The Romantics and the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre

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At the end of the reign of Charles X, French literature showed an extraordinary infatuation with the reign of Charles IX, the distant origins of which may be traced back to a then-famous drama by Marie-Joseph Chénier, *Charles IX ou la Saint-Barthélemy*, premiered on 4 November 1789. In it, Chénier advocated a new theatrical, political and didactic form by posing the question of royal responsibility in a context in which certain analogies were evident: Charles IX suggested Louis XVI; Catherine de' Medici, presented as a foreigner of dissolute morals, was an anticipation of Marie-Antoinette; the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre was an invitation to examine the problem of state religion. An enthusiastic Danton exclaimed after the first performance: 'If Figaro killed the nobility, Charles IX will kill royalty.' A fashion had been launched, the effects of which were to be of decisive importance in the invention of the French historical novel and, consequently, of the social novel (*roman de mœurs*). Almost as soon as the Terror was over, Chateaubriand retrospectively provided a theoretical basis for the system used by Chénier, exploring the possible anticipations of the Revolution in western history in his *Essai historique, moral et politique sur les révolutions anciennes et modernes*. The same author's *Les Martyrs*, which relates how Christianity grew out of the ruins of paganism, is a sequel to the essay, and Napoleon was quite justified in interpreting this 'prose epic' as a lampoon when

he recognised some of his own character traits in the portrait of the tyrant Hierocles. The reign of Charles X saw a vast increase in the number of works with a comparable intention, beginning with the publication of Vigny's *Cinq-Mars* in 1826. The avowed aim was to 'close the chasm of revolutions' (a formula coined by the Restoration government in 1820 when it sought to re-establish censorship of the press), an undertaking common to the Restoration authorities and to most authors of historical novels. Vigny set himself the task of understanding the decadence of the French aristocracy, that is to say, of identifying the early portents of the Revolution. In the same way, any mention of Cromwell and the execution of Charles I of England was tantamount to a reference to the history of the French Revolution: Hugo's play *Cromwell* and Dumas's novel *Vingt ans après* are well known, but Mérimée took an interest in the subject as early as 1822.

At this time, the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre was the focus of the interests, indeed the passions of dramatists and novelists as the event most liable to bring the Revolution to mind and to express opposition to the current regime and its values. When he wrote his *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*, Mérimée was following a trend to which other authors had already contributed. Ludovic Vitet had produced a trilogy of works on the Wars of Religion: *Les Barricades* (1826), *Les États de Blois ou la mort de MM. de Guise* (1827) and *La Mort de Henri III* (1828). The year 1826 saw the performance of *La Saint-Barthélemi* by Charles d'Outrepont, followed in 1828 by Charles de Rémusat's *La Saint-Barthélemy*, both of them inspired by Chénier. In 1829, Chénier's *Charles IX* was revived and Audin's *Histoire de la Saint-Barthélemy* (1824) was reprinted, while other plays of the same year included Dumas's *Henri III et sa cour*, Lucien Arnault's *Catherine de Médicis* and Albert Germeau's *La Réforme en 1560 ou Le Tumulte d'Amboise.* Roederer published *La Proscription de la Saint-Barthélemy* and Balzac conceived *Les Deux Rêves*, the fourth part of his novel *Sur Catherine de Médicis*, in which the eponymous queen engages in dialogue with Robespierre. In 1830, Fleury published *La Nuit de sang* and Saint-Esteben the plays *La Mort de Coligny ou La Nuit de la Saint-*

Barthélemy, followed by *1572. Scènes historiques.* After this came staged productions of *Aoust 1572 ou Charles IX à Orléans* by Lesguillon (1832) and *Charles IX* by Rosier (1834), as well as two musical adaptations of Mérimée's novel: Hérold's *Le Pré aux clercs* in 1832 and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* in 1836. Ten years later, Dumas published *La Reine Margot* (1845) and *La Dame de Montsoreau* (1846).

Throughout the nineteenth century, reference to the Wars of Religion was a way of speaking of the Revolution and more especially the Terror. Contemporaries of the death throes of the Restoration saw it as a means of pointing out the abuses of Charles X's government. The reference was widespread in the liberal milieux frequented by Mérimée, where the tendency was to take one Charles for another and identify the Ultras of the 1820s with the Catholics of 1572. The project for *La Bataille*, *Le Théâtre de Clara Gazul* and the drama entitled *La Jaquerie* all show Mérimée's opposition to the policies of Louis XVIII and Charles X. The *Chronique* followed in their wake. When it was published, Charles Magnin reviewed it in *Le Globe* dated 25 and 30 May 1829, acclaiming Mérimée as 'the most brilliant and most felicitous leader to have appeared in the Romantic avant-garde... the Mazeppa of an army of which M. Victor Hugo is the Charles XII',* but reproached him with understating royal responsibility for the massacre and not presenting a more partisan picture of the struggle between Protestants and Catholics (that is, between liberals and ultra-royalists). Like his contemporaries, Mérimée uses the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre as a means of conceptualising the Revolution and criticising the present regime, something not achieved without contradictions and ambiguities. Moreover, the novelist does not restrict himself to these parallels, since he also identifies the massacre with 'a national insurrection like that of the Spaniards in 1809', and was later (in a letter to M^me^ de La Rochejaquelein of 9 June 1857) to present the events of 1572 as an appropriate instrument for reflecting on the present day: 'If one

* The reference here is King Charles XII of Sweden (1682-1718), with whom the Cossack hetman Mazeppa (hero of Hugo's eponymous poem) was allied.

were to weigh in the balance the murders of 24 August 1572 and the knavishness of many a railway shareholder in 1857, I am not so sure in which direction the scales would tip. The idea that the life of a man is a *serious thing* is a thoroughly modern idea, and I believe there are worse actions [than murder].' St Bartholomew's Day became established as the yardstick for an era of wretchedness and misfortune because it constitutes a remarkable substitute and analogy for the Terror.

For it was indeed the year 1793 that gave the novel its orientation, according to the Preface of its first edition:

> The greater part of the nation participated in it, either actively or passively: they took arms to assail the Huguenots, whereas the bloody executions of the Terror were directed by only a small number of cruel men. In my view, that difference tends to excuse the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre somewhat.

This note clearly caused some disquiet, for it disappeared from the definitive edition of the novel:

> The greater part of the nation participated in it, either actively or passively: they took arms to assail the Huguenots, whom they regarded as foreigners and enemies.

There is no longer any mention of 'excusing' here. Nevertheless, Mérimée neither deleted nor rewrote the first page of the *Chronique*, which invites the reader to compare two moments in history:

> Not far from Étampes, on the way to Paris, one may still see a large square building, with lancet windows decorated by a few crude sculptures. Above the doorway is a niche that once contained a stone madonna; but in the Revolution it suffered the fate of many other saints, and was ceremonially smashed by the president of the Revolutionary Club of Larcy.

It is important to note that, though earlier damaged by Huguenot harquebuses, the sculpture was only destroyed during the Revolution: a 'difference' that perhaps 'tends to excuse the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre somewhat', especially when one knows that the writer was the future Inspector of Historical Monuments who endeavoured to efface the material traces of the Revolution.

Given that every French historical novel of the nineteenth century is first and foremost a means of recounting the Revolution, and especially 1793, the issues involved in the work go beyond the bounds of a liberal protest against the reign of Charles X. To recount the Revolution, as Michelet and Carlyle were to demonstrate, supposes the fascinated expression of dread at the explosions of violence of the mob, likened to a monster freed of all constraints. A writer committed to the cause of the liberal party was duty bound to underline the cruelty of Charles IX 'armed with a long harquebus, firing straight at the poor passers-by', but Mérimée the novelist also joins the historians who tried rather to grasp the principles of popular violence. The crux of the contradiction can be seen in his decision to place himself on a level which is not that of the immediate circumstances. The St Bartholomew's Day Massacre prompts him to examine precisely that which cannot be imputed to any individual responsibility:

> In the army that is besieging us, there are very few of those monsters you speak of. The soldiers are French peasants who have abandoned the plough to earn the King's pay; and the gentlemen and captains fight because they have sworn an oath of loyalty to the King.

The massacre supposes the arbitrary deployment of a force that finds within itself the principle of its deployment. Such is Merimee's thesis on the event, stated in the Preface:

> Everything seems to me to prove that this huge massacre was not the result of a king's conspiracy against a section of his people. The St Bartholomew's Day Massacre appears to me the outcome of a popular insurrection that

> could not have been predicted, and occurred in improvised fashion. It is difficult to determine what part the King took in the massacre; if he did not approve it, it is certain that he allowed it to happen. After two days of murders and violence, he disowned all that had happened and sought to put a stop to the carnage. But the people's fury had been unleashed, and it would not be assuaged by just a little blood. It required more than sixty thousand victims. The monarch was forced to let himself be swept along by the torrent that overpowered him.

The power of the mob caused Mérimée to seek the cause of the carnage in the social behaviour of the period. This is why he takes the *novelistic* option of placing anonymous characters rather than illustrious names at the heart of the action, and asserts the claims of anecdote, in which one may discover 'an authentic depiction of society and its characteristics at a given period'.

In designating himself as a 'storyteller' (*faiseur de contes*) with a taste for local colour, Mérimée is defining himself as a novelist, after the fashion of Balzac declaring that novelistic talent is manifest 'in the depiction of causes that engender deeds, in the mysteries of the human heart whose movements are neglected by historians' (*Lettres sur la littérature*). This tendency was already expressed as early as the sixteenth century, in discourses concerning the art of the epic and the novel, but it found renewed legitimacy following the events of 1789. As Hugo wrote in *William Shakespeare* and the Preface to *Cromwell*, history became, in a sense, 'democratic': it no longer dealt exclusively with great personages but went in search of the humblest in their remote valleys. Mérimée is therefore only exhibiting modesty in historical matters the better to define the scope of his inquiry, whence the famous Chapter VIII, 'Dialogue entre le lecteur et l'auteur', in which he takes up position against Vigny. The latter, writing as the inventor of the French historical novel, had asserted in the essay 'Réflexions sur la vérité en art', which accompanied the fourth edition of *Cinq-Mars* in 1829, his refusal to copy Walter Scott, or as he put it 'to imitate those foreigners who, in their tableaux, barely show on the horizon

the dominant figures of their history': 'I placed ours in the foreground, I made them the principal actors of this tragedy.' Chapter VIII of the *Chronique* develops precisely Mérimée's view of a 'faiseur de contes' who enables us to perceive the spirit of an age. It follows from this that his attention must be concentrated on Mergy, and it is of little account that his readers do not find in the novel what they came there for. Mérimée offers them 'anecdote' and what, in the introduction to the second edition of *La Guzla*, he called 'local colour':

> Around the Year of Grace 1827, I was a *Romantic*. We said to the *Classicists*: 'Your Greeks are not Greeks, your Romans are not Romans; you are incapable of giving your compositions *local colour*. There can be no salvation without *local colour*.' What we meant by *local colour* was what in the seventeenth century was called social behaviour [*les mœurs*]; but we were very proud of our term, and we thought we had invented both the term and the thing itself.

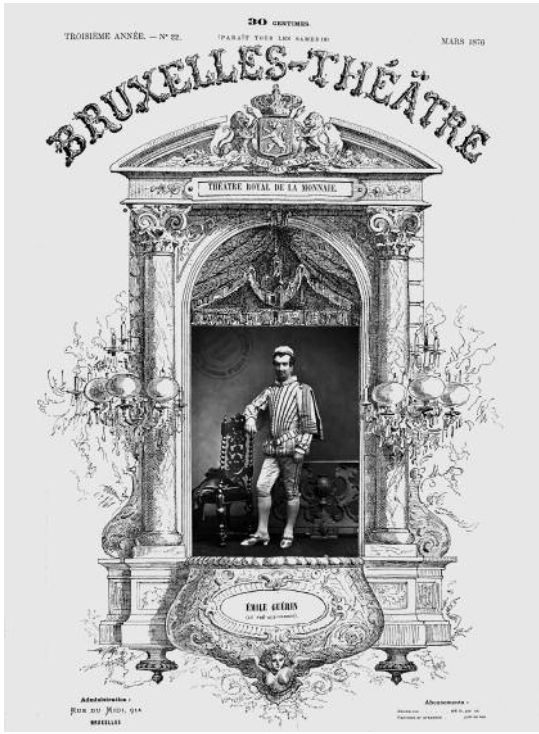
These ideas echo the Preface to *Cromwell*.

Only a grasp of the *mœurs* of the time makes it possible to understand the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. While the term *mœurs* was in favour in the seventeenth century, the *roman de mœurs* became established as a genre in the nineteenth century, as the continuation of a certain idea of the historical novel, itself determined by the need to understand the Terror and 'close the chasm of revolutions'. Balzac takes further the reflection on the novel that Mérimée had embarked on in his *Chronique*, both in *Sur Catherine de Médicis* and subsequently in *Illusions perdues*, where the principal character Lucien writes a novel, *L'Archer de Charles IX*, once again concerning the Wars of Religion – in this case, the Conspiracy of Amboise.

To write 'a picturesque history of France',** or at least to dream of one, always came down in the end to pondering the ambiguous lessons of 1793 and constituted the obligatory preliminary to the considerable under-

** An unrealised project of Balzac's from the 1820s.

taking that emerged from that idea: the creation of the 'contemporary social novel' (*roman de mœurs contemporaines*). Driven by nostalgia for a heroism now defunct, torn between anecdote and history, determined by the need to understand the violent fury of the mob, beset by rich contradictions, the *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* is an essential staging point on the road that led to that destination.



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