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# Early French Romanticism

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On sent le Romantique, on ne le définit point. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Néologie* (1801)

## 1776: An Epithet is Born

In April 1776, as France eagerly awaited news of the American insurgents' actions, a French insurgent of sorts in the field of letters, the translator Pierre Le Tourneur (1737-88), published the initial two volumes of his *Shakespeare traduit de l'anglois*, the first complete and accurate translation in French prose of Shakespeare's theater. Backed by an unusual coalition of a thousand advance subscribers topped by the French royal family, the King of England, and the Empress of Russia, Le Tourneur ushered in the most powerful counter-example to the theater of Corneille, Racine, and Molière supported by the French literary establishment. The aesthetic battle endured but took a decisive turn when in 1821 there appeared a revision of Le Tourneur's translation whose success prompted Stendhal to announce that finally "a great revolution in theater is brewing in France. Within a few years, we will make prose tragedies and follow Shakespeare's wanderings" (Martino 1925: xciii).

On February 24, 1776, two months before Le Tourneur's launch, a lone figure had sought to catch royal attention and arouse public sympathy by depositing a confessional manuscript on the altar of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Its title announced: *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques. Dialogues*. Barred from the sacred choir by an unexpected impassable railing, a desperate Jean-Jacques Rousseau had to turn back, then inward again, resuming his quest for self-introspection and justification. His tell-all auto-biographical *Confessions* and accusatory *Dialogues*, although already finished, would appear posthumously, a stunning self-portrait whose sincerity and inner conflicts preempted the moral judgment customary to classic portraiture. In addition, the philosopher dedicated the last two years of his life to composing an unusual diary of

musings. Begun in the autumn of 1776, the diary took the form of 10 meditative promenades with the title *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (published posthumously in 1782). As he ruminated memories of times past, Rousseau set apart his most serene and happiest recollection, celebrating in the fifth promenade a month-long exile on the tiny Saint-Pierre island on the Swiss lake of Bienne. Still moved by the beauty of the landscape and the protection nature had offered him then, Rousseau reminisced and wrote: "The banks of Lake Bienne are wilder and more romantic than those of Lake Geneva, because the rocks and woods border the water more closely; but they are not less cheerful" (Rousseau 2000: 41).

Thus appeared the French epithet "*romantique*." Where from? Rousseau had very likely recently read Le Tourneur's preface to the *Shakespeare traduit de l'anglois* and its explanation for the neologism "*romantique*" used to qualify a cloudy landscape – a new adjective probably coined by his collaborator Louis-Sébastien Mercier. At the same time, another friend, the Marquis de Girardin, picked up "*romantique*" for his treatise on gardening (1777), whose principles he applied to Ermenonville, the estate where Rousseau was offered a last refuge, becoming his final resting place when he died a few weeks later on July 2, 1778. Ten years later, recounting his sentimental pilgrimage to the site of Rousseau's tomb, set on an islet surrounded by poplars at the heart of Ermenonville, Le Tourneur marveled at the "pleasant vale filled with the most inspiring and romantic beauties" (Le Tourneur 1990a: 41-50, 1990b: 167).<sup>1</sup>

Reborn into French from the English transformation of *romance*, the adjective crystallized around Rousseau and nature. Shakespeare's genius had inspired Le Tourneur and Mercier's provocative statement that "Nature is one and only, like truth; neither one nor the other bears the epithet beautiful."<sup>2</sup> But it took Rousseau's embrace of truth and nature for contemporaries to open themselves to a more hybrid and complex aesthetic, privileging affect over effect, imagination over idealization, the mystery of Romantic nature over the perfection of beautiful artifice.

That two foreigners, Shakespeare and Rousseau, stirred the Republic of letters is not a coincidence. Outsiders bring the shock of the new and unfamiliar, in lieu of conformity and imitation according to pre-given rules. Thus the wave of Anglomania that swept France in mid-century slowly questioned following Greek and Roman models, the hierarchy and separation of genres, and the imitation of beautiful nature, principles now referred to as neo-Classicism. Rousseau did not wage war against ancient times and models – to the contrary he cherished golden age pastorals – but opposed the modern rationalist and materialist worldview. He embraced the freedom to criticize, which Enlightenment philosophers established as a fundamental right, to expose the shortcomings of Enlightenment philosophy as well as the stultifying confines of ancien régime society.

We must be mindful that literary history constructed *a posteriori* the periodization of neo-Classicism, Enlightenment, and early Romanticism to circumscribe movements of thought which, far from separate and consecutive, intersected and bled into one another. Rousseau's oeuvre transcends these partitions.

### Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78): Back to Origins

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings, character, and mode of existence challenged and permanently altered the French way – manners of thinking and acting framed by national pride and solidified by an absolute monarchy. Although scholars will continually be challenged by the enigma of Rousseau's genius, we can identify two striking features at the source of his nonconformity: the absence of national and educational bounds. Rousseau was born a citizen of Geneva, an independent Swiss Republic offering a unique combination of political and religious freedom for the French outside France. French was written and spoken in a democracy espousing liberal Protestantism. Rousseau's wanderlust drove him to leave Geneva at age 14, beginning a lifelong love/hate relationship, including forgoing then regaining citizenship, converting to Catholicism (1728) then back to Calvinism (1754), living in France with periods of exile in various Swiss counties which, in turn, expelled him, dying in France with his ashes eventually transferred to the Pantheon by French revolutionaries (1794). The vagaries of Rousseau's citizenship (the Swiss, French, and even Prussians could claim him as their own) underscores his nationlessness.

Freed of national identity, Rousseau was also free from the educational confines imposed by family and school: he grew up motherless, given free reign by his father, with no formal schooling and an incomplete apprenticeship as an engraver. Rousseau eventually devised his own idiosyncratic system of learning, with far less exposure to rhetoric than in a traditional education. The singularity of Rousseau's entire oeuvre may derive from this self-education. The absolute freedom of individual conscience despite social pressures, and a natural, "negative" education without walls (institutional or pedagogical), became cornerstones of his philosophy.

To ask "Was Rousseau an early Romantic?" and "Were Romantics all Rousseauists?" is to wonder about the prefiguration in Rousseau's work of themes now associated with Romanticism. Rather than reading forward and backward to find the seeds of Romanticism – with the risk of planting them ourselves – let's focus on how Rousseau's originality distinguished itself from his contemporaries'.

#### *Music, sentiment, nature*

Before becoming a man of letters, Rousseau was and remained a man of music. His first publication concerned a new system of musical notation. His career began with two operas *Les Muses galantes* (1744), and *Le Devin du village* (1752). His last years were devoted to composing songs, aptly titled *Les Consolations des misères de ma vie*. He wrote articles on music for Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, and later revised them in a *Dictionnaire de la musique* (1767). He hand-copied musical scores for a living. This passion was a fight as well: in the confrontation between French and Italian music, Rousseau, like most *philosophes*, embraced the melodic freedom and impassioned accents of Italian music and disparaged the French emphasis on instrumental harmony – too

mechanical, icy, and "noisy." Transported by the expressivity of Italian music he has just heard, Rousseau's character Saint-Preux will urge his lover Julie to learn this language of the heart: "So abandon forever that boring and lamentable French song that is more like the cries of colic than the transport of passion. Learn to produce those divine sounds inspired by sentiment, the only ones worthy of your voice, the only ones worthy of your heart, and which always carry along with them the charm and fire of sensible temperaments" (Rousseau 1997: 110). Originally developed in the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1764), the idea that "Poetry, song, and speech have a common origin" encouraged a return to the original conjunction between music and poetic sentiment, exemplified by Rousseau's own musical prose.

For generations, including his own, only Rousseau has been known on a first-name basis. Whereas Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, or Sade's first names seem inconsequential and are barely remembered, "Jean-Jacques" is substituted for Rousseau in correspondence as well as past and present criticism. Aside from the practical issue of distinction from his namesake, the then-famous poet Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, the public use of Rousseau's Christian name – by himself and others – has a vast symbolic resonance. It lays the private self in the open, it emblazons subjectivity and intimacy. Samuel Richardson's novels of sentiment had illustrated how the heart led to virtue, thus framing the question of sensitivity as a moral quest towards goodness. In his widely successful epistolary novel, *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (with more than 70 editions from 1761 to 1800) Rousseau opens the tortured heart of Saint-Preux, a young tutor in love with his pupil Julie, who eventually obeys her father's choice of a better match. After her husband knowingly chooses her former lover to become their children's tutor, Julie's virtue struggles until death to turn thwarted love into friendship. In life as in fiction, Rousseau wanted to study individualities and characters: *Émile ou traité sur l'éducation* details an imaginary boy's mental, emotional, and moral development guided by radically new pedagogical principles based on the free discovery of the world of nature and the intellect. When Jean-Jacques turned to himself as subject and object of study in his autobiographical *Confessions*, the story of his life became emblematic of how social forces restrict individual freedom.

Contrary to those who distrusted emotion as misleading and believed reason alone to be reliable, Rousseau maintained that emotions reveal truth, that they tell as much as the mind about how to read the inner and exterior worlds. He honored but did not privilege reason. In the name of truth, therefore, feelings were no longer idealized as in *L'Astrée*, the seventeenth-century pastoral admired by Rousseau, but described in their psychological complexities and piercing force. This liberation of the lyrical self had considerable appeal, particularly among women who turned to sentimental realism to convey their plights in real or imaginary correspondences and novels.

Sentiment and nature had long been wedded in poems and pastorals. Allegories of the seasons, symbolic fruit and flowers, idealized landscapes, an enchanted southern countryside, offered an abstract, eternally pleasing (*riante*) nature severed from reality. As with music and sentiment, Rousseau refused artifice when it came to nature. The wild contrasts of Swiss landscapes beloved since childhood, the rustic pleasures of his

various country retreats, and the fascination with plants (stored and classified in herbals) translated into a celebration of nature's spectacles and riches as they affect the soul and penetrate the mind. In lieu of clichéd allegorical deities, Rousseau described nature as an immediate experience, a direct revelation of thoughts and emotions. By subtitling his only novel "Letters of two lovers who live in a small town at the foot of the Alps," Rousseau fused the mountainous locale with his characters' lives. Saint-Preux tries to convey to Julie his awe at the sublime Valais mountains: "the spectacle has something indescribably magical, supernatural about it that ravishes the spirit and the senses; you forget everything, even yourself, and do not even know where you are" (Rousseau 1997: 65). Julie reciprocates by introducing him to her "Elysium," the beautiful private orchard she designed to operate a different magic than the nearby fearsome mountains: a place of delectation through pure illusion, where domesticated nature appears wild. Did Julie's invisible hand follow principles governing English gardens (as opposed to the classic symmetry of French gardening)? Rather, she applied the beloved classical tradition of Virgil's *locus amoenus* (place of delights), a topos of landscape description. Thus Rousseau's approach to nature combined classic poetical reminiscences with a personal affinity for contrasted, soul-stirring landscapes, as well as a passion for botany, the prosaic observation of the vegetal world. This unusual combination gave Rousseau his name as "l'homme de la nature," engraved in the iconography and imagination of the succeeding generation.

The religion of nature became Rousseau's natural religion, based not on revelation, dogma, nor organized churches, but on an intimate, inner sense of God's existence and an innate principle of justice and virtue (conscience). Contemplating the Alps crowning the horizon, a poor ecclesiastic from the mountainous Savoy region confides to the young Émile the essence of natural religion, an unmediated relation to the divine, which means the only essential cult is of the heart. "The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" was deemed to be so impious and dangerous by both Paris and Geneva that it caused Rousseau's banishment and the burning of his treatise *Émile*.

Thus Rousseau increasingly experienced nature as a refuge: promenades, reveries, and herborizing excursions provided solace from alienation and persecution. Nature, breathing purity and harmony, freed the writer to follow the meandering streams of consciousness and find his unique rhythm.

### 1776-1816: A Controversial Period

Rousseau's writings exerted a powerful *gravitas* over the whole European world. A systematic reference point to all aspiring for change (in politics, society, and literature), his work offers a challenge to literary historians in search of Romanticism's beginnings. This is the paradox at the heart of "pre-Romanticism," a convenient though inadequate term applied to a complex period, part eighteenth-century Enlightenment, part nineteenth-century nascent Romanticism, yet not merely transitional. Ever since its coinage around 1910, critics have disagreed on its chronological

span, its specificity, or lack thereof, and its relevance. Its prefix implies continuity with the subsequent, recognized Romanticism of Victor Hugo's generation, while its suffix suggests the unity of a movement – a continuity and unity both subject to disputation (see Minski 1998). When a 1972 symposium gathered eminent scholars to ponder the notion of French "pre-Romanticism" they could neither resolve its definition nor jettison the term (Viallaneix 1975). Rather, its ideological underpinnings were clarified. At the beginning of the twentieth century anti-German sentiment drove some French critics to define pre-Romanticism as an evolution internal to French letters, downplaying foreign influences, most notably German, and Germaine de Staël's introduction of them (see e.g., Mornet 1912, Monglond [1930] 1965). To correct the bias of this historical nationalism, comparatists widened the movement to Europe (see e.g., Van Tieghem 1967). Those who struck a balance, acknowledging innovations within a classic framework, nevertheless favored one author over another, diminishing Staël's contribution while heralding Chateaubriand's.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, pre-Romanticism is a critical construct, not a defined historical period. As Frank Bowman recently put it, the term is "rather suspect since no one ever called himself a pre-Romantic" (Bowman 1999: 77). The challenge therefore consists in adopting a historical perspective that excludes teleological illusions, namely projections of things to come. After structuralism and sociocriticism shaped analysis, recent research has emphasized the overcoming of tradition towards a new, modern vision of literature (see Bénichou 1996, Delon 1998, Fabre 1980, Mortier 1982, Minski 1998). A recent tendency has been to move away from a history of ideas towards a cultural history that establishes "a connection between, on the one hand, the great social and economic transformations that accompanied the passage from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and on the other hand the upheavals in the modes of thinking and perceiving the world . . ." (Ceserani 1999: 9). In a provoking essay, Bowman (1999) has proposed defining the "specificity of French Romanticism" in terms of "exacerbated polarities," an approach which I would argue also depicts accurately the preceding period, when the Revolution became the ultimate polarizing event for the generation who lived it. Indeed the voices and texts of this period are a study in contrasts, simultaneously original *and* conservative both in form and content. The expression of individual geniuses and the controversy generated by their work speak to sociohistorical unrest and uncertainties born of the Enlightenment's optimistic, forward drive. Rousseau figures prominently in the present chapter to reflect how early this disruption began.

## The Specificity of Early French Romanticism

### *The plight of a generation*

Early French Romanticism is first of all the story of one generation who experienced in rapid succession three monumental historical disruptions. This generation lived through the collapse of the monarchy under which they grew up, the capsizing of the

Revolution into the Terror, and the downfall of Napoleon after a 20-year reign. Gains of freedom and equality remained under constant threat, while losses (of lives, fortune, and privileges) mounted. Cycles of nostalgia and expectations, elation and horror, hope and disappointment spread confusion and *mal-être*. Hesitations about women's new status as citizens were reflected in individual fates. While the new Republic chose an allegorical Marianne to represent itself, early French Romanticism wavered between equally compelling and symbolic destinies. Was its Marianne the late Julie de l'Espinasse (1732-76), the philosophes' hostess, a tortured heart who rendered her torment in private correspondence and died of love and tuberculosis?<sup>4</sup> The beheaded martyrs of the Revolution Madame Roland (1754-93) and Olympe de Gouges (1745-93), the author of the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791)? The modern thinker Germaine de Staël or her friend Juliette Récamier, the neoclassic icon of beauty and platonic love immortalized by the painter David and hopelessly loved and adulated by her male contemporaries? Muse, medusa, "mistress of an age," women transformed themselves, a change reflected in life and fictional representations where the wish for freedom clashes with knowledge of an unhappy destiny. To women especially but not exclusively, Rousseau became this generation's common reference via his alienation and his drive to respond and generalize it.

Denied freedom of expression by the Terror, then by Napoleon's regime, the early Romantic generation had to continue the political fight of the ancien régime's philosophes, sharing with their forebears the pain of censorship and exile. On the other hand, they gained a renewed appreciation of religious expression when Napoleon reversed the Revolution's religious ban, leading the spiritual dimension to resurface in literature. Three authors stood at the forefront of this chaotic period: Germaine de Staël, Benjamin Constant, and François-René Chateaubriand.

One of the most original and complex features of early French Romanticism remains the role of his generation's best-known member: Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821). Not only did the Corsican general turned emperor thrust French politics and history into modernity, but his personality and fate also epitomized the fallen heroism central to Romantic literature. Yet at the same time, his regime's strong reaffirmation of neoclassical values, dubbed the Empire style, and extending from fashion (high-waisted white muslin dresses) to furniture, architecture, and painting, represented a return to antiquity that also left a strong imprint on literature.

#### *A literature under shock*

This generation called for a new literature to match historical change but this imperative raised questions hard to resolve in the flux of transformations: how to create, what tools to use, what references? Artists could strive for the neoclassical perfection beloved by the French national tradition, or venture imperfect new genres. They could embrace foreign traditions as a process of rejuvenation or fear their lack of taste. The results were hybrid creations, a literature best defined as experimental, partly didactic, partly imaginative.

The poetry of this tumultuous historical period, from the last decade of Louis XVI's reign to the Empire, is a kaleidoscope of themes and styles, a mixture of old and new, with no equivalent figureheads to the central six poets of English Romanticism. Since the mid-eighteenth century theoreticians had studied the origins of language and poetry to advocate a return to musicality and enthusiasm, yet in practice French poets resisted change, and innovations remained circumscribed. Paradoxically and contrary to received opinion, the period stands out for the abundance and variety of its poetic production. But without unity or dominating trend, this poetic profusion does not lend itself to a simple classic/Romantic dichotomy. In search of itself, poetry took various directions. With *Les Jardins* (1782) Jacques Delille (1738-1813) continued the descriptive poetry of nature spearheaded by Jean-François Saint-Lambert (1716-1803) in *Les Saisons* (1769). André Chénier (1762-94) revived classical myths as in "Hermès," and the modern myth of the New World with "L'Amérique," invigorated by American Independence. Creole poets like Évariste Parny (1753-1814) developed exotic, elegiac themes. The theosophist Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803) imagined new rhythms to match spiritual elevation (*L'Homme de désir*, 1790). While the above works are remarkable for their length and scope, there was also an adverse reaction to voluminous, often epic, poems, with the taste for short, "fugitive" poems, symptomatic of the shift towards a new poetics privileging instantaneity over narration (see Delon's 1997 anthology).

The evolution of theater was also incremental although many dramatists broke rules sooner and faster than poets did, and prose was well accepted except for tragedies, the last bastion. A key date in this emancipation is the 1791 law fostered by Beaumarchais (1732-99) establishing authors' rights, which finally broke the actors' despotic control over playwrights. Mercier's polemical treatise on theater (1773) turned against the French classical tradition to advocate the "*drame bourgeois*" composed for the people, who will reach its moral goal through emotion. Like Schiller, Mercier sought to realize dramas about social conditions, not characters. While contemporary actors would not perform Mercier's plays on account of his radical theses, today it is their heavy-handed morality that spoils them for readers and spectators. As will be seen repeatedly, before aesthetics achieved the lyricism called for by early French Romantics, it remained but a doctrinal aesthetic, namely theoretical, wishful thinking. Nevertheless, Mercier, inspired by but more radical than his predecessor Diderot, actively advanced dramatic theory, towards Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare* and Victor Hugo's preface to *Cromwell*.

### The Three Representatives of Early French Romanticism

#### *Germaine de Staël (1766-1817): The voice of the other*

Staël lived only 51 years but pioneered the most progressive and bold ideas. She inaugurated the type of the "*intellectuelle engagée*," the female intellectual stepping into

public debate no matter the cost. In detailing obstacles and hardships, Mary Shelley's essay on Staël's life seemed to invite a reading of the destiny of female genius as the quintessential Romantic quest for freedom and acceptance (Shelley 2002). Born in Paris, she was raised a Swiss Protestant like Rousseau, by parents from the high bourgeoisie who lavished on her the finest education. She learnt from her mother's famed Parisian salon in the presence of luminaries such as Diderot and Grimm, and from the tumultuous political career of her famous father, an agent and victim of the revolutionary cause.<sup>5</sup> French, Swiss, or Swedish according to her needs (she married, *de convenance*, the Swedish Ambassador to Paris from whom she separated in 1797), she breathed cosmopolitanism, inviting an international set of guests to Coppet, her residence by Lake Geneva, and spent her life traveling: first to England (1793) and Germany (where in 1803-4 she met Goethe and Schiller, and hired August Wilhelm Schlegel as her children's tutor); then Italy (1805) and north-eastern Europe (Vienna, Moscow, St Petersburg, Stockholm in 1812-13), back to England, where she met Byron (1813-14),<sup>6</sup> and Italy (1815). Political circumstances repeatedly forced her out of Paris: Coppet became a refuge from the Terror, then her headquarters after Napoleon banished her from the capital in 1803, and his police kept harassing her, prompting her flight to Germany. *Dix années d'exil* (published posthumously in 1820), "the most simple and interesting of her works" according to Mary Shelley, records a decade spent escaping the wrath of him who "oppressed her because she refused to be his tool" (Shelley 2002: 479).

Staël's political independence started early and never swayed: she wrote a plea against the queen's execution, labored for the return of émigrés, including Chateaubriand, then involved herself in parliamentary politics through her friend Constant. Her outspoken letters to Jefferson to press for an American intervention against Napoleon are remarkable examples of her political activism. Napoleon could neither abide her political maneuvering which he deemed dangerous, nor her work, which he read as "anti-French" in its praise of foreigners, or more pointedly in its insulting silence towards the Emperor. The two novels and two major essays that established her reputation as one of Europe's leading *femmes de lettres* provided a response to the continuing historic upheaval reshaping France, as well as an opening towards foreign national traditions and innovations discovered while in exile.

First came *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800), an ambitious interpretation of literature as the expression of society, determined by history, geography, and politics. Thus far, traditional criticism appraised beauties and defects according to set rules. Staël still believed taste was not arbitrary even when shaped by national variations, but she invoked genius as the ultimate arbitrator. The essay contrasts Northern and Southern literature, the ancients and moderns, opposing Homer, the father of classical poetry, to Ossian, the origin and representative of the melancholy literature of the North. Northern imagination favors dark imagery, inspiring philosophical self-reflections, reinforced by Christian religion and its emphasis on self-introspection. "In order to characterize the general spirit of each literature," Staël moves from an analysis of Greek and Latin literature to a

Through *De la littérature* and *De l'Allemagne* Staël was channeling into France new sources of inspiration to base a new aesthetic. By contrast, she did not seek to demonstrate new writing principles in her novels, which remain traditional in their form as well as their plot around societal obstacles to love and freedom. Named after their eponymous heroines – in many respects Staël's surrogates – *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807) – put on trial women's condition, at once novels and disquisitions. In her very long, first letter-novel set from 1790 to 1792, a wealthy young widow falls in love with her cousin's fiancé, Léonce, but mothers conspire to separate them. Delphine loses her reputation with impulsive acts of generosity and heedless independence, distressing Léonce who is afflicted by a paralyzing sense of propriety. Manipulators marry him off and trap Delphine into taking religious vows. She escapes to commit suicide rather than survive her lover, who has run away to war after his wife's death. *Delphine's* perceived immorality, its views on marriage and the right to divorce or break monastic vows scandalized France and elated Germany. "*Delphine* is a work remarkable as a novel of moral ambiguity written in a tone of moral certitude. [Rousseau's] *La Nouvelle Héloïse* had established this mode, so widely successful with the public" (Gutwirth 1978: 128). Staël reversed the much criticized suicide ending when the book was re-edited in 1820.<sup>7</sup> Permeated by her reading of Rousseau, Goethe, Byron, and Chateaubriand, Staël's tragic tale gives voice to her otherness as a woman artist in the clutches of both oppressive love and repressive society. For the cruel consequence of love as an existential need for women is the purposeful self-abasement of their talents and character (Gutwirth 1978: 102-53). Romanticism and feminism are still anachronisms, held back by the concern for novelistic and moral conventions.

This is true as well of *Corinne ou l'Italie*. This travelogue met with immediate success in France and abroad, including America where Staël sent Jefferson a personal copy. A beautiful female poet, renowned for her eloquent improvisations, living a free-spirited life in her adopted country, Italy, falls in love with a melancholy English lord, Nevil, who eventually leaves her for a paragon of virtue and traditional womanhood, Lucile. The novel gives voice to three nations, calling for a political and ideological reading that got Staël in trouble once again.

The portrayal of female genius, although she meets a tragic fate – the heart-broken Corinne dies – galvanized women authors such as Letitia Landon (L. E. L.) who adapted Staël's plot in *The Improvisatrice* (1824). Byron read *Corinne* as an allegory of the misunderstood genius, of unrewarded creative generosity. He even annotated his lover Teresa's Italian translation of the novel, remarking that Staël "is sometimes right and often wrong about Italy and England – but almost always true in delineating the heart, which is but of one nation and of no country or rather of all" (Byron 1991: 223-4). Mary Shelley agreed but faulted the tragic ending: "For the dignity of womanhood, it were better to teach how one, as highly gifted as Corinne, could find resignation or fortitude enough to endure a too common lot, and rise wiser and better from the trial" (Shelley 2002: 484).

Mary Shelley's main point of contention with the two novels is that "they do not teach the most needful lesson – moral courage" (Shelley 2002: 493). Unlike Richard-

son's Clarissa and Rousseau's Julie, Staël's unhappy heroines die crushed and diminished, their passions having dominated their reason to the end. In the tradition of Greek and Racinian tragedies, the weight of external forces upon the characters contributes to their downfall.

Published in Italy, Staël's last work, *De l'esprit des traductions* (1816), encouraged Italians to translate English and German poetry to discover new genres and free their art from ancient mythology. She further advocated translation of Shakespeare and Schiller's theater "for theater is really the executive power of literature" (Staël 1861: 296). A. W. Schlegel is the model translator, combining "exactitude with inspiration" in contrast with French habits of adaptation to national taste. This short provocative essay marked the departure point for the Romantic battle in Italy, a fire set by Staël in a final plea for emancipation. To the end "an incorrigible Revolutionary" – in the words of the Milanese governor – she died on Bastille Day, 1817.

#### *Benjamin Constant (1767-1830): Of love and politics*

Like Rousseau and Staël, Benjamin Constant was a Swiss Protestant, inheriting a tradition of liberalism of which he would become the most forceful advocate. He received his education in England, Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland, eventually spending two years at Edinburgh, Scotland, where he participated in the exclusive debating club, the Speculative Society.

His passionate and tormented liaison with Staël shaped his literary output as well as his political activism. The enthusiastic articles he wrote for *Le Publiciste* in 1807 defending *Corinne ou l'Italie* had the benefit of insight but also a telling biographical slant, responding to the tragic life of the female genius by justifying the male protagonist's torn character (Balayé 1968). Like Staël, his literary criticism was ahead of practice. When he adapted Schiller's tragedy *Wallenstein* (1809), a preface praised the power of German drama unbound by the French sacrosanct principle of the three unities (time, space, and action), but his tame, abridged, and faulty translation ultimately bowed to French taste, as if the time had not yet come. More successful was the transposition of his unhappy love life into the short novels *Adolphe* (1816) and the unfinished *Cécile*. Constant's prose achieved a piercing exactness in capturing the psychology of characters torn by their prevarication, the author's own failing, so ironically opposed to the constancy implied in his name.

While Staël could never hold an elected office on account of her sex, Constant thrust himself into politics, writing key essays at each turning point (on the Terror, the freedom of the press, elections, bipartisanship, constitutional politics, religion), serving in office when nominated or elected, falling in and out of favor, maintaining in the face of incredible political turmoil and a succession of postrevolutionary authoritarian regimes his opposition to power by force and respect for parliamentarism. He embodied the motto, later used by the ultra-royalists to insult the new generation of poets and critics, that Romanticism is Protestantism in politics, letters and art – the spirit of freedom.

*Chateaubriand (1768-1848): Bard of past times*

Unlike Staël's childhood, surrounded by a whirlwind of celebrities who inspired and gave free reign to her intellect, Chateaubriand's formative years were pervaded by solitude and gloom, giving free reign to his imagination instead. Chateaubriand grew up in the austere medieval castle of Combourg, surrounded by Brittany's tempestuous ocean, its forlorn marshes and brooding skies, a witness to the comings and goings of ships and the endless wait for the mariners' return. These leitmotivs struck a chord of recognition when discovered in Ossian. Of all French regionalisms, Brittany's Celtic lore was the closest to the Gaelic bard's invocations. Le Tourneur's complete translation of Ossian (1777-84) spurred numerous imitations, including Chateaubriand's. Encouraged by his melancholy sister Lucile, inspired by the English poets Thomas Gray, James Thompson, Edward Young, and by Salomon Gessner's *Idylls*, a morose Chateaubriand tried his hand at poetry, composing from 1784 to 1790 a series of "Tableaux de la nature" where nature's beautiful resilience contrasts with the poet's tenuous life. The lyric "I" at the center of these early poems bathes in a Rousseauist reverie.

Outgrowing fugitive poetry, Chateaubriand began to envision an epic narrative, "*l'épopée de l'homme de la nature*" but the ambitious fresco on the North-American Indians would not come to life: "I soon realized I lacked true colors, and if I wanted a faithful picture, I, like Homer, had to visit the people I wanted to paint" (Chateaubriand 1996: 65). To justify his aesthetic project of traveling to America, Chateaubriand conceived of a scientific purpose, namely the discovery of the Northwest passage, itself a journey of epic proportion in keeping with his ambitious dreams and boundless self-assurance. Fraught with contradictions and paradoxes, Chateaubriand's encounter with the New World (April 1791-January 1792) produced a shock that reverberated throughout his life and writing. Although he visited large cities, the traveler followed his exploratory instinct and spent most of his time in the wilderness ("*le désert*"). Instead of the Northwest passage, Chateaubriand discovered a still unspoiled, awe-inspiring nature, home to an indigenous people on the verge of extinction, uprooted and corrupted by settlers and traders – a ruined noble savage.

Following his return from America, Chateaubriand spent seven months in France, hastily married, then joined the royalist army of princes in August 1792. Soon wounded and sick, he fled to his uncle's in Jersey, then moved to England in May 1793. Exile had begun: Chateaubriand would return to France only seven years later, in May 1800.

In 1797 Chateaubriand published his first work in prose, the *Essai sur les révolutions*, an enormous and ambitious comparative history of revolutions as cyclic phenomena. The panoramic essay ends unexpectedly with a lyrical final chapter entitled "Nuit chez les sauvages de l'Amérique" where the author recalls his experience of the sublime. This famous final scene pre-empts the closure of history, by refusing to perceive history as a sealed, apoetical story. Contrary to appearances, the *Essai* is not a

farewell to the Muses, an abandonment of poetry for history, but a gesture towards a poetry compatible with the necessity of, and the need for, historical consciousness.

While in exile, Chateaubriand also delved into British literature, commenting on and translating personal favorites, published upon his return to France in a series of articles for the *Mercure de France* (1802) and later grouped in an expanded *Essai sur la littérature anglaise* (1836). In addition to Young and Shakespeare, he selected the lesser-known James Beattie whose *Minstrel, or the Progress of Genius* combined the divine poet and the genius-child in the Scottish shepherd Edwin. Chateaubriand was drawn to other bardic figures. Thomas Gray's defiant bard (*The Bard. A Pindaric Ode*, 1751), the last spokesman of Welsh independence, conveyed the anger, sorrow, and rebellion of those who had fallen victim to history, as many in France's postrevolutionary society. Chateaubriand also translated John Smith, a skillful imitator of Macpherson's *Ossian*. For the 25-year-old Chateaubriand, exiled by the gory aftermath of the Revolution, Ossian's mournful accents, which he so enjoyed as a youth, assumed a powerful immediacy: the importance of history in forging and maintaining one's identity; the crucial role of memory in preserving the past; the threat of erasure by time and death; the survivor's duty to record and testify. Ossian portrayed a devastated landscape of tombs and ruins similar to postrevolutionary France, and expressed similarly painful loss and regret in the wake of an historical trauma. From the fall of the ancien régime to the first-hand discovery of the Indians' tragedy triggered by European conquest, Chateaubriand's early experience of loss was compounded by an exceptionally long yet childless life, which subjected him to witnessing the death of his own generation without begetting a new one, leaving him its sole survivor.

The only voice apt to convey the pervasive sadness of these memories belongs to the elegiac bard, the central archetype of Chateaubriand's life and work. The bard's historical, sociocultural, and mythopoetic role, and the interpretive lyrics and music called for by this role, sums up the origins and destiny of a people. Milton's success in recounting the foundational narrative of Christian religion, *Genesis*, and his account of the first, the most ineluctable, and most tragic of all prophecies – humankind's subsequent, never-ending Fall – places him at the pinnacle of Chateaubriand's pantheon of bards. Begun in England, his remarkable translation of *Paradise Lost* was eventually completed 35 years later in 1835.

When time came for appeasement, Chateaubriand hoped to repair with the *Génie du christianisme* (1802) the torn link between the French and their traditions, and easily substituted biblical hymns for the Gaelic bard's songs, contrasting David's peaceful lyrics with a violent, haunting past. But the *Génie du christianisme* was also written to atone for the impious, pessimistic *Essai*, which reportedly hastened his mother's death. The *Génie* formulates the essential principles of Chateaubriand's poetics, building a "théologie poétique" from the best Christian literature. Christian religion created the conditions for heightened moral conflicts, illustrated in modern epic poems and tragedies; furthermore, Christian religion, by chasing away mythology, revealed nature's true sublime, the source of modern descriptive poetry.

Notwithstanding his celebration of Christianity, Chateaubriand cannot easily be classified as a traditionalist. His deep pessimism is not mere nostalgia but an existential angst in the face of topsy-turvy social and moral values and a weakening of religious faith. In a departure from the Catholic creed, Chateaubriand conceived Christian genius as predominantly the genius of melancholy, without hope or promise of redemption. The yearning for an indefinable ideal causes frustration and loneliness: Chateaubriand identifies this disenchantment as a modern phenomenon, born of the discrepancy between over abundant knowledge and lack of experience. The character René will epitomize "*cet état du vague des passions*" (the vagueness or "unsettled state" of the passions) which consumes the self (Chateaubriand 1976b: 296-8).

Chateaubriand inserted in the *Génie du christianisme* the stories of *Atala* and *René* as "illustrations" of his main thesis, then easily extracted them the better to promote their originality and showcase his talent. *Atala* appeared in 1801, a year earlier than the publication of the *Génie*, and its success paved the way for the enthusiastic reception of the *Génie*. The original framework of the two stories, however, was the unfinished American manuscript of *Les Natchez*, eventually revised 25 years later. This complex genealogy – from two episodes within an epic-like narrative, to illustrations of an aesthetic treatise on religion, then autonomous, albeit unclassifiable, stories – creates ambiguous, multilayered narratives. Atala, a christened Indian, falls in love with the prisoner Chactas captured by her Natchez tribe. They escape into the wilderness, eventually reaching the Catholic mission of Father Aubry. The lovers' initial delight at discovering a common bond (Chactas was adopted by Atala's European father after the latter was forced to leave her mother), is soon burdened by a secret guilt which forbids Atala's union with Chactas. After poisoning herself, Atala confesses that she vowed on her mother's deathbed to remain a virgin. Father Aubry condemns the promise as invalid and the sacrifice misguided, but Atala expires. In the epilogue the narrator encounters the last survivors of the Natchez tribe who inform him that Chactas and Father Aubry perished in the Louisiana massacre perpetrated by the French.

In *René*, an older Chactas is now the sage to whom René, a Frenchman in self-imposed exile, confides his own unhappy story, a confession triggered by a letter announcing his sister Amélie's death. Amélie's soulmate in childhood, René grows apart from her under the pressure of ill-defined feelings and inarticulate longings. Neither traveling abroad nor settling back in France cures his ennui and disgust for life. Amélie returns when her brother's despair puts him on the brink of suicide, but she eventually falls prey to a mysterious ailment, which leads her to withdraw to a convent. The climactic scene occurs as a powerless René watches the ceremony of his sister's religious vow-taking and hears her whisper her criminal passion for her brother.

The twin stories captured the imagination of Europe and met with phenomenal success. *Atala* and *René* represented contrasting aspects of the new character later called "Romantic" whose inner torment mirrors a society in the grip of crisis. Set during the corrupted Regency years following Louis XIV's death in 1715, the

narrative in effect recalls the traumatic aftermath of the 1789 Revolution. René the European suffers from an agitation without purpose, contradictory impulses that exhaust his wanderlust without achieving peace of mind or heart. For “[t]he heart is a defective instrument, a lyre lacking strings” (Chateaubriand 1980: 80). The half-Indian Atala is alienated like René, she commits suicide like Werther, but she is other, foreign, a modern, split subject, a “*métisse*” (half-caste) who bears the memory of the colonial takeover. This hybridity is embedded in the story’s odd style, alternating between the narrator’s descriptive prose and the characters’ metaphoric language meant to convey their “primitive” voices. Chateaubriand’s rhythmic, ternary periods convey the majesty of the wilderness whereas parataxis, namely short, declarative sentences without conjunctions or coordination, transcribes a “*parler sauvage*” that sound paradoxically stilted to our modern ears, and might explain *Atala*’s fall from grace in today’s literary cannon. By contrast, René’s unbridled expression of vacuity echoes in countless modern dramas.

Catastrophe looms large on Chateaubriand’s horizon: struck by the loss of loved ones to the Revolution, obsessed by ruins of literary and political fame (Byron, Napoleon), tormented by history’s fateful turns (the downfall of the Indians, the twilight of the Enlightenment), Chateaubriand always contemplated the Fall, the ultimate unhappy ending. The Fall is both the premise and the conclusion of *Les Martyrs* and *Les Natchez*, two epic frescoes in prose, the former opposing pagans and Christians in third-century Gaul, the latter North-American Indians and Europeans. The emotional struggles of their respective protagonists, Eudore and René, their suicidal passivity, their weakening under the burden of exile, their secret wounds, cast them as prototypical antiheroes, and “Romantic” characters. This character assumes yet a different temperament when of the opposite sex: Velléda (Brittany’s last bard in *Les Martyrs*) and Mila (René’s sister-in-law) are passionate, proud, resolute, active, yet ultimately fall victim to their passion and suffer a similarly tragic fate to their male counterparts.

After the disappointment of *Les Martyrs* in 1809, Chateaubriand officially bade farewell to the muse of poetry and engaged history by becoming a political actor from 1814 until 1830. Even before he recorded his extraordinary life as an epic journey in the autobiographical *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (1844), a 14-year-old Victor Hugo proclaimed in his 1816 diary: “I want to be Chateaubriand or nothing.”

An irreconcilable thematic and stylistic duality at the core of *Les Martyrs* and *Les Natchez* condemned them to a critical purgatory, which has lasted to this day. In each text, the conflict exploded between the epic and the novel, between poetry and prose, Classicism and Romanticism. Indeed *Les Martyrs* and *Les Natchez* are the site of a fundamental hesitation between allegiance to the ancients or to the new Romantic spirit, a hesitation staged as a *mise en abyme*: while relating the decline of Indian tribes and Christian martyrdom, both epic poems seem to ask: is Romanticism a Fall? Is Classicism paradise lost? Chateaubriand’s art mirrors his position in letters, poised on the brink of Romanticism, but steeped in Classicism: “mon poème se ressent des lieux qu’il a fréquenté: le classique y domine le romantique” (Chateaubriand 1961a: I, 637).<sup>8</sup>

Long outliving Staël and Byron, Chateaubriand wrote his memoirs acutely aware of having begun a “school,” but remained divided about his followers.

### Senancour (1770-1846): The Invisible Romantic

It seems fitting to end with a case emblematic of the ironies of posterity when it comes to the French early Romantics. When Étienne Pivert de Senancour published his epistolary novel *Oberman* in 1804, the drawn-out, brooding meditations of the lone protagonist failed to capture readers’ interests. Thirty years elapsed before the critic Sainte-Beuve and the novelist George Sand wrote articles which turned into prefaces for new editions of *Oberman* in 1833 and 1840, bringing the novel back to life, albeit briefly. It inspired Sainte-Beuve’s novel *Volupté* (1834) and Sand’s *Lélia* (1833), as well as the composer Liszt,<sup>9</sup> the poet Gérard de Nerval, and Balzac’s early novels, in particular *Le Lys dans la Vallée* (*Lily of the Valley*; [1835] 1997). Matthew Arnold wrote two fervent poems in homage to the author of *Oberman*,<sup>10</sup> and also reviewed the book, praising Senancour’s “austere and sad sincerity,” casting him as the quint-essential Shakespearean tragic character: “as deep as his sense that the time was out of joint, was the feeling of this Hamlet that he had no power to set it right” (Arnold 1960: 157, 160).

With the passage of time, the original confessional, tormented lyricism seemed by then worn on everyone’s sleeve, a mere fashion distasteful to its fathers. It provoked Senancour to revise and tone down his one and only novel in 1833, just as Chateaubriand, at exactly the same time, was compulsively footnoting his works in view of their first complete edition. The confrontation of these amended versions has not sufficiently been called upon to understand the conflicted rapport of the early French Romantics with their own creations and the generation who followed them.

### NOTES

- 1 Note that all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 “La nature est une, comme la vérité: l’une ne comporte pas plus que l’autre, l’épithète de belle.” (“Discours des Préfaces,” in Le Tourneur 1990a: cxxxiii).
- 3 See Souriau ([1927] 1973), which describes Staël as inferior to Chateaubriand.
- 4 Her contemporaries never knew this private correspondence. Her *Lettres à M. de Guibert* were published in 1809.
- 5 Staël’s mother, Suzanne Curchod, had been the historian Edmund Gibbon’s first and only love but his father prohibited the marriage. Staël’s father, Jacques Necker, was Louis XVI’s Finance Minister.
- 6 See Byron ([1821] 1991). Byron later visited Coppet in 1816, but the Shelleys did not, although they were staying close by in the Villa Diodati on the shores of Lake Geneva where Mary Shelley began *Frankenstein*.
- 7 Staël had published her *Reflexions sur le suicide* in 1813.
- 8 This judgment on *Les Martyrs* equally applies to *Les Natchez*.
- 9 Liszt, “Les Années de pèlerinage: La Vallée d’Oberman” and “Le Mal du pays” (1834).

- 10 "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Obermann'" (1852), "Obermann Once More" (1867). See Arnold (1986: 66-71, 252-63).

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