

Lamartine's Popular Novels: Between Literature and Politics

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Asked to name a writer in conjunction with the so-called popular novel in France during the second half of the nineteenth century, one would hardly think of mentioning Alphonse de Lamartine, the poet whose first book of verse in 1820 launched French romanticism on its way, and such a well-mannered, in-bred aristocrat that the French satirist Béranger coined the word 'desaristocratization' in cynic reference to Lamartine's growing liberalism. Yet, from the very beginning – the preface to his 1820 *Méditations poétiques* is proof of that – Lamartine did think of himself as a writer whose specific calling was to bring literature closer to the ordinary and to the human heart. Initially, this claim served only a literary purpose, as it helped characterize and justify the novelty of the poet's inspiration. Later on, around 1849, it took on a more political meaning when Lamartine started to write fiction in prose in order to redefine his public image and reach a larger audience. The climax was reached in 1850 and 1851 when Lamartine made his first steps into the field of 'popular literature' with the publication of two novels in prose, written specifically for the lower classes about the lower classes: *Geneviève, Histoire d'une servante* (1850) and *Le Tailleur de pierres de Saint-Point* (1851).

Unlike, for instance, Eugène Sue, whose *Mystères de Paris* published in 1842–43, had been by far the most widely read piece of popular literature of the time, Lamartine did not deal in these novels with the working classes in industrialized, urban settings. Rather, *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres* both feature individuals in traditional occupations, who live in rural, even remote, settings. Nor did Lamartine represent the lower classes as the help-

less and degenerate victims of an oppressive and unjust social order. While his novels appeal heavily to the reader's feelings of sympathy and compassion – a common feature among popular novels – Geneviève's and Claude's sufferings are of a very personal nature, often brought upon them by themselves. Hence, revolutionary or socialist views have no place in Lamartine's novels, which glorify instead personal abnegation and unlimited resignation to God's will.

Written in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution, during the difficult years of the Second Republic, when bonapartism was again a major political force, these popular novels were one of Lamartine's many attempts to preserve the Republic and a crude, topical, response to his heightened sense of political and social urgency. As a result, *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres* occupy a very marginal place among his literary writings and have been largely ignored, even by specialists, and quite understandably. Offering little of the picturesque and drama that one finds, for instance, in *Graziella*, Lamartine's largely autobiographical novella published in 1849, these stories aim at little else besides a systematic exemplification of Christian virtues. Here, a stern and unyielding didacticism prevails over almost any other consideration, in a professed effort to be accessible to uneducated readers. Yet I would contend that *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres* deserve attention for precisely that reason. Indeed, these novels offer a unique viewpoint from which to apprehend who Lamartine was in 1850, how his Christian humanitarianism, challenged by the street violence of June 1848, was responding to the fear of popular insurrection, and how his political and literary priorities came together at this crucial moment of his life. While many major studies of Lamartine – by Henri Guillemin in the 1940s, Christian Croisille in the 70s and Paul Bénichou in the 80s – have carefully reviewed this period of his life, their assessment of *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres* have yielded little beyond the traditional perception of them as minor, circumstantial, and overall rather unfortunate outgrowths of his poetic genius. It is this particular understanding of Lamartine's literary evolution that I would like to challenge here.

1849 marked a critical point in Lamartine's political and literary career.¹ A member of the French Academy since 1829 and a member of the French Parliament since 1833, he had become in 1848 one of the most influential public figures of his time. His fame peaked just before and immediately after the Revolution of 1848, when, as a member of the Provisional Government of the new Republic, he attempted to achieve a peaceful and harmonious transition from the Monarchy to the Republic. The working-class insurrection in Paris of June 1848, which ended the 1848 Revolution and inaugurated a period of reaction, resulted in Lamartine's disgrace in the eyes of both the conservatives and the liberals, and put an end to his credibility as a moderator. Lamartine was blamed for the failure of the democratic regime and for

his inability to keep the lower classes under control. His popularity declined rapidly. While in the National Assembly elections of April 1848, he had been the most popular candidate with more than a million votes in his favour, only 18,000 persons voted for him in the presidential elections of December 1848, which were won by Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon's nephew. With his political future looking suddenly bleak, Lamartine worked almost obsessively at keeping the lines of communication open with the voters, most particularly those from the lower classes. He tried to redefine his image as a writer, publishing for the first time works in prose that were not political essays or historical writings, but more or less autobiographical fictions, symbolic of his desire to make himself better and more widely known: *Confidences* (1849), which included the story of *Graziella*, and *Raphael* (1849). Similarly, between 1850 and 1851 he frantically launched one after the other three periodicals, whose titles are indicative enough of his determination to address the lower classes: *Le Conseiller du peuple*, *Les Foyers du peuple* and *Le Civilisateur*. *Geneviève: histoire d'une servante* which was first serialized in *Le Conseiller du peuple* before being published separately, and *Le Tailleur de pierres de Saint-Point* were part of the same effort. Besides serving as platforms for Lamartine's Christian proselytizing, these novels also advertized, like the periodicals, albeit to a lesser extent, Lamartine's previous achievements as a liberal by alluding to almost every social reform that he had defended as a parliamentarian from 1833 through 1848.

These new journalistic and literary endeavors were met with scepticism, if not disdain. Quite remarkable, indeed, is how fast and apparently unstoppable Lamartine's political decline was. Within a few months, the man whose nationally recognized authority and influence had guaranteed the social peace during the revolution and helped organize the Republic had lost all his clout. A candidate in the next legislative elections of May 1849, Lamartine lost again and was elected to the Assembly only when a seat in the Loiret became vacant two months later. Meanwhile, his politics came to be perceived as unclear, ambiguous, if not downright opportunistic. What had appeared to be his liberalism through his many parliamentary interventions in the 1830s and 40s was retrospectively questioned when he ran in the May 1849 legislative elections on a list that featured many right-wing politicians – a candidacy that William Fortescue describes as his 'local reemergence as an important conservative political figure'.² In the light of his devastating defeat in the last presidential elections, Lamartine's plea in his various periodicals that he better than anyone deserved the people's trust and could serve the poor's interests singularly lacked credibility. So too, in *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres* did his systematic identification of the social order with the Divine one and of civic responsibilities with Christian virtues. As a result, most of Lamartine's contemporaries, including Alexis de Tocqueville, quickly drew their conclusion: Lamartine's political role was over and the less he did to regain his popularity, the better – as if, from then on, he had

no alternative but to reveal only further how inconsistent or contradictory his politics were.³ Arguably, such a stark dismissal would not have occurred, or at least not to that extent, if Louis-Napoleon's populist propaganda had not by then short-circuited Lamartine's more traditional social concerns. Nevertheless, I believe there is more consistency and more continuity in Lamartine's political and literary gestures after 1848 than has been commonly acknowledged.

Lamartine was born of highly respected aristocratic stock. Pierre de Lamartine de Pratz, Alphonse's father, belonged to a family of wealthy landowners whose properties extended over the Mâconnais and the Franche-Comté regions while his maternal grandparents were for many years attached to the Orleans family, the direct descendants of Louis XIV's brother, with whom they lived in the Palais-Royal, next to the Louvre. Jean-Louis Desroys, Lamartine's grandfather, was the administrator in charge of the Orleans family's domains and Marie-Marguerite Desroys, his grandmother, was the assistant governess of the Duke of Orleans' grandchildren.⁴ Not surprisingly, therefore, Lamartine started as a royalist advocating the return of the Old Regime but grew – like many others in the romantic generation, Eugène Sue included – into a convinced republican and an active advocate of civil and social rights. As a member of the Parliament from 1833 till 1848, he spoke against the death penalty, and the misdemeanors of French officials in colonized Algeria, and in favour of the abolition of slavery and the adoption of universal suffrage. A social reformist, he asked for more governmental assistance for the needy and particularly for abandoned children. Yet, unlike Sue who by 1850 had become a 'red' republican and a socialist, Lamartine believed in political and social continuity, presenting himself as an intermediary between the left-wing and the right-wing forces.⁵ Like most humanitarians, he thought that society was unduly harsh and that the rich should help the poor, but he refused to think of social conflicts in terms of class struggle as Marx and Engels had just defined it – the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was published in 1848 – and preached instead the *bonne entente* between classes. Inspired by a philosophic and religious sense that harmony defines the natural, as well as the social, order, Lamartine tended to think of social relations as family relations and of his role in society as a mission conferred upon him by God. As Paul Bénichou explains in *Les Mages romantiques* Lamartine was not only a humanitarian, but a Christian one, who believed that politics was his way of fulfilling God's will and of injecting more reason, justice, and charity into the social and political order.⁶ This particular combination made for an unusual form of humanitarianism, by which, while endorsing the existing class system and the principle of private property, Lamartine preached submission and self-sacrifice as the ultimate civic and moral values.

When the Marxist interpretation of history prevailed, this kind of Christian humanitarianism was totally discredited as a harmful symbol of ideolog-

ical contradictions, and usually interpreted as a sign of political inconsistency, even bad faith. But Lamartine's bi-polarized politics – between his interest and concern for the lower classes and his attachment to a conservative social order – need not be seen in such a negative light. Two historians, Tudesq and Jardin, have for some time already recognized the importance of a social type in nineteenth-century France, the *notable*, whose description clearly applies to Lamartine.⁷ A member of the social elite, cultivated and influential, the *notable* most often supported the changes brought by the modern age while denouncing the miserable living conditions of the lower classes. A strong advocate of civil rights and new ideas, he nevertheless conceived of the class system as a network of reciprocal obligations which bound individuals together – a vision obviously inherited from pre-revolutionary times. As Jardin and Tudesq write: 'An intermediary as well between tradition (by virtue of his family background) and the future, [the *notable*] understood his and his contemporaries' time'.⁸ In their view, the *notable's* understanding of his time and his willingness to have the old and the new coexist was, indeed, a crucial factor that helped engineer France's economic, political, and cultural transition from the Old Regime to the industrialized age. Because the *notable* was usually an aristocrat who, by tradition, lived in rural areas and was close to the peasants, his leadership was often essential in helping the rural communities map out new realities and accommodate themselves to the effects of modernization.

This description, by insisting on how historically meaningful and culturally and socially constructive the *notable* was, precisely because he harbored two mentalities at once, helps one read a little differently Lamartine's social and political views after December 1848. Perhaps Lamartine did not so much become a conservative again in May 1849 as he simply responded to new priorities (and party distinction had never been one of his!). Whereas in the 1840s the humanitarian spirit that permeated political thought provided the right context for Lamartine's liberalism to grow, the popular violence of June 1848 and Louis-Napoleon's election to the Presidency were bringing back the apocalyptic memories of the 1793 Terror and right-wing imperialism. Lamartine's priorities from December 1848 until Louis-Napoleon's coup in December 1851 only shifted from establishing the republic to preserving it, and from advocating social measures in favour of the poor to preaching social peace and respectful collaboration between the classes. While with *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres* he was obviously departing from his customary literary practices by addressing specifically the uneducated and the poor, I would contend that the change was only tactical: he used a different medium to address a different public but what he wrote in his popular novels only repeated the social and political beliefs he had steadfastly held over the previous two decades. What has changed, however, after 1848 is the obvious subordination of Lamartine's literary talent to his political goals.

Lamartine had always thought of himself as God's ambassador to the lower classes, instinctively empathic to the masses' feelings and motives.⁹ Until 1848, journalism and political action were the means to this end. After 1848, literature became one as well (from 1852 on, it became the only form of activism left to Lamartine, who then dedicated part of his last years to the publication of his *Cours familier de littérature*, an enormous 'textbook' intended to introduce French literature to the uneducated).¹⁰ In this regard, one of Lamartine's most treasured experiences, and one that, in my opinion, greatly influenced his future journalistic and literary activities, was his position as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Provisional Government of the Second Republic. It is worth remembering, indeed, that among the romantic generation, Lamartine was about the only one, artist or poet, who actually ever was a statesman. As he was receiving delegations from various foreign countries as well as, oddly enough, from French workers' corporations (among which, interestingly, one made up of stone-cutters), Lamartine felt that he was playing the role of the new Republic's ambassador to the lower classes, praising their courage and assuring them that the Republic would be beneficent to them.¹¹ Similarly, his publications in 1850 and 1851 acknowledge the importance of the lower classes in the nation's political life but emphasize also their need for moral and political guidance. As the titles of his many periodicals make clear, everything that Lamartine publishes during this period is geared to enlighten, educate, counsel the people in view of the new political situation. Not surprisingly, the narrative strategies in *Le Tailleur de pierres* and in *Geneviève* operate along the same lines. Both stories are originally told by Geneviève and by Claude to the narrator, who then decides to write them down. The novels thus establish Lamartine not only as a compassionate and trusted auditor of poor people's life stories, but also as a powerful and accurate 'translator' who can convey the voice of the people into the written page. Indeed, just like the aristocratic narrator of *Graziella* who claims that with the proper attire he can make himself undistinguishable from any other fisherman, Lamartine in *Geneviève* invokes his powers as a poet and a man of extraordinary sensitivity to explain that he will be able to speak the servant's words perfectly: 'I am convinced that I shall not be wrong by one circumstance, nor by one detail, one word, one intonation'.¹²

Patronizing as it is – for the symbiosis between the writer and the lower classes is definitely a one-way street (while *Graziella*'s narrator can convincingly dress like a fisherman, *Graziella*, the fisherman's daughter, cannot put on a lady's dress without looking suddenly obscene; similarly, while Lamartine is certain he can repeat *verbatim* the servant's words, he discourages Reine Garde, the former servant who inspired him to write *Geneviève*, from publishing her own poems) – this claim in fact indicates clearly how Lamartine conceived of his political and literary missions as being one and the same. For there is no doubt that the long preface to *Geneviève* metaphorically re-enacts Lamartine's recent investiture as a leading force in the Provi-

sional Government of the Second Republic and an intermediary between the social classes. *Geneviève's* preface recalls a conversation that, a few years earlier in 1846, Lamartine had with a former domestic servant named Reine Garde. Reine, then a seamstress in Aix-en-Provence, had travelled on a Sunday to the city of Marseille where Lamartine was vacationing for the sole purpose of seeing the renowned poet. As it happened, the two interlocutors soon engaged in a discussion of literature – more specifically, popular literature. Quite in the manner of a Socratic dialogue in which the way questions are asked helps the interlocutor deliver the appropriate answers, Lamartine leads Reine to the conclusion that only books that speak of the lower classes in an easy and dignified manner qualify as truly popular literature. While here Lamartine is obviously trying to promote and contextualize his new image as a popular writer, the preface belongs to the tradition, well represented in nineteenth-century realist fiction, of expository prefaces, where matters of realism, genre, and readership are discussed. But, as Reine expresses at great length her enchantment with Lamartine's views, it is obvious that the preface is here also designed to advertize his self-professed spiritual kinship with the lower classes, which is at the root of his commitment to republican values. As Paul Bénichou has recently shown, Lamartine had not become a republican by chance.¹³ Elaborating on a very early conviction that the best political system had to be rationally determined as the most appropriate context in which to realize God's will and to put Christian virtues into practice, Lamartine had come to the conclusion that democracy was such a regime.¹⁴ Thus, when Reine – whose regal name, incidentally, is a reminder that the nation's sovereignty is now within the lower classes – takes leave of Lamartine, she has become not only the 'Muse' to whom *Geneviève* is dedicated but, more importantly, the popular authority who has just given Lamartine a vote of confidence and mandated him as a popular writer: 'Reine! If I ever write one or two of these popular tales that you suggested, you will allow me to dedicate the first one to you, won't you? Your name will bring it luck' (51). Besides staging Lamartine's investiture by Reine Garde as the one truly popular writer of his time, *Geneviève's* preface also explains Lamartine's higher purpose, his mission to the readers. To do so, the preface includes a text, originally called *Lettre à Chapuys-Montlaville* also known as *Des publications populaires*, that was first published in 1843 and had been already reprinted once in an earlier issue of *Le Conseiller du peuple*. In this text, particularly indicative of the *notable's* ideology, Lamartine's rhetoric, inspired simultaneously by Biblical images and by modern realities, illustrates how an old-fashioned view of society, where each class is defined by a set of civil rights and moral obligations toward others, can coexist with a keen understanding of the times' newly-emerging forces. As Lamartine discusses at length the necessity of developing a popular literature and the importance of political journalism, he makes it very clear that the press will become extremely powerful as regulator of public opinion and will change the way

politics work. In fact, as the field of potential readers keeps growing and new educational laws are about to extend literacy much further, Lamartine compares journalists and writers to 'pioneers' who are about to discover in their readership a new continent and a wealth of new opportunities: 'A whole new world is yet to be discovered, without sailing, like Columbus did, across the Atlantic. This new world consists of the masses' sensibility and mind' (49). The metaphor of the 'new world' – obviously inspired by French colonialism in Algeria and possibly by Alexander von Humboldt, the famous German geologist, friend of Goethe, whose books about his travels in South America were then enjoying an immense popularity – gives Lamartine an opportunity to use recent history to teach a lesson. Unlike the French Army in Algeria whose excesses Lamartine had denounced in the Parliament in the 1830s, writers and journalists must be aware of their responsibilities towards the lower classes. Not only explorers but missionaries as well, they will be responsible for educating and enlightening their readers and for accomplishing 'a moral revolution' by which 'the intelligence, the opinions, the mores, the welfare of the masses' (48) will be transformed. Meanwhile, Lamartine's acute foresight into the future of the media coexists with his characteristic assumption that the masses are in need of moral guidance and are best not left to their own devices. Like the world before God's intervention, the masses are conceived as matter in need of spirit, as a body without a soul, or, as the story of *Geneviève* clearly suggests, as a woman without a man's guidance. In Lamartine's Christian view, the 'enlightenment' of the lower classes is compared to the awakening of the soul and the role of the press to a 'daily and universal infiltration of light into the darkness of [the people's] mind, into their dozing' (48).

While in his periodicals Lamartine addresses his readers' minds, in his popular novels he obviously appeals to their hearts and souls. *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres de Saint-Point* are designed to arouse the reader's compassion for the poor and the helpless, as well as to serve the lower classes as examples of social and moral goodness.¹⁵ Here, resignation and submission to God's will are the ultimate values and the very reason why *Geneviève's* and *Claude's* lives are so exemplary. Each novel, therefore, is a dramatization of Lamartine's belief, central to his Christian humanitarianism, that self-sacrifice and abnegation are the foundation of the moral and social order. Although the circumstances are different – a difference here almost entirely due to the fact that *Geneviève* is a woman and *Claude* a man – *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres* share basically the same storyline. *Geneviève* is a young, devoted, industrious shopkeeper in a village near Grenoble, who sacrifices her reputation as an honest woman, her prospects for marital happiness, and even her chances of survival (she is forced to take to the mountains and become a beggar), in order to save her younger sister *Josette*, who has just born an illegitimate child, from shame and dishonour. Similarly, *Claude* the stone-cutter renounces his love for his young cousin *Denise* so that *Gratien*,

his brother, who accidentally became blind at the age of seven and who is desperately attached to the young woman, can marry her. After seven years during which he travelled all around France practising his trade as a stone-cutter, Claude comes back to his hut in the mountain only to find that Gratien has died, leaving Denise with two little children. As Claude and Denise are once more about to get married, Denise and the children die, blown away by an accidental explosion in the quarry. Claude then becomes a hermit, accepting only food and clothes as compensation for his work. As we can see, in both stories the main characters sacrifice their chances for happiness to a younger or helpless sibling, whom they love very dearly; meanwhile the sacrifices are all in vain because the beloved dies. Geneviève and Claude are left with no other prospect in life than to search for spiritual peace.

In many ways, these rigid and stern stories make no compromise. They insistingly demonstrate that resignation and endurance are the virtues to which the poor owe their survival and the respect of others. In this respect, Geneviève's and Claude's stories obviously suggest that the lower classes should look at their social misfortunes the way good Christians endure personal hardship – as a trial, imposed on them by God, which will ultimately earn them a place in Heaven. Interestingly, selfishness (often combined with helplessness, as in the case of Josette and Gratien) and abnegation are the two leading motives in these stories, and they pertain to individuals. In *Le Conseiller du peuple* Lamartine also gives selfishness centre stage but from a social and political perspective. In his eyes, indeed, social problems result from 'the two natural vices that are typical of each class in their respective social position, among the poor, envy; among the rich, selfishness', 180–81. Characteristically humanitarian, Lamartine's vision gives each social class its own evil, which stands nowhere but inside human minds and hearts. Therefore, his mission as a politician is described in moral terms too: it is to straighten out society's moral vices by alerting everybody's attention to them, or, as Lamartine puts it, 'to give History a consciousness'. One can appropriately paraphrase him and define his foray into popular literature as a complementary attempt 'to give Literature a consciousness'.

In spite of what Lamartine seems to think, and that many commentators have repeated after him, the true novelty of his popular novels is not so much that they tell in a simple manner stories about the lower classes. As almost every page would make it clear, neither the plot nor the style in these stories are simple, even if, being allegedly told by uneducated speakers, they have fewer biblical or mythological allusions, and fewer rhetorical effects. Nor is it, really, that these novels tend to turn systematically into hagiographies, exemplary tales celebrating the characters' absolute devotion and self-sacrifice. As dominant as it is here, this last trait is, in fact, a recurring one, already found in Lamartine's long epic poem, published in 1836, *Jocelyn*, whose story line, incidentally, shares many similarities with those of *Geneviève* and *Le Tailleur de pierres* and in his later *Cours familier de littérature*.¹⁶ Whether

he is writing poetry or prose or popular tales, Lamartine's themes always seem to revolve around the accidental loss of a beloved, ironic twists of fate, and personal sacrifice.

What is more of a novelty, on the other hand, is the fact that Lamartine's popular novels are supposedly oral accounts (in *Jocelyn*, the poet presents himself as the editor of a manuscript discovered in the priest's house) and that the stories are delivered with the characteristics of a speech act. Geneviève and Claude, both in their particular settings – Geneviève is indoors, knitting stockings near the fireplace; Claude is outdoors, sitting on the grass, near the hut where he lives, high in the mountains – tell their story in their own words to a narrator/listener, clearly identified as Lamartine himself. While Lamartine is by every standard a very considerate auditor, interested and curious, helpful and compassionate to the point of shedding tears, it is worth noting that his presence in the text never goes unsuspected, even when he is silent. As Geneviève and Claude keep addressing him with a respectful 'Monsieur' while they talk and repeatedly worry that their stories are worthless or that their listener will be bored, they keep bringing to the reader's attention their own social insignificance. Interestingly, what the conversational format does here is to underline the social distance between the author and his character/narrator. This is specially true of *Geneviève*, where the servant is deferential in two ways, as a servant towards a master and as a woman towards a man.

While in *Le Tailleur de pierres* feelings of spiritual kinship can partly bridge the social gap between Lamartine and Claude, as chapter four, taking the romantic form of a dialogue between 'Moi' and 'Lui', demonstrates, such companionship never happens in *Geneviève*. Instead, the servant follows the customary practice among women in rural areas and sits near the fire – but behind Lamartine or eats at the table – but standing up. Meanwhile, the novels have surprisingly different orientations. *Le Tailleur de pierres* is primarily concerned with religious questions. While destiny has been most cruel to Claude, sparing him nothing, the stone-cutter – whose profession, symbolically, as well as phonetically in French, evokes Saint Peter and the foundation of the Christian Church – shows such peaceful resignation and unwavering faith that Lamartine looks up to him for answers. Socially inferior, Claude, as a Christian, is morally superior to his interlocutor and his story illustrates Lamartine's belief that God may be closer to the poor and the ill-favoured. Geneviève, on the other hand, may be in every way just as resigned and courageous as Claude but she is not as innocent. Although she never did anything wrong nor ever harmed anyone, the novel suggests that she would not have had to face such hardship if she had not displayed a hubristic and misplaced maternal attachment to her sister and, then, to her sister's illegitimate baby. While Claude is mostly a victim of destiny, Geneviève helps bring disaster upon herself. If for Lamartine human life always means expiation, it means so all the more where women are con-

cerned, as if they had to bear twice, as human beings and as women, Eve's specific responsibility in the original sin and the Fall. Like that of every other woman in the novel – her sister's, of course, but also that of her mother who, inexplicably sick, cannot care for her daughters, and even that of Luce, the young woman who secretly adopted Geneviève's nephew after her own baby died – Geneviève's life, indeed, seems to expiate every sin possible for a mother, even though she never actually becomes one.¹⁷ Whereas Claude can play Lamartine's spiritual *alter ego* and serves as a model and an inspiration in spite of the social distance, the general orientation in *Geneviève* is more social than religious as Lamartine takes the opportunity to advocate forgiveness and remind the readers that the poor, and especially women, need society's help.

In this respect, the choice of a female domestic servant is particularly telling since Lamartine could certainly derive his sense of mission toward the lower classes from, among other things, his mother's enduring concern for her servants. As Alix de Lamartine's diary amply demonstrates, she considered their moral and physical well-being her personal responsibility and worried constantly about their religious education.¹⁸ Also, because servants worked in the household, lived next to the family, and could develop a personal attachment to their masters, they offered a unique opportunity to describe social relations in humanitarian terms, that is, as moral obligations. Servants, Lamartine writes, are like an extended family, 'a family just as close, as loving, ... as devoted to the reputation, honor, interest, and long life of the family than the family itself' (60). Besides, Lamartine's two decades as a member of the French Academy who had therefore watched many of the Academy's *Prix de vertu* – yearly awards granted to exemplary poor persons – go to domestic servants, could only convince him further that no other character but a servant would exemplify so appropriately the concept of *bonne entente* between the social classes, whereby the poor find their happiness in serving the rich and the rich find theirs in providing for, and protecting, the poor. Last but not least, the character of a female domestic servant allowed Lamartine to express his social views from a specific, and controversial, point of view.

One detail of the story is particularly revealing. After Josette gives birth to her illegitimate child, Geneviève, determined to preserve her sister's reputation, decides to take the baby to a public hostel in the city of Grenoble. There, she leaves him on a revolving cradle (*un tour* in French), such as was found near the door of many foundling homes.¹⁹ Originally imported in the 1800s from czarist Russia by Napoleon, these devices allowed a mother to deposit her baby at the door of a public hostel and, by ringing a bell, to make the presence of the baby known without herself being seen. The idea was that if women were spared the shame of disclosing who they were, they would rather abandon their babies than have abortions or kill them – and, of course, domestic servants were particularly concerned about this matter since they,

who were sure to lose their jobs if their pregnancy was known, had one of the highest rates of abortions and infanticides. The measure succeeded far beyond expectation and the number of abandoned children dramatically increased wherever revolving cradles existed. Consequently, some members of Parliament started to protest against what they saw as immoral devices encouraging illegitimate pregnancies, and asked for their suppression. But Lamartine, as he reminds the readers in *Geneviève*, spoke in their favour. Some biographers, including Fortescue, explain Lamartine's position as one mandated by guilt. It is well known, indeed, that Lamartine had at least two illegitimate sons, one allegedly by a young servant girl whom he had met when he was a sixteen-year-old student at the Jesuit school of Belley.²⁰ Just as important, I think, is the fact that Lamartine as a Christian humanitarian could relate his concern for single mothers and abandoned children to his more general view of society as an extended family, whose members and functions are all interdependent. As *Geneviève* makes it particularly clear, in Lamartine's eyes, the gender hierarchy, just like the social one, is part of the divine order, thus sacred and an occasion to practice Christian virtues. Just as the poor and the uneducated need to be protected and enlightened by those who enjoy social and cultural privileges, women must have men's, or else the State's, support and guidance to raise children.

The opening pages of *Geneviève* present Lamartine's first popular novel as proceeding directly from his poetry. According to Lamartine, *Geneviève* is, indeed, the 'real' name of Marthe, the priest's devoted servant in *Jocelyn*, his epic poem about a young priest, published in 1836. In the poem, Marthe is affectionately mentioned a few times but has no bearing on the plot. In the novel, *Geneviève* tells her own story and explains how and why she became *Jocelyn*'s servant in Voiron – alias Valneige. More than just an advertising gimmick, as has been suggested, the reference to *Jocelyn* is well within character: Lamartine is, indeed, as suspicious of literary upheavals as of political or social ones. The filiation between *Jocelyn* and *Geneviève* underlines one of Lamartine's most enduring claims, that of the continuity and the rationality of his personal evolution in politics and in literature. From poetry to prose, from romantic lyrics to vernacular, from the character of a priest to that of a domestic servant, from the representation of a man to that of a woman, from *Jocelyn* to *Geneviève*, Lamartine's evolution shows how determined he was to come always closer to the people, whatever the cost. In this case, the cost might have been simply his activity as a poet, as the following announcement made in 1852 in his periodical *Le Civilisateur* seems to suggest: 'The people and the writers have so far spoken two different languages... In the past, we sang our poems for the happy and privileged few... Humbler today and maybe more useful, we are not ashamed to learn the language which speaks to your intelligence through your heart'.²¹

As he made the very significant switch from poetry to prose and chose to

ignore his devastating defeat in the presidential elections to continue to address the voters, it is tempting to interpret Lamartine's literary orientation after December 1848 in the light of the many examples of abnegation and sacrifice found in his popular novels. Dedicating all his creative energy to the purpose of edifying the poor, engaging in a crusade against the revolutionary and imperialistic evils, Lamartine was perhaps deliberately sacrificing his poetic inspiration to better fulfill his mission towards the lower classes. If so, then, destiny is just as ironic in Lamartine's real life as in his novels. For his strategies to recover his political influence all failed. In addition, unlike Victor Hugo, whose return to Paris in 1870, after twenty years in exile, marked the beginning of his ascent as a living symbol of the Republic, Lamartine's role in the French Revolution of February 1848 was, until recently, largely forgotten. Finally, little of what he wrote after 1848 was valued and he is still mostly remembered for his early books of poetry. Lamartine's sacrifice in giving up poetry, just like Geneviève's or Claude's, was made in vain.

Notes

1 For the subsequent discussion of Lamartine's political career and religious thought, I am heavily indebted to William Fortescue's *Alphonse de Lamartine: A Political Biography* (New York, 1983) and to Paul Bénichou's *Le Temps des prophètes* (Paris, 1977) and *Les Mages romantiques* (Paris, 1988). Published very recently, the following volumes are also extremely useful: F. L'Huillier, *Lamartine en politique* (Strasbourg, 1993) and A. de Lamartine, *La Politique et l'histoire*, with a presentation by Renée David (Imprimerie Nationale, 1993).

2 W. Fortescue, *Alphonse de Lamartine* p. 252.

3 In his memoirs, Tocqueville is very harsh on Lamartine: 'Talking or writing, he departed from truth and returned to it without taking any notice, being solely concerned with the particular effect he wanted to produce at that moment.' See A. de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848*. P. Mayer and A. P. Kerr (eds), (New Brunswick, 1992), p. 108. It is interesting to compare Tocqueville's judgement of Lamartine with that of the socialist Proudhon. While being quite aware of Lamartine's ideological contradictions, Proudhon had much more respect for him. See P. Palix, 'Proudhon, juge de Lamartine (1845-1851)' in P. Viallaneix (ed.), *Lamartine. Le livre du centenaire* (Paris, 1971), p. 263.

4 See M. Domange, *Le Petit Monde des Lamartine* (Evian, 1968), pp. 16-32.

5 Eugène Sue, once Lamartine's friend, made several visits to the castle of Saint-Point, Lamartine's main residence near Mâcon. For more details on the relationship between Lamartine and Sue, see H. Guillemain, *Le 'Jocelyn' de Lamartine* (Paris, n.d.), pp. 20, 40 and 185; and F. Letessier, 'Alphonse de Lamartine et Eugène Sue' in S. Bernard-Griffiths and C. Croisille (eds), *Relire Lamartine aujourd'hui. Actes du Colloque International de Mâcon, Juin 1990* (Paris, 1993), pp. 19-38.

6 Bénichou, *Les Mages* p. 28.

7 A. Jardin and A.-J. Tudesq, *Restoration and Reaction 1815-1848* trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1988).

8 Jardin and Tudesq, *Restoration*, p. 390.

9 See Bénichou, *op. cit.*

10 See J. Gaulmier, 'La traversée du désert d'Alphonse de Lamartine. A propos du

Cours familier de littérature in Viallaneix, *Le Livre du centenaire*, pp. 59–67.

11 See Lamartine's own account of his activities in the Provisional Government, *Trois mois au pouvoir, par M. de Lamartine* (Paris, 1848), and R. Bellet's commentary of Lamartine's account, 'Deux mois de pouvoir: M. de Lamartine répond à diverses délégations apportant leur soutien à la nouvelle République (mars-avril 1848)' in Bernard-Griffiths and Croisille, *Relire Lamartine*, pp. 121–32.

12 A. de Lamartine, *Geneviève. Histoire d'une servante* (Paris, 1879), pp. 56–57. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets. All translations, unless specified otherwise, are mine.

13 Bénichou, *Les Mages* pp. 28–42.

14 See Bénichou's illuminating discussion of this highly idiosyncratic aspect of Lamartine's political thought in *Les Mages* pp. 42–45.

15 A. de Lamartine, *Le Tailleur de pierres de Saint-Point* (Paris, 1907).

16 See J.-L. Diaz, 'Lamartine et les "Saints de la gloire humaine"' in Bernard-Griffiths and Croisille, *Relire Lamartine*, p. 231.

17 For an analysis of the theme of motherhood in *Geneviève*, see Martine Gantrel, 'Homeless women: maidservants in fiction' in S. Nash (ed.), *Home and its Dislocations in Nineteenth-century France* (Albany, 1993), p. 250.

18 See M. Domange (ed.), *Le Journal de Madame de Lamartine: mère d'Alphonse de Lamartine, 1801–1829* (Paris, 1983), vol. 1, *passim*. See also Domange, *Le Petit Monde, passim*.

19 For a history of the *tours* in France, see R. Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany, 1984).

20 Fortescue, *Alphonse de Lamartine*, p. 15. Domange mentions the story but does not corroborate it (*Le Petit Monde*, p. 105).

21 Cited in Guillemin, *Le 'Jocelyn'*, p. 74.