the origin, to nature, to the female,⁸² is more and more accompanied, in Michelet's writing, by a positive value. Modern man, Michelet implies, cannot survive if he cuts the link to his origin in nature, the mother, the past, his own body, and his instinctual life, since these are also the sources of life and energy. Man remains, after all, part of nature, whose generative and reproductive powers render her indispensable at all times.⁸³ The goal must be to understand and gradually penetrate the reproductive powers with reason and law.⁸⁴ For until that task has been completed, those powers remain dangerous, chaotic, potentially overwhelming, and regressive. The same is true of the obscure regions of the imagination, of the individual psychic past, and of the collective past, as well as of poetic forms of language, which,

⁸⁰ On "Nature as Female," see the fine chapter with that title in Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 1–41.

⁸¹ *Histoire romaine* (Paris, 1833 [2d ed.]), 2 vols., 1:102; *Life of Luther, garnered from his own writings*, trans. G.H. Smith (New York: D. Appleton, 1846 [orig. French, 1831]): "Poor aged mother of the modern world, denied and beaten by her son, it is not I, of a surety, who would wish to wound her afresh . . ." (introduction, xii).

⁸² Amply commented on by—among others—Arthur Mitzman, *Michelet historian* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), 18, 112, and me, in "The Go-Between: Jules Michelet, 1798–1874," *MLN* 89 (1974):503–41.

⁸³ "La mer"—the sea—remains "la grande femelle du globe, dont l'infatigable désir, la conception permanente, l'enfantement, ne finit jamais" (*La Mer*, 113). On Michelet's switch from a view of nature as enemy to a view of nature as savior, see Linda Orr, *Jules Michelet*, 12–13. Michelet's binary polarities of nature and culture, female and male, etc., are, of course, part of an ancient traditional way of thinking that is subject to constant renewal: Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian, "Pan" and "Logos" or "Baroque" and "Classical" in the work of the brilliant Catalan essayist Eugenio d'Ors.

⁸⁴ Cf. the passage in *La Montagne* (quoted in the text, at p. 329 below), in which Michelet describes taking the mud baths at Acqui in 1854. The historian presents himself here as assuming the passive, female role, allowing himself to be "penetrated" and "entered" by *Terra mater* ("elle m'entra," he reports, in an extraordinary transitive use of the normally intransitive verb *entrer*), in order to gain understanding of her "secrets." "Chère mère commune!" he writes. "Nous sommes un. Je viens de vous. J'y retourne. Mais dites-moi donc votre secret. Que faites-vous dans vos profondes ténèbres?" (*La Montagne*, 114).

like all the Romantics, Michelet associates with the earliest forms of human expression and communication. Poetry is the past of prose as geography is the past of history and the female the past of the male. It is the first articulated form to emerge from undifferentiated chaos. In *La Mer*, the fecundity of certain species is represented as at once reassuring and terrifying, salutary and threatening. And the same can be said of poetic language with its capacity for infinite generation of meaning.

History, for Michelet, is thus nothing less than the never-ending struggle against the ancien régime of nature, the process by which nature, woman, and the past, in their confusing multitude of unstable, constantly varying forms, are progressively transformed from capricious mistresses of human destiny into trained assistants in the creation of a specifically human order.⁸⁵ That is the purpose of the too obviously masculine lighthouses that ring the common sea—*la mer*—transforming the dark and threatening element into a medium of communication and enlightenment. “Who can say how many men and ships have been saved by lighthouses? . . . Even in 1830, the sea was all darkness. Very few lighthouses in Europe. None in Africa, save at the Cape. None in Asia, save at Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. Not a single one in the entire expanse of South America. Since then, all the nations have followed France” in constructing lighthouses. “Little by little, the light”—of the Enlightenment, of the Revolution, of Western Civilization, no doubt—“is spreading.”⁸⁶ A similar purpose is served by the great purifying birds that limit the otherwise overwhelming fertility of the insect world—and the insect, Michelet insists, in its blind dedication to the species, its indifference to individuality, its complete solidarity with the community, is “essentiellement une femelle,”⁸⁷ whereas the bird, in contrast, is focused above all on the nuclear family, a paterfamilias.⁸⁸ These birds constitute a veritable gallery of heroes: the stork “expurgateur admirable . . . de tous les lieux humides,” the tropical kamichi, “épurateur intrépide . . . bel et vaillant oiseau . . . méprisant la promiscuité du bas monde dont il vit,” the humble Breton hen, “intrépide et vorace,” that holds in check a seemingly infinite production of snails, slugs, and insects that would otherwise destroy the crops and carry out on man’s own body “une orgie sanguinaire . . . danse effrénée de ce monde famélique.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ “Si la vie des mers a un rêve, un vœu, un désir confus, c’est celui de la fixité” (*La Mer*, 199).

⁸⁶ *La Mer*, 101–03.

⁸⁷ *L’Insecte*, O.C. 17:440.

⁸⁸ *L’Oiseau*, “Eclaircissements,” O.C. 17:170.

⁸⁹ *L’Oiseau*, O.C. 17:59, 97, 129.



From *L'Oiseau*

Michelet presents the fecundity of nature and in particular of the lowest forms of life as rich and inventive,⁹⁰ but also horrifying and menacing. “I was stunned, stupefied, and terrified,” he relates in *L’Insecte*, “by the inexhaustible energy, I was about to say the fury of

⁹⁰ “Que les repus vantent le jeûne. La nature parlera plus haut qu’eux. Partout elle arrive à l’homme en bonne et riche nourrice aux pleines mamelles. . . . Plus féconde encore est la mer. Ses bancs de harengs, de sardines, après avoir nourri un monde de poissons avides, vont s’échouer à la côte, les sardines en telle quantité qu’on en engraisse les terres” (*Le Banquet*, O.C. 16:602).

inventiveness that nature deploys. . . . I was overwhelmed, closed my eyes, begged for mercy; for it was affecting my brain, dulling it, darkening it.”⁹¹ Unchecked, this productiveness of nature would prevent the evolution of higher species and result in deadly, senseless repetition. Mass destruction and “*épuration*” are necessary, in other words, for there to be a history of nature. Michelet’s argument may strike us today as somewhat chilling: History, progress, the evolution of higher species, he suggests, require restricting the fertility and the otherwise unlimited expansion of the lower species; they require not expenditure, but renunciation of expenditure and careful, abstemious accumulation of capital. Thus the higher species reproduce sparingly. In contrast to the ant and the termite (“the single female in each swarm is so horrifyingly fecund that she produces 80,000 eggs per day”), the whale (“like us, a gentle red-blooded mammal that suckles its young with its milk” and is far removed from the “monsters of the previous age, horrid aborted creatures of the primeval slime”) is extremely slow to come to term and produces only one offspring at a time.⁹²

Death thus has its place in the economy of a historically evolving nature.

The earth itself has been improved by suffering. Nature has worked on it through the violent action of its ministers of death. The various species of those ministers, whose numbers are now diminishing,⁹³ are reminders of or witnesses to an earlier state, when the globe was swarming with lower forms of life and nature was working to eliminate the excess of her own fecundity. Against the unbreathable air which then enveloped the globe, the plants were saviors. Against the fearful, suffocating density of those inferior plants, the burrowing insect, which later came to be cursed, was an agent of salvation. Against the insect, the toad, and the general mass of reptiles, the poisonous snake was an invaluable expurgator. And when finally the higher form of winged life took flight, it too found an obstacle to the fertility of its impetuous youth in the destructive legions of powerful and voracious birds of prey—eagles, falcons, vultures.⁹⁴

Not surprisingly, excessive fertility is a particular problem for *la mer*. “The sea would be overwhelmed by its bountiful life if that inex-

⁹¹ *L’Insecte*, O.C. 17:358.

⁹² “. . . l’unique femelle de chaque essaim a l’horrible fécondité de pondre, par jour, 80,000 oeufs” (*L’Oiseau* [Paris, 1898], “Eclaircissements,” 359); “douce race de mammifères qui ont, comme nous, le sang rouge et le lait” . . . “monstres de l’âge précédent, horribles avortons de la fange primitive” . . . “La mère n’a jamais qu’un petit, et c’est beaucoup” (*La Mer*, 203, 207).

⁹³ Their number is diminishing, according to Michelet, as the natural order is progressively humanized, and there is less need of them to regulate it.

⁹⁴ *L’Oiseau*, O.C. 17:103.

pressible power of production were not violently held in check by the tenacious alliance of all the forces of destruction. Recall that a single herring has forty, fifty, as many as seventy thousand eggs! Without the remedy of violent death, each one would multiply on average by fifty thousand, and each of those fifty thousand multiplying in turn by another fifty thousand, in several generations the herring would either fill the Ocean, making it virtually a solid mass, or putrefy it, eliminating every species and turning it into a desert." The cod is even more terrifying. "It can carry as many as nine million eggs! A fifty-pound cod has fourteen pounds of eggs—a third of its weight! And this creature, with its fearful maternity, is ready for love nine months out of twelve. The whole world is imperiled by it." At this point, "Life calls imperiously on its sister death for assistance."⁹⁵ The ministers of death in the sea are the shark, "le beau mangeur de la nature," virtually sterile in comparison with other forms of marine life,⁹⁶ along with crabs and other shellfish, various birds (such as gulls and vultures), storms, and finally humans—thousands of British, French, Dutch, and American fishermen. "Against the threat of infinite fecundity" all of these act as "agents de la salubrité."⁹⁷ Death is thus necessary to combat and cure "the strange ill that torments *la mer*: excessive fertility. Death, the helpful surgeon . . . relieves her of the plethora in which she would otherwise drown."⁹⁸ The "immense struggle" of Life and Death, it turns out, is ultimately "all harmony" and "ensures salvation."⁹⁹

No less than to nature or *la mer*, excessive fertility is a threat to the imagination of the writer, in the form of a plethora of meanings. Like all the Romantics, Michelet thought of poetry as the most ancient, primitive, and natural form of human language. The victory of the democratic republic over the old regime, of law over arbitrariness, is also the victory of prose ("voix virile") over poetry ("jeune fille au douteux langage").¹⁰⁰ The language of symbol, Michelet explains, like that of nature, is open to multiple interpretations. "Every symbol is ambiguous, as is all poetry. As is nature herself. Look how she delights in the illusion of living forms, in that fertile sophistry in which everything has a double meaning, look how she constantly translates things from one form to another, asking for nothing better than to . . . confound all of life in an immense amphibology." Progress consists in reining

⁹⁵ *La Mer*, 108.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 110, 196.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 186, 145 (on storms).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 196–97.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁰⁰ *Origines du droit français, cherchées dans les symboles et formules du droit universel* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, n.d.), lxi.

in and gradually reducing this “fertile sophistry.” God—who is on the side of Progress of course—intervenes to limit nature. “He discriminates, even as she confuses everything. . . . He constantly distinguishes, describes, defines, prescribes; he is the eternal measurer.”¹⁰¹

Man must do no less. He is enchanted, in the virgin forest, by “fantastic orchids, fever’s favored daughters, children of the miasmatic air, strange vegetable butterflies, suspended from the trunks of enormous trees, seemingly in flight.” But he must resist the enchantment at all costs: “Do not yield, defend yourself, do not allow your drooping head to be charmed by the spell. Arise! Arise! Danger in a thousand forms is all around you.”¹⁰² In the natural history texts the “équivoque” is frequently deceptive and threatening, like the soft white quicksands (“sable équivoque”) around Mont Saint-Michel, into which the unwary traveler may be “swallowed down.”¹⁰³

But, once again, repression is not the way. Without the creative power of poetry, language and thought would become anaemic and impotent. The allurements must be acknowledged and integrated. Just as he was drawn to the obscure and troubling regions of history that official historiography has deliberately ignored, Michelet was irresistibly drawn to nature’s transvestite “fantasmagories,” and “créations fantastiques.”¹⁰⁴ He delights in the infinite mutability of forms and substances, and as he describes these his own prose seems to become weightless, to take on that quality of “lightness” that Italo Calvino considers one of the essential virtues of literature.¹⁰⁵ He admits, in a passage on the coral reefs, that “one is enchanted and disturbed by all that. It is like a dizziness, a dream. The fairy with her slippery mirages—the water—adds to the colors [of the underwater plants] a prism of fleeting tints, a marvelous mobility, a capricious inconstancy, an element of hesitation and uncertainty.”¹⁰⁶

“The fields and forests of our earth,” says Darwin, “seem empty deserts compared with those of the sea [always *la mer*].” And, indeed,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., xciii–xcv.

¹⁰² *L’Oiseau*, O.C. 17:95.

¹⁰³ *La Mer*, 53.

¹⁰⁴ *La Mer*, 87 et passim. On the fascination of forms that seemed to hover between animal and vegetable, etc., in the eighteenth century, see Barbara Stafford, “Images of ambiguity: eighteenth century microscopy and the neither/nor,” in David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill, eds., *Visions of Empire: voyages, botany, and representations of nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 230–57.

¹⁰⁵ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992).

¹⁰⁶ *La Mer*, 136. See also on the “solonnels passages ou la vie incertaine semble hesiter encore” *L’Oiseau* (Paris, 1936), 18.

all who have sailed the transparent seas of the Indies are amazed by the phantasmagoria that lies on the sea floor. It is specially striking because of the bizarre way in which plants and animals here exchange their natural distinguishing marks and their entire appearances. Soft, gelatinous plants, with rounded organs resembling neither stems nor leaves but taking on the fleshy plumpness and gentle curves of animal life, seem to want us to mistake them for animals. Real animals seem to work at being plants and resembling vegetation. . . . Some have the solidity, the quasi-everlastingness of trees, others bloom and fade like flowers. The sea anemone opens up like a pale pink marguerite or like a garnet-red azure-eyed aster. But as soon as a daughter, a new anemone, slips from her corolla, you see her crumple and vanish.

More variable still is the proteus of the waters, the alcyonium, which may take on any form and color. It can mimic a plant, it can mimic a fruit; it can fan out, become a hedge of bushes, or assume the roundness of a graceful flowerbed. All of that, however, is fleeting, ephemeral, so timidly alive that the least quiver will make it vanish into nothingness. In a flash everything has returned to the bosom of the common mother.

If you lean from above over the edge of the reefs and coral banks you will see beneath the water the floor carpet, green with asterias and tubipores, the fungias rolled up like snowballs, the meandrinias, their surfaces historiated with little labyrinths whose hills and valleys are marked in vivid colors. At the end of their calcareous branch, the caryophyllales . . . in velvet green, matched with orange, fish for their sustenance by gently moving their rich golden stamens in the water.¹⁰⁷

Certain forms of marine life, notably the velella and the medusa (“why,” he asks, “that terrible name for such a charming creature?”), seem to hold a special fascination for Michelet. An entire chapter of *La Mer* is devoted to them. Typically, the chapter opens with a personal recollection that links the world of nature with the world of historical

¹⁰⁷ (Paris, 1936), 18. “‘Nos prairies, nos forêts de terre,’ dit Darwin, ‘paraissent désertes et vides, si on les compare à celles de mer.’ Et en effet tous ceux qui courent sur les transparentes mers des Indes sont saisis de la fantasmagorie que leur offre le fond. Elle est surtout surprenante par l’échange singulier que les plantes et les animaux font de leurs insignes naturels, de leur apparence. Les plantes molles et gelatineuses, avec des organes arrondis qui ne semblent ni tiges ni feuilles, affectant le gras, la douceur des courbes animales, semblent vouloir qu’on s’y trompe, et qu’on les croie animaux. Les vrais animaux ont l’air de s’ingénier pour être plantes et ressembler aux végétaux. . . . Le proté des eaux, l’alcyon, prend toute forme et toute couleur. Il joue la plante, il joue le fruit; il se dresse en éventail, devient une haie buissonneuse ou s’arrondit en gracieuse corbeille. Mais tout cela fugitif, éphémère, de vie si craintive qu’au moindre frémissement tout disparaît, rien ne reste . . .” (*La Mer*, 134–35). In 1861 Michelet had not yet read the *Origin of Species*—a French translation was to appear a year later. He is probably referring to *The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs* of 1842.

time, with the historian himself, and with the experience of humans: a memory of the winter of 1858, spent at Hyères, on the Mediterranean coast, of a lovely young foreign princess who had come there from afar in a last, futile effort to salvage her failing health, and of a particular medusa, trapped in a little hollow of the beach from which the water had ebbed away, wavering between life and death—*était-elle morte ou mourante?*—and saved by the historian who “does not find it easy to believe in death” and who gathers her up and places her back in the water. The medusa is described as a timid creature, a form of polyp “sortie de l’association.” “Simply put,” Michelet explains, “the medusa is an emancipated polyp.”¹⁰⁸ But how hesitant and timid is her pursuit of autonomy.

The medusa seems to have been made to flip-flop. Heavy on top, unstable below, she is almost the opposite of her cousin, the physalia. Above the water the latter has only a little balloon, an insubmersible bladder, while she lets her long tentacles—infinately long, twenty feet or more—drag along the bottom. These stabilize her, sweep the sea, drug the fish, and deliver them to her. Light and careless, inflating her pearly balloon tinted with blue or purple, she sends out, through her long, sinister blue hair, a subtle poison, which, when discharged, fells its victim immediately.

Less fearsome, the vellelas are also well protected. . . . Their minute organization already has a little solidity. They can determine their direction, turning their oblique sail into the wind. The porpitas, which appear to be only a flower, a daisy, have lightness in their favor; they float even after they are dead. The same is true of so many more fantastical, almost aerial creatures, festoons of golden bells or festoons of rosebuds, . . . blue girdles of Venus. All of this swims and swims invincibly, fears only land, drifts far out to sea, to the high sea, and however violent the latter may seem, always finds security there. . . .

Such is not the case of the poor medusa. She must fear the shore and she must fear the storm. She could make herself heavy and drop toward the bottom, but the depths are out of bounds for her. She lives only on the surface, in full light and in full danger. She can see, she can hear, she has a delicate sense of touch, far too delicate for her own happiness. She cannot determine her own direction. Her organs are more complicated, they weigh her down, and make her lose balance easily.

So you are tempted to think that she repents of having tried to achieve a freedom that has turned out to be so hazardous, that she regrets the lower stage of life, the security of communal living. The polypary made the medusa, the medusa makes the polypary. Thus she

¹⁰⁸ *La Mer*, 154.

returns to the group. But that vegetative life is so tedious that in the next generation, she again seeks freedom and strikes off again in whatever direction her rudderless navigation takes her. Bizarre alternation!—in which she passes eternally from one thing to the other. Moving, she dreams of rest; inert, she dreams of movement.¹⁰⁹

Using the poetic power of language, Michelet creates a “grande féerie” of his own to match that which he says is created by the sea (always, it is necessary to insist: *la mer*), on stormy nights.¹¹⁰ The Museum of Natural History itself is a “palais de féerie,” he says.¹¹¹ Integrated into the text of the natural historian or into the temple of science, the fascination of nature, of “la terrible fée” that drives men mad¹¹²—and the fée is, of course, a female, a kind of witch—is relieved of its dangerous powers. From the blood of the Gorgon, Calvino might have said, springs winged Pegasus. The enchantment that has the capacity to kill becomes a cure, like the herbs and simples of the Witch. It remakes the wholeness destroyed by the division of labor that is the indispensable condition of modern thought and action. Obscurity, uncertainty, oblivion are here not an escape or a regression but a restorative.¹¹³ Michelet claims that in history imagination and poetry are the assistants of a discourse of truth. The historian, for that reason, is the best educator of the nation, the best mother of the people. In certain circumstances, he observes in *La Mer*, noting that the male shark is infinitely protective of its young, “the male is more maternal than the mother herself.”¹¹⁴ The best of all mothers, in Michelet, is a motherly father; the best of justices: law tempered by compassion; the best of protectors: *la mère patrie* (as in Daumier’s androgynous “La République”); the best of historians: the historian who has a feeling for the poetry of the past and can identify with it, without yielding to it or losing himself in it.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 154–56.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹³ In woman, according to Michelet, and specifically in his wife, man “trouve l’oubli . . . qui chaque jour fait sa renaissance.” Oblivion is permitted only in carefully regulated conditions. As a product of alcohol or drugs, it is unbendingly proscribed. On the inevitable—and accepted—deformation of the harmonious human body and mind in modern times, see *L’Amour* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1899), 269–71; also *Le Prêtre, la Femme et la Famille* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, n.d. [1900]), 277–78 (1st ed. 1845).

¹¹⁴ *La Mer*, 199.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Michelet’s comments about himself in the *Journal*: “J’ai eu le génie maternel” (1:416–17, 24 June 1842), and in one of his letters to Athénais: “Il faut que tu m’acceptes comme mère, et plus encore” (letter of 6–7 January 1849, in *Journal* 2:633). To Alfred Dumesnil, he had already claimed the right to speak in the name of the young man’s mother: “Votre mère vit toujours. . . . Je puis vous parler en son nom même” (Letters of 28 October and 6 November 1842, *Lettres inédites*, 42, 45). In his work on “crowds” (*La Psychologie des foules*, 1895), Gustave Le Bon acknowledges that “the part played by the unconscious in

There is, in the end, no challenge to the privilege of light over darkness, clarity over ambiguity, law over grace, and language that liberates and lightens over language that obscures and mystifies. Everything that inhibits light and lightness is condemned, not least the seductive, fatal “plantes de la tentation”—“fées terribles” that distort our perceptions: tobacco, alcohol, coffee, the whole world of drugs and intoxicants.¹¹⁶ The most dangerous part of any storm is what is “fantastic” about it, the terrors we imagine. By discovering the patterns of air and sea currents, Maury did not rid the world of storms, Michelet insists, but he brought light into our ignorance and fear.¹¹⁷

In *Le Peuple* (1846), Michelet had already quoted Goethe’s dying words: “Light, more light,” adding an important commentary: “These words of the dying giant are the cry of all nature and they echo from world to world. What was said by the great and powerful man, one of God’s elders, is said also in the depths of the sea by the molluscs, the humblest of his children, those least advanced in the scale of animal life. They do not want to live where no light ever penetrates. The flower desires the light, turns its head toward it, and droops and languishes without it. Our co-workers, the animals, are happy or sad, like us, in proportion as the light strikes them. My grandson, but two months old, cries when darkness falls.”¹¹⁸ The earth, we read in *La Montagne*, heaves and rises toward the sun, “her father, her lover, or both in one.” “In the ages of darkness, when an opaque atmosphere enveloped her in a veil of mists, she already sensed him and longed for him from the depths of her being.”¹¹⁹ So too the bird strives upward toward the

all our acts is immense, and that played by reason is very small.” The frightening and potentially destructive primitive powers of the unconscious that dominate the “crowd,” he concedes, are also the source of human creativity. “The most learned academics, the most esteemed grammarians can do no more than note down the laws that govern languages; they would be utterly incapable of creating them. Even with respect to the ideas of great men, are we certain that they are exclusively the offspring of their brains? No doubt such ideas are always created by solitary minds, but is it not the genius of crowds that has furnished the thousands of grains of dust forming the soil in which they have sprung up?” (*The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* [1897], rpt. [Dunwoody, Georgia: Norman S. Berg, n.d.], introduction, viii–ix). For Le Bon, it should be noted, the crowd is “everywhere distinguished by feminine characteristics” (ch.2, p. 20).

¹¹⁶ *La Montagne*, 176–77.

¹¹⁷ *La Mer*, 246.

¹¹⁸ Michelet, *Le Peuple*, ed. François Refort (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier/Société des Textes Français Modernes, 1946), 79. This passage is cited at length at the beginning of the section entitled “The Light—the Night” that opens part 2 of *L’Oiseau* (O.C. 17:109).

¹¹⁹ “La sombre terre des ténèbres a nécessairement envie de se faire terre lumineuse, la terre d’amour qu’Il féconde” (*La Montagne*, 119–20, 121–22). Cf. 30–31: “N’a-t-elle pas, même en ces ténèbres, le sens du mouvement du Soleil, ce père, cet amant adoré. Son élan vers lui, comprime, semble par moments soulever, gonfler son sein. Regret? Aspiration? toujours vaine, incomplète, impuissante, comme toute chose de ce monde. L’aspiration retombe, comme si elle avait réfléchi, se contenait, mais non pas sans soupir.”

light, realizing the desire of all creation. “The cry of all the animal and vegetable species, uttered in their thousands of different languages, the call that rises from the stones themselves and from inorganic life is ‘Wings! We want wings, the power to rise upward, movement.’”¹²⁰

Nevertheless, in his sympathetic representation of the medusa, “être indécis,” unable to choose between communal life and autonomy, “dreaming of rest when it is in movement” and “dreaming of movement when it is inert,” constantly flip-flopping from one state to another, Michelet offered a more complete image not only of the tension marking all the forms of life and each stage of development, but of the historian himself, committed to both poetry and prose, dreamwork and analysis, the world of the dead (saving what is past from oblivion) and the world of the living (putting the past “behind” him and clearing the way for the future). He too, it would seem, “fut créé pour chavirer.”¹²¹ For it is not without a painful wrench that he leaves the comforting dimness of the past and turns toward the light of the future.¹²² In *La Sorcière* the author tells of watching the sun rise above Toulon, where he has just put the finishing touches to his book, a celebration of the last of the ancient sibylls: “A great miracle was about to happen, that would explode and eclipse everything. I let it come, and did not hurry it. The forthcoming transfiguration, the longed for rapture of the light, in no way diminished the profound charm of being still in the divine night, half concealed, hardly distinguishable from the prodigious surrounding enchantment. . . . Come, O Sun. In anticipation of your coming, we adore you, but still we would take advantage of this last moment of dream.”¹²³

IV

Michelet thus came to see the same processes at work in nature as in history. And just as historiography itself becomes a force in the

¹²⁰ *L'Oiseau* (Paris, 1936), 13.

¹²¹ *La Mer*, 154.

¹²² Like “*le petit mâle*” equally attracted by the sun, whose rays bathe him in gold and fill him with desire for life (“la liberté, la vie mobile”), and by the gentle, internal warmth of the loving maternal home, which lures him back toward the shadowy depths (*La Montagne*, 250).

¹²³ *La Sorcière* (Paris: Julliard, 1964), 323. Cf. *Journal* 1:517, 4 August 1843: “Une larme encore; et puis je vous suis, ô avenir”; *Histoire de France*, book 4 (in P. Viallaneix, ed., *Jeanne d’Arc* [Paris: Gallimard, 1974], 172–216): “Il faut que le vieux monde passe, que la trace du moyen-âge achève de s’effacer, que nous voyions mourir tout ce que nous aimions, ce qui nous allaita tout petit, ce qui fut notre père et notre mère, ce qui nous chantait tout doucement dans le berceau. . . . Est-ce donc fait, hélas! n’y aura-t-il pas miséricorde?” (215–16).

making of history, by revealing to the conscious intelligence of the human agent striving toward freedom that he is participating in the millennia-long enterprise of all history, natural history accomplishes this same objective with respect to nature. Science becomes the self-consciousness of nature. It is man, in the words of Michelet's close friend Edgar Quinet, who "completes the universe and gives voice to dumb creation, proclaiming down the centuries the secret concealed in the entrails of the earth." Or as Michelet himself put it, man is "the earth's genius, her spirit of invention."¹²⁴ Despite the resounding opening sentence of the early *Introduction à l'histoire universelle*—"Avec le monde a commencé une guerre qui doit finir avec le monde, et pas avant: celle de l'homme contre la nature, de l'esprit contre la matière, de la liberté contre la fatalité"—there is, in other words, no absolute opposition of natural history and civil history. Both are engaged in the same enterprise, both are striving toward higher and higher ends, and for both the highest end is the most developed but also the most complete form of humanity. "Human history and eternal history now move forward together in my mind," the historian announced to a friend in 1855, "struck as I am by what is eternal in the restless history of man and what is progressive in the apparently immutable history of the globe and of nature."¹²⁵ And among his notes for the 1869 preface to the *History of France*, we find the following passage: "As I studied them, history and natural history fused into one. I watched the progressive generation of species, the transformation of species, of human races and classes, of more or less savage tribes, of cities, of societies unfold before my eyes."¹²⁶

Just as the frighteningly fecund ant, seemingly devoid of individuality, nothing but an instrument of the group—"l'horrible femelle d'où sort ce torrent maudit"¹²⁷—turns out on closer inspection to be "some

¹²⁴ Edgar Quinet, *De l'Origine des dieux*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1857), 3:415. Michelet in *La Mer*, 328: "Have compassion on yourselves, you poor men of the West. Restore yourselves. Think of the common salvation. The Earth begs you to live. . . . In losing you, she would lose herself. For you are her genius, her spirit of invention. Her life depends on your life, your death would be her death."

¹²⁵ "L'histoire et l'histoire éternelle vont maintenant de front dans mes pensées, frappé surtout que je suis de ce qu'il y a d'éternel dans l'histoire mobile de l'homme, et de progressif dans celle du globe et de la nature, immuable en apparence" (*Lettres inédites*, 228, letter to Eugene Noel, 9 August 1855).

¹²⁶ Quoted from Michelet's papers in "L'Héroïsme de l'esprit," O.C. 4:38–39.

¹²⁷ *L'Oiseau* (Paris, 1898), "Eclaircissements," 359.

one,” not unlike “us,”¹²⁸ the bird to be almost human (“une personne”) rather than alien as it at first appeared,¹²⁹ instinct to be a form of reason, continuous with it, rather than opposed to it,¹³⁰ the sea—“fermée, impénétrable . . . élément étranger”—to be “une puissance . . . amie,”¹³¹ and woman herself to be—“ô bonheur!”—not “une chose” but “une personne,”¹³² natural history turns out to be not the Other of history but a close sibling. Nothing in the universe is completely distinct from and discontinuous with anything else. *Natura non fecit saltum*.¹³³ The only lacunae are those of our own ignorance.¹³⁴

¹²⁸ *L'Insecte*, O.C. 17:347: “Ce masque fixe, immobile, condamné à ne rien dire, est-ce celui d'un monstre ou d'un spectre? Non. D'après ses mouvements, et tant d'actes empreints de réflexion, d'après ses arts plus avancés que ceux de grands animaux, on est bien tenté de croire qu'en cette tête il y a quelqu'un. Et, du plus haut au plus bas de l'échelle de la vie, on sent l'identité de l'âme” (“Is the fixed and immovable mask, thus condemned to perpetual silence, that of a monster or a specter? No. After watching its movements, its numerous actions indicative of reflection, its arts so much more advanced than those of the larger animals, we are not unwilling to believe that in this head exists a personality. And from the highest to the lowest in the scale of life, we recognize the identity of the soul” [*The Insect* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1875), 151]).

Characteristically, the description of the ant, observed through a microscope lens, constantly evokes a human being: “Elle était vive, alerte, impatiente de sortir de là. . . . Je fus obligé de l'étheriser quelque peu pour l'engourdir et la rendre moins mobile. . . . L'éther glissa, entra fort peu, et l'étourdit seulement. Après un moment d'immobilité, elle revint à moitié et fit quelques mouvements, comme ceux d'une personne ivre, ou frappée d'une forte migraine. Elle avait l'air de se dire: ‘Où suis-je?’ et elle tâchait de reconnaître le terrain où elle marchait, la grande feuille de papier. . . . Ses attitudes, ses tâtonnements, ses efforts pour se rendre compte de la situation, la montraient précisément ce que nous aurions été dans une circonstance semblable. La reine Mab de Shakespeare, dans son char de coque de noix, me revenait à l'esprit” (345–46). (“She was lively, alert, disquieted, and impatient to quit the table. . . . I was obliged to etherize her a little, so as to stupefy her, and render her less agitated. . . . The ether affected her but slightly, and only stupefied her. After a moment's immobility she partly recovered, and made a few movements like those of an intoxicated person, or as if she were affected by a fit of vertigo. She seemed to say, ‘Where am I?’ and endeavoured to make out the ground where she was walking, the great sheet of white paper. . . . Her attitudes, her gropings, her efforts to obtain a knowledge of the situation, showed precisely what we should have been under similar circumstances. Shakespeare's Queen Mab in her nut-shell chariot, occurred to my mind” [*The Insect*, 148–49]). The nineteenth-century translations convey the gist of Michelet's text but are quite inadequate stylistically. The second passage has been slightly altered to convey the unmistakable charge of femininity in the pronoun *elle*, confirmed by the reference to Queen Mab. The nineteenth-century English translator resolutely treats *elle* as a purely grammatical gender and translates as “it.”

¹²⁹ *L'Oiseau*, O.C. 17:65. In the chapter on “Education”(17:151–52) Michelet suggests that the education of birds produces “maîtres” and “docteurs” (master-artisans and scholars).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 17:68.

¹³¹ *La Mer*, 48, 55; cf. 54: “C'est une mère un peu violente, mais enfin, c'est une mère.”

¹³² “Longtemps elle semblait muette, ne disait rien. . . . Est-ce une personne? est-ce une chose? . . . Voici enfin qu'elle a parlé. . . . O bonheur! C'est une personne! Du fond obscur et fatal, sa liberté s'est détachée” (*L'Amour*, 1899, p. 21).

¹³³ *L'Oiseau* (Paris, 1898), 18.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

At the same time, the underlying reality of order has to be repeatedly reasserted against the devastating experience of disorder, absurdity, and destruction. “Le sentiment de l’harmonie du monde diminue tous les jours en moi,” Michelet admitted only a few months after Mme Dumesnil’s death and his earlier resolve to seek an antidote to his discouragement in nature, the source of life.¹³⁵ At any point the good mother may suddenly be unmasked as a savage and devouring *marâtre*, “l’outrageuse Circé” of *La Sorcière*.¹³⁶ “Totally lovable and fecund,” the mother is also “dangerous, homicidal . . . mother and mistress at the same time . . . incestuous, seductive . . . she has us take our pleasure with her, caresses us, intoxicates us, and kills us.”¹³⁷ The *peuple*—the hero of history, in Michelet’s view of it, from whom all good comes—may show itself, in the form of a metaphor used to evoke “the great sea serpent” in *La Mer*, as “a terrifying mob, a horrible populace.”¹³⁸ Beneath her alluring and deceiving appearances, nature may be revealed as senselessly destructive. Beautiful meadows turn out to be dangerous marshes that suck down the unwary traveler,¹³⁹ a tropical savanna in the chapter aptly entitled “La Fantasmagorie des couleurs et des lumières” in *L’Insecte* turns out to be a heaving mass of living creatures endowed with the most varied and exquisite instruments of dismemberment,¹⁴⁰ the calm green ponds of the virgin forest in *L’Oiseau* conceal armies of “implacable anatomists who with a million lancets will make of your vital tissue a wonderful lace, a gauze, a breath, a nothingness.”¹⁴¹ The sea itself—*la mer*, the source of life—is a grave, “ugly, hideous,” a “world of darkness” full of man-eating monsters.¹⁴²

What is common to nature, the people, and woman is that all three have been attacked, overcome, and then “left behind” by the higher forms that arose out of them: Nature by Man, who has struggled relentlessly to detach himself from his origin; the people by the educated bourgeoisie; the female, in whom man recognizes and fears his own unregulated sexuality (the early letters Michelet wrote to Poinset

¹³⁵ *Lettres inédites*, 40, letter to Alfred Dumesnil, 13 October 1842.

¹³⁶ *La Sorcière*, 153.

¹³⁷ *Journal* 1:119, 13 July 1834.

¹³⁸ *La Mer*, 96.

¹³⁹ “Mémoires d’une jeune fille honnête” [a biography of Athénais], *Journal* 2:584.

¹⁴⁰ *L’Insecte*, O.C. 17:360.

¹⁴¹ *L’Oiseau*, O.C. 17:95.

¹⁴² *La Mer*, 43–45, 96. In *L’Oiseau* nature is both “beloved mother,” “rendez-vous of peace and love,” “harmony of the world,” “magnificent organization of the globe”; and “l’atroce et méchante mer,” “l’odieuse et féconde mer qui menace de m’engloutir” (*L’Oiseau* [Paris, 1898], 52, 57, 73, 74, 108, 111).

concerning the dangerous allure of women seem conclusive on this point),¹⁴³ by her male offspring; the Witch (popular medicine) by her son, the doctor (scientific or learned medicine); symbolic and poetic ways of thinking by analysis and calculation. At the same time as Michelet was writing of those obscure struggles in his natural history books or in popular books like *Le Peuple*, *L'Amour*, or *La Sorcière*, Bachofen in his solitude in far-off Basel was writing of an ancient war—so ancient that it is unrecorded in any history and remembered only in myth—by which men wrested power and authority from women, and that same struggle was also being evoked by Michelet's friend, the Fourierist Alphonse Toussenel, in his *L'Esprit des bêtes: zoologie passionnelle* (1858). Another friend, Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, the son of the famous zoologist, recalled "l'acte le plus significatif de propriété que [notre espèce] ait jamais accompli sur le globe,"¹⁴⁴ that is to say the domestication of animals in a prehistory "about which history, though it is the memory of the human race, remains totally silent."¹⁴⁵ As already noted, the guilt and, above all, the fear of a "return of the repressed" generated in the victors by these ancient dirty wars, on which "progress"—the social, cultural, and economic order of the nineteenth century—is founded, are such that the vanquished partner, the primitive origin, is readily seen as radically Other. The fear is always of being drawn back into identification with that Other, losing one's hard won individual identity: like the son tempted by incest—or, for that matter, the male by the female; the unwary traveler sucked down into the swamp; the explorer going native as he is seduced by voluptuous women;¹⁴⁶ the artist losing his mind to the "terrible fée" that fascinates him;¹⁴⁷ the timid medusa rejoining the polyp from which she had detached herself;¹⁴⁸ the independent peasant or artisan slipping back into propertyless communism or swallowed up by the anonymous *foule* of the modern industrial economy, which Gustave Le Bon was to characterize two decades after

¹⁴³ Cf. the fate of Prince Georges Cantacuzène in the life of Mme Michelet that accompanies the text of *L'Oiseau*. The prince is portrayed as a demented satyr, "pauvre Caliban désarmé," stricken in his virility and wandering like a shadow through the palace over which his wife now rules. In his *Journal* (2:576), Michelet explains the cause of the prince's degradation: "Le Prince avait pour son malheur trop aimé le . . . et s'était épuisé chez les belles Italiennes."

¹⁴⁴ Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Essais de zoologie générale* (Paris: Librairie encyclopédique de Roret, 1841), pt. 2, ch. 2, "De la Domestication des animaux", 248–330, at 256.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁴⁶ The implied threat to the traveler Anquetil Duperron in India in *Bible de l'humanité* (Paris: Chamerot, 1864), 10–11.

¹⁴⁷ *La Mer*, 51–52.

¹⁴⁸ *La Mer*, 154–56.

Michelet's death as essentially "feminine" and as leading humanity "back to the primitive communism that was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilization."¹⁴⁹ (There can be little doubt that to Michelet, who had observed the early effects of the industrial revolution in Northern England and Scotland in the 1830s, mass production of goods in factories, often by female workers, was as horrifying as the mindless fecundity of the termite or the cod.) Better even the heroic Satanism of the parricidal, murderous, English, Michelet implies, than regression to the lotos-land of identity, the dangerous pantheistic dream of the German nature-philosophers. "Progress" can be sustained only by unflagging struggle and resistance to the blandishments of the origin and by a continuous effort to distance oneself from it.

As we saw, however, the complement to that pattern of unrelenting conflict with the origin, that "guerre qui ne finira jamais," is a vision not of triumph and repression but of progressive assimilation, spiritualization, edification, education. The anti-Semitism of the nineteenth century seems to be a model of its attitudes to women, nature, and the people: deep hostility to those who remain connected to the origins and refuse to accept the "higher," *modern* form of their own being, along with liberal support of assimilationist policies. In the conciliatory and optimistic assimilationist scenario, the "higher" term recognizes its affinity to the "lower," acknowledges the Other in the Self, and through this acknowledgment and identification gains the confidence of the Other, secures her willing collaboration, and, raising her above herself, obtains her redemption. This is the noble and dangerous task, Michelet tells us in the 1869 preface, that is accomplished by the historian when he descends to the underworld of the past to pacify its inarticulate shades and, by lending them a voice and a language, reintegrate them into the *cit *, the human community reconstituted and governed by law: when he tells, in short, not the official story of the victors of history, but the unrecorded tale of the victims.¹⁵⁰ It is also the task that Isidore Geoffroy de Saint-Hilaire proposes to the naturalist when he writes in his essay on the domestication of animals of the need to resume a process of which humanity has retained only "de vagues et

¹⁴⁹ Gustave Le Bon, *La Psychologie des foules* (1895); Engl. trans. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1897), rpt. (Dunwoody, Georgia: Norman S. Berg, n.d.), ch. 2, pp. 16, 20, 29, 33, and introduction, xvi. See above, note 116.

¹⁵⁰ "Pr f ce de 1869," O.C. 4:8; *Journal* 1:378 (30 January 1842); *Le Peuple*, 201. The surviving member of the couple in *L'Amour* calls to the soul of the beloved: "Je suis ta nature et ta vie naturelle. . . . Oh je t'en prie, deviens moi-m me! . . . Tu seras moi tout   fait" (*L'Amour*, [Paris, 1861; 5th ed.], 414).

fabuleux souvenirs,” to “conquer new, as yet unsubdued species which could be of great utility, and to consolidate, complete, and better exploit the conquest of the animal species that have already been subdued.” Characteristically, Michelet gives this project, which he endorses in principle, a generous twist. The point of departure of any plan for the domestication of the animal world, he writes, must be not “the benefit man derives from domesticated animals” but “the benefit animals might derive from man.”¹⁵¹

The natural history writings demonstrate with exceptional vividness that hostility to and sympathy with the Other, fear and conciliatoriness, are inseparable in Michelet’s progressivist and evolutionary vision of nature and of the past. Earlier, less differentiated stages of evolution (natural or historical) are a threatening and seductive origin to which the more advanced forms of life are constantly tempted to regress (through incest, drugs, poetry, imagination) and which they must fend off vigorously and relentlessly. One cannot help speculating that, whatever roots it might have had in Michelet’s psyche, this mingled fear of and fascination with the Other (nature, the female, the past) has an essential social and political dimension. Absent from the writing of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it most probably expresses both his anxiety about a return of the *ancien régime*, usually identified as capricious, arbitrary, pre-rational, and thus “feminine,”¹⁵² and his fear of modern communism and of modern industrial society. In Michelet’s eyes, both the *ancien régime* and all forms of collectivist societies, ancient and modern, represented a regression from the post-Revolutionary order, the twin pillars of

¹⁵¹Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, “De la Domestication des animaux,” 308. Cf. Michelet, *L’Oiseau*, O.C. 17:166–67.

¹⁵²In a striking passage of the fourth lecture on the French Revolution, given on 4 March 1847, Michelet warned against the dangers of the past. As historians, he declared, “We have two obligations: to study history and enter into the spirit of tradition; and to despise history and take upon ourselves the revolutionary spirit, the spirit of innovation and progress.” “History,” he added, “has become a means of oppression. . . . The history of politics is killing politics: copy England and sacrifice France and the Revolution. The history of philosophy is killing philosophy: Royer-Collard is killing Maine de Biran. The history of art (Roman art) is killing art: today, still, David makes us overlook Géricault. The history of architecture is killing architecture: the chief question has become ‘What shall we copy?’” But this “oppressive” history is a “false” history, according to Michelet. It is history as written and defined for its own purposes by the Restoration, by a regressive desire to return to the *ancien régime*. “I understand them well. ‘The past is sacred,’ they cry; ‘The past is venerable.’ All kinds of interests have rallied under the banner of the history of the past.” The cure is to study history as it truly is—that is, as something that cannot return in its original condition. For it is because the Revolution sought to deny history that a false history “has been able to return in triumph” (Jules Michelet, *Cours au Collège de France*, 2 [1845–51], ed. P. Viallaneix [Paris: Gallimard, 1995], 205–06).

which, for him, were the independent French peasant and the independent artisan, with their limited, well-defined, and hard-won property and freedom. His social model is recognizable as the family, led by a kindly and protective husband and father with the support of a devoted wife and mother. In this model, the husband alone has access to and legitimate authority over the dangerous, mysterious productive powers of the female. Michelet's writing is in fact marked by suspicion of doctors and an almost pathological obsession with priests and the deceptively feminine robes by means of which, according to him, they insinuate themselves into the intimacy of wives and women. Michelet apparently viewed both doctors and priests as illegitimate rivals for possession of the secrets of the female.

The last word of the evolutionary process is thus optimistically asserted to be not conflict and repression, but harmony and integration—the reassuring recognition that the origin (as always: nature, the female, the past) is in fact not Other but an earlier form of the Same, containing the potential to transcend itself and straining to do so; not radically different, but part of a comprehensive whole embracing all the forms of life and all the moments of historical time, each in its appropriate place. The goal of history and nature alike, and the particular task of man in the cosmic economy, according to Michelet, is the realization of a “gentle, peaceful republic of all the forms of life,”¹⁵³ in which, as in the vision of the prophet (Isaiah 11:6–8), peace and fraternity will reign—between the sexes, between the classes, among the species.¹⁵⁴ “Making peace with the animals,” as a reviewer wrote of *L'Oiseau*, “is part of the progress of democracy.” Or, as Taine put it, “the destiny of man,” for Michelet, “is to gather together all living creatures in a vast republic inspired by universal love.”¹⁵⁵ That consoling and rather sentimental vision of the End of History seems to have been history's *alibi* for Michelet, in both the common senses of the word: as an elsewhere or alternative and as a justification or excuse.

¹⁵³ *L'Oiseau* (Paris, 1898), 338.

¹⁵⁴ Thus Toussenel is reproached for his love of hunting and Athénais's father praised for preferring not to eat meat (*L'Oiseau*, O.C. 17:47, 56).

¹⁵⁵ Louis de Ronchaud, *Revue de Paris* 15.6 (1856), quoted in O.C. 17:252–58. Hippolyte Taine, in *Revue de l'instruction publique* 27.3 (1856), quoted in O.C. 17:236–41: “The book of the Bird is but a chapter added to the book of the People. . . . Yesterday, the author called on the opposing social classes to seek reconciliation and harmony and chose as the motto of the future revolution not proud liberty, not leveling equality, but generous fraternity. Today, he is trying to make peace between the birds and Man, by showing that many birds are our servants, that almost all are our friends and allies. . . . and that, even though he is still at a brutal and barbarous stage of his development, the destiny of man is to gather together all living creatures in a vast republic inspired by universal love.”

V

Michelet's natural history works were not only to be about the process by which the entire universe moves through pain and conflict toward the reconciliation of all its related elements in a "higher" unity than the original identity; they were meant to be, in themselves, a demonstration or anticipation of that reconciliation.

As noted earlier, Michelet always claimed to be deeply connected to the source of life, that foundation and origin of everything, in which male and female are not yet separate and distinguished.¹⁵⁶ To that connection he attributed his special gift of historical insight and understanding and his ability to contribute to progress by mediating between the past and the future, like the pilots of the Gironde negotiating the passage from the rough open sea to the domesticated river in *La Mer*.¹⁵⁷ "I feel myself profoundly the son of woman," he wrote in 1845. "At every instant, in my ideas, in my words, to say nothing of gestures and traits, I rediscover my mother [la mère] in myself. The blood of woman is in the sympathy I feel for bygone ages and my tender remembrance of all who are no more."¹⁵⁸ To that source, moreover, as to a kind of *repos du guerrier*, Michelet claims he always returned for recreation and reinvigoration. Woman, he declared, is the cordial that refreshes the man of action.¹⁵⁹

It is as a return to the source that he presents his decision to leave Paris for Brittany after losing his post at the Archives in 1852. "For the first time, after thirty years of teaching and twenty-two at the Archives, I moved out of Paris, my native city, and I sought solitude in the neigh-

¹⁵⁶ See my article, "The Go-Between," *MLN* 89 (1974), at 512–13.

¹⁵⁷ *La Mer*, 86, 89.

¹⁵⁸ *Le Prêtre, la femme et la famille. Les Jésuites*, preface (dated 1845), xxii–xxiii.

¹⁵⁹ "La femme est l'elixir de l'homme." Cf. *Le Prêtre, la Femme et la Famille*: "L'homme moderne, victime de la division du travail, condamné souvent à une spécialité étroite où il perd le sentiment de la vie générale et où il s'atrophie lui-même, aurait besoin de trouver chez lui un esprit jeune et serein, moins spécialisé, mieux équilibré, qui le sortit du métier, et lui rendit le sentiment de la grande et douce harmonie. . . . Il faudrait une femme au foyer pour rafraîchir le front brûlant de l'homme. Cet ouvrier (sommes-nous autre chose dans nos spécialités?), ce forgeron altéré d'avoir trop battu le fer, elle lui rouvrirait la source vive du beau et du bon, de Dieu et de la nature; il boirait un moment aux eaux éternelles. . ." (277–78). See also *L'Amour* (Paris, 1899): The wife restores her husband, "le relève fatigué, le rajeunit, lui rend des ailes. . . . Elle est le prix de la journée, la douceur du soir, le repos. En elle seule il trouve l'oubli. . . . qui chaque jour fait sa renaissance" (11–12, 21). Likewise *Journal* 2:333 (26 June 1857): "l'homme renouvelle son électricité par celle de la femme; la femme est la pile électrique. La femme, même non émue, par son contact féconde l'homme cérébralement, quand il ne s'assouvit pas et réserve son désir. Elle fait l'érection du cerveau: esprit, talent, invention."

borhood of Nantes, at the gates of Brittany and Vendée.”¹⁶⁰ He who had always been a historian sought refuge, an “alibi,” as he put it, in nature. “Time weighed heavily on us, life, work, the accidents and events of the age, the dissolution of a whole intellectual society in which we had lived and which nothing had replaced. Relaxation from the strenuous labors of historical research and writing had been provided by teaching, which was a form of friendship. But rest pauses were now marked by total silence. Where were we to turn for rest and recreation if not to nature?”¹⁶¹

In describing his place of exile, the historian and champion of the Revolution cannot have used its *ancien régime* designation—rather than the newer departmental designations established by the Revolution—without reflection. More than any other of the old French provinces, Brittany and Vendée, the two notorious centers of resistance to the Revolution, had always represented in the historian’s work the opposite of historical progress, appearing as geologically the most “primitive” and historically the most backward parts of France. The famous “Tableau de la France” at the opening of book 3 of the *Histoire de France*, which describes a voyage in time as well as in space and which culminates in Paris, where all provincial particularities are “*aufgehoben*” (to borrow the highly appropriate Hegelian term) in a new, comprehensive, and “higher” identity, begins with Brittany. And, sure enough, the landscape of the Breton exile, as described in the introduction to *L’Oiseau*, has all the characteristics that are associated throughout Michelet’s work with natural origins and the female: liquidity, formlessness, fertility, abundance—characteristics both beneficial and threatening, which may pass unpredictably from the former to the latter, depending on whether the historian wishes to emphasize the need for man to distance himself from nature and transcend her or the need for him to transform and elevate her.

“I went as far as the land would take me,” he recounts, “and did not stop until Nantes, not far from the sea [as always, *la mer*], on a little hill from which one can observe the yellow waters of Brittany mingling in the river Loire with the grey waters of Vendée.”¹⁶² It rained constantly. In the garden of the mid-eighteenth-century house, half an hour distant from Nantes, where the couple settled, and which Michelet takes care to describe as “*d’ancien régime*,”¹⁶³ the damp soil and

¹⁶⁰ *Le Banquet*, O.C. 16:591.

¹⁶¹ *L’Oiseau*, “Introduction: Comment l’auteur fut conduit à l’étude de la nature,” O.C. 17:45.

¹⁶² *L’Oiseau*, introduction, O.C. 17:57.

¹⁶³ Jules Michelet, *Lettres inédites*, 173–74, letter to Alfred Dumesnil, 17 June 1852.

atmosphere produced “vegetables and plants of a thousand kinds growing pell-mell, . . . high and strong grasses . . . a forest of cherry-trees bent under the weight of their red fruit and giving the impression of inexhaustible abundance.” The “luxuriance of the vegetation, the virgin forest of fruit trees,” though not yet represented as threatening, “completely shut in the view,” preventing any vision of the whole or of the order of the whole. In places, “one would have thought oneself at sea.” *La mer* again. “Constantly agitated by winds from the sea, the trees imitated the sound of the waves, their endlessly repeated ebb and flow.”¹⁶⁴ From this low-lying, diffuse, ill-defined, seascape-like landscape, however, “an enormous cedar thrust its trunk upward, a veritable vegetable cathedral. Bare and stripped at its base, it was alive and vigorous where it reached toward the light. . . . The spire must have attained about eighty feet in height.” Thanks to this erect cedar, the low-lying, watery landscape acquired shape and form. “The tree could be seen from a distance of three leagues, from the far bank of the Sèvre nantaise [the river that runs through the low wooded country of Vendée into the Loire at Nantes] and from the woods of Vendée.”¹⁶⁵ Out of the still undifferentiated body of nature herself—the source of life and renewal—the vital Lamarckian shaping principle of progress, order, and law thus emerges into view, visibly recalling the lingam worshiped in the ancient oriental fertility cults Michelet had learned about from his reading of Schlegel, Görres, and Creuzer, and, at the same time, by its striving toward the light (underlined by the spiritual associations of the cathedral and the spire), marking nature’s own aspiration to transcend herself.

The transfer from Brittany in the fall of 1853 to the warmth of the Ligurian coast, at Nervi, near Genoa, is once again represented as a return to nature. Italy, Michelet observes, was his *glorieuse nourrice*—the “glorious wet-nurse who did more than any Frenchman to raise France and me.”¹⁶⁶ One of the most striking of his narratives of rest and recreation—the narrative of his taking the mud baths at Acqui—is situated toward the end of the couple’s stay at Nervi, in 1854, just before they embarked on the writing of the first of the natural history

¹⁶⁴ O.C. 17:58.

¹⁶⁵ O.C. 17:58. Cf. *La Mer*, pt. 1, ch. 8 (“Les Phares”), devoted to the lighthouses that emerge boldly from the waves bringing order and illumination to the dark, formless wastes of the sea. In *La Sorcière*, in the midst of the thick slimy soil of the Middle Ages, which draws the unwary traveler down, “makes him *de main morte*, a dead man, a nothing, a beast,” the free man, representing Liberty, is pictured sitting on a boundary stone, “sur une borne” (*La Sorcière* [Paris: Julliard, 1964], 52, 54).

¹⁶⁶ O.C. 17:62.

books. The historian enters this intensely erotic narrative carefully in his journal, before incorporating it a decade later into *La Montagne*. The earth, he recounts, was first molded around his body. "A strange disguise. Yet nothing that should really surprise me. Shall I not be in the earth in a while? . . . Is not our cradle, the earth, in which the race was born, also a cradle for rebirth?" Soon he feels "an indeterminate well-being. A condition close to that of dream . . . the maternal dream." There is still a capacity for self-awareness, however. Then "every idea disappeared as I became profoundly absorbed. The only thought remaining to me was terra mater. I could feel her very well, full of tenderness and compassion, warming her wounded child. From outside me? Inside me also. For she penetrated with her vivifying spirits, entered into me and mingled with me, insinuated her soul into me. My identification with her was gradually becoming complete. I could no longer distinguish myself from her." Finally, he found that his face, which alone was not buried in the mud, importuned him. "The buried body was happy, and it was me. Left out of the earth, the head complained, it was not me. . . . So intense was this marriage—more than a marriage!—between me and the earth. It would be better to call it an *exchange of natures*. I was Earth and she was a man. She had taken on my infirmity, my sin. I, in becoming Earth, had taken on life, warmth, and youth."¹⁶⁷

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that the contribution of Mme Michelet to Michelet's natural history works—despite her tendency to sentimental moralizing and excessive, often trivial detail—was considerably more important than has long been thought. It extended well beyond the passages placed by Michelet between quotation marks. Those quotation marks were meant to signal passages entirely written by Athénais that Michelet had incorporated without change into the finished work, but much more of what she contributed was reworked, appropriated, and assimilated into the historian's text without acknowledgment. The relation of man to "nature," of the "male" to the "female," and of the educated bourgeois professor to the untutored young wife by whom he acknowledged that he was regularly, "tous les soirs rafraîchi et renouvelé," is thus not only a major theme of the natural history writings, it is inscribed in their very form and composition.

In dedicating the 1867 edition of *L'Oiseau* to Athénais, Michelet asserted unambiguously that all the natural history books were the product of their common labors and that it was she who had led him

¹⁶⁷ *La Montagne*, 112–14.

to write on natural history in the first place. "I dedicate to you what is your own. . . . You alone inspired them. Without you, I should have continued to pursue the hard path of human history, relentlessly following my furrow. You alone prepared them. It was from your hands that I received the rich harvest of nature. And you alone crowned them, placing on the finished works the sacred flower that blesses them."¹⁶⁸ A year later, in *La Montagne* (1868), Athénais herself publicly laid claim to the role Michelet had ascribed to her. The natural history series had been initiated by her, she wrote, and it was Michelet who followed on.¹⁶⁹ Later, a more precise account of the collaboration was provided by Michelet in his will and by Athénais in a document entitled "Revendication des Droits de Mme Michelet pour sa collaboration aux ouvrages de M. Michelet, *L'Oiseau, L'Insecte, La Mer, La Montagne*" (Paris: Typographie Georges Chamerot, 1876), which she had published after Michelet's death in response to a suit brought by Alfred Dumesnil and his family challenging her right to the royalties from her husband's publications.¹⁷⁰ "Our entire fortune was acquired in the course of my second marriage," Michelet declares; "my wife contributed to it not only by running our household affairs economically, but actively, through a continuous collaboration with me. She went over the proofs of all my books and she did the preparatory work for my natural history books (*The Bird, The Insect, The Sea, The Mountain*) by reading, taking notes, etc. She even wrote substantial portions of these books."

Athénais's version is essentially the same. First, she explains, she corrected the proofs of all her husband's history writings, read and took notes for him, and helped him with his correspondence.

The taste that I had developed for natural history from living in the country as a child had remained so lively in me that even while serving as my husband's secretary, I still found time for those favorite studies. I had formed the plan of writing a series of little children's books: I started with *The Bird*. One day, reading through my first attempt, my husband was carried away by it and said: "Let's do it together." And that is how it was done. . . . My role in the collaborative enterprise was as follows: I did the first reading and went to the libraries, especially the library of the Natural History Museum, to select and copy down the passages we needed from rare books and pamphlets that could not be taken out. At the same time, I studied the

¹⁶⁸ O.C. 17:45.

¹⁶⁹ *La Montagne*, 227.

¹⁷⁰ See on this the invaluable study by Edward Kaplan, "La Collaboration de Michelet et de Mme Michelet dans *L'Oiseau*," O.C. 17:187–206.

collections there and spent hours with living animals, which even in captivity, were an invaluable resource for us. When I came home, I arranged my notes and observations in order and little by little the book got written. *The Bird*, our first-born, was easy. It was the creature of a movement of our hearts, an hour of ecstasy. But it was harder with *The Insect* and *The Sea*. I had to do a lot of work.¹⁷¹

The arena of the couple's collaboration turns out, in fact, to have been an arena of uninterrupted competition and conflict, as Michelet imposed his style, his formulations, his concerns, his ideas on the looser, more anecdotal, and sentimental texts of his young wife.

Michelet himself reports signs of what he calls irritation on Athénais's part at the way he was participating in their common enterprise. In September 1855, he notes in his journal, with apparent surprise, that she seemed displeased by what he calls "le haut crescendo moral" he was imparting to the subject matter.¹⁷² In fact the trouble went deeper than Michelet suspected. Mme Michelet had already confided to a family friend that she hoped her husband would soon resume work on the *Histoire de France*, because "once he is embarked on that, he will have no thought for anything else. I will be responsible for correcting the proofs of our book on the birds and I shall try to restore everything that he deleted. But, my dear Sir, that will not be easy now, for he tore up all the passages written by me for which he substituted his own work. Still, I shall certainly not leave his in place, if I can get rid of them and find my own again."¹⁷³ From Mme Michelet's point of view, the problem was not anything particular about her husband's contribution to what was supposed to be their common work, it was that he was taking it over, assimilating her contribution into his. As she saw matters, in Michelet's reconciliation of nature and history, the original and the evolved, the ancient and the modern, it was only too clear which of the two was to have the leading role.

Athénais's dissatisfaction and resentment did not diminish. In October 1868, having read through parts of her husband's journal, she noted down her displeasure at the cool, clinical approach he took to everything, especially their relationship. "The cold clear look of an enemy. Everything is noted, underlined in black and red, attitudes, words, conversations, even what goes on inside, but everything is skewed. It's a veritable study in anatomy." And she goes on to reproach

¹⁷¹ O.C. 17:189.

¹⁷² *Journal* 2:293, 12 September 1855.

¹⁷³ Letter from Eugène Noël to Alfred Dumesnil, reporting a conversation with Mme Michelet, 26 September 1855, quoted in E. Kaplan's Introduction, O.C. 17:29–30.

him for not having truly sought to emancipate her and for not having allowed her to be herself. Instead, she had to rise each morning at four to correct the proofs of his books. “I ought to have remained more myself,” she concluded, “I ought not to have been so self-effacing before your tastes, your wishes, your ways.”¹⁷⁴

In reworking *L'Oiseau* and cutting back Mme Michelet's part in it, Michelet had the full approval of his son-in-law, Alfred Dumesnil, who was also a historian and whom he regarded as his spiritual son (“le fils de ma pensée”).¹⁷⁵ Always disdainful of the woman Michelet took as his second wife, Dumesnil mercilessly exposed the sentimentality of her writing.¹⁷⁶ He was appalled, he told a friend, by the “forme lyrico-guindée” of the book's early chapters. “But as M. Michelet exterminates more and more of his wife's manuscript, he takes off, discovers his own truth, his own tone, the master stands revealed. *Au miaulement du matou a succédé le chant du coq* [The crowing of the cock takes the place of the mewling of the cat]. Monsieur Michelet writes wonderfully well about the bird as purifier, as instrument of the beneficent chemistry by which the earth is purged of insects and putrescent corpses. But what a sublime, warm-blooded, full-toned, clear-sighted bird is he himself, who was able to extract such generous movements and victorious sounds from a hotchpotch of nauseating notes and insipid compositions!”¹⁷⁷ The most polite comment he can make to the pair, he adds, is “for the sake of the animals, stop trying to marry your two voices.” Go instead and write separate books.

In his natural history books Michelet succeeded in combining poetry and description of natural phenomena—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say poetry and moral and political reflections inspired by the natural world. In fact these neglected texts contain some of the finest poetic writing of the period. But it was Michelet's work, the achievement of a powerfully individual writer who aspired, with typical nineteenth-century grandiosity, to contain not only “les deux sexes

¹⁷⁴ *Journal* 4:395–96, 19 October 1868, note.

¹⁷⁵ *Lettres inédites*, 25–26, to Dr. Hahnemann, 3 January 1842. Dumesnil was the son of Mme Dumesnil, a woman Michelet had loved passionately, perhaps without physical fulfillment. He had also been his student and became the husband of the historian's beloved only daughter, Adèle.

¹⁷⁶ According to Dumesnil, the short autobiography of Athénais, which Michelet retained in the introduction to *L'Oiseau*, was “un vrai ramonage de sous-maîtresse” [the scrap pile of an assistant madam], written “en style miaulard” [in the whining style]. “Childhood memories of a dog called Azor, a cat called Mocquo, a rabbit called (I forget its name) recounted by a person who has lost her memory” (letter to Eugène Noël, 27 September 1855, quoted by Kaplan, O.C. 17:30–31).

¹⁷⁷ Letter from Alfred Dumesnil to Eugène Noël, 29 September 1855, quoted by Kaplan, introduction, O.C. 17:31–32.

de l'esprit" but the entire universe in himself. It was not the result of an equal collaboration between the two Michelets, as he liked to imply.¹⁷⁸ Athénais was never more than an indispensable research assistant, and far from serving as a demonstration of the "happy republic inspired by universal love" that it was humanity's destiny, according to Michelet, to bring about, the collaboration of husband and wife was an occasion of domination, division, acrimony, and resentment. Nature was, after all, no alibi for history.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ "Cette oeuvre," he wrote of *L'Oiseau*, "a . . . le caractère d'être venue comme vient toute vraie création vivante. Elle s'est faite à la chaleur d'une douce incubation. Et elle s'est rencontrée une et harmonique, justement parce qu'elle venait de deux principes différents . . ." (*L'Oiseau*, O.C. 17:46).

¹⁷⁹ Athénais Michelet subsequently succeeded (thanks to her husband's name and reputation?) in carving out a minor literary career for herself. Her *Mémoires d'une enfant* appeared in 1867, and were immediately translated into English. There was a second edition in 1868. The year 1904 saw the publication of *Les Chats*, with introduction and notes by the great historian Gabriel Monod, who had been Michelet's student and was also the author of the first major study of his work. A second edition was published in 1924. In 1871, she completed a manuscript expressly for the English market (it deals at length with the English garden and the Scottish Highlands) with the title *Nature, or the Poetry of Earth and Sea* (London and Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1872). Translated by the translator of the other natural history books, H. Davenport Adams, and profusely illustrated by Hector Giacomelli (1822–1904), who had also illustrated the other natural history books, this work apparently enjoyed some success; there were new editions in 1880 and 1884. In the opening sentence, Mme Michelet referred to "this Book, which I have attempted unaided." Though the influence, if not the actual hand, of Michelet is inescapable (even in the claim that "this modest exploration of Nature . . . is at the same time, an exploration or examination of myself" [xiii]), it is equally clearly not by Michelet. It often tries to evoke the same moods and uses a familiar vocabulary, but the range is narrow: between gentle, slightly religious melancholy, and delight at the charm and playfulness of nature. It is obvious that Mme Michelet did not have her husband's literary talent or imagination. She was no George Sand or George Eliot. But it is by no means obvious that the couple's collaboration would have been more even or successful if she had been more talented.

