



This is a repository copy of *Michelet's nonmodernity*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/145497/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Book Section:**

Goergen, M. [orcid.org/0000-0002-2427-372X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2427-372X) (2020) *Michelet's nonmodernity*. In: Arnould-Bloomfield, E. and Chi-ah Lyu, C., (eds.) *Nonmodern Practices: Latour and Literary Studies*. Bloomsbury , pp. 131-151. ISBN 9781501354281

---

© 2020 The Author. This is an author-produced version of a book chapter subsequently published in *Nonmodern Practices: Latour and Literary Studies*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## Michelet's Nonmodernity

Never lose an occasion, my friend, to declare, again, that Michelet is the very genius of history; firstly because it's true; and, furthermore, it annoys so many people to do so; and it is such a torture for our good friends the moderns...<sup>1</sup>

'It is urgent, it is properly vital for philosophy that we use the 19th century as the new Middle Ages at last', pleaded Michel Serres in conclusion to a study on Michelet's *The Sorceress*<sup>2</sup>. This suggestion was scrupulously heeded by Latour, for whom the legacy of the post-Revolutionary period acts as a philosophical and political matrix. In a similar way to Serres, Latour sees the 19th century as a crucible of contradictions: a rational and modern century, it resolutely partitions practices, disciplines and agents into binary oppositions; but in doing so it also causes hybrids and quasi-objects to proliferate. Whilst it may think of itself as the heyday of modernity, it is in fact the high point of the nonmodern.

This interpretation is implicit in *The Pasteurisation of France* (1988), and fully developed in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991). When the latter was published, the 19th century had become an object of intense scrutiny for Latour. As the first section of this study will show, the French intellectual climate of the 1980s lent itself favourably to a critical reassessment of the post-1789 period; the concept of nonmodernity is a distinct product of this *Zeitgeist*. The first goal of these pages is to analyse how Latour's ideas contribute to a change in the perception of the cultural and ideological legacy of the 19th century, and to show how, in bypassing the modern/antimodern binary in which it was circumscribed, the concept of nonmodernity restores the 19<sup>th</sup> century to its complexity. The second and third sections of this study will illustrate the crucial role played by literature in the reappraisal of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century as nonmodern, and define literature as the very place of origin of nonmodern sensibility. Finally, nonmodernity can also help us make sense of specific

works and authors that had become unreadable or out of fashion under the restrictive paradigm of modernity. Latour's critical toolbox, which is clearly inspired by semiotics and narrative theories<sup>3</sup>, has the potential to rejuvenate our historical approach of 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary works. This is what the final section will illustrate. Jules Michelet will be used as one of the most prominent representatives of the nonmodern strand that runs through 19<sup>th</sup>-century French literature. His works exemplify the ambivalence of a century which, whilst apparently upholding the constitutional principles of modernity, was also actively undermining them. Hopefully these pages will be in keeping with Serres's suggestion: re-reading Michelet in the light of Latour can help us recover networks of meanings and agents that had been discarded, and to read the French 19<sup>th</sup> century anew, as both an unfamiliar and yet surprisingly relevant for early 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers.

## I.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, the post-1789 period is represented as coterminous with the golden age of modernism, conceived both as a temporal rupture between past and present and as an epistemological rift between the natural and the social. It coincides with the peak era of stabilization of the modernist fallacy, a 'Second Enlightenment' during which the critical discourse of social sciences further widens the great schisms initiated sometime in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: between nature and culture, the human and the non-human, science and politics. *We Have Never Been Modern*, which by Latour's own admission was written on the smouldering ashes of naturalism and socialism, therefore clearly articulates a critique of the political, scientific and intellectual heritage commonly associated with 'the 19<sup>th</sup> century'. It denounces and unmask the triumph of the parallel project of scientific domination and political emancipation, whose delusional nature

was brutally revealed in 1989, a year dubbed by Latour the ‘year of miracles’. Crucially, 1989 seems to be the final nail in the coffin of a waning 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose illusions were finally dispelled with the fall of the Berlin wall.

For Latour, two watershed moments illustrate the illusions inherent in the modernist construction of history: 1789 and 1989, the year of the French Revolution and the commemoration of its bicentenary, two events which coincide with the beginning and the end of the modernist narrative. In the eyes of a modern, the French Revolution is a *tabula rasa*, the mythical point of inception of a new world to come. This interpretation has been dominant for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of Marxist historiography. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour joins ranks with thinkers of various ideological backgrounds who, in the favourable intellectual climate of the 1970s and 1980s, will challenge these then commonplace assumptions about the Revolution and the ‘modern’ century that it spawned. Latour self-admittedly aims to do for modernity what François Furet did for the the French Revolution in *Interpreting the Revolution* (1978), namely to emancipate the events and the objects it created from the ulterior discourses that organised their coherence. 1789 and 1989 therefore function for Latour as two historical markers around which the very notion of history can be revised. Ultimately, he relies on the deconstruction of the historicised concept of Revolution – with 1789 and 1989 as its external margins – to write a non-modern history of modernity, in other words a history in which the liminal value of these dates ceases to be functional.

As Latour was writing *We Have Never Been modern*, French intellectual history was at a crucial point of juncture. Marxism, as a hegemonic intellectual and political school of thought, was steadily losing ground, as the last vestiges of the regimes it inspired crumbled in Eastern Europe. The Revolution had ceased to be a promised land rising on the historic horizon. It had already been

confined to the mute strangeness of the past. Against this backdrop, the concept of non-modernity is highly representative of what François Dosse recently called the ‘1989 moment’, during which the critical bequest of Marxism is re-evaluated. What is also at stake in this intellectual moment, beyond Marxism, is a revision of the ulterior reading of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was underpinned by the hermeneutic totalitarianism of Marxist discourse. Latour’s non-modernity is a paradigm that emerges in the midst of a flurry of publications by French historians, intellectuals and essayists, which are testament to a newfound interest in a century whose meaning has suddenly ceased to be predicated on a political eschatology. A few representative examples will illustrate this revival. In the wake of Furet's revisionist reading of the Revolution, claiming that *la Révolution française est terminée* (the French revolution is over), the publication of Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* [*Rethinking France*] relegates the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s ideological legacy into the past: for Nora, it has ceased to be ingrained in living national *memory*, and should be now treated with the distance and dispassionateness owed to earlier periods of *history*. Over the same period of time, the Orsay museum (1986) opens its doors to the public, making the 19<sup>th</sup> century a state-funded object of musealisation and commemoration in its own right, in a gesture that further stresses its uncanny remoteness. Meanwhile, Philippe Muray denounces the collusion of socialism and illuminism in a ferocious pamphlet, *Le 19e siècle à travers les âges* [*The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Through the Ages*] (1984). The 1980s and early 1990s are a long procession of farewells to the century that preceded. Be they nostalgic or revengeful, they always feature the same line of arguments: the 19<sup>th</sup> century is to blame for a historical promise it didn't keep (socialism), while the alliance of technical mastery of nature and social progress it heralded (naturalism) also proved to be a fallacy.

Latour's concept of non-modernity evidently feeds into this moment of French thought. The idea that we have never been modern is rooted in the belief that revolutions in fact never really

happened, and indeed *cannot* ever happen: there never was an unbridgeable rift between a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, but only ulterior intellectual and political interpretations that constructed and imposed a discontinuous narrative of history.

A welcome side effect of this theoretical reassessment in philosophy, politics and literary studies is that it also paved the way for the rediscovery of figures that had been rejected by modernity, or until then confined to obsolescence. These figures, though Latour’s lens, can now be interpreted as the main protagonists of a non-modern narrative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In political philosophy for instance, the 70s and 80s were hailed as a ‘return to Tocqueville’, inaugurated by liberal philosopher Raymond Aron. This philosophical comeback gained momentum, once again, thanks to Furet’s book, which commends Tocqueville’s moderation and nonteleological perception of history. Tocqueville’s intellectual patronage is one that Latour also readily acknowledges when he states that ‘modernity still awaits its Tocqueville’<sup>4</sup>—a role that he is evidently willing to take on himself. By virtue of his emphasis on permanence and continuity in history (or, as Latour would put it, extension and acceleration of practices by a greater number of agents) rather than on rupture and purity, Tocqueville is the building block on which an heterodox (i.e. non-Marxist) reassessment of the historical legacy of the 19th century can be built. Other figures re-emerge in his wake, among which those writers and thinkers who had been idolised by the French Third Republic, made into national prophets of progress and democracy, and had then been largely shunned by advocates of political or aesthetic modernity, among whom towering literary figures such as Hugo or Michelet, to whom I will turn in the final section of this text. The loose corpus of ideas these writers adhered to was aptly named ‘humanitarianism’ by historian of ideas Paul Bénichou, who highlighted their attempts at determining a new secular faith for post-Revolutionary France, based on a blend of political and moral optimism, a belief in the pacifying

and progressive impact of education and technology, a faith in the inevitability of democracy, and the celebration of the people as the historic agent behind this drive towards progress. Victor Hugo, the most universally recognised of these figures, is also the one who most remarkably returned to the limelight in the mid-1980s. In 1985, the French government celebrates the centenary of the writer's death with a flurry of events aimed at reminding younger generations of the writer's importance in the construction of French Republican identity. The backdrop of these celebrations is distinctly one of ideological disarray that chimes in with Latour's critique of revolutionary eschatology: at this point François Mitterrand's socialist administration had long given up its early ambition of breaking away from capitalism and of '*changer la vie*' [changing life], and steadily initiated a conversion to market economy. As the lyrical illusions of May 1981 subsided, the left looked for alternative narratives that would allow it to abandon its radical legacy, which was still ripe with the promise of a new revolution to come. The French socialist party tried to reinvent itself as a progressive force whose main task was now to curb the excesses of a liberal democratic order whose foundations they no longer wished to challenge. At this stage in the dissolution of the ideological corpus of the left, pre-Marxist humanitarian figures could provide a welcome fallback narrative. This is precisely what Philippe Muray pinpoints in his 1984 controversial study. According to Muray, the reason why returning to references such as Tocqueville or Hugo proves so effective is that, however different they might be on other counts, they provide an alternative narrative to the Manicheism of revolutionary teleology. They do so, essentially, by reintroducing two elements that Marxism rejected: firstly, the idea of Providence (the crossed-out God, in Latour's words); secondly, and crucially for the scope of the present article, they challenge the process of purification that led to the division between human and non-human subjects. Here again, Tocqueville and Hugo foreshadow a distinctly nonmodern take on the century. A chapter in

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* emphasizes, for instance, an environmental agency in the felicity conditions of American democracy: 'there are a thousand circumstances independent of the will of men that make it easy to have the democratic republic in the United States',<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville writes, among which is nature itself: 'in the United States, it is not only legislation that is democratic; nature itself works for the people.'<sup>6</sup> As Pierre Charbonnier notes, Tocqueville here is hinting that there might be 'ecological conditions to freedom and equality'.<sup>7</sup> As to Hugo, his providentialist ontology refuses to separate humans, animals, and objects: 'In this century', he claims, 'I am the first who has spoken not only of that human and non-human agencies are coterminous, and underpinned by hidden principle of unity. Muray points out that what defines '19<sup>th</sup>-centuryness' is precisely the idea that all forms of life stem from the same vital unity. Politically, this bolsters an optimistic vision of the 'people' or the 'masses', represented as being instinctively closer to this common vitalist matrix than other classes, such as, say, bourgeois intellectuals. This has a distinct appeal for the 1980s, especially for the left, as it looks for new 'historic agents' to represent, and new ways to articulate its own mission, now that it has abandoned its ambition to make a clean break with the past. An emphasis on unity and connection is what Jean Baudrillard signposts as the characteristic ideological sidestep of the left as he publishes the ominous *La Gauche divine* [*The Divine Left*] in 1985: socialism has become a pure celebration of interaction and social links. It extols the virtues of the 'circularity of exchanges', putting forth vitalism and mediation as foundations of the body politic, at the expense of 'the violent myth of the social' embodied by the Revolutionary tradition. It has, in a word, forfeited modernity in favour of non-modernity.

There is evidence, then, to suggest that towards 1989, the 'year of miracles', France operated an return to heretofore neglected aspects and figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in order to counteract the



ideological void left by the simultaneous collapse of two pillars of modernity: confidence in the domination of nature on the one hand, faith in the emancipation of humanity on the other hand. The rise of the nonmodern marks a period of ideological reshuffle for the left.

It makes sense, as a result, to include Latour's philosophical stance into what Bernard Hours defined as 'the thought of the bicentenary':<sup>8</sup> Latour's denunciation of the pitfalls of modernity chimes in perfectly with contemporary reassessments of the mission, purview and agents of the French left. But within this broad movement, Latour's approach is unique. Its originality lies in the resolutely anachronistic bias of his critical apparatus. In refusing to take the premise that history is made of clearly defined 'befores' and 'afters' for granted, Latour fundamentally differs from the many iterations of post-modern or anti-modern discourses that have determined the oppositional boundaries of the French intellectual field for the last forty years. In contrast, Latour insists that the idea that 'time passes' is itself a by-product of the modern constitution: 'the connections among beings alone make time. It was the systematic connection of entities in a coherent whole that constituted the flow of modern time'.<sup>9</sup> History, and the process of division it implies, is hence always potentially guilty of a typically modernist sin. It theoretically splinters past and future, rendered incommensurable by denying their common mediations—when in fact any given point of history is filled with resurgences: 'the past remains, and even returns'.<sup>10</sup>

It is obvious that what Latour is denouncing here is a vision of history and progress that is typically attached to the very constitution of the 19th century as a stable ideological point of reference, and that I have outlined above. However, as Jean-Baptiste Fressoz argues, 'modernity has never been unequivocal in its mechanistic view of the universe and in its project to attain technological mastery of the world [...] nineteenth-century technological modernization did not occur in a fog of unconsciousness or a modernist frenzy'.<sup>11</sup> If, as Latour shows in the wake of

François Furet, the French Revolution was not revolutionary as its events unfolded, then we should also entertain the possibility that the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a whole, was already aware of its own nonmodernity even as it unfolded the thread of the modern narrative; we can think afresh our relation to the 19<sup>th</sup> century by considering it as the cradle of nonmodernity. This is one of the many avenues of research opened by *We Have Never Been Modern*: for is it not precisely over the course of this undisputed century of triumphant modernity, as the exclusions underpinning the modern constitution were at their most inflexible, that the most fascinating hybrids were likely to be spawned?

## II

The hypothesis of this section is that these hybrids found a welcoming environment in literary and artistic production. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century tries to define ‘modernity’ in literature and the arts, it is in fact already tiptoeing towards a definition of the nonmodern. Literary modernity is defined not a process of purification and rupture, but as its exact opposite, namely a trigger for the production of hybrids and for the representation of mediations. This justifies why we should turn to it now to look for an alternative to the all-too implacable logic of modernity as a rift.

It is perhaps inevitable to refer to Baudelaire, as he provides both the most comprehensive and most influential definition of ‘modernity’ provided in France at a time when the word modernity was still a neologism—he is indeed among the first to deal with the notion. ‘By modernity’, Baudelaire writes, ‘I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable’.<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire's ‘modern’ is a far cry from the polarising

mainstream interpretation of modernity that is condemned in *We Have Never Been Modern*. Far from it: it is essentially not incompatible with Latour's non-modern, to the extent that both notions can be seen as cognate. This is true in particular with respect to their perception of time and the teleological construction of history. H.-R. Jauss rightly points out that Baudelaire's conception of modernity 'no longer even understands itself as epochally opposed to some determinate past [...]'.<sup>13</sup> In this definition, Jauss adds, 'the great historical antithesis between the old and the new, between ancient and modern taste, gradually loses its currency'.<sup>14</sup> Baudelaire sees modernity as nothing else than an experience of entanglement and heterogeneity.

As a result, the aesthetic experience of modernity is in effect one of blurred boundaries. It challenges the radical rupture between past and present, between 'them' and 'us', that Latour sees as the act of faith of the modern mindset. Indeed, in line with Baudelaire's definition, the modern literary canon develops an ambivalent and critical reaction to the experience of the acceleration of technical and social times, as well as to the process of political rationalisation. As Antoine Compagnon has shown, this points to a fundamental ambivalence at the heart of the modern project: masterpieces of modern literature developed into a haven of anti-modern political feeling: 'historically, modernism, or true modernism, worthy of this name, has always been antimodern, that is ambivalent, self-reflective, and experienced modernity as an uprooting'.<sup>15</sup> At least within the specific province of literary experience, then, the seemingly irreconcilable notions of the modern and the anti-modern overlap and contaminate each other.

As far as I know, Latour doesn't explicitly refer to this Baudelairian etymology, nor does he pay particular attention to literary incarnations of the concept of modernity. This is despite their evident proximity with some aspects of the non-modernity he advocates. For what is true of the French Revolution does apply to the literary experience of modernity: one should differentiate the

‘modalities of historical action’ from the ‘process’<sup>16</sup>. ‘Modern’ writers used the concept of modernity to understand what they were going through and to give it meaning; but this does not mean that, in practice, their writing was modern, no more than—in Furet and Latour’s eyes—the French Revolution was revolutionary.

### III

Before I turn to Jules Michelet’s works as a prime example of nonmodern practice, it is useful to illustrate how nonmodernity can be used to challenge certain undisputed premises of literary history. The great shift of modernity in literature can be summarised in very broad sweeps as affecting first and foremost the status of imitation. Before modernity, models prevail; the order of mimesis is one of conformity with tradition and with an essentialised reality that it is the mission of the literary text to illustrate and reconfigure. After modernity, though, the text becomes its own standard of evaluation, liberated from the shackles of aesthetic norms; its relation to reality becomes increasingly conscious of its mediated nature; the type of connections that can be drawn between reality and its textual representation becomes contingent on highly subjective, and potentially infinite, variations. With Latour, it is the two main tenets of literary modernity, namely its self-reflexive nature and its autonomy from non-literary discourses, that are questioned. They correspond to a twofold and complementary process of purification (in the affirmation that there is a separate type of discourse called ‘literature’ which is incommensurable with others) and mediation (literature claiming to be a unique and privileged channel for the expression of the whole of human experience): this is the very same process as the one defining the modern paradox as a whole.

To an extent, then, Latour's non-modern does justice to the way modern literature defined itself in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: not as a clean break or a new dawn, but as an uncertain encounter of darkness

and light, populated with uncertain creatures. It places the notion of hybridity and mediation at its centre. In doing so, it also radically decentres the focus of literary history. If non-modernity is a valuable category to understand literary history, then it can potentially, and considerably, alter the composition of our traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary Pantheon—*exit* Flaubert, say, and enter Michelet.

Another exciting promise carried by the concept of nonmodernity in literary studies is that it prompts to scrutinise the way writers negotiated their own aesthetic practices, and to refuse to take their (or anyone else's) ulterior discursive rationalisations for granted. It does so, however, in a way that notably differs from the tradition of contemporary sociology of literature. This discipline which, in the wake of Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art*, has developed a methodology that aims to account for the positions occupied by writers within the cultural, social and economic spheres of their time, using concepts of habitus and capital at their centre. Specialists of sociopoetics, such as Alain Viala or Jérôme Meizoz, made effective use of the concept of 'posture auctoriale' [ 'auctorial posture', or 'author's image' ] to describe the way writers negotiated their identity within the literary field. What this school of criticism takes for granted, however, is that auctorial postures are necessarily predicated on the existence of an autonomous literary field that single-handedly steers a writer's social and artistic trajectory. As William Paulson pointed out,<sup>17</sup> the very existence of this divide between literary and non-literary discourses is something that the concept of non-modernity challenges: this divide can be seen as a prime example of purification, akin to the one that artificially separates nature and society. A nonmodernist literary history would hence challenge the misplaced sociological polarities of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French literary field—between 'art for art's sake' on the one hand and 'bourgeois art' on the other—, and focus instead on the 'Middle Kingdom', especially on those productions that have been expelled from the realm of

institutionalised literature. It would consider literature as moving ‘via spirals and eddies, forever reviving dead forms in new guise’<sup>18</sup>—genres, tropes, topoi and types would then have to be understood in their entanglement and recurrences rather than in the brutal breakups that set them apart. It would also strive to bridge the age-old gap between authorial intentionality on the one hand and reader’s freedom of interpretation on the other hand, by conferring agency to other elements within and outside of the text, as Latour himself suggests: ‘Balzac is indeed the author of his novels, but he often writes, and one is tempted to believe him, that he has been “carried away” by his characters, who have forced him to put them down on paper’...<sup>19</sup>

I have already mentioned that the concept of non-modernity was implicit in Baudelaire’s definition of modernity, and that the apparent rift between moderns and anti-moderns had, in fact, always spawned literary hybrids. The argument could be made—it is implicit in Compagnon—that ‘literature’, rather than being the name given in the 19th century to the institution of an autonomous field of cultural production with its own set of values and rules of inclusion and exclusion, is in fact the very embodiment of the ‘Middle Kingdom’, the place where the combined work of purification and mediation is at its most visible, finds its most welcoming environment, and reveals its profound solidarity. For in spite of all attempts at defining its essence, literature remains indeed an experience of hybridity, a discourse that can only be defined by what it does to other discourses, and by the extent to which it alters subjectivities. ‘As for texts, why deny them the grandeur of forming the social bond that holds us together?’<sup>20</sup> asks Latour: literature can be envisaged as a network of bonds, material, subjective and textual at one and the same time, making it the paragon of quasi-objects.

Someday, perhaps, teachers and scholars will refer to ‘nonmodern literature’ with the same air of aplomb and self-confidence as they would talking about romanticism or realism. The reality of 19<sup>th</sup>-century writing practices cannot be fully explained away by the ulterior justifications provided by the modern/antimodern divide. Latour prompts us to take a new approach to the construction of the literary canon – via a Latourian rereading of the Baudelairian construction of ‘modernity’ – and to turn our attention to works that slipped through the cracks, works that had been nonmodern all along, and therefore remained somewhat invisible or unreadable.

#### IV

The text as a quasi-object, as a bond, as the utopian milieu where different agents, things, beings and events find a space of negotiation and mediation: this is how Latour’s concepts can help us constitute the paradigm of a non-modern literary history, which does justice to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century’s own complex relation to modernity. Assuredly, Jules Michelet, a historian and a moralist, a Professor at the Collège de France and the author of a monumental and passionately subjective history of the French Revolution, would figure prominently in any textbook on non-modern writing. Michelet sits uncomfortably between genres and disciplines: besides his historical writings, he was also the author of natural histories such as *The Insect* (1858) or *The Sea* (1861), or of moral treatises such as *The People* (1846). He was also a prolific diarist. What makes him an exemplary case study is that his intellectual career is also an evolution from modernity to nonmodernity. He was originally very much the shining example of a modern in Latour’s sense—a thinker who believed in the unbridgeable differences between humans and non-humans—so much so, in fact, that it is in Michelet’s works that some of the most prescient

definitions of what Latour will describe as the constitutional conditions of modernity can be found. Let us now follow the trail of Michelet's conversion to non-modernity.

In the very first paragraph of his *Introduction to World History* (1831), Michelet posits an absolute separation between nature and man as the foundation of his vision of human agency: 'With the world, a war began that will end with the world, and not before: the war of man against nature, of spirit against matter, of liberty against fatality. History is nothing but the story of this endless struggle'.<sup>21</sup> This separation, more brutally expressed by Michelet than by any other thinker of his time, spells out what Latour defines as the first conditions of the modern constitution, namely the absolute separation of nature and society. In Michelet's early texts, this separation is coextensive with a rejection of the Christian dogma of Grace, to which he substitutes the Revolutionary ideal of Justice. As Bénichou notes, 'in fact, invoking Justice against Grace is wanting God's justice to be our own: God, in Michelet's eyes, can only love us according to Law, Reason and Justice, that is according to the idea Man has of God'.<sup>22</sup> In rejecting Grace, Michelet candidly exposes one of the guarantees of Latour's modern constitution, the 'crossed-out God': the divine is simultaneously transcendent (Grace is rejected from the realm of human actions) and immanent (in the form of Justice, which is defined by humans). The principles of Christianity and those of the Revolution were as incompatible to the early Michelet as those of nature and human progress.

And yet, as Mitzman points out, Michelet's ideas change over the course of the 1840s and 1850s: 'from a basic belief in the linear progress of freedom through conflict with and liberation from the natural world, he came to accept a cyclical view of nature and spiritual existence built on the principle of harmony.'<sup>23</sup> The watershed moment for this change is June 1848 and the



disillusions brought about by the demise of the Second Republic and the 2 December coup of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. This troubled historical context is exacerbated by personal circumstances, as Michelet is dismissed from the Collège de France on 12 March 1851. Michelet's view of history had thus far been predicated on the idea of the French Revolution as a clean break, revealing new universal principles to France and to the world: 'Did France exist before that time? It might be denied'.<sup>24</sup> The Revolution functions theoretically as an absolute origin: 'Grand, stange, surprising scene! To see a whole people emerging, at once, from nonentity to existence [...]'. But what June 1848 challenges for Michelet is the confidence in a linear perfectibility of societies that was implicit in this vision of Revolution as ground zero. Michelet's appraisal of history changes accordingly. Rather than being represented as a clean break, made at an identifiable moment in time by a defined set of rational agents, the Revolution becomes a spiritual principle, one whose incarnation is neither limited to human agency, nor to a distinct chronology. So much so that historical discourse is no longer sufficient to explain it away: it is treated, as Gossman points out, as an 'ever-renewed promise of redemption'<sup>25</sup>, in which all of creation – man, nature and things – equally partakes.

1848 is to Michelet what Latour showed 1989 to be for his generation: a 'year of miracles' in which the contradictions of modernity are crudely exposed, and the shortcomings of a dominant ideologies brutally unmasked. Now that the Revolution as a historical process had proved to be reversible, its true nature is to be found elsewhere: in other *agents*, in other *temporalities*. Michelet's latter intellectual production is increasingly interested in finding a space of representation for agents that had had little or no voice in historical discourse so far, whether these agents are human (the people, the sorceress) or, more interestingly perhaps, non-human (the sea, the bird, the mountain, the insect). In doing so, Michelet does not seek to impose his own human

rationality on them, but rather embraces the idea that history is a form of alchemy that involves the participation of a multiplicity of subjects and objects, as well as the co-existence of historical time and natural cycles of recursivity and renewals. Michelet's premonition, which leads to a fundamental of his ideology in the 40s and 50s, is as follows: while human and non-human agencies, or indeed human and non-human temporalities cannot be conflated, they are in fact underpinned by a profound unity, that it is the mission of the writer to reveal.<sup>26</sup> In Michelet, as Barthes noted, there is 'no barrier of essence between the orders of nature: the mineral is the plant, the animal contains the human dream.'<sup>27</sup> Michelet's work becomes a meditation on the relation between nature and culture,<sup>28</sup> supported by two principles that anticipate Latour's non-modern paradigm: irreducibility on the one hand, and translatability on the other. Nothing in Michelet's world can claim to be the universal equivalent of anything else, yet everything is equally correlated and worthy of representation. In *The Insect*, for instance, Michelet addresses non-human agents as equal partners: 'If thou toilest and lovest, O Insect, whatever may be thy aspect, I cannot separate myself from thee. We are truly somewhat akin. For what am I myself, but a worker?'<sup>29</sup> Michelet's world is one without stitchings, where the smallest elements of inert nature are bestowed with the same intensity of agency and subjectivity, down to the tiniest ant: 'however humble the insect may seem in appearance [...] it exists independently; it moves, goes, comes, advances or returns [...] it suffices for itself; it foresees, provides, defends, and boldly confronts the most unexpected chances. In this, then, do we not discern, as it were, a first glimpse of personality?'<sup>30</sup>

No discourse then, be it the discourse of the historian as opposed to the discourse of 'the people', and no agent, be it the 'great man' as the subject of history as opposed to the insect, the mountain or the bird, can be said to encapsulate and express the meaning of others. Yet everything may become the object of a translation—humans and non-humans can become allies to each other; as

Latour puts it, ‘an actor expands while it can convince others that it includes, protects, redeems, or understands them’<sup>31</sup>.

Expansion and understanding are precisely the missions assigned to writing by Michelet. Writing triggers a process of empowerment of other agents, during which the writer’s autonomous rationality gets profoundly altered by mediations. In *The People*, Michelet represents himself as a spokesperson for the different classes that make up the social fabric of France, for, he claims, ‘I unite them all in my in my own person’.<sup>32</sup> his word becomes the very nexus of mediation where different beings, who have no other space or voice, find their natural habitat. Beings and things are porous in Michelet’s ontology, which also means that, conversely, the writer’s voice own subjectivity can merge with non-human agencies, as in this famous example in *The Mountain* [1866], in which Michelet recounts the experience of taking mud baths at Acqui:

The only image that I could then cherish was that of Mother Earth – Terra Mater. I felt her very plainly, caressing and pitying and warming her wounded child. Without? Ay, and internally also. She interpenetrated my frame with her vivifying principles, entered into and blended with me, insinuated into my being her very soul. The identification between us grew complete. I could no longer distinguish myself from her.<sup>33</sup>

As this example shows, Michelet advocates a fundamental ontological equality between human and non-human subjects, hereby anticipating Latour. Unsurprisingly for the graphomaniac that he was, however, Michelet endows the practice of writing, and book as objects, a privileged status within this flat metaphysics. Michelet clearly insists on the capacity of the written word to have the same ontological status as other human and non-human subjects. Texts are to be understood as having their own agency. But also, because everything can eventually be translated into a textual

form, Michelet hints that a book might indeed be the most welcoming space of all, one in which all temporalities can be deployed, and all voices are represented—while in the extratextual world epiphanies like that of the Aquí mud baths are rare. Texts, therefore, are the ultimate mediators, the most effective environment for networks to reveal themselves, and for the limitations of modernity’s oppositional structure—human vs. non-humans, subject vs. object, science vs. politics...—to be exposed. For Michelet, the most meaningless duality of them all is no doubt the separation of the self and the world. We have to take Michelet seriously when he writes, in the *Preface to the History of France* (1869): ‘My life in this book, it has been transformed into it. This book has been my life’s only outcome’<sup>34</sup>: for the extraordinary power of the text is that it suspends, however briefly, the antagonism of the self and the world. In the written word, Michelet seeks the ideal unity he can no longer find in history, the elusive balance between his own subjectivity and its dissolution within a collective of other actants. This moment of equilibrium defines both what a writer should be for Michelet—the momentary spokesperson of a variety of different and potentially conflicting agents—and what he also ends up seeing as the real incarnation of the Revolutionary spirit, namely a moment of unity and harmonious polyphony that can be both eternally preserved by texts and yet for ever reactualised in the act of reading. As Gossman suggests, ‘is it not, in fact, by transforming [the Revolution] into literature that Michelet hopes to suspend the fragile epiphanic moment and make it eternal, indefinitely re-presentable and renewable?’<sup>35</sup>

Michelet’s writing established a continuum between human and non-human, facts and subjectivity, autobiography and collective narratives, science and fiction. These are seamlessly entangled in his works. In Latour’s word, Michelet’s books can be read as *factishes*: he writes them as much as he is written by them, with ‘the robust certainty that allows practice to pass into action

without the practitioner ever believing in the difference between construction and reality, immanence and transcendence'<sup>36</sup>—to the extent that it threatens the very integrity of both himself as a writer and his book as a historical or scientific artefact. Michelet's originality and exemplarity is that the very essence of his work is to display and dramatize these negotiations rather than to hide them. The writer himself is torn between a sense of failure—the impossibility to purify, the feeling that an excess of language and meaning is constantly created—and the acknowledgement, more and more consenting and enthusiastic as Michelet gets older, that other agents do have a right to be represented, and that at the root of history and human experience lies the mysterious unity postulated by translatability. Michelet increasingly conceived of his role as writer and as an historian as that of the delegate of a parliament of things.

### Conclusion

Three short conclusions can be drawn from this reading of Michelet and the notes that precede it. Firstly, if Michelet is indeed a non-modern, it is no doubt because he was also, at first, a disillusioned modern, shaken by the possibility of history going backwards or of the Revolution being erased. Non-modernity is present, in other guises, in 'progressive' writers such as Hugo or Zola, who shared Michelet's fears. There is a non-modernist vein that runs through the French 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that is still largely unexplored. Secondly, while Michelet did not consider his production as literary, what he does is precisely to define a characteristic of nonmodern literature: by granting all agents the same ontological status, nonmodernity unveils the essentially narrative nature of all disciplines: ultimately, distinctions between the literary and the scientific, the factual and the fictional, are secondary. As suggested before, a great number of texts who sit halfway between disciplines—this is of course Michelet's case, but one can think of the works of Fourier

or Pierre Leroux, among others—could be reassessed. Thirdly, as Roland Barthes hinted in an article aptly called ‘Michelet’s Modernity’,<sup>37</sup> what made writers like Michelet ‘unreadable’ before the ‘year of miracles’ is precisely what makes them relevant and young again today: their interest for symbolic mediations, their concern for the problems of delegation of authority and voice—who can speak, on whose behalf? What channels of communication/translation can be used? How can nonhuman agency be represented ?... These questions seem more pressing in the early 21st century, as we are negotiating ways of defining a democratic and natural contract that can accommodate both humans and non-humans in the face of political and ecological disaster. Nonmoderns, such as Michelet, offer a fictional model of life in common.

Maxime Goergen

School of Languages and Cultures

University of Sheffield (UK)

### Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. *Michelet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

---, ‘Michelet Today’, in *The Rustle of Language*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 195-207.

---, ‘Michelet’s Modernity’. In *The Rustle of Language*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 208-211.

Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. 1863. London: Phaidon Press, 1995.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Divine Left. A Chronicle of the Years 1977-1984*. 1985. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

Bénichou, Paul. *Le Temps des prophètes. Doctrines de l'âge romantique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1977.

Bowman, Frank. 'Michelet et les métamorphoses du Christ'. *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 5 (1974): 824-851.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Charbonnier, Pierre. 'Les Aventures écologiques du libéralisme', AOC, accessed June 24 2019, [https://aoc.media/analyse/2018/04/25/aventures-ecologiques-liberalisme/#\\_ftnref1](https://aoc.media/analyse/2018/04/25/aventures-ecologiques-liberalisme/#_ftnref1).

Compagnon, Antoine. *Les Antimodernes. De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*. Paris: Gallimard, 2005.

Dosse, François. *L'Avenir en miettes, 1968-1989*. Vol. 2 of *La Saga des intellectuels français, 1944-1989*. Paris: Gallimard, 2018.

Fressoz, Jean-Baptiste. 'The Lessons of Disaster: A Historical Perspective of Postmodern Optimism', *Books and Ideas* accessed June 24 2019, <https://booksandideas.net/The-Lessons-of-Disasters.html>.

Furet, François. *Interpreting the French Revolution*. 1978. Translated by Elborg Forster. Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Gossman, Lionel. 'Michelet's Gospel of Revolution'. In *Between History and Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, 201-224.

- Harman, Graham, *Bruno Latour. Reassembling the Political*. London: Pluto Books, 2014.
- Heinich, Nathalie, 'Une Sociologie très catholique? A propos de Bruno Latour'. *Esprit* 5 (2007), 14-26.
- Hours, Bernard. 'Compte-rendu de *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*'. *L'Homme et la société*, 109 (1993), 132-134.
- Hugo, Victor. *Victor Hugo on Things That Matter. A Reader*, edited by Marva A. Barnett. Yale: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Jauss, Hans Robert, 'Modernity and Literary Tradition', *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (2005), 329–64, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/430964>.
- Latour, Bruno, *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- , *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- , *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- , *On the Modern Cult of Factish Gods*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- , *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- , *Cogitamus. Six lettres sur les humanités scientifiques*. Paris : La Découverte, 2014.
- Mandrou, Robert, 'Pourquoi relire *Le Peuple*'. *L'Arc* 52 (1973), 50-53.
- Michelet, Jules, *History of the French Revolution*, edited by Gordon Wright. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- , *The People*. New York: Appleton, 1846.



---, *On History. Introduction to World History* (1831); *Opening Address at the Faculty of Letters*, 9 January 1834; Preface to *History of France* (1869). Translated by Flora Kimmich, Lionel Gossman and Edward K. Kaplan. Cambridge, UK: OpenBook Publishers, 2013.

---, *The Insect*. London: Nelson, 1875.

---, *The Mountain*. London: Nelson, 1872.

Mitzman, Arthur. 'Michelet and Social Romanticism: Religion, Revolution, Nature'. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57 (1996), 659-682.

Murray, Philippe. *Le 19e siècle à travers les âges*. Paris: Denoël, 1984.

Nora, Pierre, and Jordan, David P., eds. *Rethinking France*. 1984-1992. 4 vols. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001-2010.

Petitier, Paule. 'Un Discours sur la mort ; Michelet et le modèle de *L'Insecte*'. *Romantisme*, 64 (1989), 101-112.

Paulson, William, 'Nous n'avons jamais été dix-neuviémistes, ou l'avenir d'un avant-dernier siècle'. *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 24 (1995-1996), 34-39.

Péguy, Charles, *Clio. Dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne*. Paris: Gallimard, 1932.

Serres, Michel, *Hermès I: la Communication*. Paris: Minuit, 1968.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Charles Péguy, *Clio. Dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1932), 45.
- <sup>2</sup> Michel Serres, *Hermès I: la communication* (Paris: Minuit, 1948), 226. My translation.
- <sup>3</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54-56.
- <sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 40
- <sup>5</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by Eduardo Nolla, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Liberty Funds, 2010), 453.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.
- <sup>7</sup> Pierre Charbonnier, 'Les Aventures écologiques du libéralisme', *AOC*, 24 April 2018. Available online : [https://aoc.media/analyse/2018/04/25/aventures-ecologiques-liberalisme/#\\_ftnref1](https://aoc.media/analyse/2018/04/25/aventures-ecologiques-liberalisme/#_ftnref1) (accessed 20 June 2019)
- <sup>8</sup> Bernard Hours, 'Compte-rendu de *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*', in *L'Homme et la société*, 109 (1993), 133.
- <sup>9</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 77.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.
- <sup>11</sup> Fressoz, Jean-Baptiste. 'The Lessons of Disaster: A Historical Perspective of Postmodern Optimism'. *Books and Ideas*. Available online: <https://booksandideas.net/The-Lessons-of-Disasters.html>
- <sup>12</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995 [1863]), 13.
- <sup>13</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, 'Modernity and Literary Tradition', *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (2005), 359.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes. De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 12. My translation.
- <sup>16</sup> Bruno Latour, *Cogitamus. Six lettres sur les humanités scientifiques* (Paris : La Découverte), 60-61.
- <sup>17</sup> William Paulson, 'Nous n'avons jamais été dix-neuviémistes, ou l'avenir d'un avant-dernier siècle', *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, 24 (1996), 34–39.
- <sup>18</sup> Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 165.
- <sup>19</sup> Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 158.
- <sup>20</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 90.
- <sup>21</sup> Jules Michelet, *Introduction to World History* (1831), in *On History*, trans. Flora Kimmich, ed. Lionel Gossman and Edward K. Kaplan (Cambridge, UK: Openbooks, 2013), 25.
- <sup>22</sup> Paul Bénichou, *Le Temps des prophètes. Doctrines de l'âge romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 541.
- <sup>23</sup> Arthur Mitzman, 'Michelet and Social Romanticism: Religion, Revolution, Nature', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57 (1996), 668.
- <sup>24</sup> Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*, vol.1, trans. by C. Cocks (London: Bohn, 1847), 201.
- <sup>25</sup> Lionel Gossman, 'Michelet's Gospel of Revolution', in *Between History and Literature*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), 218.
- <sup>26</sup> On this point, see Paule Petitier, 'Un Discours sur la mort ; Michelet et le modèle de *L'Insecte*', *Romantisme*, 64 (1989), 101-112.

- 
- <sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *Michelet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 33.
- <sup>28</sup> As Robert Mandrou points out, this is the object of *The People* (1846), which reflects on the influence of natural and material conditions on the way social groups come to life. See Robert Mandrou, 'Pourquoi relire *Le Peuple*', *L'Arc* 52 (1973), 50-53.
- <sup>29</sup> Jules Michelet. *The Insect* (1858; London: Nelson and Sons, 1875), 22.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.
- <sup>31</sup> Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 173.
- <sup>32</sup> Jules Michelet, *The People* (New York: Appleton, 1846), 25.
- <sup>33</sup> Jules Michelet, *The Mountain* (London: Nelson and Sons, 1872), 111.
- <sup>34</sup> Jules Michelet, *Preface to the History of France* (1869), in *On History*, 143.
- <sup>35</sup> Lionel Gossman, 'Michelet's Gospel of Revolution', 222.
- <sup>36</sup> Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 22.
- <sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Michelet's Modernity', in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 208-211.