

MASTER-MIND LECTURE

Michelet

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I WOULD like to begin this evening with a confession: to speak about Michelet before a non-French audience is a daunting task. I have often seen this with my students at the University of Chicago who, though they enter easily into the world of Augustin Thierry or Guizot—not to mention Tocqueville—when confronted with Michelet's prose are wont to beat a hasty retreat. I should think that here in England Michelet's 'case' is even more difficult to plead, for among French authors he is certainly one of the most hostile to British civilization and his works are riddled with nasty remarks about your continent and your people. Of the two national histories (English and French) into which Guizot would have liked to read the future of Europe—which at that time represented the future of the world—Michelet retained only that of his own country. For him it was the only truly universal history. The 'other' history, I perhaps need not remind you, was at that time in a dominant position; Michelet none the less divested it of its philosophical dignity. You can thus measure the difficulty of the task with which I have been charged: to escort this bristling Frenchman into the British Academy.

Perhaps the simplest way to understand that terribly passionate writer is to place ourselves in the central years of his life, in the 1840s which mark the period between the death of Madame Dumesnil and his second marriage with Athénaïs Mialaret and coincides with his writing the end of his history of the Middle Ages and the first volumes of his history of the French Revolution. Michelet was, as you can see, someone for whom the history of the world was so closely tied to his formidable ego, and whose intellectual imagination was so inseparable from his personal experience,

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that it is impossible to disentangle the landmarks of his life from those of his work.

Between 1840 and 1843, while painfully enduring the mortal agony of the woman he loved, he wrote the fifth and sixth volumes of his *History of France*, consecrating the former to Charles VII and Joan of Arc, and the latter to Louis XI. The chronological order of his work would end there for he would not resume writing the following volumes, which would start with the Renaissance, until more than 10 years later. In the interim years from 1847 to 1853, he would publish his *History of the French Revolution*. One might be tempted to attribute Michelet's chronological inversion to a clairvoyance which would have befitted his penchant for prophesy, for he managed to write his history of the French Revolution at the very time of its revival in the Second Republic; that detour, however, was most probably the result of a shift in inspiration which happened to occur that year.

In 1843, Michelet began his lectures on the Middle Ages at the Collège de France. On 16 March, he cancelled his thirteenth talk, in which he was to have sung the praises of the great blossoming of the 12th century. When, with the start of the second semester at the end of April, he resumed his classes, he startled his students with a complete about-face in tone and subject matter; this was the moment of Michelet's well-known attack on the Jesuits, those symbols of the mechanical domination of men's souls and of an extinct religious world. With great brilliance he threw himself headlong into the battle then raging between the University and the Catholic Church. This last wished to break-up the state's educational monopoly in order to be at perfect liberty to have its own teachers and schools. Flanked by his friend Edgar Quinet, Michelet took on one of the most venerable institutions of his dearly beloved Middle Ages: the Church. It is not as if he had been blind to its weaknesses, but he had always preferred to stress its virtues. For example, in 1835 he wrote of Luther, 'We shall not be the ones, after so many of those before us, to expose the wounds of the Church into which we were born and which is so dear to us. Poor old mother of the modern world, repudiated and beaten by her sons: we would be the last to wish to cause her further injury.' Nevertheless, in 1843, that was exactly what he did and brutally.

And thus one of the central tenets of Michelet's moral existence took form: that the Catholic Church, bearer of the Christian message that illuminated the Middle Ages, lost its momentum somewhere between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. From then on, it was but a deceptive promise, meant to conceal its condemnation of humankind and the despotism practiced in its name by the absolute authority of kings. Thenceforth, the modern era was defined exclusively by the invention for

and by men of a new path toward salvation. Like so many historians of the 19th century, Michelet saw history as a substitute for religion and as something that fulfilled the promise of Christianity while simultaneously breaking with the dogma of Christian churches. For him, the modern era was the era of the emancipation of man of which the French Revolution was the herald and Michelet the prophet.

Like Marx and, in this way, like Tocqueville, Michelet married two contradictory ideas: the idea that men are free, and the idea that history follows an inevitable path. Nineteenth century philosophies of history are marked by the same tension between free will and grace that ran through Christianity, and those philosophies may be viewed as secularized theologies. Michelet's philosophy, however, is peculiar in that it is torn between the idea of the universality of man and the idea of a chosen nation. This is perhaps the characteristic that makes his work most impenetrable for the non-French reader.

For the chosen nation was, of course, France, and the sign of its election was the Revolution of 1789. Michelet was closely tied to the era of great revolutionary events not only by the year of his birth—1798—but also by his familial saga; by his father's having been a jacobin, small-time printer, by his impoverished childhood, by his hard-working youth—all this within the close atmosphere of a miniscule, meritorious bourgeoisie—and thus by his entire material and moral world. Only Michelet and Hugo had such a carnal feeling and love for revolutionary Paris. The Tuileries, the *salle du manège*, the Jacobin and Cordelier clubs were not, for Michelet, the abstractions they have become for present-day historians. For days he had meditated in these silent theatres abandoned by the immense event, haunted by the shadows of the great generation. Nevertheless, if the Revolution had provided the stock of his memory, it had not immediately taken over his vision of the past. When he was young, Michelet was more interested in Vico than in the revolutionary tradition and at that time he was far from being a left-wing Republican. While teaching at the Ecole Normale in the twenties, he was also the private tutor to the royal family or rather, to the royal families—the Bourbons and the Orléans. It was not until the years with which I am concerned there this evening that he began to view the Revolution as the centre and most profound truth of national history.

If we wish to understand how he arrived at that position we must turn to *Le Peuple*, which he wrote in 1846 and which is one of his most important works and surely the one that tore him away from the Middle Ages and vaulted him into 1789. Like so many French intellectuals of his time, Michelet detested both the idea and the reality of social classes—those symbols of a society divided and of the mutual hatred between citizens of

the same nation. He viewed them as the terrible product of modern individualism that had made men prisoners of their own self-interest, their egoism. To counter that atomized world of individuals in permanent competition, he proposed the world of the *People*, a community bound together, like a family, by mutual love. Like Stendhal, he would have preferred to accumulate the advantages of aristocracy and democracy and make heroic virtue and the spirit of mutual aid the crowning glories of modern equality. For him, the idea of the people was the very stuff of French 'nationality', the key to its historical substance and to its validity as a universal model.

The idea of nationality, so characteristic of this period all over Europe, allowed Michelet to lift the curse that modern philosophy had put on modern times. That curse was the thorny problem of how to make a community out of individuals determined by their particular private interests. Michelet's solution was the nation—that all but divine creation born of European civilization which endows men's sociability with its highest significance; and among all nations, each of which incarnates a different idea or principle, only one offered a universal example—the example of 1789—and that was France. 'France is a humanity, a religion' proclaimed Michelet in one of his lectures at the Collège de France in 1845. 'To be truly cosmopolitan, one must be French. France shall be the saviour.' Michelet thus took up the message of 1789 50 years after, a historian-prophet whose mission as spokesman for the nation was to illuminate the future. The French Revolution had also sought to embody the universality of man in law and thus handed down to the French an idea of the nation inseparable from democracy (whereas the Germans, as we know, came up with something quite different). But if Michelet gave us a sort of literary reincarnation of the Revolution, in doing so he re-exposed the central contradiction of that event: the impossibility of embodying the universal in the particular and of emancipating humanity with the brilliant stroke of the nation.

Perhaps it is inadequate to say that Michelet 're-exposed' the contradiction of the French Revolution for he would stretch that contradiction to the limit. Let us take, for example, his aversion to England, which was certainly a legacy of the Revolution. If we consider the revolutionaries' attitude, we see that they arrived at that collective passion gradually, as a result of a series of events. In 1789, for example, it is very little in evidence. Michelet however, saw England as the antithesis of French nationality—a country dominated by money, wealth, private interest, egoism and Locke's 'negative' liberty. He viewed the attempt to emulate England, to make July 1830 a sort of French 1688, as one of the crimes of Guizot and the Orleanists—they were guilty of exposing the French nation to fatal germs.

In this sense, he agrees with Burke while saying the contrary. In 1790, in his *Reflections*, Burke drew a radical separation between the two histories when he diagnosed 1789 as being incompatible with European civilization. The interminable war proved him right. But once Napoleon had been defeated and after the Restoration, Guizot had hoped to reunite European history by writing a combined history of England and France as if they were made up of the same things.

July 1830 appeared to have proven him right but 15 years later, Michelet took up Burke's proof once more—in completely different terms to be sure—and came out on the side of France. The Whig parliamentarian had seen a deplorable and potentially contagious messianism in 1789. Half a century later, the French Republican saw the same messianism as something admirable and a worthy example for the rest of the world.

II

At the heart of Michelet's messianic prophecy is that extraordinary event—perhaps we should say advent—which revealed and transformed the nation's history in its entirety, enabling its chronicler to announce the future in terms of a voyage through the past. The French Revolution was the fulfilment of nationality in the name of and for the benefit of man. Since we cannot treat all of Michelet's history of France, let me confine myself, as an historian of the French Revolution, to the way in which he treated its apex.

In order fully to do justice to that rupture, that advent, Michelet cast it as the clash of two religions of which one, the new one, which was a religion of the rule of law (*droit*), was an anti-religion, because it was a means for men to reappropriate their sovereignty alienated from God and the king. Such a concept is inherently contradictory; meant to dramatize the rupture of '89, it blinded Michelet to one of the fundamental problems of the French Revolution and of modern politics in general: how to establish society outside of any religious reference, exclusively upon the consent of individuals. Michelet thus had a great deal of difficulty grappling with the notion that the Revolution was a failure: for how important could that new religion of law and justice have been if at the end of it lay Bonaparte's despotism?

On the other hand, Michelet's sort of intimacy with the revolutionary event itself, and with French history in general, endowed him with a remarkable understanding of the actors and the symbolic stakes that motivated them. To Toqueville, the French monarchy was a mechanism of administrative centralization and the political dispossession of society that

prepared the explosion of 1789. Michelet offered not an analysis, but rather provided a portrait of that monarchy—he spoke in terms of a ‘resurrection’—that explained the extent to which it occupied the space of sovereignty, the obedience and even love it inspired, and then the subsequent revolt of that love disappointed, and the symbolic establishment of the people in place of the king. These two interpretations do not explain the same things but they are not incompatible. That of Michelet opened up an important approach which explained the over-investment of the French revolutionaries in the political sphere and their faith that once restored, national sovereignty would allow them to accomplish anything and inaugurate an era of collective regeneration. No one understood better than Michelet that in taking the Bastille, that enormous, empty fortress, the Parisian rioters of 14 July had repossessed for the people the power abandoned by the kings.

And so we see that Michelet’s history of the Revolution was written from the inside with an extraordinary clairvoyance as to the motivations of the revolutionaries—famous or anonymous—and above all, of the people, during those turbulent years. He understood that if the Revolution was a great era devoid of great men, this was so because it constantly eluded those who thought themselves in control of it. In order then, to get to its very deepest roots, one needed to put oneself at the heart of its most exceptional innovation: the arrival of the people in the theatre of power. Nothing was further from Michelet than an abstract history in the style of Mignet, for example, who cast the people as just one among the three great collective actors in the drama, along with the nobility and the bourgeoisie, and whose role was inscribed beforehand in the great book of class struggle. For Michelet, people are more than a theoretical element; they are an empirical group of individuals whose spontaneous actions gradually gave shape to what would eventually constitute the Revolution.

Michelet’s favourite part of the Revolution was the beginning, the period that extended from the Estates General to the Festival of the Federation. He would write that section of his book from 1846 to 1847, those years during which the Republicans were full of hope and optimism. The spirit of fraternity harked back to its ancestors just as the divisions of 1848, a bit later on, would replicate those of 1792. What Michelet found laudable about 1789 was the unity that reigned among the people and in the nation as they repossessed their sovereignty and affirmed the rule of Law; this was something quite different from the ‘little insular and egotistical revolution’ of the English in the 17th century because its goal was not merely to benefit a particular national patrimony—such as English liberty—but to found a universal credo of a new age with the voice of a chosen nation. That was how he interpreted the Declaration of the

Rights of Man, which he felt the Constituents had stymied in stressing individual rights rather than the law—*le Droit* with a capital ‘D’—which transcends subjective rights. Perhaps wary of the numerous critics of natural rights philosophy, especially those on the left such as Saint Simon, Comte, Buchez and Louis Blanc; Michelet sought to render the revolutionary foundation absolute and to root it in something supra-human.

What that foundation required was a fraternally unified France, freed from its feudal divisions; this was fulfilled by the Night of 4 August. A sovereign Assembly, freed of the royal veto was accomplished in early September. A vanquished monarchy, transformed back into its true substance—the people—returned to Paris from exile in Versailles: this is what came of the October Days. Michelet’s history was the opposite of that of Burke and of the French anglophiles from Lally-Tollendal and Mounier to Madame de Staël and Guizot. What he found laudable about the French Revolution was its philosophical universalism, its abstract radicalism, and its exemplary unique character. What he extolled in that nation which had opened the way for the emancipation of humanity was not modern individualism which, on the contrary, made the Revolution similar to earlier ones and thus brought it closer to the aristocratic and mercantile England he disliked; but fraternity, which had created the atmosphere of unity that had closed the gap and dissolved the opposition between individuals and society. Thanks to a simplification of Sieyès, Michelet invested a great deal in the idea of the nation—it was the only thing that promoted a synthesis of free individuals, and endowed historical action with the privileged form necessary to emancipation.

That was, for Michelet, the significance of the Festival of the Federation on 14 July 1790, which he saw as the apogee and very genius of the Revolution. We need only listen to the following passage to understand what separated him from Tocqueville, another admirer of the same day:

[The Fête de la Fédération] was a conspiracy in the name of French unity. The provincial federations all looked toward the center, invoked the National Assembly, and attached themselves to it, pledging themselves to it, that is, to unity. They all thanked Paris for its call to Fraternity. (III.4)

The French Revolution would, however, deliver less than it had promised. The decline began in 1790 with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, that ‘weak and false’ document that divided the people, revived fanaticism, and gave ammunition to the Counter-revolution. Instead of reaffirming its own credo, the Revolution would close with that of its enemies. ‘Nothing was more destructive to the Revolution than its lack of self-knowledge from a religious standpoint, its ignorance that it bore within itself a religion. It had become a stranger to itself, no less to Christianity,

and no longer knew if it was for or against it, or whether it should return to it or surpass it.' (III.9). What then did the Revolution actually do? It attempted to reform Christianity without believing in it. This was because the Revolution was born of the Enlightenment: and 'what a strange sight it was to see a Voltaire reforming the Church, claiming he was restoring its apostolic rigor!' The new religion of the Federations—that patriotic fraternity diametrically opposed to the civic abdication of Christian individualism, failed to become the herald of the men of '89.

Thanks to the philosophy of the eighteenth century, the revolutionaries did know how to repair the centuries of damage undergone by mankind. But they did not know how to crystallize and prolong the formidable fraternal impetus of 1789 into a religious faith; and so divisions of opinion reappeared once more as the counter-revolution recovered its force and, in opposition to the stunted new spirit, wove the vast conspiracy of the past. To parry this terrible menace, 'there had to be a plot. So came the conspiracy of the Jacobins which completely envelopped France' (IV.1). Simultaneously, however, that 'great and terrible machine which had given the Revolution its incalculable force and was the only thing that could save it', also distorted the Revolution's primordial inspiration and stymied *a fortiori* its religious end—a task that was left to the nineteenth-century Republicans.

There lies one of the essential cruxes of Michelet's analysis. From that point on, the Revolution entered into exterior and civil war, social division, political dissent and, shortly thereafter, the Terror, although it is difficult to say whether the origin of this tragedy lay with the Revolution's adversaries or in its own impotence. Whatever the case may be, that failure was never a total one: even when reduced to the Jacobin club, the Revolution was still the Revolution. It did not become, as Quinet would argue later on, its opposite, rather, it was like a narrow little flame, vascillating, endangered, after the great blaze of 1789. That is how Michelet dealt with what was, at the time, the classic problem of revolutionary historiography, torn between 'eighty-niners' and 'ninety-three-ers'. In contrast to Buchez, Louis Blanc and the socialists, he was fundamentally on the side of '89. But he refused to see a radical break between the two periods and to see 1793 as merely the repudiation of 1789. Just as he did not lose his republican faith in 1849 or in 1851, in the tragic atmosphere in which he wrote the tragic part of his history of France, so he did not abandon the French Revolution when it was a mere shadow of itself. The Convention and the Jacobins had indeed substituted the dictatorship of the Terror for the sovereignty of the people, but they did save the nation.

The Terror was itself, however, another matter. It was the product not only of extraordinary circumstances, but of Jacobin fanaticism. For

Michelet, the Jacobins of 1793 took over from where the people of 1789 left off. After three years of revolution in generalized disorder, the dominant note was one of public indifference: 'In '93, the people went home; before that year was out, they had to be paid before they would return to the *sections* . . . In that [atmosphere of] increasing apathy and in order to curb it, that formidable machine which had slackened off in 1792—the machine of Public Safety—remade and reconstituted itself in its mainspring—the *Jacobin club*' (IX.1). So the club substituted its 'machine' for the revolution which had lost its popular impetus, replacing liberty with political orthodoxy. The ideological domination wielded by that quasi-military apparatus would soon lead to the dictatorship of a single man and to the Terror, imposed upon the Revolution from above. Michelet thus refuted the completely flat, circumstantial interpretation of the Terror common to Mignet and Louis Blanc. He also rejected Quinet's idea that absolutism reappeared from within the Revolution. Instead, he inaugurated a very modern vision of the risks run by oligarchical confiscation of democratic power in the name of the people.

None the less, his Revolution ends with 9 thermidor. That is when, in the summer of 1853, he laid his pen aside never to venture further into the Thermidorian backlash he disliked. The spectacle of the fledgling Second Republic did not lure him into that period where the bourgeoisie, money and the army would, for a long time, disfigure his Revolution. He had wished to write the annals of the Republic, something that had been done for the monarchy, and not surrender its past to the bourgeoisie or reconstitute the titles of the Bonapartes. In the dialectic between the past and the present that haunts all histories of the French Revolution, Michelet's version, by ending on 9 thermidor, simply confirmed his loyalties.

The miraculous thing about that formidable *Summa* of erudition and imagination is that, after two centuries, it remains the sole national monument to the French Revolution. To conclude, we might consider briefly this paradox. The Revolution had left the French with so many memories of civil war and with so many antagonistic political traditions that it had dismembered their history, abandoning them to nothing but conflicts of succession.

But Michelet, and only Michelet, in the mid-19th century succeeded in rearticulating French history for his fellow citizens by boldly taking up its central enigma, the rupture of 1789. Once he had resolved that enigma, he could go back to the past, taking up the course of French history from where he had left off at the Renaissance, and terminate his great work descending the centuries of the kings to bring together the France of Joan of Arc with the France of the soldiers of Year II.

No historian today can consider that immense work without mixed political sentiments. But he may find there, though Michelet's love affair with the nation may put off the non-French reader, at least two concepts that have served us well. The first is the notion of a Republic neither 'liberal' (in the English sense of the term) nor socialist—a philosophically uncertain notion which none the less served as the pedestal of post-revolutionary stabilization in France at the creation of the Third Republic. The second is the cult of the Republican idea, which made the Republic inseparable from the national idea in contrast to what came to pass in Germany in the first half of the 20th century.

It may also be said that Michelet's religion of nationality was a blind spot that kept him from considering the impasses of the Revolution. It helped him almost magically to resolve a whole series of questions raised by his predecessors from Hegel to Guizot and including Maistre and Constant: the contradiction between men's subjective rights and their constituting a political community between the freedom of citizens and the indivisibility of sovereignty, between the ideology of the Revolution and its course, to name a few. Michelet was also insensitive to what was particular about the universal event that was the Revolution of 1789: he had blurred that paradox from the start by deeming that France's history was a history-elect, singled out to embody the universal. In so doing, he deprived himself of any means to explain that history's failings which rather perversely resurfaced before his eyes as the Second Republic also ended in a Bonaparte.

In spite of that, the *History of France* and the *History of the French Revolution* have aged well—that I am praising them here before you today may testify to that. The longevity of those two great works is perhaps best explained by the fact that, like Gibbon in English culture, they are more than their singular political message. To the dazzled reader they reveal the secrets of a great artist—one of the giants of French prose. How very French he was, Michelet, in turning politics into literature. Nineteenth-century France, obsessed as it was with its revolutionary heritage, produced no great politicians. There was no Disraeli, no Gladstone, no one capable of incarnating the past and the future of the nation. There was, however, Michelet, who returned to his country its history rendered universal and a work of art.