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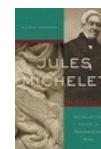
Michèle Hannoosh

Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France

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Margaret MacNamidhe

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Readers may know Michèle Hannoosh best from her work on the French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix. Alerted to error-riddled versions of his famous *Journal* (while researching her landmark *Painting and the Journal of Delacroix*, Princeton University Press, 1995), Hannoosh returned to its sources. In her two-volume critical edition of the *Journal* (José Corti, 2009) and associated publications, Hannoosh brought to light a vast array of new material and ordered a labyrinth of cross-references.

In *Jules Michelet*, Hannoosh focuses on an inaugural specialist in what Michel Foucault called "history itself" (*L'Archéologie du savoir*, Gallimard, 1969, 13). Two detailed reviews of the book have already appeared, one by Bettina R. Lerner—widely published on Michelet as well as on the rise of socially concerned, literary Romanticism—and the other by Beth S. Wright, a scholar versed in the French Restoration's visual culture. I see my job here as evaluating the case *Jules Michelet* makes for the "visual arts" occupying a central role in Michelet's "historical oeuvre" (3, 13). To do so, I must first describe Hannoosh's account of Michelet's overall importance.

Jules Michelet (1798–1874) belonged to the "Romantic liberal school" of historians, who responded to the post-French Revolution society's need for "substance" to be imparted to a turbulent recent past (9, emphasis in original). But Michelet stands out for three main reasons. First, narration was a mode he made his own, bearing out Dutch philosopher Frank Ankersmit's insistence that "narrative substance" infuses every historian's response to the past (*Narrative Logic*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1983, 7). Michelet's story of France's "idea of nation," culminating in the 1789 Revolution, produced his historical oeuvre, including *Le Peuple* (1846), *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1847–53), and the sixteen-volume *Histoire de France* (1833–67) (122). But Michelet's publishing did not stop with these monumental works; a "fascination with nature" produced late-career studies in natural history like *L'Oiseau* and *L'Insecte* (14).

Hannoosh's attention to the "narrative substance" of Michelet's writing explains, I believe, her invocation of Ankersmit instead of the American historian of ideas Hayden White. Both careers were launched in the 1970s under poststructuralism's sway, but an extended discussion of Michelet within "history's golden age" was undertaken by White, not Ankersmit (*Metahistory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973/2014, 435, 135–62). *Metahistory's* commitment to the death of the author, however, with categories into which all historical writing falls, does not accommodate Hannoosh's gift for fine-grained analyses of the historian's lavish prose, which Hannoosh calls "brazenly personal and deeply lyrical, rhapsodic in emotional charge" (7). Hannoosh reveals how Michelet made use of "interior monologue or free indirect discourse"—she identifies structuring rhetorical devices at every turn—capable of propelling his prose from "joy to irony to despair" (28, 119). Work could grind to a halt, as it did on the *Histoire de France* in 1844, when Michelet felt unequal to the task of narration. In fact, *Le Peuple* was written after Michelet put the former on pause. Only *after* he had written about the people did Michelet feel he could narrate "the centuries of the absolute monarchy" (70).

The second reason for Michelet's exceptionalism was his view of the past as a veritable living entity. White's much-applied descriptor for this approach is "organicist" (*Metahistory*, 190). But Hannoosh observes that Michelet summoned up history in ways "more incantatory than corporeal"—even if his feelings could be "visceral" at times—while Lerner emphasizes how Michelet made seven "socio-historical" groups converge into one heroic people (29, 42; Lerner, "Michelet, Mythologue," *Yale French Studies* 111, 2007: 65, 66). His profoundly original account of French history led to resurrection: the "spirit of Christianity" was reborn "in the Revolution" (56). But "salvation" in the "modern era" had been presaged by Christological figures—the fifteenth-century Joan of Arc most of all (55). The burdens of absolutism were overcome when the people, through the Revolution, assumed Christ's paschal role.

The third reason for Michelet's singularity was his career's rise and fall: a "Calvary-like trajectory" awarded heroic memorialization under the Third Republic (7). Michelet's star ascended during the July Monarchy's expansion of education, and in 1838 he was appointed to the Collège de France. But in 1852 he lost his position "for giving lectures considered too favorable to republicanism" (92).

What case, then, is built by *Jules Michelet* for "artworks" occupying a central role in Michelet's historical oeuvre (4, 6, 13, 26)? Although the introduction takes on, with Hannoosh's unmistakable thoroughness, two centuries' worth of the literature on Michelet, I felt the want of her meticulousness in respect to the umbrella term "artworks," which range "from Rembrandt and Rubens to David and Géricault, from Gothic architecture and Renaissance sculpture to the etchings of Callot to the lithographs of Daumier" (20, 7). On the one hand, artworks are kept in museums, but on the other, they can be "maps, relics, [and] inscriptions" as well as cathedrals, each showing the "key ideas standing behind events" (6). As a result, there are uncertain relations between the solitary artwork and representation in *Jules Michelet*. The contrast between three descriptions he made about the Musée des Monuments français indicates this uncertainty. All come from the 1840s, when Michelet was engaged in a "near-obsessive repetition and reworking of a passage" that would appear in the preface to *Le Peuple*. It distills remembered visits to the painter Alexandre Lenoir's "resurrectionist" display of French history in the "gardens of the Augustinians" (3, 32). Lenoir gathered "sculpture, stained glass, and architectural ornaments," as well as the "royal tombs from Saint-Denis" confiscated during the Revolution, in the "dark, low-vaulted rooms" of the former monastery (built over in the July Monarchy; 1, 3). The canonical version of the visit becomes an ur-experience for Michelet's encounters with "art" (2, emphasis in original). Entering a room containing the tombs of Frankish royalty (or so Michelet believed), his younger self succumbed to the impression of awakened "sleeping figures" (2): the "fearful" child thought he saw figures from the sixth and seventh centuries "sit right up" (2).

This recollection allows for the "uncanny kind of historicity" that Lerner's review considers characteristic of Michelet's revelatory response to artworks. But the other "formative" recollections of Lenoir's museum do not share much in common with the origin story among tombs (165). The second mention compares the museum to "a dusty jumble of art and antiquities, like a drawing by Piranesi," while Michelet's third description emphasizes the "dim light of that museum, which recalls Rembrandt's *Philosopher*" (3, 165). The reader must know how "pale" the depicted window is in the *Philosopher*—a small oil Michelet believed Rembrandt painted around 1630—in order to appreciate how dark the museum must have been (164). Origins for the second description's references, meanwhile, include the category of curiosity defined by Enlightenment systemizations of aesthetics, though by contrast Michelet's story depends on the staging of an open-ended, firsthand experience. Michelet's "heart beat fast" when he wandered the museum as a child, seeking "I know not: what life was like then, I suppose" (2).

I note also that Michelet's second description of the Musée des Monuments français refers to "a drawing by Piranesi," but his views of ancient Roman, or Rome-inspired, monuments were known from large-scale etchings, leafed through in portfolios (2–3). This reminds us that a familiarity with letters and ligatures—small forms of moveable type, rather than graphic forms—constituted Michelet's originary encounter with print, when he helped out in his beloved father's ill-fated *imprimerie* (131). These allusions to reproductive media made me wish that *Jules Michelet* had engaged with the intermediality described in Stephen Bann's account of the contemporary "thriving market" for the "commercial production of images" (*Distinguished Images*, Yale University Press, 2013, 4, 6). A revival of burin reproductive engraving along with the dissemination of steel engraving and lithography resulted in "a culture where the opposition between 'original' and a 'copy' was consistently blurred" (Bann, *Parallel Lines*, Yale University Press, 2001, 214n12).

For me, the strongest parts of *Jules Michelet* are those in which Hannoosh reveals the extent of the historian's obsession with death (which he called odorous and "restless" in a "damp tomb"; 17, 25). I close this review by emphasizing the drama of these unforgettable passages, in which Michelet appears tantalized by the "nightmare" of "an endless cycle of birth and death" (16). On the one hand, Michelet thought he perceived bodies reanimating in the tomb. The stone could turn "supple and malleable," and Michelet could not "leave [it] alone," in that writing could "become an act of sculpting" with a voice shifting from "the historian's to the sculptor's in free indirect style" (117, 116, 87). On the other hand, the tomb can be necrotic. Michelet witnessed no less than four exhumations of loved ones, seeing worms and "terrible ugliness" under the "paradise" of graveyards, compelled all the while by a "strangely attractive" experience (149, 118). Such extremes put me in mind of the famous lines opening T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), with evening "spread out against the sky" like a "patient etherized upon a table." (Appropriately enough, Hannoosh's work includes a masterful examination of Eliot.) It is fitting that the quality *Jules Michelet* evokes so powerfully—the historian's capacity to glimpse resurrection in decay and vice versa—attracted Vincent van Gogh to Michelet's writing. Fourteen years after the historian's death, van Gogh found solace in *L'Insecte's* conjuring of metamorphosis from a chrysalis state (Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000, 171).

Margaret MacNamidhe
School of the Art Institute of Chicago



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