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Reinterpretation

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Jules Michelet and the Nineteenth-Century Concept of Insanity: A Romantic's Reinterpretation

Richard R. Chase, Jr.

Despite the historical attention that Jules Michelet continues to receive, there has been no adequate explanation of his defense of democracy within the context of his century, when conservatives, and frequently liberals, held that the masses were insane and needed guidance from a ruling class and a paternalistic government.¹ Michel Foucault first emphasized the use of psychology to categorize the people as incompetent and dangerous, which in turn has led to a common conclusion, summarized by Jan Goldstein, that nineteenth-century psychology was “antidemocratic.”² Edmund Burke, Thomas Carlyle, and

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¹ Notable works on Michelet include, Georges Cogniot, “Qu'est-ce que le peuple pour Michelet et pour nous?,” *Europe: Revue littéraire mensuelle* 535–536 (Nov.–Dec. 1973): 43–51; Jeanlouis Cornuz, *Jules Michelet: Un Aspect de la pensée religieuse au XIXe siècle* (Geneva, 1955); Jean Guéhenno, *L'Évangile éternel, étude sur Michelet* (Paris, 1970); Oscar A. Haac, *Jules Michelet* (Boston, 1982); Edward K. Kaplan, *Michelet's Poetic Vision: A Romantic Philosophy of Nature, Man, & Woman* (Amherst, Mass., 1977); Stephen A. Kippur, *Jules Michelet: A Study of Mind and Sensibility* (Albany, N. Y., 1981); Arthur Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian: Rebirth and Romanticism in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven, Conn., 1990); Linda Orr, *Jules Michelet: Nature, History, and Language* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1976); Charles Rearick, “Symbol, Legend, and History: Michelet as Folklorist-Historian,” *French Historical Studies* 7 (Spring 1971): 72–92; Paul Viallaneix, *La Voie royale: Essai sur l'idée de peuple dans l'oeuvre de Michelet*, new ed. (Paris, 1971).

² See especially, Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1961); idem, *Les Mots et les choses: Une Archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris, 1966); idem, *Naissance de la clinique: Une Archéologie du regard médical*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1972); idem, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris, 1975); Jan Goldstein, “‘Moral Contagion’: A Professional Ideology of Medicine and Psychiatry in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France,” in *Professions and the French State, 1700–1900*, ed. Gerald Geison (Philadelphia, 1984), 215; idem, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987), including pp. 2–4 for her discussion of “anti-psychiatry”; especially Robert Castel, *L'Ordre psychiatrique: L'Age d'or de l'aliénisme* (Paris, 1976); and Marcel Gauchet and Gladys Swain, *La Pratique de l'esprit humain: L'Institution asilaire et la révolution démocratique* (Paris, 1980).

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François Guizot were among those who helped to create this attack on democracy by defining the French Revolution and the resulting Terror as an insanity that led the masses to excess.³ This conclusion received widespread medical support, especially from the alienist Jean-Etienne Esquirol and his pupils, trained at Charenton, who explained that monomania was contagious; if not controlled by the government, a desire such as that for equality, arising from the French Revolution, would spread until it consumed the nation with its infection.⁴ My article is indebted to Foucault but also to those historians, such as Michael Ignatieff and Daniel Pick, who insist that the rhetorical use of nineteenth-century concepts of psychology was complex and thus not limited to antidemocratic polemic.⁵

Michelet's argument is a case in point. His histories can only be understood as a defense of the people, a defense that, in three ways, can be broadly defined as medical. Firstly, he accepted the science of his time. From psychology he borrowed the widely held conviction that passions were contagious and from physiology he argued that ideas themselves, and not mere predispositions, would be transmitted from one generation to the next. These so-called biological laws made it appear certain that Jeanne d'Arc's heroic example would spread throughout society and then to succeeding generations; France's salvation would be assured. The birth of a nation, as with an individual, seemed to depend on these medical laws. In a letter to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Michelet explained, "[In history], what I look for . . . is the demonstration of this grand Being [the nation], the laws of her life, the forms of her reason, in a word, *her psychology*."⁶

Michelet relied on medicine because it could validate a nineteenth-century political argument. Psychology and physiology assured that healthy ideas could be transmitted among the people, despite the countervailing influence of the monarchy and the clergy, who transmitted

³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis, 1955); Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (New York, 1934); Richard Chase, Jr., "The Influence of Psychology on Guizot and Orleanist Policies," *French History* 3 (Spring 1989): 177–93.

⁴ Jean-Etienne Esquirol, *Des maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-légal*, 3 vols. in 2 (Paris, 1838), 1:52–53, 588, 669. For a summary of Esquirol's antidemocratic argument, see the account of Esquirol in René Semelaigne, *Les Grands Aliénistes français: Philippe Pinel, Esquirol, Ferrus, Jean-Pierre Falret, Félix Voisin, Georget* (Paris, 1894).

⁵ Michael Ignatieff, "State, Civil Society, and Total Institutions: A Critique of Recent Social Histories of Punishment," in *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, eds. M. Tonry and N. Morris (Chicago, 1981) 3:156–57, 168, 179–80; Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918* (Cambridge, 1989), 235–36.

⁶ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, ed. G. Walter, 2 vols. (Paris, 1952), 2:1001. Also see B. F. Bart, "Michelet and Proudhon: A Comparison of Methods," *French Studies* 4 (April 1950): 128–41.

only mindless submission to succeeding generations by inculcating acceptance of hereditary rule and original sin and who maintained that the contagious nature of obsessions would only lead to dissolution and eventually to suicide for the individual and the nation. In contrast, Michelet argued that the natural act of the reproductive process insured that the government could adopt a laissez-faire attitude because there existed a law that, in biology as in economics, insured progress and thus should not be contravened. No outside class or government need interfere with the progress that biology and history assured. As he explained, "Our legislative doctors treat each symptom that appears here or there as an isolated and distinct case." Instead, "before trying every external and local remedy, it would be useful to inquire into the inner evil that produces all these symptoms."⁷ In anticipation of Foucault, Michelet criticized those who neither understood nor correctly applied the true laws of medicine: "Too many people notice only outward causes. . . . Our philanthropists have this fine idea, and so they think they can preserve or cure man only by building him tombs."⁸

Secondly, Michelet's defense of democracy required the transvaluation of those who had been labeled as incompetent. Consequently, he created the myth of Jeanne d'Arc in order to transform both the commoner and women: instead of a curse, they represented France's salvation. The mythologizing of the Maiden was important because in myth values can be changed into their opposite.⁹ Michelet transformed the weak into the strong, the ill into those who bring health to the nation. His rhetorical tour de force, which placed the masses at the forefront of historical progress, depended on a redefinition of insanity itself: the people were indeed mad, but—standing this argument on its head—the people's monomaniacal desire for freedom represented the very passion that would bring unity to France. The people's insanity represented determination, just as a woman's monthly illness, to use the century's parlance, was responsible for mankind's cure. Michelet was not a misogynist, as some historians implied.¹⁰ Female suffering, physical and mental, was transformed into strength, because women were ultimately responsible for transmitting the ideas of freedom and sacrifice to their children. They gave birth to the nation itself.

⁷ Jules Michelet, *The People*, trans. J. P. McKay (Urbana, IL, 1973), 108–9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹ G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge, 1974), 83.

¹⁰ Jeanne Calo, *La Création de la femme chez Michelet* (Paris, 1975); Cynthia E. Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 30.

Thirdly, Michelet's histories were based on a complex process of identification whereby he associated himself with the people, France with the hospital, and Jeanne d'Arc with the physician whose lasting example would initiate a cure. They were also based on his own adolescence, when he suffered, in his words, from "la fièvre mentale."¹¹ Through the rehabilitation of the people he transvalued his own illness; he identified his pain with that of the people and their tortured past. History, he explained, represented a "violent psychological chemistry, where my individual passions, where my people become me, and where my *moi* returns to animate the people."¹² At the beginning of *The People*, he confessed, "I have found it [the book] above all in the recollections of my youth. To know the life of the people and their toils and sufferings, I had only to question my memory."¹³ He had seen his own pain reflected first in the inmates at the asylums that he frequented as a youth and then in the historical sufferings of the people. He began to make these associations when his family lived at a *maison de santé*, where his father worked from 1815–18,¹⁴ and then at Bicêtre and the Salpêtrière, where his first and best friend, Paul Poincot, interned until his premature death in 1820. "I have very often traversed Bicêtre and the Salpêtrière. I went there to see an intern, a friend whom I have lost. There, I saw how the young doctor could learn, in all things psychological, if he took the time. I have seen at the Salpêtrière what no person could ever fathom: the wound of France.¹⁵ The true healer was Poincot, who helped Michelet overcome his own emotional turmoil.¹⁶ Jeanne d'Arc would play a similar historical role as France's physician. The people's enemies became Poincot's antithesis; they were the false healers in the form of priest and clerical confessor and in the guise of monarchy and then empire. Michelet lent power to his histories by transferring his own feelings to his historical subjects. Personal experience allowed him to remain a romantic, despite his debt to science, because he studied the people not from the perspective of a physician, the detached observer, but from within the emotional pain itself.

¹¹ Jules Michelet, *Jules Michelet: Ecrits de Jeunesse, journal (1820–1823)—Mémorial journal des idées*, ed. P. Viallaneix, 5th ed. (Paris, 1959), 13.

¹² Jules Michelet, *Jules Michelet: Journal*, eds. P. Viallaneix and C. Digeon, 4 vols. (Paris, 1959–76), 1:362.

¹³ Michelet, *The People*, 3.

¹⁴ Jules Michelet, *Ma jeunesse* (Paris, 1884), 152–55. These pages include Michelet's description of the first nude woman whom he ever saw. She was insane, having been seduced, impregnated, and abandoned at sixteen. She was the opposite of Michelet's myth of Jeanne d'Arc.

¹⁵ Gaëton Picon, *L'Étudiant: Précédé Michelet et la parole historienne* (Paris, 1970), 73–74.

¹⁶ Michelet, *Ma jeunesse*, 214.

However, Michelet was not satisfied with basing his works on subjective experience, emotion, and faith. In his mind, Christian histories demanded a blind acceptance of a legendary past that contradicted reason. According to François Furet, Michelet sought to create “the credo of the new age, the modern religion,” which would support “the revolutionary foundation as absolute, rooted in something beyond the human.”¹⁷ Science, based on biological principles, would serve as the bedrock with which to create history anew. These principles must be explained more fully before Michelet’s histories can be appreciated as a scientifically based rebuttal to antidemocratic criticism.

The Medical Legacy

Michelet shared a fascination with science, and particularly medicine, that was common to the nineteenth century. During the French Revolution, Philippe Pinel had begun to unlock the mysteries of the mind when he began to treat insanity, a disease previously held to be largely incurable. Pinel and his pupils, including Esquirol, appeared to be the Newtons of their age; they were discovering the laws of mental behavior. Contagion seemed to be as centrally important to psychology as gravity was to physics. Passions were infectious. A single obsession was particularly dangerous, because a monomaniac witnessed long and seemingly rational periods when detection of the disease was nearly impossible, giving time for unhealthy ideas to spread among a gullible populace. Psychology, however, was not unrivaled in this fascination with science. Physiologists also emphasized the influence of the body on the mental process. A philosophical debate resulted where alienists, most frequently as defenders of idealism and man’s free will, associated physiology with materialistic determinism.¹⁸ Heated rhetoric often ensued, but compromise was possible because man, being both mind and body, was logically influenced by both. Neither pure idealism nor doctrinaire materialism could be maintained. Physiologists often sought to prove that ideas were transmitted in a material fashion through the hereditary process, for logic seemed to dictate that ideas, which after all were contagious among strangers, would assuredly be passed from mother to child, particularly during times of passionate turmoil. Such critical moments included menstruation and conception; the ideas that obsessed the mother at these

¹⁷ François Furet, “Michelet,” in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, eds. F. Furet and M. Ozouf, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 982, 986.

¹⁸ Many of these philosophical debates are summarized by George Boas, *French Philosophies of the Romantic Period* (New York, 1964).

times would be transmitted to the fetus and then to posterity. Nineteenth-century fascination with the female reproductive cycle becomes understandable in this context. Novelists might emphasize the destructive guilt, transmitted by an adulteress, which led to the destruction of her family, but Michelet chose to concentrate upon the more prevalent emotion of maternal sacrifice, which, when transmitted, led to fraternity and the birth of the nation.

Michelet singled out two alienists, Philippe Pinel and Ulysse Trélat, and two physiologists, Bruno Jacques Béraud and Prosper Lucas, as particularly influential.¹⁹ Agreeing with Pinel, Michelet concluded: "The passions are contagious," a concept that Michelet had already learned to appreciate by the time he had read Trélat's book, *La Folie lucide*: "In a beautiful recent book, *La Folie lucide*, one sees what a fixed idea is,"²⁰ what Pinel's famous student, Esquirol, might call monomania. By definition, a "fixed idea" was contagious and, as Trélat went on to explain, could be transmitted by hereditary influence not only to the individual but also to "a learned civilization, because if bad is transmittable, good is equally so; one inherits healthy faculties as one inherits unhealthy faculties."²¹ Michelet had come to this conclusion by a two-step process for which the key dates of 1840–42 and then 1856–59 can be documented. His belief in the infectious and beneficial nature of love, which helped to alter his attitude towards nature and womankind, began in 1840. Arthur Mitzman explains that Michelet's new, more positive conception of "natural fecundity and maternity as the source of human brotherhood" developed after the death of Pauline, Michelet's first wife, in 1839 and during a period from 1840–42, when the historian fell in love with François-Adèle Dumesnil.²² Love, which Michelet experienced so intensely, was contagious; it would spread until fraternity had triumphed.

This general idea was translated into specific scientific theory by a series of treatises that were written, according to Michelet, from "1827 to 1847."²³ He became particularly impressed by these works in a period from 1856 to 1859, when the names of physiologists began to appear in his *Journal*.²⁴ This period coincides with the time when he

¹⁹ Jules Michelet, *L'Amour*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1859), 30, 444–45; Jules Michelet, *The Women of the French Revolution*, trans. M. R. Pennington (Philadelphia, Pa., 1855), 117.

²⁰ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 18 vols. (n.p., n.d.), 16:223.

²¹ Ulysse Trélat, *La Folie lucide: Etudiée et considérée au point de vue de la famille et de la société* (Paris, 1861), 320.

²² Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian*, 26–29. Madame Dumesnil was the mother of Alfred, Michelet's son-in-law.

²³ Michelet, *L'Amour*, 7.

²⁴ In particular, see Michelet, *Journal*, 2:300, 333–34, 459–66; 3:49–50, 424.

began to write his natural histories and to accelerate his studies on womanhood.²⁵ These books have traditionally been either criticized or discounted, but when analyzed in conjunction with his *Histoire de France*, which he resumed in 1854, they should be seen as the culmination of Michelet's thought.²⁶ His earlier belief in the contagious nature of ideas became tangible in both a personal and scientific manner that seemingly confirmed each other. On an intimate level his *Journal* is filled with descriptions of the monthly cycles of his second wife, Athénaïs, whom he had married in 1849.²⁷ The mysteries of female biology were, in Michelet's mind, revealed by the theories of the physiologists who, his *Journal* indicates, had also become his friends.

Michelet had observed numerous dissections of the brain and had "studied a great number of both sexes of all ages" under the supervision of Dr. Béraud.²⁸ This scientist and confidant had shown, according to Michelet, that the generational transmission of ideas did not merely account for illness and degeneracy but also for the creation of exceptional people who then helped to further civilization.²⁹ Heredity, as so conceived, altered first the individual and then the species, not only anatomically but also emotionally and intellectually.³⁰ Moral characteristics were likewise transmitted. Heredity determined the process whereby people acquired "their aptitudes, their tastes," and which, according to Béraud, lead to the formulation of the "loi de perfectionnement." The results of this process could be either good or bad. When bad passions were transmitted, mankind descended to a "condition of abrutissement, that is to say, the gradual return to a state further and further removed from the state of social perfection"; when good passions were transmitted, individual and social progress was assured.³¹

²⁵ Michelet's natural histories include *L'Oiseau*, 6th ed. (Paris, 1859), *L'Insecte* (Paris, 1858), *La Mer*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1861), *La Montagne* (Paris, 1868). His most revealing studies on women are *L'Amour* and *La Femme* (Paris, 1860).

²⁶ Mitzman concurs that Michelet's natural histories have largely been ignored. See Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian*, 284. Mitzman, who ends his study in 1854, does not treat two notable exceptions: Kaplan, *Michelet's Poetic Vision*, and Orr, *Jules Michelet*.

²⁷ The sexual problems that partially account for these observations are summarized in Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian*, 201–3.

²⁸ Michelet, *La Femme*, 34, 54–56.

²⁹ Bruno Jacques Béraud, *Elements de physiologie de l'homme et des principaux vertébrés, répondant à toutes les questions physiologiques du programme des examens de fin d'année*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1856–57), 2:750–59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 824–25. For a similar opinion, see Prosper Lucas, *Traité philosophique et physiologique de l'hérédité naturelle dans les états de santé et de maladie du système nerveux avec l'application méthodique des lois de la procréation au traitement général des affections dont elle est le principe*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1847–50), 1:8.

³¹ B. Béraud, *Elements de physiologie de l'homme*, 2:824. For a similar conclusion that there was a "hereditary law [which] exists in nations and renders perfection gradually to the

Béraud admitted that many of his ideas came from Lucas, who, in turn, built on the work of Jean Jacques Coste and Charles Négrier. Coste and Négrier had begun the study, in Michelet's terminology, of "ovology,"³² or the science of reproduction. These theories became so well known that Emile Zola explained that his novel, *Madelaine Férat*, was based on "this thesis [of the generational transmission of ideas] from Michelet and doctor Lucas."³³ Michelet himself credited Lucas for culminating earlier findings in order to develop the laws of generational transmission of ideas from both parents to their offspring. The female role remained paramount, leading Michelet to conclude that "the object of love, woman, in her essential mystery, longtime ignored, misunderstood, has been revealed by a series of discoveries."³⁴

Physiologists focused upon the crucial question: when did impregnation occur? Agreeing with the earlier conclusions of Négrier and Coste, Béraud formulated what was taken to be the most scientific—but is, in retrospect, the most surprising—answer: women became pregnant during menstruation! Lucas disagreed with what was, according to him, the majority opinion, but only to argue that a woman was as likely to become pregnant during any time of the month.³⁵ This debate seemed crucial because these physiologists agreed on a larger issue: the generational transmission of both physical and psychological traits appeared certain and, in Lucas's words, depended on the "states of health or illness of the father and of the mother, at the moment of coitus." Sexual relations should be timed to correspond with the physical and psychological health of both parents and with times when passions were under control, which would exclude intercourse during menstruation, because the female would be physically exhausted as well as emotionally distraught. Lucas also counseled that relations with people suffering from a variety of illnesses, both mental and physical, should be avoided.³⁶ Other physicians, such as

human species," see A. Pierre Béraud, *De la phrénologie humaine appliquée à la philosophie, aux mœurs, et au socialisme* (Paris, 1848), 356.

³² Jean Jacques Coste, *Histoire générale et particulière du développement des corps organisés, publiée sous les auspices de M. Villemain, ministre de l'instruction publique*, 2 vols. in 1 (Paris, 1847–59); Charles Négrier, *Recherches anatomiques et physiologiques sur les ovaires dans l'espèce humaine, considérés spécialement sous le rapport de leur influence dans la menstruation* (Paris, 1840).

³³ See Michelet, *Journal*, 4:76, and the note on 401.

³⁴ Michelet, *L'Amour*, 7.

³⁵ Béraud, *Elements de physiologie de l'homme*, 2:398–99; Lucas, *Traité philosophique et physiologique*, 2:916–17.

³⁶ Lucas, *Traité philosophique et physiologique*, 2:906–22. At the time epilepsy was seen as a severe form of mental illness.

Trélat, argued that moral persuasion would not be sufficient and that the government should pass laws that prohibited unhealthy unions.³⁷

Michelet, however, emphasized the positive; namely, that it was the unique historical and biological role of women which determined that healthy ideas would be passed on to the children of France. He concluded that women, formerly considered "impure," were in reality the vehicles of mankind's progress.³⁸ Jeanne d'Arc had begun this process, and her rebellion then had become contagious during the fifteenth century. Frenchmen had to be cured by a process that Pinel and other alienists called the moral treatment, whereby unhealthy obsessions would be replaced by healthy ideas, such as those offered by the Maiden's example.³⁹ Her suffering became contagious and was transmitted to each subsequent generation through women's willingness to accept the sacrifice inherent in childbirth and motherhood. This willingness for sacrifice then became the dominant passion that was transmitted to each child. Each birth represented an act of fraternity that would grow in every generation until a united France had been achieved.⁴⁰

According to Michelet, Lucas had developed a scientific law of progress because "the generative act does not give a unique result but . . . has multiple and lasting effects that often continue into the future." Therefore, "the first impregnation has influenced the future for many years."⁴¹ He marveled at this biological chain where an idea proceeded from mother to fetus to society: "Our physiological way, so prodigiously complicated, goes its way without demanding counsel. It has been thus for the perpetuation of the human species, operated by love and marriage, by the constitution of the family."⁴² Such conclusions, according to Michelet, were supported between 1840 and 1850 by the Académie des sciences and the Collège de France to the point where the laws governing the hereditary transmission of ideas became "accepted as an article of human faith."⁴³

³⁷ Trélat, *La Folie lucide*, 321–28.

³⁸ Michelet, *L'Amour*, 8.

³⁹ Philippe Pinel, *Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1809). The moral treatment was equivalent to the psychological treatment, in contrast to physical treatments such as bleeding and purging.

⁴⁰ Jules Michelet, *Lettres inédites adressées à Mlle Mialaret (Mme Michelet)* (Paris, 1899), 152. Also see Edward K. Kaplan, "Les Deux Sexes de l'esprit: Michelet phénoménologue de la pensée créatrice et morale," *Europe: Revue littéraire mensuelle* 535–536 (Nov.–Dec. 1973), 103.

⁴¹ Michelet, *L'Amour*, 449.

⁴² Michelet, *La Femme*, 270. For similar conclusions see Lucas, *Traité philosophique et physiologique*, 1:2.

⁴³ Michelet, *La Femme*, 271–72.

Michelet's Redefinition of Insanity

Michelet was convinced that biological discoveries could be applied directly to the study of the past. He exclaimed, "No time is out of the pale of science; the future itself belongs to . . . [sciences] that are sufficiently advanced to enable one to predict the return of phenomena, as can be done in the physical sciences and will be one day (in a conjectural manner) in the historical sciences."⁴⁴ He believed in a medical law of progress that worked according to a psychological dialectic, like a struggle between passions, which should not be suppressed, as was commonly counseled. All progress depended upon this battle between the passions—one harmonizing, the other alienating—to which Michelet referred as the *moi* versus the *non-moi*. Such terminology is often difficult to analyze because it seems to be more poetic than scientific. Yet, similar and equally vague language appeared in the medical literature of the period. For example, the ideas of Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, an alienist most remembered for his study on the psychological effects of hashish, can help elucidate Michelet's thought by keeping the discussion within a nineteenth-century framework.⁴⁵ Moreau explained that the *moi* by itself was "*infertile, sterile*" unless it interacted with society. Through this contact, Moreau stated in prose reminiscent of Michelet's Romantic style: The isolated *moi* is transfigured, it becomes "the human *moi*; it is the individual transformed into humanity, it is humanity transformed into the individual."⁴⁶ In his histories, Michelet explained the manner whereby Frenchmen, trapped within themselves, could not progress; the *moi* could only grow through contact with others, a confrontation that was initially viewed as a struggle with the other, or the *non-moi*. Pain resulted at first, but this emotional confrontation was a prerequisite for individual and social progress. In France's case, historical progress resulted because mankind would not accept the submissive role relegated by the church and the monarchy.⁴⁷ These two institutions were the *non-moi*, ironically necessary because their injustices forced man to revolt against his pain and alienation. Rebellion was initially psychological and sacrificial, and in this matter revolution mirrored the values in-

⁴⁴ Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, *The Jesuits*, trans. from the French, ed. L. Edwards (New York, 1845), 66–67.

⁴⁵ Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, *Etudes psychiques sur la folie* (Paris, 1840).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6–7 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ Jules Michelet, *The Bible of Humanity*, trans. V. Calfa (New York, 1877), 151. Michelet distinguished between the "active passion," which led to progress, and the "passive passion," which resulted in decline. He argued that the passive passion was first introduced by Alexander the Great, who by combining the role of king and priest used government and religion to control the people.

herent in childbirth. The people, forced to confront the other, the *non-moi*, revolted; their heroism was transmitted through the generations, leading inexorably to national unity.

The complexity of Michelet's vision of a psychology based on the will to sacrifice and its attendant hope, a vision in which the process of historical revolution conflated with biological childbirth, belies the generalization that insanity was a simple label, used in the nineteenth century to censure and control. For Michelet, insanity represented the psychologically enslaved condition whereby the people became alienated from each other, but it also represented an act of defiance, as the people revolted against the potential tyranny of passionate and political domination. He insisted, however, "The beautiful, great heroic insanities are enlightened by passions; . . . the most foolhardy has the effect of wisdom."⁴⁸ This heroic revolt achieved progress on a political level as a rebellion against the people's oppressors and on a psychological and more fundamental level as a refusal to accept mankind's own disease. History became the slow, spiral-like struggle whereby man was repressed and made ill, then revolted and made well, until finally true, although temporary, freedom had been achieved during the French Revolution. Hereditary transmission of this heroic idea of revolt would lead to genuine nationalism: passionate discord would end and insanity would disappear when the final confrontation of the *moi* versus the *non-moi* had been played out.

An Analysis of Michelet's Histories

In a necessarily brief examination of Michelet's historical work, four periods can be singled out as crucial stages in the generational transmission of this idea of fraternity: the Hundred Years' War, the Wars of Religion, the Regency during the minority of Louis XV, and the French Revolution. Each represented a painful era of division but also an important stage when nationalism was transmitted, a time of cure, when the people became increasingly aware of their insanity as well as the means to conquer it through fraternity—a final harmonization of the passions. In each period the internal psychological war between an insanity that was destructive and the revolt against the pain that this insanity engendered was mirrored in the confrontation of either leading individuals or institutions. The *non-moi*, the destructive madness of Charles VI, Charles IX, the daughter of the Regent Philippe d'Orléans, and the Bastille, was confronted and eventually over-

⁴⁸ Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 15:345.

come by the *moi*, the heroic madness of the masses led by Jeanne d'Arc, by witches, and by John Law, until eventually the people conquered it on their own. Their rebellion was insane; it was undertaken against all odds to fight against all the injustice that king, priest, and the people's own psychological torment had imposed throughout the centuries. Insanities during the French Revolution, so discredited by antidemocratic writers, according to Michelet, represented instead the people's most glorious struggle to become free at last.

In his *Histoire de France*, Michelet concluded that Frenchmen had first become aware of their nationality during the Hundred Years' War, an idea that would be transmitted until it culminated in the fraternal revolt of 1789. He explained the first positive effects of this psychological confrontation, brought about by facing the English, a foreign adversary, the *non-moi*. Here Michelet gave credit to the English, as Karl Marx would to the Industrial Revolution: enemies forced the people into such misery that a revolt, leading to historical progress, became inevitable. "The struggle against England," Michelet explained, "rendered France an immense service. Forced to unite against the enemy, the provinces found among themselves a people. It was in seeing themselves next to the English that they felt they were in France. It is with nations as with the individual who knows and distinguishes his personality by the resistance from what is not his: he notices the *moi* by the *non-moi*."⁴⁹

Progress is paradoxical, because, as Michelet asserts, "it is necessary that humanity suffer and be patient, that it merit its [progress's] arrival."⁵⁰ The English invasion brought additional misery to the people by spreading political discord and creating civil war. Everywhere people were forced to face their own divisions and submission. This realization brought about revolt, a psychological confrontation where the *moi* faced the *non-moi*. The people "avoided becoming idiots only by becoming madmen," he wrote, "An access of somber insanity struck in this [fourteenth] century."⁵¹ Madness, therefore, was a revolt against such brutalizing authorities. The people learned to know their own feelings through their confrontation with insanity and thereby recognized that they desired national unity and its individual counterpart, emotional harmony.⁵² "If wisdom consists in knowing

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:69 (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8:235.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 4:302.

one's self and in pacifying it," he observed, "no epoch was more naturally insane."⁵³

This period of insanity was mirrored in the mad king, Charles VI, just as the general feeling of unity became symbolized by Jeanne d'Arc.⁵⁴ The Maiden and the mad king represented the emotional confrontation within the average Frenchman. In Michelet's words, "The individual history explains the general history. The insanity of the king was not of the king alone: the realm had its part in it."⁵⁵ Man's progress resulted precisely because of this painful confrontation of the *moi*, represented by the healthy will of Jeanne, versus the *non-moi*, symbolized by the diseased will of Charles VI, the English, the nobility, and the church.

During the Hundred Years' War, the most important confrontation took place not on the battlefield but within the mental struggles of Frenchmen. According to Michelet, "Life is a combat . . . but one should not complain about it; rather it is tragic when the combat ends. The interior war of *l'homo duplex* [the confrontation of the *moi* versus the *mon-moi*] is exactly what sustains us. Contemplate it, this war, raging not only in the king, but in the realm, and in the Paris of that time, which represented this war so well."⁵⁶ The people of France, of Paris, represented the *homo duplex*, the divided man struggling through insanity and thereby learning to become one. The initial result of these insanities, however, was even greater political division. Charles VI's madness led to countless crimes, culminating in the murder of Louis d'Orléans in 1407. Two factions resulted: Armagnacs killed Burgundians, but France herself became the real victim.⁵⁷ Michelet compared the failure to reunite France by physical force to the inadequacies of the period's medicine: "There was already, as today, materialistic medicine, which bled the body without caring for the soul, which wanted to cure the physical illness [*le mal physique*] without examining the psychological illness [*le mal moral*]."⁵⁸

The real cure for France came from a combination of psychological and physical treatment initiated by Jeanne d'Arc. "The modern heroes," Michelet explained, "*they are the heroes of action.*" They instituted "the justice of God, which acts, which combats, which saves

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5:15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:32-33.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:16.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 59. "*Le mal moral*" would have been treated better by the moral treatment prescribed by Pinel and his pupils.

and heals.” Of Jeanne d’Arc’s advice to Charles VII to proceed to Reims and there claim the crown, he writes, “The Maiden alone had this advice, and this heroic insanity was wisdom itself.”⁵⁹ Insanity had pointed to its own cure, to its own path toward unity, which was symbolized by the reestablishment of Valois control under the rightful heir, Charles VII. Michelet described the period of Charles VII’s reign as one of cure, to be contrasted to the English feudal divisions mirrored in their own mad king, Henry VI.⁶⁰ Such language led to the conclusion, reported in the newspaper, *La Boussole*, that Michelet had described the Maiden as insane. The alienist, Louis Florentin Calmeil, later labeled her a *théomaniac*, a monomaniac obsessed with religious visions.⁶¹ In his *Journal*, Michelet emphasized that he had rejected such charges so vehemently that *La Boussole* had apologized and retracted the original statement.⁶²

Michelet explained that Jeanne was an exception; she was the child-woman who represented perfect national unity. “This prolongation of childhood,” he wrote, “was a singularity of Jeanne d’Arc, who remained a small girl and was never a woman.”⁶³ She was subject neither to passionate divisions, which were considered to begin mainly at adolescence, nor to the physiological trials occasioned by the onset of menstruation.⁶⁴ Jeanne represented both individual and national fraternity, a psychological unity that she typified as the people’s true healer and as Charles VII’s true confessor. Like Poinot, she was no longer divided by passions; she foreshadowed the unity that both individual and nation were to become. On the other hand, the English and the church, who tortured Jeanne to death, remained the implacable enemies of the nation itself. Michelet knew that Jeanne’s and the people’s attachment toward nationalism would continue, despite the delays created by monarchy and the Gallican church, because nationalism was transmitted at the moment of conception through the contagious nature of fixed ideas.

In the sixteenth century, the people’s emotional conflict again created a nationalistic revolt during the Wars of Religion. The suffering of the masses once more became mirrored in the monarchy. As

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:31–32, 6:136.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6:249.

⁶¹ Louis Florentin Calmeil, *De la folie considérée sous le point de vue pathologique, philosophique, historique et judiciaire*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1845; reprint ed., New York, 1976), 1:127–35.

⁶² Michelet, *Journal*, 1:606.

⁶³ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 2:497. Also see Michelet, *The Women of the French Revolution*, 234–35.

⁶⁴ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 2:497; Michelet, *The People*, 119.

Michelet stated, "A madman was born, Charles IX, the furious inspirer of Saint-Bartholomew's Day."⁶⁵ This tragic event again resulted in partisan rivalries, which through contagion led to further madness.⁶⁶ "The dreams and insanities of Francis I in 1515 [during the Italian Wars], when France was strong, were the follies of a young man," he explained; "those of the Guises and of Diane, in 1547, with a ruined France, were an insanity of the mentally ill [*une démence d'aliénés*]." As earlier, a foreign enemy, this time the Spanish, helped spread the disease. With this infection, however, an increasing number of Frenchmen became aware of their nationality. "It is time," Michelet admonished, "to look at the great psychological facts of the epoch, [which are] more important than any political fact. They are all in three words: *sorcery, convents, casuistry*."⁶⁷

Catherine B. Clément has already noted the heroic role the sorceress played for Michelet. She "is insane; she possesses 'the illuminism of lucid insanity.'"⁶⁸ Michelet described her repeatedly as a *demi-fou*, a monomaniac of "*half-sane, half-insane* madness."⁶⁹ Her psychological pain mirrored the agony of the people whom she had doctored for a thousand years. Internal conflict led to the realization that she must revolt against the Christian acceptance of pain and disease as the just punishments from God.⁷⁰ "Foreshadowing of the modern Prometheus are to be seen in her," Michelet explained, "a beginning of industry, above all of the sovereign industry that heals and revivifies men."⁷¹ She spread this rebellion in the Black Mass, which Michelet described as "the frenzied outbreaks of a maddened brain, lifting impiety to the level of popular indignation."⁷² She represented "the general insanity of the time," which led to clandestine *sabbats*, a "brutal unity, confused and mad [*vertige*],"⁷³ and which marked the beginning of fra-

⁶⁵ Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 10:304.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12:64.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11:12, 13:109.

⁶⁸ Catherine B. Clément, "Michelet et Freud: De la sorcière à l'hystérique," *Europe: Revue littéraire mensuelle* 535–536 (Nov.–Dec. 1973): 114.

⁶⁹ Jules Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*, trans. of *La Sorcière* by A. R. Allison (New York, 1971), xv.

⁷⁰ Clément, "Michelet et Freud," 115; Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*, xviii.

⁷¹ Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*, ix–x.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷³ Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 8:107, 13:122. I have translated "vertige" as "mad." Michelet often used many synonyms for madness or insanity. Examples include Michelet's description of the Great Terror: "Avant 1800, une chose fort tragique, c'est le vertige, une sorte d'aliénation mentale." He depicted the exploration of the Basques as follows: "L'Elan basque et la folie lucide qui se guida si bien autour du monde." According to Trélat, "La Folie lucide" was a form of monomania, which allowed Michelet to refer to the Basques as "les héros du vertige." See Jules Michelet, *Histoire du XIXe siècle*, new ed., 3 vols. (Paris, 1880), 1:xv; Michelet, *La Mer*, 274, 270; Trélat, *La Folie lucide*.

ternity and the nation. Jeanne d'Arc's example once again spread to others, who in turn became persecuted as witches; yet, their insanity insured the continuation of fraternity and the nation's progress.

The church was particularly responsible for crushing this revolt throughout French history. In *La Sorcière* Michelet concentrated upon one Charlotte Cadière, who from 1729 through 1731 suffered unbearably at the hands of her confessor. She had written, in words that could apply to any age, about her own progression beyond monomania: "I became more than half mad. I felt such a craving for pain!" Thus, for Michelet, "The mighty cry of pain . . . is the true inward meaning of the Witches' Sabbath. . . . It expresses not only material sufferings, . . . but a very abyss of agony." Therefore, "she [the sorceress in general and Cadière in particular] is left horror-stricken, half wild with remorse and passionate revolt."⁷⁴ Rebellion came from the pain of mental torment. Heroic passions arose from the individual's confrontation with the *non-moi*, which externally was the false confessor but internally was the growing awareness of one's own submissive insanity. The individual was ultimately faced with either revolt or suicide.

Progress was assured because mankind would never accept its own demise; the spirit of revolt spread from Jeanne to women to succeeding generations until the next period of rebellion, which erupted during the Regency of Louis XV. Commentators of Michelet have wondered why he devoted one of eighteen volumes of his *Histoire de France* to this short and neglected segment of French history. This period, however, was similar to the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of Religion; all were insane revolts that led toward national unity. The Regency crisis was also prepared by the preceding miseries of the people, this time due to Louis XIV's wars, increased taxation, and the famine of 1707. The pain caused by these events was again mirrored in a public figure, probably the duchesse du Berry, the daughter of the Regent, Philippe d'Orléans.⁷⁵ Michelet called her "half mad [*demi-fou*]," a monomaniac whom he compared to the mad kings, Charles VI and Charles IX. These monarchs had been fundamentally important to their periods, but there was no comparable historical significance to the duchesse de Berry, who died in 1719 at the age of twenty-four. She served as a literary device, as a foil to the emotional turmoil

⁷⁴ Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*, 274, 317-18, 322. Michelet also emphasized the capability of priests to drive women mad in Jules Michelet, *Priests, Women, and Families*, trans. from the French, third ed. by C. Cocks, 2nd English ed. (London, 1846), especially 126, 264.

⁷⁵ Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 11:12.

of her period.⁷⁶ "She had all the chaos of the [eighteenth] century," Michelet wrote. He examined her madness further, referring at this point to Trélat: "In a beautiful recent book, *La Folie lucide*, one sees what a fixed idea is. No chimera and no crime where such an idea cannot lead. One sees there, moreover, that these *demi-fous* are crafty, very apt at intrigue. They are excellent instruments for those who know how to make use of them."⁷⁷ This description provided a convenient way to explain the intrigue caused by the Regent's daughter.

On a second level, monomania characterized a Regency where monetary gain was the fixed idea of every member of government, each of whom, therefore, could be manipulated by the financier, John Law. On a third level, because the Regent's daughter symbolized the eighteenth century as a whole, monomania stood for an Enlightenment age that was preoccupied and finally tricked by the notion of man's infallible reason. On the fourth and most significant level, Michelet explained, the positive effect of this insanity manifested itself: the people became preoccupied with obsessions of equality and unity, and this monomania led progressively and inexorably to the French Revolution.

The Regency period was dominated by John Law, who was the heroic counterpart to the Regent's daughter. "An insanity . . . seized it [the period] at this moment," Michelet wrote, "the discovery of a prodigious mine of gold: the marvelous System that changed all paper into gold." His analogy was obvious: he was comparing medieval alchemy to Law's proposal to print paper money, a scheme that had been shunned as mad but had suddenly become accepted. In Michelet's words, "The fruit flourished, a true rose, a voluptuous beauty—Insanity. For the first time, Insanity was dressed decently, richly, and, one could say, like a queen; Insanity, fresh and fat, . . . as was the daughter of the Regent."⁷⁸ Man's awareness and acceptance of madness became crucial. During the Enlightenment the insanities of crown, church, and nobility were increasingly criticized. More importantly, the people no longer had to hide their insanity, as sorceress and al-

⁷⁶ Michelet does not mention the name of the regent's daughter but the most obvious choice is the duchesse de Berry, described in J. H. Shennan, *Philippe, Duke of Orléans: Regent of France, 1715–1723* (London, 1979), 128. An alternative explanation is that the daughter was in fact *l'homo-duplex* as represented in Alexandre Dumas, *Oeuvres de Alexandre Dumas: Une Fille du régent* (Paris, 1931). Dumas contrasted the worldly duchesse de Berry with her cloistered sister, Louise-Adélaïde d'Orléans. The daughter, by remaining unnamed by Michelet, may have symbolized the struggle between these two sisters, the *moi* versus the *non-moi*.

⁷⁷ Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 16:220, 223.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

chemist had been so cruelly forced to do in earlier periods. The people's *idée fixe* of revolt, silently passed through generations, could come out into the open and culminate in 1789. Michelet, therefore, explained the importance of Law's system in the broadest terms: "There was never a more general movement. It was not, as one seems to believe, a simple affair of finance, but a social revolution; it existed already in the minds. The *System* was the effect much more than the cause. An immense fermentation had preceded it."⁷⁹

Michelet claimed that the people became as heroically determined to change their oppressed situation as Law had been to convert paper into gold. Both dreamed of overturning the hierarchy of society and nature that church and government had accepted as permanent. Michelet wrote, "Law was evidently mad with the vertigo of utopia."⁸⁰ This dizzying insanity led to his disgrace, just as passionate excess would later discredit the Great Revolution. Michelet concluded that neither Law nor the people were guilty, but like all monomaniacs, they could easily be tricked and led astray.

Michelet equated the people's desire for fraternity with love, which he defined as that emotion which "is so strong that it believes the contrary to what it sees. The more the thing [love] is illogical, insane, absurd, . . . the more it is a matter of faith."⁸¹ The people's efforts would thus be insane. Like Law's actions, they were based on a conviction of love and the faith that they could accomplish so much, when all around them were proofs to the contrary. This faith was the wisdom of the people's insanity, and it was what led to the Revolution.⁸²

The French Revolution represented the culmination of the people's awakening, a cure that had begun during the Hundred Years' War. The counterparts to the people's internal emotional struggles were thus no longer major political figures. During the Revolution, psychological confrontation became mirrored in key events: the storming of the Bastille, the Fête de la Fédération of 1790, and their opposite, the two Terrors. In his book on the Revolution Michelet explained this historic change. Under Louis XV, "humanity, still feeble, placed its unity in a sign, a visible living sign, a man, an individual. Henceforth, unity, more pure, and free from this material condition, will consist in the union of the hearts, the community, [and] the mind, the

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 18:160.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 225.

passion of sentiments and ideas arising from identity of opinions.’⁸³ This growing sense of fraternity resulted in the Revolution, which in turn represented the culminating act of insanity: “The lunacy of the Revolution was here wisdom.”⁸⁴ The insanity had spread from the revolt of the few, who had been ridiculed by society, to all the people. “How long,” Michelet asked, “is insanity’s progress confined to children and fools, to poets and madmen? And yet one day that madness proves to be the common sense of all!”⁸⁵

The most significant event of the Revolution was the storming of the Bastille, when the people “attained what is morally the highest degree of order—unanimity of feeling.” Michelet described the time before its capture as an evening that “had been stormy, agitated by a whirlwind of ungovernable frenzy. With daylight, one idea dawned upon Paris.” Seized by monomania, the people struck at their oppressors. Michelet went on to describe the fall of the prison: “Correctly speaking, the Bastille was not taken; it surrendered. Troubled by a bad conscience, it went mad and lost all presence of mind.”⁸⁶ Insanity confronted itself again; the people madly revolted against an insane injustice.

July 14 became the microcosm of the Revolution as well as France’s entire history. As such, the symbol of the Bastille’s insanity was four-fold. Firstly, the Bastille represented the insane old regime which had taught the people to remain passive. The people were, therefore, justified in attacking it. Secondly, the prison symbolized ill treatment and false cures offered by society’s leaders before 1789.⁸⁷ Thirdly, the storming of the Bastille represented a moment of great heroic insanity, when the people sought to cure themselves by acting as one. Fourthly, as Michelet described the atrocities that occurred after its fall, the image of insanity removed the people’s guilt. This use of the insanity defense transferred the blame to the nobles and the church, who for centuries had ruled by keeping the people insane.⁸⁸

⁸³ Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*, ed. with an intro. by G. Wright, trans. C. Cocks (Chicago, 1967), 53.

⁸⁴ Quotation from Michelet in Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (Groningen, Netherlands, 1955), 78. Geyl does not give his source.

⁸⁵ Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*, 39.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 161, 176.

⁸⁷ Michelet had discussed the false treatments of Friedrich Anton Mesmer in medicine and Charles Alexandre de Calonne in finance as anticipations of the storming of the Bastille, which symbolized all the false cures offered by the Old Regime. See Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 18:275.

⁸⁸ Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*, 204–5. For an analysis of the insanity defense, see Raymond de Saussure, “The Influence of the Concept of Monomania on French

The people's unity culminated in the Fête de la Fédération of 1790, when passions became harmonized and the people united. The Fédération was the instance of the true fraternity that Jeanne d'Arc had anticipated; yet, it was also a moment that could not last. Because all historical movements originated from psychological confrontation, there remained not only the chance but the necessity of divisive passions that would give rise to the next *non-moi*. During the Revolution the people would suffer, but only to prepare France for the more permanent unity that the Maiden and then the Fête de la Fédération had prefigured and that biological law assured. The loss of women's support doomed the Revolution, which was based on fraternity and on the sacrifice made by mothers, each of whom was responsible for the generational transmission of ideas. "What was lacking," claimed Michelet, "was sacrifice, the immolation of passion."⁸⁹ The enemies of the people knew precisely where to strike, for the greatest blow to Revolutionary fraternity was dealt when priests subverted the women. Through the contagion of divisive passions, this tragedy turned families and then entire areas, such as the Vendée, against the Revolution.⁹⁰ Priests, as false confessors, had driven the people against themselves, just as earlier clerics had persecuted the sorceress, typified by Charlotte Cadière.

This destructive insanity spread among the people, resulting in the September massacres: "The massacres had succeeded to a state of madness, of horrible fascination, and of hydrophobic fury."⁹¹ This attack reached its cruelest heights, according to Michelet, when Parisians attacked the poor, the ill, and the insane at Bicêtre. Michelet's greatest biographer, Paul Viallaneix, states that there was no true looting of the hospital of Bicêtre itself; in fact, the raid differed in nature from the other massacres.⁹² Michelet's intent, however, was more poetic than strictly factual, because the attack on the hospital symbolized the antithesis of the people's rescue of those interned at the Bastille. The assault of the inmates at Bicêtre, an image of the insane people attacking the insane, symbolized the horrible internal conflicts to which the people had once again been reduced. In just over three years the peo-

Medico-Legal Psychiatry (from 1825 to 1840)," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 1 (July 1946): 365-97.

⁸⁹ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 1:533.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1145-70.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1090.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 149, 1088-89. For another criticism of Michelet's account of the attack on the hospital, see Paul Bru, *Histoire de Bicêtre, (hospice-prison-asile) d'après des documents historiques* (Paris, 1890), 80.

ple's insanity had become egoistic and cruel in imitation of the Old Regime that they were attempting to defeat.

This passionate excess, which doomed the Revolution, then spread to factions within the Convention. Unreasonable fears of ubiquitous plots replaced the former faith in unity. Michelet summarized that development as "this terrible scaffolding of insanities." As fear built upon fear, the Great Terror resulted. "What would happen," Michelet asked, "if in this sick France, the horrible epidemic were to strike, more contagious than any other, this frightful longing for death."⁹³ In short, an unhealthy monomania had replaced a healthy obsession; the people had not been given the time for a cure. "In order to return to the source of the disaster," Michelet observed, "one very tragic thing, before 1800, was the madness, a kind of mental alienation. The nightmare of the Terror and of the general war had upset the spirits, putting them outside all reason and totally out of balance."⁹⁴

According to Michelet, history, as the Revolution demonstrated, never progressed in a straight line. Man's complex emotional makeup led to successive periods of crisis. Each era witnessed a higher level of man's development; each stage prepared for mankind's next heroic effort. The death of the Revolution could lead only to greater future unity, an idea that Michelet expressed poetically. Referring to the Revolution's enemies, he wrote, "The sword they plunged into her heart works miracles and heals."⁹⁵

Any analysis of Michelet's histories can be checked against his natural histories, which, by his own admission, were allegories of France's past: "All natural history I had begun to regard as a branch of the political."⁹⁶ In *La Mer*, for instance, the ocean represented France's stormy past. He compared the tempests to the Revolution's excesses, which attracted the attention of the casual observer. As if attempting to instruct a conservative such as Edmund Burke, Michelet argued, "These [storms] are the accidents that pass at the surface and do not at all reveal the true mysterious personality of the sea." The waves, he continued, "gave me the impression of a frightful *mob*, a horrible populace, not of men, but of barking dogs—a million, a billion bulldogs, enraged, or rather, mad." Below these waves, there existed "an unknown ocean, that of the sufferings of the people."⁹⁷ The true his-

⁹³ Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution: française*, 1:1196, 2:160.

⁹⁴ Michelet, *Histoire du XIXe siècle*, 1:xv.

⁹⁵ Michelet, *The People*, 199.

⁹⁶ Jules Michelet, *The Bird*, trans. W.-H. D. Adams, new ed. (London, 1872), 52.

⁹⁷ Jules Michelet, *La Mer*, 60, 85; Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 1:536, 431.

tory, then, which Michelet explained in terms of a polyp's molting, like each crisis in France's history, represented pain and vulnerability. Each molting was a psychological trial, a "beautiful insanity," which created "the effort and all the progress in the world."⁹⁸ This struggle was not as obvious as the madness of the waves that most observers noticed. The real historical drama was played out below the surface in the unseen and insane striving of the individual will to progress against all odds.⁹⁹ By writing *La Mer*, Michelet had fulfilled a promise made in 1821: "I had in mind to write the *History of a drop of water*, and I believe that I am going to do this insane thing."¹⁰⁰ The drop of water was the individual, alienated by destructive insanities transmitted by the people's enemies to keep the masses separate and submissive. The French people's heroic, yet insane, effort represented a common desire to form a nation, a single ocean. He compared this ocean to mother's milk, which united all living things. The sea's depths, like the people's history, had its understandable rhythms, its natural laws of psychology and physiology that regulated movement and insured progress.

⁹⁸ Michelet, *La Mer*, 169–68.

⁹⁹ Michelet's choice of language is crucial to understanding his histories. He selected the word "mue," that had been used to describe the polyp's molting, in order to symbolize the people's rebellion to achieve freedom. The insane but really healthy revolt, the *moi*, was contrasted to a debilitating insanity, the *non-moi*, made contagious by English incendiary pamphlets. British leaders were also overcome with "une sorte de rage mue," as were French nobles and clergy who became "amuété" or maddened.

¹⁰⁰ Michelet, *Ecrits de Jeunesse*, 225.