

History, Nature and National Identity in France, 1800–30

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In a seminal essay, Lionel Gossman has described how the relationship between literature and history did not become truly problematic until the close of the eighteenth century.¹ Until that point it was generally agreed that the historian – as opposed to the scholar or the antiquarian – wrote literature, a form of writing whose effectiveness was judged in relation to rhetoric rather than in terms of the production of new knowledge. However, with the emergence of Romanticism traditional definitions of literature and of history were revised and genre boundaries were re-negotiated. Literature, increasingly identified with poetry, was henceforth associated with the articulation of a privileged vision of the real. History, although not yet formally organised as a profession, drew on the model of the natural sciences and redefined itself as an epistemological project, a project whose objective was the production of new knowledge.² Indeed, many nineteenth-century French historians were convinced that it was thanks to their labours that the past could at last fully be known.

The division between history and literature was articulated by means of a series of binary oppositions: reason and imagination, truth and falsehood, reality and fiction, science and art, intellect and feeling. In reality, however, the surface sundering of literature from history was accompanied by deeper synergies, moments of recognition and memorable examples of cross-fertilisation. Balzac's totalising ambitions in writing *La Comédie humaine* [The Human Comedy] encompassed his desire to become the synthetic historian of his times. In his writing, literature and history collaborated in order to reveal the complex truth of post-revolutionary French society. Historical

novelists, for their part, rejected the charge of inauthenticity and defended the serious nature of their own investigations of past reality. Alfred de Vigny argued that it was legitimate for the creative writer to distort the factual record when what was at stake was the disclosure of a deeper moral truth. According to Vigny, the novelist had a higher ambition than fidelity to fact; the imagination transformed the historical data in order to say something significant about human nature in general.³ Literature possessed a symbolic dimension which meant that it was truer than history.

At the same time the divorce of literature from history paradoxically opened the door to thinking about the historical process itself on an analogy with literary creation. Vigny memorably described history as a novel whose author was the people. In what sense was the unfolding of history a form of art? How could the people be simultaneously the author and the collective subject of history? Historians looked to the natural sciences for interpretative models but at the same time some viewed history itself a process of collective self-creation which was amenable to explanation in aesthetic terms.⁴ History possessed its own beauty, and the meaning of history lay less in the actions of individuals than in collective processes which in their unfolding testified to the outworking of a higher, metaphysical principle. A study of chronology and succession was thus insufficient. The truth of the past lay elsewhere.

Many believed that it was preserved in collective representations of social reality, in the myths, religions, cosmogonies and genealogical narratives which philological science from Vico to Creuzer and Grimm was at last deciphering. In this spirit nineteenth-century history set out to be scientific, analytical, rational, demythologising. However, it remained open to literature in so far as it also aimed to recreate, to reconstruct a lost past. On the one hand, the historian wielded the scalpel, dissected the past. On the other, historians as different as François Guizot and Jules Michelet recognised that in the act of writing the distance between self and object was abolished, since sympathetic identification was essential for the act of recreation.⁵ In these circumstances it does not come as a surprise to find historians acknowledging the role that literary models played in determining their career ambitions (the influence of Walter Scott often being crucial). French Romantic historians did not feel constrained to restrict their output to works which corresponded to a narrow definition of their discipline. Prosper de Barante wrote a form of narrative history which reflected literary models.⁶ Augustin Thierry, best known as the greatest historian of the Norman Conquest, moved away from the accepted norms of historical writing when he published his successful *Récits des temps mérovingiens* (1840) [Tales of Merovingian Times]. In some instances history appeared unable to accommodate the desire for totality and synthesis which animated a rising generation. Thus Pierre-Simon Ballanche and Edgar Quinet, who had reputations as philosophical interpreters of the past, turned to literature and found within an expanded definition of epic poetry the creative freedom that they needed

simultaneously to re-imagine the past and to offer prophetic glimpses of the future. The French Romantics transgressed the boundaries of their new science of history. Michelet's *Histoire de France* [History of France] (1833–69) possessed the symbolic power, the magnitude and the energy of an epic. Gossman has emphasised the extent to which Michelet operated on the margins of literature and history, producing works of a mixed, hybrid character, texts such as *La Sorcière* [The Witch] (1862), which challenge our sense of the relationship between literary and historical truth.

In the present article, my concern is with the different constructions of national identity produced in the first half of the nineteenth century and with the ways in which these definitions of national belonging were mediated through historical writing and literary production.⁷ In the wake of the Revolution, the contending forces of liberalism and traditionalism proposed alternative definitions of the values identified with France and Frenchness, and in both cases history and literature were employed to validate competing projects of national reconstruction. Core values were located in the national past and inscribed in the French landscape. Counter-revolutionaries and liberals alike looked to the past for images of coherence and unity.

Nation-building had been central to the revolutionary project begun in 1789. In *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état* [What is the Third Estate?], Sieyès had effectively excluded the nobility and the clergy from his definition of the national community. Henceforward the nation and the Third Estate were to be one. Revolutionary nationalism defined itself as a modernising force, embodying the will to break radically from the past, to regenerate society and create a 'new man'. It was a centralising, egalitarian doctrine which destroyed not only the institutions of the Ancien Régime but also the local identities which had united civil society. However, the descent of the Revolution into repression and violence in the name of virtue compromised the ideals of the liberal Enlightenment on which it had been founded. In the post-revolutionary period liberals and conservatives disagreed about the meaning of 1789 but they shared the view that the Revolution had produced a dangerously anarchic sensibility which had dissolved the social bond.⁸ The legacy of the Revolution was that of a divided nation. It was necessary to rethink the assumptions that underlay French national identity.

In the post-revolutionary period, conservative Catholic writers and thinkers were drawn to representations of national identity which foregrounded monarchical sentiment, local attachments, the countryside, hierarchy and traditionalist religion. Reactionary thinkers such as Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre typified this approach. De Maistre mocked written constitutions as misguided attempts by individuals to alter the divinely instituted patterns of collective life. He repudiated individualism, which he viewed as subversive of society in general. Industrial capitalism was rejected because it promoted change and undermined traditional forms of social organisation. The traditionalists revered the past because in their eyes it represented permanence and

repetition. They contrasted the failings of representative institutions with the contribution made by intermediary groups and associations. What mattered most was the restoration of natural inequalities and hierarchies, the eradication of the democratic spirit and its rationalist foundation. De Bonald aspired to a culture of stasis. He valorised the family not the individual, the countryside not the town.⁹ The Jacobins had simultaneously promoted the notion of Paris as the rational, bureaucratic centre of command and the belief that virtue resided in the humble lives of the peasantry. Jacobin rhetoric had insisted on the indivisibility of the nation, and in practice this had meant fighting federalism on all fronts, waging civil war in the Vendée, crushing the insurrection in Lyons. Conservative Catholics wanted to rebuild national identity by reducing the role of Paris as administrative centre and by re-establishing a vision of France composed of distinctive provinces all united in their loyalty to the king. This argument in favour of provincial autonomy was often made by way of an appeal to an idealised, pre-revolutionary past. Paris was denounced as atheistic, depraved and turbulent, while the countryside was praised for revering God and respecting the family. The future lay in decentralisation and the restoration of the privileges and customary rights of the rural nobility.

The counter-revolutionary critics' assault on the values of modernity rested on the assumption that the true spirit of France was identical to the France of the Ancien Régime. In their view it was the Revolution which had sundered the nation from its founding origin in the monarchy. The execution of Louis XVI had cut France loose from its anchorage in the transcendent, divine order. National identity was part of God's providential plan for humankind and was not something that mere humans could invent or reinvent. In the eyes of counter-revolutionaries, only the restoration of social norms could reverse the process of disintegration. A programme designed to rebuild the moral fabric of society was put forward by Chateaubriand in his enormously influential *Génie du christianisme* [Genius of Christianity] (1802). His aim in this book was to persuade his contemporaries that the individual's restless search for fulfilment was in reality the displacement of a quest for God which Christianity alone could fully answer. His stance was in some ways unorthodox and self-contradictory – he included within the *Génie* his short story, 'René', in which he ran the risk of making the combination of assertive individualism and melancholic *ennui* appear dangerously seductive. Nonetheless, his intention was to convince a generation, disillusioned by the events of the Revolution, that only the Christian religion offered the tormented soul a resting point and a purpose in life. What matters for our present discussion is that Chateaubriand's Catholicism had a decidedly national dimension. The *Génie du christianisme* was ostensibly an aesthetic defence of the Christian religion but it was also a retrieval of the national past. Chateaubriand proposed a poetics of memory and remembrance which amounted to an appropriation of the historical field by the conservative consciousness which, having reclaimed history as an area for the

activity of divine providence, proceeded to privilege certain moments in the nation's history – the crusades, the heroic deeds of Saint-Louis – and recommend them as suitable subjects to be represented within a new construction of national culture. His exploration of the past led him to develop a sociological aesthetic which envisaged cultures as entities which nourished themselves on their collective pasts. Chateaubriand accepted that political theory on its own was unlikely to effect the stabilisation of post-revolutionary French society. Social integration involved feeling and moral sentiment, and the resources of literature and history were called upon to support the conservative cause. In this end, Chateaubriand was remarkably successful; the early poetic output of Victor Hugo and Alphonse de Lamartine testified to the extent of his influence on the new generation of poets which emerged in France during the Restoration.

For Chateaubriand, however, it was not just France's role in history but also the geographical space inhabited by the nation which had to be reclaimed by the Counter Revolution. In this he was particularly effective because, unlike a dry philosopher such as de Bonald, he remained deeply marked by Rousseau's awareness of the sacredness of nature. He struck a chord with his readers by suggesting that the human response to the beauties of the natural world was a way of connecting with the awesome power of the creator. External nature resonated with the Christian sensibility. However, the response to nature was also directly related to national identity. For Chateaubriand, patriotism was a complex of emotions, private and public, in which recollections of the countryside mingled with thoughts of family history and moments of national greatness. In this context, the countryside was invested with meaning and became a repository of tradition, of royalist and catholic values. In order to make his point Chateaubriand included in the *Génie* a number of tableaux which evoked the cycle of the seasons and represented the great feasts of the Christian calendar. The superstitions of popular religion were celebrated, not mocked. Religion that lay at the centre of the idealised village community provided the focus for national belonging. Nature revealed the presence of the divine, but landscape, shaped by preceding generations of Frenchmen, testified to the values of labour, order, hierarchy and subservience. In 'René', Chateaubriand alluded to the innocence of rural ways. However, he did not travel very far down the road of the pastoral. On the one hand, commitment to royalism involved an appreciation of natural beauty, a feeling for the specificity of the French provinces (including the landscape of Chateaubriand's native Brittany), and a belief in the moral soundness of the idealised village community; on the other, the countryside aroused memories of the Great Fear of 1789, of the rural population in revolt. Conservatives held the Enlightenment responsible for releasing the destructive impulses of natural man, and they feared that in the absence of religion the peasantry might once again become a force of anarchy in the land. The counter-revolutionaries used the

urban–rural opposition in order to attack the centralised state. but this did not mean that they held that peasant communities were inherently virtuous. Virtue, in their eyes, was more accurately understood in terms of resistance to the Republic. Virtue was to be found among the blood and tears of the prisons of 1793. It did not automatically flower in the countryside. The countryside that they valorised was a countryside organised, controlled, policed by religion.

The case of Chateaubriand illustrates how the conservative vision of the national past rejected the notion of change as progress. What mattered for traditionalists was the recovery of an enduring national essence, the reassertion of values which, during the revolutionary decade, had been preserved by those counter-revolutionaries who lived in exile beyond the physical frontiers of France. The challenge for early nineteenth-century liberals was to provide a vision of French national identity which reconnected isolated individuals with community but which rejected the counter-revolutionary values of traditional authority, hierarchy and stasis. On some points the positions of the liberals and the traditionalists were not too far apart. Both groups regretted that during the Revolution social cohesion had been lost, both blamed the violence of the Revolution on the emergence of self-regarding, atomised individuals who placed subjective freedom above all other considerations. However, whereas the traditionalists emphasised the impurity of the revolutionary crisis and urged an improbable restoration of a bankrupt social order, the liberals sought to distinguish between 1789 and 1793 and to reconcile a post-revolutionary definition of individualism with a redefined sense of social belonging, the locus of which was the bourgeois nation. Both groups wanted to rebuild the nation. Neither had any truck with the revolutionary belief that in order to reorganise society the past had to be rejected in favour of abstract, universal principles. However, post-revolutionary liberals were constrained to re-appropriate the past differently from the traditionalists, who used the reference to the past in order to defend a regressive, broadly theocratic model of social life. Liberals wrote a different history, one which endorsed a different definition of French national identity. Liberals espoused change, not stasis, and they rewrote national history as a progressive narrative which both validated subjective autonomy and guaranteed collective cohesion. The collective past was reinterpreted as a grand narrative of national purpose, and the Revolution of 1789 was defended as the culmination of a long period of struggle. History was called upon to fulfil an integrative function, demonstrating to individuals that they belonged to a community which somehow remained the same despite being embroiled within the dynamic processes of change over the centuries. The liberal historian related how French identity came into being, endured and ultimately came to embody the best in humankind by combining individual rights with social oneness. The hope was that the reader of the historical text would identify with this developing image of Frenchness.

The liberal historians dreamt of a reconciliation between the people and the crown in the context of representative institutions which guaranteed essential individual freedoms. Correctly interpreted, history demonstrated that France, since the establishment of the Communes, was moving towards the constitutional arrangements that were eventually put in place in 1830. France progressed, but French identity, and the key national characteristics, somehow remained the same. 1793 had been an aberration, whereas 1789 had been necessary. Whether they wrote about the history of the Revolution or the history of France in general, the liberal historians produced texts which proclaimed the existence of a unified national self which was itself inscribed within the grand movement of world history. The present could assimilate the past and yet be validated by it, because the past corresponded to the progressive actualisation of freedom, justice and reason. The national spirit was understood as a mode of expression of the divine. The liberals thus had an answer for the traditionalists' reading of the Revolution in terms of sacrifice and divine punishment.

When it came to the countryside, most liberals agreed with the traditionalists that Jacobin centralisation was a bad thing and that localism was a virtue. Both groups considered that the commune was an essential element of social organisation. However, whereas the Catholic right viewed the rural commune as the embodiment of resistance to change, the liberals saw localism as both a check on central power and the site for change, education and development. The liberals' overall case was that stability in the life of the nation depended not on the imposition of received truth but on the reasoned discussion of alternative possibilities for action. It was nevertheless a commonplace for liberals, eager to witness the industrial transformation of France, to brand rural areas as backward and almost foreign, lands ripe for internal colonisation. Could liberals somehow follow the example of the conservatives and discover their cherished values in the French countryside or in the soul of the peasantry? When it came to literary production, the conservatives had the advantage of starting out with the better plot lines: the resistance of the rebel *chouans* to revolutionary authority had genuine dramatic potential and caught the attention of novelists such as Balzac and Barbey d'Aurevilly.¹⁰ Novelists with progressive sympathies – Eugène Sue, for example – were more readily drawn to the modern urban environment (although we should never underestimate the immense impact made by the rural novels of George Sand, set in her native Berry). French prose fiction of the Romantic period often used the rural-urban contrast as a structuring opposition in texts which took the form of a *Bildungsroman*. However, such texts tended to privilege the city as end-point, whether the personal journey resulted in success or disillusionment. Numerous Romantic writers turned to landscape, constructed as value-laden nature, understood as the visible expression of a divine inwardness. But it was difficult to connect this reading of nature as the outward form of spirit with the vision of history as dynamic

progress. Only rarely did a writer successfully unite the two: one example would be Victor Hugo in his poem, 'Le Satyre' [The Satyr]. The liberal vision of history validated bourgeois individualism and it had little time for either nature or the rural population.

The alliance of liberal politics with liberal economics meant that history, the realm of freedom, was constituted by the negation of matter. The historical process in general terms was understood as a liberation from, and a mastering of, the natural world. National history was emancipatory in character, since it described the overthrow of feudalism and the liberation of the individual from overweening forms of external authority. World history was likewise interpreted as a form of liberation struggle; it described the general movement of civilisation from East to West, from India to Europe, in the course of which human beings progressively freed themselves from the domination of external nature and asserted their freedom as self-conscious individuals. Ideas were the stuff of history. Liberal history was not inclined to valorise nature or privilege matter.¹¹

However, while subjective autonomy was authorised by history, subjective freedom on its own was not enough. Ultimately, self-understanding rested on a narrative reconstruction which included not just the human past but also, in some way, the natural world. We can see this shift at work in the writings of Edgar Quinet, who began as a liberal but whose thought developed into a form of republican nationalism. Quinet argued that a form of pre-established harmony existed between a community and its environment. This did not simply mean that physical nature influenced, perhaps largely determined, the form taken by human societies. Quinet went much further and contended that civilisations actualised divine thoughts that lay dormant in the unconscious world of nature.¹² His approach encouraged the search for analogies between history and nature and suggested that the organic metaphor was an appropriate tool for understanding social change. More importantly, by representing a civilisation as a totality within which external nature and human endeavour collaborated, he suggested that history, without nature, was in a sense incomplete. In practice this meant that each national entity inhabited a particular landscape. Landscape mysteriously yielded up a meaning which appeared to confirm the historical trajectory subsequently followed by a given collective entity. Neither biology nor environment fully determined the defining characteristics of a nation. While the liberal historians sought to capture the truth of the past in narrative, Quinet was suggesting that this truth, unfolding in time and re-presented by the historian, was also mirrored in the spectacle of timeless nature. Both were mysteriously organised by God.

The foregoing examples have attempted to illustrate how forces on the right and on the left in post-revolutionary France endeavoured to construct a unified national self in discourse. The Revolution had defined the role of France in terms of the actualisation of universal values. Its immediate successors

recognised that the past could not easily be denied: it weighed on the present. I have shown how during this early post-revolutionary period there emerged competing readings of the past, interpretations which, joined with alternative views of the nation's relationship to its environment, corresponded to competing definitions of national identity. However, neither the liberal nor the traditionalist view of national identity achieved enduring intellectual hegemony. During the 1830s and 1840s, both were largely supplanted by more radical socialist and republican constructions of the nation, which placed greater emphasis on the role of 'the people', conceived as the agent which in reality was forging French national identity.

The texts which I have been discussing, whether by historians, philosophers, novelists or poets, are all about origins, about beginnings; and they all also, implicitly, raise issues about endings, projecting hopes and fears concerning the collective future onto the canvas of history and the map of nature. History and fiction, in the 1830s, are overlapping domains. I have shown how competing visions of the national past inspired novelists and poets to develop similar themes in their work. There remains the question of the status of the historical writing that I have been examining.

I have already alluded to the extent to which the liberal historians, while redefining history as science, also remained attached to the understanding of history as art. What, in the final analysis, for writers and readers of the period, differentiated historical narratives from fictional narratives?¹³ Was it enough to reply that in the former the referent was lived human experience while in the latter the subject matter was an invention? Ultimately this distinction proved to be unsatisfactory, not so much because both history and fiction produced an illusion of reality by using inherited conventions and cultural codes, but because the underlying thrust of Romantic writing was not so much to imitate external reality as to disclose the presence of the infinite in the finite. Romantic Platonism¹⁴ encouraged the privileging of eternity over time, of the ideal over the real, of the spiritual over the material. Neither the historian nor the literary artist was primarily concerned with mimesis. The Romantics did not simply re-present past reality, they reimagined it in order to endow it with a coherence which endorsed emerging re-definitions of national identity. This textualisation of past reality did not turn it into fiction, did not deprive it of its factual content. Rather, by investing history as progress with a metaphysical meaning, a meaning which served a broader political purpose by legitimating national identity, the Romantic historians undermined the sense that history and literature corresponded to different orders of reality. History functioned as a discourse of truth, authorising action and confirming models of social belonging, but it shared with literature an inescapable point of anchorage in the symbolic.

Notes

1 Lionel Gossman, 'History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification' in *Between Literature and History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 229–56.

2 See Sophie-Anne Leterrier, *Le XIXe siècle historien* (Paris, 1997).

3 Alfred de Vigny, 'De la vérité dans l'art', published as a preface to *Cinq-Mars* (1826).

4 See Emery Neff, *The Poetry of History: The Contribution of Literature and Literary Scholarship to the Writing of History since Voltaire* (New York, 1947); Peter Gay, *Style in History* (London, 1975).

5 See Ceri Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism* (London, 1993).

6 See Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio* (Cambridge, 1984).

7 See E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nation and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des identités nationales* (Paris, 1999).

8 See Ceri Crossley, 'History as a Principle of Legitimation in France (1820–48)' in Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Writing National Histories* (London, 1999), pp. 49–56.

9 For a detailed discussion of Bonald, see Ceri Crossley, 'Town, Country and the Circulation of Revolutionary Energy: The Cases Of Bonald And Michelet' in Alan Forest and Peter Jones (eds), *Reshaping France: Town, Country and Region during the French Revolution* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 243–53.

10 See Claudie Bernard, *Le Chouan romanesque* (Paris, 1989).

11 This of course did not mean that they were not interested in nature. Thiers, for example, devoted much time and effort to an unpublished philosophical treatise with the title *L'Harmonie universelle: certitude, concordance et succession*. See J. B. T. Bury and R. P. Tombs, *Thiers 1797–1877: A Political Life* (London, 1986), pp. 158–59.

12 See Crossley, 'Divine Intention and Human Meaning: Some Aspects of Romantic Geography in France' in Colin Smethurst (ed.), *Romantic Geographies* (Glasgow, 1996), pp. 1–11.

13 See Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge, 1986).

14 See Michel Brix, *Le Romantisme français: esthétique platonicienne et modernité littéraire* (Louvain, 1999).

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