

## INTRODUCTION

In an oft-cited passage from the preface to *Le Peuple* (1846), Michelet reflects on the origins of his vocation as a historian: “My strongest childhood impression [. . .] is of the Musée des monuments français, which was so regrettably dismantled. It is there, and nowhere else, that I first had a vivid impression of history. I filled those tombs with my imagination, I felt the presence of the dead through the marble statues, and it was not without terror that I entered the low-vaulted rooms where Dagobert, Chilpéric and Frédégonde slumbered.”<sup>1</sup> The Musée des monuments français, opened in 1795 under the direction of the painter Alexandre Lenoir, brought together the works of sculpture and architecture that had been confiscated from ecclesiastical and royal buildings during the Revolution, most notably the royal tombs from Saint-Denis.<sup>2</sup> Housed in the Petits-Augustins monastery on the site of the current École des beaux-arts, it didactically constructed, through these works, a national history, its rooms arranged chronologically to mark a progression from the deep, dark, underground caverns of the Merovingians to the light-filled rooms of the seventeenth century. It was closed by the Restoration government in 1816, and the objects were either returned to their original locations or dispersed. Michelet was fond of this memory of his childhood visits, around which he developed two lectures for the Collège de France and to which he referred at least three times in his published writings.<sup>3</sup> In his 1847 *Histoire de la Révolution française*, for example, he returns

to it, elaborating on the impression that the experience made on him and its relevance to his future:

Even now I remember the emotion, still the same and as vivid as ever, which made my heart beat fast when, as a small boy, I entered those dark, low-vaulted rooms and gazed at those pale faces; when, excited, curious and fearful, I wandered, seeking, from room to room and from age to age. Seeking what? I know not: what life was like then, I suppose, and the spirit of those times. I was not altogether sure that they were not alive, all those sleeping figures of marble, stretched out on top of their tombs; and when I passed from the sumptuous monuments of the sixteenth century in their resplendent alabaster, into the low room of the Merovingians where the cross of Dagobert was kept, I did not really know whether I might not see Chilpéric and Frédégonde sit right up.<sup>4</sup>

For all the poetic license here—Frédégonde’s tomb was in a different room, her husband Chilpéric’s was destroyed in the Revolution, and, if by the “cross of Dagobert” he means the Frankish king’s funerary monument, that was in the so-called Élysée garden—Michelet did indeed frequent the museum as a child, and the importance of this experience for defining the vocation of one of the most prominent founders of modern French historiography has long been acknowledged. The young Michelet wandering around the cavernous rooms of the museum, imagining the life and times of the figures on the tombstones, experiencing them as alive, gradually descending in reverse order into the depths of the past, is an apt beginning for the later author of a *History of France* covering nearly twenty centuries from Roman Gaul to Louis XVI.

What has not claimed much attention, however, and what will concern me here, is that in these passages Michelet attributed the awakening of his consciousness of history and his vocation as a historian to a key encounter with *art*. The experience of the Musée des monuments français dramatizes the awakening of his historical consciousness as an encounter not only with *relics* from the past, consistent with Lenoir’s project of a “resurrectionist” history in which the visitor would, like Télémaque, contemplate the shades in the underworld,<sup>5</sup> but specifically with works of art: Michelet indeed characterizes the museum as “a dusty jumble of art and antiquities, like a drawing

by Piranesi.”<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising: Lenoir’s approach was to stage the drama of French history, with the sculptures as actors, the stained-glass windows as lighting, the architectural ornaments as décor.<sup>7</sup> The museum was indeed for Michelet a *living* history—“That museum was not a cemetery”<sup>8</sup>—the works conversing with one another and with the visitor: “They spoke, they spoke to you and they spoke to one another [. . .] of the times and eternity, of art and God.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as the near-obsessive repetition and reworking of the passage suggests, the experience of the museum acquired for Michelet an allegorical status, becoming a founding myth of not only his life’s vocation but also his life’s work, in its specificity: “There I heard the great chorus of the sixteenth century”; “That’s where I sensed France.”<sup>10</sup> Such experiences of art would be repeated over and over in different guises throughout his life.

Indeed, as his private journal and his published works attest, Michelet was a passionate and voracious student of the visual arts and an assiduous interpreter of them. He filled his private notes and published histories with discussions of artworks that served both as evidence of the character of a particular historical moment and as allegories of the historian’s relation to, and writing of, the past. His conception of historiography accorded to the visual arts a major place: he treated works of painting, sculpture, architecture, and engraving as historical phenomena that held a privileged place in the elaboration of the history of a given period. Visiting public museums and private galleries on his incessant travels within France and abroad; spending time at the Louvre, at the Salon, in the studios of artists; studying prints and illustrated books at the Bibliothèque nationale or the Louvre’s Cabinet des dessins; observing the public and private monuments in provincial towns and national capitals, Michelet reflected constantly on the importance of art for the history of cultures and societies. As he put it in a note for a lecture from 1842, art and history were one: “I would like to enter with you into an understanding of art and of human activity, to see how each, in its various manifestations, has influenced the other. That is, when I analyze a statue, I will show the part that religion or the laws of the society had in it; and when I analyze a set of laws, I will say [. . .] how the idea of the beautiful, of genius, and of art current at the time affected not just its form but its content.”<sup>11</sup>

His interests were wide-ranging: from Van Eyck, Dürer, Rembrandt, and Rubens to David and Géricault, from gothic architecture and Renaissance

sculpture to his contemporaries Prévault and David d'Angers, from the etchings of Callot to the lithographs of Daumier. For Michelet, such art bore witness to a history that had frequently gone unnoticed and untold; it expressed key ideas standing behind events; it stated concepts that would come to fruition in history only later; in its power to attract and enchant, it paradoxically brought out the truth. As I shall argue here, an experience of the visual arts, along with its interpretation and elaboration in writing, accompanies, and often is at the origin of, Michelet's most important and original historical concepts, and it allows us to see these concepts in their greatest depth and complexity. In the main periods that, for him, marked out the course of France's history—the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Reformation, and the Revolution, with the long, dark interlude of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century wars of religion between the latter two—works of art were crucial to his understanding of their dominant ideas: the gothic, the Renaissance, civil war, nation, and the people.

One of the first to notice Michelet's interest in the visual arts was the young Roland Barthes. In 1942, while undergoing treatment for tuberculosis in a sanatorium in Saint-Hilaire du Touvet in the Alps, Barthes embarked on the Herculean task of reading Michelet's sixteen-volume *Histoire de France*. From this would emerge, in 1954, one of the first "modern" monographs on Michelet, Barthes's *Michelet par lui-même*. In this work, Barthes sought to identify "an organized network of obsessions" that structured Michelet's existence and gave coherence to it and his historical project generally: ingestion, minerality, blood, tears, obsessions linked to the body as a historical object, subject to time. This approach informed studies of Michelet for many years.<sup>12</sup> But Barthes also provided a substantial iconography: noting Michelet's practice of studying portraits of the historical figures about whom he was writing, and of seeing in them the traces of the figures' existence in history, Barthes did the same. He included as illustrations all the known images of Michelet himself and reproductions of some of the artworks prominent in his writings: "Taking my cue from the kind of impassioned gaze with which he interrogated all historical objects, I have chosen freely some pieces of what might be considered Michelet's 'imaginary museum.'"<sup>13</sup>

This seemingly incidental inclusion of images was the remnant of an important role that Barthes had attributed to art in an earlier discussion of Michelet but played down significantly in the book. In an article published three years before *Michelet par lui-même*, Barthes had characterized

Michelet's writing of history as consisting of two modes, which he termed "récit" and "tableau."<sup>14</sup> In "récit," his narrative mode, Michelet, according to Barthes, moves within history; he is part of it, without having any distance from it and without possessing it; he is a traveler whose moving body links each historical detail to the rest. In this Calvary-like trajectory, the historian seeks "stations," resting places, in which history can be grasped in its immobility, like a painting before an observer: this is the mode that Barthes calls "tableau," history viewed from a totalizing position in which the historian can understand its order, see objects distant in time in a relationship of simultaneity, and assign meaning to them. In this mode, the historian has a "visual function," conceiving time not as linear flow attached to his own movement, but as spatial field possessed by his gaze. In these "tableau" moments, Michelet occupies a god-like position, standing above, rather than within, history, its objects assembled together rather than spread out, available to be compared and contrasted in a system of meaning. For Barthes, this has the benefit of allowing Michelet to grasp the structures of history, to understand how history can in fact be *resistant* to the flow of time in which historical objects disappear into the void of the past; instead, in the visual, spatial mode of "tableau," history remains under the gaze of the historian. Like a painted portrait, history as "tableau" encloses, and also, in its fixity, reveals, the secret of its character, its motivations, its way of behaving. For Barthes, this is embodied in Michelet's verbal portraits of historical figures, in which certain physical qualities have particular ethical and hermeneutical resonances.<sup>15</sup> In "récit," history constantly escapes the historian as it is carried away into the past, or as he, in his trajectory through it, leaves it behind; in "tableau," history reveals itself as a whole, and what might have been lost or invisible is made present to view and remains so.<sup>16</sup> Barthes argues that Michelet's historical writing results from the tension between these two modes, between the "ascent" (*remontée*) and the resting place (*station*), between "récit" and "tableau."

In his article, Barthes likens these two movements to the growth of a plant—its vertical shoot and its horizontal spread—and with this vegetal comparison his analysis more or less abandons the painting metaphor to pursue the natural metaphors that will inform his book of 1954.<sup>17</sup> But his characterization of these two types of historiography deserves to be pursued. The "impassioned gaze" with which Michelet interrogated history had been formed and developed, I shall argue, in his experience of the visual

arts, and his conception of history as “tableau” must be considered in the light of the prominent attention that he gives to *real* works of visual art in his writing. In this book, I will examine the role that reflection on the visual arts plays in Michelet’s historical project and method. Indeed, his insights about art—personal, idiosyncratic, sometimes wildly imaginative and fantastically lyrical—are crucial to the formulation and elaboration of his most original and important historical concepts. However, while his treatment of art indeed provided a model for understanding the meaning of history, as Barthes suggested, it led him far from the position of divine omniscience and control, of history as pure creation, that Barthes imagined. The practice of history was less creation than, as Michelet himself famously stated, “resurrection,” placing constraints and responsibilities upon the historian in relation to the past. As we shall see, his treatment of the visual arts was crucial to that concept too. An examination of Michelet’s approach to art brings out the dynamic mutual relationship between the historian and the past, and thus the critical importance of the past to the present.

For Michelet, the visual arts had a special relation to history. Like other historical objects that he invoked (maps, relics, inscriptions), they were artifacts from the past that endured into the present, and, as such, they embodied the survival and memory that were for him part of history’s very essence: the study of the past “in itself” was always, for Michelet, a simultaneous interrogation of the present that it helped to constitute. But works of art went beyond the status of historical artifact. As representations, they contained and revealed a world now absent that the historian could enter, appreciate, attempt to understand, and bring to life, but—crucially—not control. As material objects that expressed *ideas*, they were especially apt bearers of historical meaning, revealing within a particular object the larger forces that constituted the past. And in all these ways, artworks had a life of their own by which they could directly engage—and instruct—the historian. Thus, in Michelet’s experience, the visual arts did not simply fill in an incomplete historical picture; rather, they brought out—and allowed him to understand—the meaning of historical events, objects, facts, and details, the essence of an era, the abstract concepts embodied in a concrete reality. Often these were aspects of a history that had remained up till then obscure: over and over in his *Journal*, in particular, the visual arts take over where historical understanding falters, providing a kind of epiphanic illumination, revealing to him a general idea that had previously eluded him.

In this way, art formed the ideas of the historian more than the reverse: the artwork did not *acquire* its meaning from his ideas; rather, its meaning emerged and became known through the historian's "dialogue" with it.<sup>18</sup> Michelet's analyses of art function allegorically, bringing out the complex forces that underlie a given period, movement, or event, the ideas and characteristics that explain those forces, and the qualities that seemingly transcended them in their time and anticipated what came later, or provided the evidence and ground for critique. Moreover, his engagement with art furnishes a model for the historian's relation to history itself, a relation in which history is imbricated in the present and the task of historiography is a *reciprocal* engagement of the historian and the past.

Specifically, the historical understanding reached through reflection on the visual arts emerges in, and through, writing: these moments, which Michelet experiences as moments of revelation, inspire some of the most memorably *poetic* passages in his work. Brazenly personal and deeply lyrical, rhapsodic in its emotional charge and its range of tones from joy to irony to despair, Michelet's writing has always elicited extreme responses. Stephen Bann has written of the "sheer performance" of Michelet's style, which makes illustration unnecessary: he is "his own illustrator and portraitist."<sup>19</sup> As Maurice Samuels has shown, Michelet's practice was criticized at the time for an unseemly egotism, spectacularization, and popularization unsuited to the gravity and objectivity of the new science of historiography.<sup>20</sup> Terms such as "lachrymose," "hysterical," "sentimental," and "exalted" have been used, in his time and ours, to describe his prose. Many of his contemporaries found it at best distracting, at worst disturbing, even sadistic in the pleasure with which it "painted" the violent or disreputable moments, forces, characters, and motivations that it described: reviewing the *Guerres de religion* volume in 1856, Athanase Coquerel *fils* criticized "that excessive color and movement, even in subjects that are terrifying or shocking, which make these violent pages resemble a little too much certain paintings by M. Delacroix."<sup>21</sup>

Such pictorial metaphors were commonly applied to Michelet's writing.<sup>22</sup> The *chansonnier* Béranger called him "the Rembrandt of history."<sup>23</sup> In 1857, Émile Montégut reviewed the different styles in which Michelet "portrayed" the actors of his history: "He employs, as he wishes, the dry, meticulous line of Albrecht Dürer or the expert pencil of an Italian master, and goes from a portrait study in the manner of Van Dyck to a light, rapid

sketch like Callot's," his portrait of the emperor Maximilian being "meticulous and detailed in the manner of the German masters of the Renaissance," and his depictions of François de Guise and his brother Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, "painted with the brush of a Flemish master of the Antwerp school."<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere he called Michelet an "artist-historian" and praised his "painterly talent."<sup>25</sup> But Montégut went beyond the common attribution of painterly qualities to Michelet's writing. He was one of the few to address directly Michelet's *treatment* of the visual arts, and to understand that this grasped and expressed a meaning that had historical, and not just aesthetic, significance: "An artist himself, M. Michelet is wonderfully sensitive to works of art and often succeeds in making us grasp the most delicate aspects of their beauty. A book, a painting, a statue described by his pen are presented to us with their own individual look, and reveal to us the secret dreams that gave birth to them. He makes us grasp the feeling that inspired the artist, the inner vision that guided his hand. [. . .] This artist's, this painter's talent, these perpetual glimpses into art and literature make up, in large part, M. Michelet's originality."<sup>26</sup> For Montégut, Michelet's analyses of art, and the kind of writing in which they take form, bring out the hidden forces, the unrecognized desires, appetites, aspirations, and ideals, that motivate human beings and the historical processes and events in which they are engaged—what Montégut calls "la chimère des époques":

No one is more adept at grasping the character of the times, the spirit, the look, the face of each successive generation, the imaginary of different eras, that secret mainspring, hidden deep in our souls and which, unbeknownst to us, makes us tick. Desires, vague torments of the imagination, gazes turned toward an obscure, ill-defined ideal, sensual appetites for beautiful earthly things, hopes and regrets, all these vain shadows pursued with such relentless activity through battles, massacres, popular festivals, M. Michelet is able to grasp them and fix them on his historical canvas in their most fleeting nuances. That is not just an artist's talent; it is also that of a philosopher.<sup>27</sup>

In turn, Michelet's analyses, and the pictorial writing in which they take shape, make the reader understand clearly what may have only been felt—by the individual or collective—confusedly. Although Montégut maintains

that such deep, abundant, and fleeting insights “say more about the meaning of events than many a scholarly history,” his sympathetic review presents this as a “feminine” talent as opposed to a “male reason,” lacking “the severe, calm respect for ideas and facts that every thinker must carry within.”<sup>28</sup> Instead, Michelet is passion, emotion, imagination, sensuality, nerves. Such criticisms imply that Michelet’s writing reflected an outdated Romanticism, however revelatory, at odds with the modern science of history, which his generation had paradoxically been the first to espouse.<sup>29</sup>

French historiography underwent profound changes during the Restoration and the early July Monarchy. The practice of history became an investigation into the foundations of the new, post-Revolutionary society, an explanation, and perhaps justification, of the present.<sup>30</sup> As Ceri Crossley notes, historiography reflected the need to establish a solid basis for post-Revolutionary society that, more often than not, seemed unstable and uncertain, riven by deep ideological divisions and competing political claims.<sup>31</sup> The Romantic liberal school of French historians that included Augustin Thierry, François Guizot, Prosper de Barante and, especially, the post-1830 generation composed of Michelet, François Mignet, and Edgar Quinet, sought to place historiography on a more solid footing by emphasizing archival sources rather than legends, critique rather than storytelling, the separation of the past from the present, and the laws that govern historical development. As François Hartog has argued, this was accompanied by a shift in the concept of historical vision, the ways in which the historian “structured the visible,” that is, observed and represented the past: liberal historians such as Thierry saw themselves not as detached observers outside history, but rather as occupying a special vantage point within it, in which the past leads to the present.<sup>32</sup>

But as Marcel Gauchet indicates, the “poetics of exposition,” the question of a “romanesque” historical discourse that could give *substance* to the past, was in fact central to the formation of history as a “scientific” and scholarly discipline in this period, raising the question of what historical data have meaning and how they convey that meaning.<sup>33</sup> Thierry, for example, criticized the philosophical school of historians—Hume, Robertson—for separating the “color” and “physiognomy” of historical data from those data themselves; for putting their discussion of the arts, customs and *mores*, clothing, and the like, in appendices rather than in the body of the text, as though they were mere digressions; for separating narration from commentary, and

“art” from “science.”<sup>34</sup> Instead, “peindre” (to depict, or paint) was inseparable from “raconter” (to recount, tell, discuss), and “narration” from “commentary.”<sup>35</sup> Gauchet goes so far as to assert that the scholarly discipline of history emerged *from* such an evocative writing rather than the reverse: this new form of writing history, integrating narrative and commentary, accompanied the birth of history as a discipline.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, the new history, told “from below,” as a complex play of forces rather than something directed and overseen by rulers and legislators, brought history onto the terrain of narrative. On the other hand, the emphasis on the particular, the individual, and the local made the expression of a general significance, an overall pattern, or an underlying idea all the more important. This double imperative required a new type of historical discourse, of which, as Gauchet argues, the historical novel constituted one example and an “artistic” historiography another.<sup>37</sup> By making abstract historical forces present, the artistic reconstitution of the past as a real, living entity brought together both the details of history and the laws by which it evolved. Reconstructing history in this way allowed readers to understand the collective, abstract forces that constituted it.<sup>38</sup>

In his historical writing Michelet took this a step further, not only bringing the abstract, collective forces of history to life, but also bringing out history’s meaning as he did so, its place within a system that related to the present. It was a bold and risky move. Thierry accused Michelet of “seeing in every fact the sign of an idea,” of straying from analysis and observation to bold assertions of meaning (“hardiesses synthétiques”), thus elaborating notably a philosophy of history as a long, ongoing struggle of ideas, a “perpétuelle psychomachie.”<sup>39</sup> But the integration of narrative and commentary, of description and allegorization, was central to a new concept of history in which the past is not a passive “other” to be formed by the historian, but rather an interlocutor in a necessary and reciprocal dialogue with him in the present. Michelet’s poetic style—animating the past, mingling with it, making it speak, abolishing the temporal distance between it and himself, inserting his own voice and position—reflected this approach. Liberal historians, in contrast, had advocated withdrawing from the narrative, adopting an authorial third-person omniscience, letting the facts “speak for themselves.”<sup>40</sup> Barante’s methodological preface to his *Histoire des ducs de Bourgogne* (1824) emphasizes the historian’s duty to abstain from judgment and commentary, instead ensuring that the narration of facts itself, presented

clearly, vividly, and coherently, with the “color” and “imprint” of the time, will suggest to the reader what the writer did not want to say overtly.<sup>41</sup> In his 1869 preface to the *Histoire de France*, Michelet criticized Barante for such “self-effacement.”<sup>42</sup> Nothing could be further from his own highly personal involvement in the text.

In *Les Noms de l'histoire*, Jacques Rancière emphasized this aspect of Michelet's work. Rancière argued that Michelet's style was crucial to a new concept of history, one in which the distinction between the narrative and the historian's explanatory discourse, between telling and meaning, is abolished. Far from undermining the veracity of the work, this style, Rancière argues, defines the conditions of possibility for the “scientific” approach.<sup>43</sup> For Rancière, Michelet's “revolution in the poetic structures of knowledge” makes the meaning of the past, and of the narrative of that past, *perceptible, visible*, imposing on mere appearance the “power of the event” itself, removing from the narration such relativizing distinctions as tense, mode, and person, eschewing the deceptions of mimesis to make the speaker's own position clear, affirming the immanence of meaning (that meaning and event are one), and ultimately “making history possible as a discourse of the truth.”<sup>44</sup> Significantly, for Rancière, this is a “Romantic-republican” paradigm, which makes the past and its meaning present in both material and temporal terms, in contrast to a distancing, distinguishing “royal-empirical” paradigm; and it is the basis for a democratic historiography.<sup>45</sup>

Michelet most developed—and deployed—this intensely lyrical style in writing about *art*, revealing a historical truth in the telling, a truth that he could not formulate—indeed often could not discern—by any other means. Writing about art was not just an ekphrastic exercise, but rather crucial to historical discovery and understanding. The point was not simply to describe the artwork, or even to make it palpable. The experience of art was a real, unmediated experience of the past and its meaning, and the task of writing was to express both that experience and that meaning in a single formulation. In examining Michelet's response to, and use of, these artworks, I will thus focus on the nature of his art-writing, notably the ways in which his highly *personal* response to the artwork and the *general* significance that he draws from it are translated through the prose itself. He thus enacts, through language, a “ressuscitation” of the artwork like that which he also performed on the past, bringing both to life in the present. Michelet's concept of historiography was in this sense “pictorial,” giving substance, through language,

to the past, depicting rather than merely verbalizing it,<sup>46</sup> rendering it as history that lives on in, and is engaged by, the present. In writing about art, Michelet reconciled the two competing requirements of the Romantic historian: to reconstitute the past in its individuality, specificity, and difference from the present, while also bringing out its meaning *for* the present.<sup>47</sup> Art-writing became itself a writing, and a philosophy, of history.

While sporadic examples of Michelet's comments on art have long attracted interest—his highly influential remarks on the gothic, his brilliant analysis of Dürer's *Melencolia*, his trenchant discussion of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*—no study of his art-writing and its role in his historical project has ever been carried out. Lucien Febvre, in 1943, claimed that Michelet was one of the primary art writers of the nineteenth century and compared him to Baudelaire. In his *Michelet par lui-même*, Barthes noted that Michelet wrote about historical figures only after consulting portraits of them. Francis Haskell, in a chapter of *History and Its Images* (1993), gave the subject its fullest treatment, affirming the importance of the arts to Michelet's thought and work, especially the way in which the process of allegorizing what he saw, drawing from it its historical and cultural significance, took place almost at the same time as the act of seeing itself. Thomas Gaetgens showed the importance of German art for Michelet's thought and work. Chakè Matossian reflected on the pictorial imaginary behind Michelet's writing.<sup>48</sup> These studies provide tantalizing glimpses into an aesthetic and visual sensibility of exceptional boldness and originality.

In this book, I examine, through key examples, the role that reflection on the visual arts plays in the formulation and elaboration of Michelet's most original and important historical concepts. In so doing, I study what his insights on art—eccentric, idiosyncratic, and intensely personal as they are—can contribute to our understanding of those concepts, and of the relationship between art and history in nineteenth-century France. In chapter 1, I discuss the special status of art in Michelet's historical imagination, the function of art-writing in his historical practice, and the specific rhetorical features that make that writing an effective vehicle for historical understanding. I then concentrate on the major periods by which Michelet marked out history and the concepts associated with them—the gothic, the Renaissance, civil war, nation and the people—by examining his analyses of those artists and works that he took to embody them: the cathedrals of Reims and Strasbourg for the gothic (chapter 2); the paintings of Van Eyck, Rubens,

and Dürer for the Renaissance (chapter 3); the Fontainebleau school and the sculptures of Jean Goujon and Germain Pilon for the Wars of Religion (chapter 4); Géricault for the nation and the people (chapter 5). The conclusion considers Michelet's favorite example of the artist-historian, Rembrandt.

As I will demonstrate, Michelet's understanding of the course of history was rooted in works of art, and his most fundamental historical concepts lie in the artworks that he associates with them; these do not merely illustrate his idea but define, broaden, and deepen it, bringing out its complexities and contradictions, and frequently leading him to modify it significantly. In so doing, he works out a writing that also translated a concept of history and its role in the modern world: an approach to the past as a living, independent entity with which the historian, like the citizen, engages in the present. And his use of art points well beyond the nineteenth century to the practices of later historians and theorists, from Barthes to Foucault, Certeau, and Ankersmit, for whom the work of art has a special relationship to history.

"There must be a prodigious quantity of ideas in these works for which so many men of genius have worn out their lives":<sup>49</sup> as this remark that he made before the masterpieces in the Louvre suggests, Michelet grasped early on that works of visual art were not just examples of material beauty, but that they expressed ideas. He never explicitly theorized his use of the visual arts, but his interest in them spans his entire life, and his writing about them plays a role in all his major historical works. While, in the early 1820s, perhaps under the influence of Vico, he speaks little of artworks in favor of literature, the balance soon swings the other way: by the late 1820s, when he begins to travel, especially, the visual arts come to occupy a prominent place in his thought, his teaching, and his writing. The volumes of the *Histoire de France*, published from 1833 to 1869, all contain substantial treatments of artworks, which far surpass anything that this admittedly voracious reader ever did with texts; the same can be said of his lectures at the École normale and the Collège de France.

There are two related qualifications to make to this long-standing engagement with the visual arts. First, it is most intense and concentrated in the 1830s and 1840s, when Michelet was laying the foundations of his historical oeuvre; with few exceptions, his later works draw largely on the analyses from this period, which can be seen in his journal and lectures.<sup>50</sup>

Second, his use of the visual arts subsides as a focus on nature emerges: thus in his works of natural history from the 1850s and 1860s—*L’Oiseau*, *L’Insecte*, *La Mer*, and *La Montagne*—the visual arts play almost no role, and in the *Journal* entries corresponding to those years there is far less sustained discussion of them than previously. He continued to view art, to visit museums and exhibitions, to treat the visual arts as historical evidence, to meet with artists, but reflection on art retreated in favor of the study of natural phenomena. While he maintained the connection, which he had forged in the 1840s, between history and nature, and thus between his historical works and those of natural history, the two grew increasingly at odds in affective terms. About a particularly idyllic stay in Fontainebleau he wrote: “I was completely absorbed in nature [. . .]. It’s almost impossible for me to work on history there.”<sup>51</sup> Thus nature is consistently described as a “rest” from the “rude labor of history,” providing “relief” from “the terrible sixteenth century” and embodying a purifying force after the “long dusty road, burnt, bloody, and sublime [. . .],” of history.<sup>52</sup> As Göran Blix has shown, nature became increasingly the vital, emancipatory force that could alone unblock and transform a stalled, even ossified history.<sup>53</sup> And art, so connected to history in Michelet’s thought, began to take on a dangerous ambiguity: it had the power to “raise him up,” but, in its materiality, it could also “hold him back,” and prevent him from seeing “spirit” or “God.” Thus he compares it to a cloud that allows us to take pleasure in seeing the sun but prevents us from looking straight at it, and adds: “The need to render spirit material and incarnate is our misfortune in life.”<sup>54</sup>

This move may have had something to do with what is usually considered the major turning point in Michelet’s life, the fifty-year-old widower’s marriage in 1849 to Athénaïs Mialaret, twenty-four years his junior. This initiated an increasingly intense fascination with nature, including the materiality of the human body and its functions, which would last until his death in 1874. The *Journal* records this extreme affective and intellectual attention of which Athénaïs Michelet was the object. What may be relevant for our purposes here, Athénaïs Michelet is consistently figured, even in the recording of her bodily conditions and functions, as almost immaterial: diminutives—especially “little” and “dear”—are commonly applied to her and to whatever concerns her; she is constantly described as “pure,” “virginal,” a “jewel,” “dignified,” “sensible,” “holy,” as opposed to Michelet’s own “materialist” and “sensual” nature; she is “spirit.”<sup>55</sup> One wonders whether the “dignified” wife

provided relief from “that mistress, History” and from “art and its temptations which delight and enervate” (*Jour.*, 2:127, 5 September 1850).

Not that, in these works on nature, art is abandoned entirely. Michelet consulted prints extensively: for example, Alexander Wilson’s *American Ornithology* (1808–14), John James Audubon’s *The Birds of America* (1827–38), and John Gould’s *The Birds of Australia* (1840–48) for *L’Oiseau*, or Henry Smeathman’s work on termites (1781) and Maria Sibylla Merian’s *Metamorphosis insectorum surinamensium* (1705) for *L’Insecte*.<sup>56</sup> A writing both ekphrastic and synesthetic animates his rich descriptions: “At every step, old tree-trunks cut off, not uprooted, seemed to be dressed in an incomparable green velvet, a fabric beautifully padded with delicate mosses soft to the touch, which delighted the eye by their changing appearance, their reflections, their gleaming lights”;<sup>57</sup> the bees, “almost luminous, under their lustrous wings glazed with gold”<sup>58</sup>; in the village of Grindelwald, the framed opening of his hotel window “inundated with light” appears “more than full, overflowing with something enormous, brilliant, in motion,” a “chaos of light,” which is the glacier seen from afar, whereas from up close it is “a great dirty white way [. . .] with deep grooves and very furrowed ruts, [. . .] between which rather muted crystals rose up like sugarloaves, [. . .] whitish, some tinged with pale blue or a certain bottle-green, equivocal and sinister”;<sup>59</sup> the sea creatures—“bronze-colored crabs, radiating sea anemones, snow-white porcelain-shells, golden lampreys, curling volutes, [. . .]. It teems with luminous microfauna which, at times drawn to the surface, appear as trails or serpents of fire, as glittering festoons.”<sup>60</sup> He discusses nature with reference to, and using the language of, art, creating a painting of his own. Thus, in *L’Oiseau*, a warbler singing in its cage becomes a figure in an Orientalist painting, “the captive of a very severe master,” with a “more than feminine *morbidezza*,” a gracefulness of shape and movement, dressed in simple gray that nevertheless has “the shiny reflections of silk”—a scene that he contrasts with Ingres’s odalisques and Turkish baths, and Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers*, the spirited liveliness of the bird distinguished from the resignation, indifference, and ennui of their figures.<sup>61</sup> Pictorial methods also provide a model for natural ones: “Rembrandt derived the soft, warm effects of his paintings from the science of chiaroscuro. The nightingale begins to sing when the evening mist mingles with the last rays of sunlight; and that is why we are moved by its song. Our soul, at that uncertain twilight hour, takes possession of its inner light once more.”<sup>62</sup>

In these works of natural history, the visual arts provide a method, a metaphor, a point of reference or comparison: an entire chapter of *L'Insecte* is devoted to “The Renewal of Our Arts Through the Study of Insects,” in which the eye of a horsefly seen through a magnifying glass “offers the strange phantasmagoria of a mosaic of precious gems, such as all the art of Froment-Meurice could hardly have created”; the shell of a beetle is like a stained-glass window; an insect’s wing has the transparency of the windows on Bourges Cathedral.<sup>63</sup> Spiders that eat one another are like the shipwrecked on the *Raft of the Medusa*;<sup>64</sup> the “electrified waters” of Ruisdael’s *The Breakwater* translate the fecund life of the sea.<sup>65</sup> But artworks are never the object of analysis, nor are they a privileged bearer of meaning as they are in Michelet’s historical works. It is symptomatic that Fontainebleau, which he had always considered a perfect union of nature and art (see below, chapter 4), becomes, in *L'Insecte*, a place of pure nature: “The power of this place is not in its history, nor in the art it contains. [. . .] Its true genius is nature.”<sup>66</sup>

In what follows, I will thus concentrate on the historical works initiated in the 1830s and 1840s, but spanning Michelet’s whole career. I will move between the *Journal*, lectures, and published works, bringing out the differences when these are pertinent, but I do not regard the *Journal* entries as mere preparatory texts for the public lectures and the finished works. On the contrary, the *Journal* records Michelet’s experience of the artwork and the elaboration, through writing, of its meaning—stages essential to his own process of historical discovery; it also shows the sometimes crucial shifts that an artwork inspires in his thinking, particularly with repeated viewings, as he returns over and over to observe it anew.

Artworks were perhaps a buttress against what Lionel Gossmann called the “nightmare” that haunts Michelet’s work: the idea that there is no order to history, that the past is opaque and unintelligible, resistant to the language we use to embrace it, that nature is pure materiality, an endless cycle of birth and death, and that history is meaningless.<sup>67</sup> The most urgent task of the historian, in Michelet’s view, was to determine the order of history, the “link” between the ages that gave birth to the future and that was often obscured in the present by an “*idée fixe*,” an ideological preoccupation—Christianity, Puritanism—that kept it from being understood:

I must produce and preserve, in the present state the world is in of having forgotten its past, the connection between the ages that

is so necessary, the vital chain that, from a past seemingly dead, carries the life force toward the future. The partisans of that *idée fixe*, those who believed in the Christian legend, did not realize that there were in Virgil things that went beyond Christianity and were understood only by Dante. The partisans of that *idée fixe*, the English of Milton's time, did not realize that there was in Shakespeare a prophetic gleam that went beyond Puritanism, and which was understood only by us, the men of the Revolution.

[. . .] May I be that connection between the ages! In the reign of the *idée fixe* that will soon take over the world, may I be there to protest in the name of history and nature.<sup>68</sup>

As Gossmann states, Michelet wavered all his life between confidence in nature and history, on the one hand, and this nightmare, on the other, the fear that it was all an illusion, unintelligible, arbitrary, pure materiality. In this sense, works of visual art could be reassuring: material bearers of meaning, physical expressions of historical forces, processes, and patterns, real explanations of uncertain or enigmatic phenomena; they bore witness to a philosophy of history, to the order and meaning in it, to the future that could emerge from the past, and to the sense expressed by matter, all contained within the frame of a picture or in a unified object. Indeed, his analyses of artworks often bring out this “temporal link,” the future ideas that were unstated and even unknown at the time. By the same token, however, Michelet's chosen images so often, in his account of them, *acknowledged* the nightmare of randomness, death, matter, and meaninglessness: such was the case, as we shall see, with Dürer's angel, Michelangelo's prophets and sibyls, Pilon's Valentine Balbiani, pictures by the aging Rubens, Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, all confronting the historian with doubt, inadequacy, and the possibility of failure. Expressing this “nightmare” in language, converting it into discourse, may have eased the trauma by channeling it into constructive creation or containing it within the lines of the prose, but it did not do away with it altogether. Art was a “ladder” to higher things, to God, to the ideal, “raising” him up and “sustaining” him, but it also could “hold him back” and “hold him down” (*Jour.*, 2:127, 5 September 1850). Worse, it could lull, distract, and potentially paralyze, preventing moral or political action. Michelet's art-writing testifies to this deep doubt that artworks often brought out, perhaps the better to conjure it.

The “revolution in the poetic structures of knowledge” that Rancière believed Michelet created, making the narrative of the event also the narrative of its meaning, took place within the space of this art-writing. As we shall see in more detail, the writing of art was for Michelet an act of discovery in which historical meaning was revealed and made available to the present. His highly lyrical prose, translating his *personal* response to the artwork and drawing *general* significance from it, defines a new historiography capable of expressing the unknown thoughts, the silent voices, the hidden forces, what Michelet considered the “truth,” of the past—the whisperings of all those pale faces, all those slumbering figures in the Musée des monuments français which had, melodramatically, to be sure, but nevertheless fruitfully, called out to him so often in his youth.