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BACK FROM THE GRAVE: MARC FUMAROLI'S CHATEAUBRIAND

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For Martin Malia (1924–2004)

Marc Fumaroli, *Chateaubriand: Poésie et terreur* (Paris: Fallois, 2003)

Has the time come to revive François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), author of *Atala* and *René*, the novels that defined romanticism in France and, above all, of the immense *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* ("Memoirs from beyond the grave"), perhaps the most ambitious of all French autobiographical projects? What does an eighteenth-century provincial nobleman's son, author of fanciful tales of encounters with North American "noble savages," apologist for medieval Christianity, and unsuccessful proponent of a Bourbon restoration after 1815, have to say to twenty-first-century readers? The first important study of Chateaubriand's career, the nineteenth-century literary critic Sainte-Beuve's *Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire sous l'Empire*, written in 1849, firmly assigned the great romantic author to an earlier phase of French letters. Commenting on the just-published posthumous *Mémoires*, Sainte-Beuve admitted that the work revealed Chateaubriand's "immense talent as a writer," but damned the work by saying that "he reveals himself in all his egotistical nakedness."[1] The distinguished French literary scholar Marc Fumaroli has now set out to reverse these verdicts on the man and the *Mémoires*.

In a contemporary world that has lost its historical bearings, Fumaroli argues, Chateaubriand could not be more relevant. "The posthumous Chateaubriand of the *Memoirs* was set to become the patron of an anti-modernity still to develop and to remain even today the underlying matrix of every French literary renaissance," Fumaroli writes (41). Through his critique of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Chateaubriand sought to make readers aware of the loss entailed in the break with earlier history and with the Christian tradition. At the same time, however, his acute sense of temporality and his deep devotion to liberty

1 C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, *Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire sous l'Empire*, ed. Maurice Allem, 2 vols. (Paris: Garnier frères, 1948), 2:358.

kept him from becoming merely a nostalgic prophet of the past. "A swimmer between two shores," as he described himself, Chateaubriand was one of the first to comprehend the condition of modern humanity, cut off from its roots by revolutionary ruptures and forced to strive toward an unknown and constantly receding goal.

That Marc Fumaroli, who shares with his subject the distinction of membership in the Académie française, should appoint himself Chateaubriand's defender is something of a surprise. Fumaroli is known above all as one of the great interpreters of the French classical tradition, whereas Chateaubriand has been recognized since his own day as the epitome of French romanticism. By abandoning poetry, with its rules and constraints, for the freedom of prose, and by turning his prose into a vehicle for the uninhibited expression of personal emotion, Chateaubriand rebelled against the hierarchy of literary values whose emergence Fumaroli examined in his classic *L'âge de l'éloquence*. Even in that work, however, Fumaroli saw a thread connecting classicism and romanticism. Chateaubriand's generation, he argued, did not simply replace the musty rhetoric of classicism with a new "literature"; instead, the romantics sketched out "a new rhetoric, adjusted to the institutional and social upheavals that had substituted the Republic for the old regime monarchy in France."[2] In *Chateaubriand: Poésie et terreur*, Fumaroli gives this argument a reverse twist: Chateaubriand, he contends, was a classicist at heart, for whom "the fixed forms and classical language . . . were always the French norm; his 'new prose' was nothing but an enormous deviation in proportion to emergency conditions (*un état d'exception*)" (159). The extraordinary circumstances of the revolutionary era could only be represented in a language of disorder and excess.

Fumaroli is not alone in paying renewed attention to Chateaubriand. Although the text of *Chateaubriand: poésie et terreur* makes virtually no reference to other Chateaubriand scholarship, earlier versions of two of its chapters appeared in two important recent volumes of essays on the subject, both co-edited by Jean-Claude Berchet and Philippe Berthier.[3] In his essay on the concept of *régimes d'historicité*, published in 2003, the French historian François Hartog has argued for seeing Chateaubriand as a pivotal figure in the evolution of Western perceptions of temporal experience, situated on the frontier "between two orders of time and

2 Marc Fumaroli, *L'Âge de l'éloquence: Rhétorique et 'res literaria' de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994 [1980]), 4.

3 *Chateaubriand: Le tremblement du temps*, dir. Jean-Claude Berchet and Philippe Berthier (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1994); *Chateaubriand Mémorialiste: Colloque du cent cinquintenaire (1848–1998)*, ed. Jean-Claude Berchet and Philippe Berthier (Geneva: Droz, 2000). For a recent account of Chateaubriand's life, see Jean-Paul Clément, *Chateaubriand: Biographie morale et intellectuelle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).

pulled by two different ways of conceptualizing historicity: the old and the new, the modern regime."[4] In the important essay on "Memoirs of Men of State" that he contributed to the collective project he directed, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora saw Chateaubriand as the culminating figure in the tradition that elevated political memoirs to the status of genuine literature. Chateaubriand and his predecessors, the Cardinal de Retz and the duc de Saint-Simon, were "superior failures in politics, animated by an ego comparable to that of the greatest and most ardent statesmen of their time . . . all equally obsessed by power but saved from failure . . . by the glorification of their memoirs as literary masterpieces."[5]

Recent English-language scholarship on Chateaubriand has been more limited, and certainly not comparable to the current interest in his contemporaries Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant. Intellectual historian Harry Liebersohn has been one of the rare American scholars to pay Chateaubriand much attention, crediting him with "a revolutionary rethinking of the relationship between Indians and Europeans" and drawing attention to his link to Tocqueville, a theme also explored in Fumaroli's book.[6] De Staël has benefited from contemporary interest in the origins of feminism and in women's contributions to history and literature, and Constant is now seen as a central figure in the history of French liberal thought, connecting the Enlightenment era and Tocqueville. Fumaroli shows that Chateaubriand and de Staël were more closely linked than one might expect—he found most of his mistresses among her circle of friends, and his late-life love affair with Juliette Récamier was consecrated by a joint pilgrimage to de Staël's tomb—but he was hardly a feminist, and, in politics, his name remains associated with the Catholic conservatism of the Bourbon restoration, a tradition that has had few Anglo-Saxon admirers. Fumaroli's attempt to put Chateaubriand, rather than de Staël and Constant, at the center of the revolutionary era's intellectual world, and to establish him, rather than Constant, as Tocqueville's most important interlocutor from the previous generation, challenges the conventional wisdom of contemporary English-language scholarship.

To make his case for Chateaubriand and for the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, the monumental account of his life that occupied the author on and off for more than four decades, Fumaroli has written a book in the mode of Chateaubriand's own *oeuvre*. At 760 pages of dense text, *Chateaubriand: Poésie et terreur* exceeds the

4 François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 21.

5 Pierre Nora, "Memoirs of Men of State from Commynes to de Gaulle," in *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, dir. Pierre Nora, trans. Mary Trouille (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 423.

6 Harry Liebersohn, *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travellers and North American Indians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47.

dimensions of any normal critical essay; the publisher's jacket copy suggests that it be considered not as a single book but as a "portable library," whose chapters might be read "separately and at leisure." Like the narrator of the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, Fumaroli accords himself the liberty of moving forward and backward in time, and of returning to many themes at several points in the book, so that the first discussion of Chateaubriand's childhood, for example, follows essays on the political and literary influences that shaped his work, whereas Fumaroli's final discussion of Chateaubriand's youthful memories occurs on pages 713–14. Although *Chateaubriand: Poésie et terreur* is more accessible than much literary criticism, since it eschews arcane theoretical debates and erudite argument with other scholars, it does presuppose considerable acquaintance with its subject's life and work. Fumaroli briefly refers to the consequences of Chateaubriand's unhappy marriage to Céleste Buisson de la Vigne on several occasions, for example, but anyone curious to know how the famous champion of both romantic love and Catholic morality got himself into a commitment that prevented him from following the dictates of either will have to turn elsewhere.

Readers willing to follow Fumaroli's meandering *essai-fleuve* to the end will nevertheless find much to reward them. Particularly in the English-speaking world, where Chateaubriand's florid prose, his theatrical personality, and his Catholic religiosity have all worked against him, his importance has normally been summed up in a few stereotypical phrases: inventor of French romanticism, political reactionary, apologist for Catholicism, author of a self-glorifying memoir in which he put himself on the same plane as Napoleon, and namesake of the double-thick steak—supposedly invented by his chef during his ambassadorship in England in the 1820s—that is often the most expensive entrée on French restaurant menus. Fumaroli shows that Chateaubriand was a far more complex figure than these clichés would suggest. Like his contemporary Goethe, whom he offhandedly dismissed in his *Mémoires*, Chateaubriand was a sensitive witness to the disruptions of the revolutionary era, and a writer torn between classical tradition and romantic experimentation. The *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, in Fumaroli's reading, is one of the founding texts of the modern literature of memory, fit to be put in the same category as Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, whose author it influenced. And Chateaubriand, uncle by marriage of Alexis de Tocqueville, deserves to be considered, alongside Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant, as one of the key figures in the tradition of French liberalism and one of the inspirations for his nephew's work.

As the mention of terror in its title suggests, Fumaroli's interpretation of Chateaubriand begins with the postulate that the French Revolution was a catastrophe from which neither the young author nor the world ever fully recovered. "One doesn't understand anything about his work, about his actions, about his Christian faith, about his melancholy, if one forgets that he had survived

a holocaust," Fumaroli writes (144). Like many French aristocrats, the young Chateaubriand had not immediately rejected the movement of 1789, but the increasing radicalization of revolutionary politics drove him to join the counter-revolutionary émigré army in 1792, and its defeat forced him to take refuge in England until Napoleon came to power. Several of his close relatives, including his older brother, were guillotined. The publication of his *Essai sur les révolutions* in London in 1797 put him in the company of the other major anti-revolutionary thinkers of the emigration, Bonald, de Maistre, and the abbé Barruel. But, as Fumaroli demonstrates, Chateaubriand differed from these contemporaries because he could not make himself into a systematic counterrevolutionary. He valued liberty too highly, he had absorbed too much of the individualism of Rousseau, and he was too acutely conscious of the impossibility of reversing the flow of time to embark on a crusade for the restoration of the old regime. His entire career, culminating with the writing of the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, would be devoted to trying to reconcile tradition and liberty.

Unlike Bonald, de Maistre, and Barruel, or, for that matter, his liberal contemporary Benjamin Constant, Chateaubriand was never a theorist. From the *Essai* onward, he would appeal not to abstract reasoning but to "the unmediated contents of his consciousness, the existential categories that he had elaborated out of his own experience and to which he made himself, in person, the irrecusable witness . . . ," as the basis for his positions (31). Hence he would find the memoir genre the most suitable vehicle for expressing what history had taught him. By being true to his memories, he distinguished himself from the opportunists around him, particularly his *bête noire*, Talleyrand, whose multiple betrayals during the revolutionary period had made it impossible for them to give an honest account of themselves (74). But the apprenticeship that made Chateaubriand capable of producing the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* was a long and difficult one. Retracing its stages is the goal of Fumaroli's essay.

Chateaubriand's apprenticeship began with Rousseau. Born in 1768, the young Breton nobleman was part of the generation whose adolescence was indelibly marked by the encounter with the "prophet of democracy" and his "romantic sense of passion" (97). Critics of the French Revolution usually have little good to say about Rousseau, but the way in which Fumaroli handles Chateaubriand's relationship to his great predecessor demonstrates one of the virtues of *Chateaubriand: poésie et terreur*, namely, its author's tolerance of complexity. Fumaroli recognizes that Rousseau himself was more than the proto-totalitarian theorist of the general will to which conservatives often reduce him. Chateaubriand responded to Rousseau's genuine passion for liberty, and to his critique of modernity. Above all, he responded to the example of Rousseau's *Confessions*, that milestone in the history of French first-person narrative. When he came to write his own memoirs, however, Chateaubriand departed from

the Rousseauist model. His own work became "anti-*Confessions*, testifying that the former 'disciple of Rousseau' had gone beyond the horizon of the eighteenth-century autobiographer with whom he had identified in his youth." Chateaubriand's memoirs had a historical dimension lacking in Rousseau; they "showed the capacity of embracing the destiny of an entire generation, of an entire nation and of an entire century" (103). However critical the older Chateaubriand became of his earliest mentor, however, he remained indebted to Rousseau's example of the power of memory, "the flying carpet invented by the autobiographer of the *Confessions*" (122), and he never indulged in the facile identification of Rousseau with Robespierre that characterized most post-revolutionary writing.

Much more went into the writing of Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* than just a creative reappropriation of Rousseau, and much of the interest of Fumaroli's work comes from the skillful way in which he teases out the many threads that had to be woven together to produce that masterpiece. Fumaroli devotes a chapter to Chateaubriand's unlikely friendship with Louis de Fontanes, a poet in the classical tradition and a conservative supporter of Napoleon, who taught Chateaubriand to temper the excesses of his romantic style but at the same time was open-minded enough to recognize the younger man's genius and to help launch his literary career. Later chapters discuss Chateaubriand's relationships with the Christian theosophist Pierre-Simon Ballanche, whose works helped him recognize that even the disasters of the revolutionary era could be seen as part of a divine plan for humanity, and with Ballanche's friend Juliette Récamier, the celebrated beauty immortalized by Jacques-Louis David, who became the companion of Chateaubriand's later years and who made him see that his destiny was to complete the great project of the *Mémoires* rather than to fritter away his talent in futile political engagements.

In addition to tracing these personal relationships, Fumaroli elucidates the literary influences on Chateaubriand. There was the cross-Channel duel with Byron, whom Chateaubriand recognized as his one serious competitor in the endeavor to portray the "mal du siècle" that obsessed the romantics. Chateaubriand regarded Byron as an ungrateful disciple who failed to acknowledge how much he owed to his French predecessor, but the posthumous publication of Byron's personal papers in French in 1830 was one of the spurs to Chateaubriand's own autobiographical project. In the persona developed by the English poet in his *Childe Harold* Chateaubriand found a model for the "I" of his *Mémoires*, "at once a lyrical 'I,' an active historical figure and a Christian Homer retracing the epic of his century" (258). Byron and Chateaubriand were both deeply indebted not only to Rousseau but to Milton; Chateaubriand labored for decades on a translation of *Paradise Lost*. The difference between them was, Fumaroli argues, that Byron identified with Milton's Satan, the rebel against

authority, whereas Chateaubriand came to see himself in the Adam of Milton's poem, the symbol of humanity. "Subject to time, cut down by death, humanity is capable of humility, of repentance, of prayer, of conversion, of ascension, of religion," Fumaroli writes (269), values that Chateaubriand came to embrace in place of the heroic but ultimately sterile defiance embodied by Satan.

The story of the making of the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* also requires Fumaroli to retrace the major phases of Chateaubriand's career and to consider his other literary works as stages leading to the crowning accomplishment of his life story. The "I" of the *Mémoires*, Fumaroli shows, was a complicated construction. Chateaubriand devoted more time to his childhood and youth than any previous memoirist, but the pleasure he found in evoking the first stages of his life, while it may have strengthened his tendency to see the modern age itself as a decline from the vigor of antiquity, did not turn into simple nostalgia. From his self-proclaimed vantage point beyond the grave, he exercised his "freedom to fold and refold chronology in order to identify his story with the irony of Time," Fumaroli writes (216). At the outset of his literary career, he put much of himself into the persona of René, the social outsider overwhelmed by passion, but he did not allow himself to become a prisoner of that identity. "Because he had descended into the depths of the 'mal du siècle,' the memorialist had learned the great value of the religious and moral commonplaces that hid from men their penchant for inhumanity, and made them accept the emotional bonds of community life . . . " (251). Fumaroli insists on the sincerity of Chateaubriand's return to Christianity at the end of his period of exile in the 1790s, even though he admits that the famous line from the *Mémoires*, "I wept and I believed," distorts a process that actually lasted much longer and involved a certain amount of calculation. He also concedes that Chateaubriand's conversion still left him "a thoroughly mediocre theologian" (278); and it is clear that the *Génie du christianisme* is the work of Chateaubriand for which he has the least enthusiasm.

The celebrity Chateaubriand enjoyed after the publication of his best-selling *Génie du christianisme* in 1802 allowed him to taste the fruits of success for the first time, culminating in his appointment to a significant diplomatic post as the number two man in the French embassy to Rome, but he soon realized the moral price of serving the Bonapartist regime. This first disillusionment with politics would be followed by a more prolonged and more shattering disappointment under the Restoration. Fumaroli protests against the "black legend" of Chateaubriand's ineptitude as a practical politician during this period, and insists on his importance as a political thinker whose ideas can stand comparison with those of Benjamin Constant (454, 456). Nevertheless, neither Chateaubriand nor anyone else could save the regime, and its collapse in 1830 ended his hope for a reconciliation of tradition and liberty. For Chateaubriand, the installation of the bourgeois July Monarchy was worse than the bloody Terror

of 1793: "The Terror is no longer a tragic exception that can be brought to an end, but the recurrent norm of French, and therefore of world, political history" (475). Coinciding with the end of his last liaison with a younger woman, the catastrophe of 1830 forced Chateaubriand to accept the fact that his active career was over. Reconciled after 1832 to a quiet life shared with Madame Récamier, he was finally able to turn to the job of transforming the more straightforward narrative of his life he had begun decades earlier into the immense meditation on loss and memory that would become his most lasting achievement.

As he shows how the different stages of Chateaubriand's life all contributed to the making of the authorial persona of the *Mémoires*, Fumaroli also demonstrates how all of Chateaubriand's earlier literary works served as stepping stones to his final masterpiece. The vast uncompleted epic about the American Indians that Chateaubriand labored over during his exile in England was his first effort to judge European civilization from an outsider's perspective; when he later cast himself as a voice from beyond the grave, he would identify himself with the noble savage of his first writings. "Both were ways of making an interior retreat 'into the wilderness,' from the depth and height of which the solitary observer could see the inherent vanity of the social and historical world" (333). Like the later memoirist, the narratorial "I" of his youthful *Essai sur les révolutions* had already learned to emulate "the flight of a bird that compensated for its weakness and its lack of direction by the altitude it reached, and the immensity of the landscape of memory it took in and meditated upon" (351). Rereading these early works in the 1820s, when he was preparing a complete edition of his writings, was in itself one of the experiences that made Chateaubriand capable of creating the *Mémoires*.

The novels *Atala* and *René* were exercises in dissecting and portraying human passions, and the elaborate Christian epic *Les Martyrs*, Chateaubriand's main project during the Napoleonic empire, was an opportunity for the author to cast himself in the role of Eudore, a protagonist also forced to live in a world undergoing a spiritual revolution. The account Chateaubriand wrote of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem that he undertook while writing *Les Martyrs* was his first work written in the first person. In it "he invented a poetic and meditative genre of prose that the great travel writers of the nineteenth century, Taine, Bourget, Barrès, inherited from him" (441), and one that anticipated the stream-of-consciousness technique of the later *Mémoires*. Although each of his earlier projects had a finality of its own, cumulatively they gave Chateaubriand the range of literary skills that would come together to such effect in his final work.

In Marc Fumaroli, Chateaubriand's *Mémoires* have truly found their ideal reader. The *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* have long been recognized as one of the classics of French autobiographical art, but even critics of that tradition as insightful as Philippe Lejeune, whose writings have practically created the field

of autobiography studies in France, have often found it difficult to integrate Chateaubriand's work into their discussions. In his pioneering studies on French autobiography in the early 1970s, Lejeune admits: "I bypassed Chateaubriand, whom I admired but who scared me."[7] The work's length, its density of historical reference, and its curious combination of self-revelation and reticence have all made it difficult to deal with. Fumaroli has overcome these obstacles by creating a critical work conceived on the scale of its subject, and one that echoes the *Mémoires*' own multi-layered density. He deals with the problem of the *Mémoires*' factual accuracy largely by ignoring it: he essentially adopts the position articulated by Lejeune in his celebrated essay "The Autobiographical Pact," to the effect that "what matters is less the resemblance of 'Rousseau at the age of sixteen' represented in the text of the *Confessions*, with the Rousseau of 1728, 'such as he was,' than the double effort of Rousseau around 1764 to *paint*: 1) his relationship to the past, 2) this past such as it was."[8] For Fumaroli, the literal accuracy of any of the incidents recorded in the text is of less concern than what Chateaubriand made out of them.

As Fumaroli demonstrates in one of his most interesting chapters, Chateaubriand was aware, not only of Rousseau's *Confessions*, but of the earlier French tradition of political memoir-writing, about which he had made critical comments in the *Génie du christianisme*. The publication of the first reliable edition of the duc de Saint-Simon's memoirs in 1829–31 helped change his views. He came to realize that "in order to join a sense of the grandeur of the epoch to a recognition of the 'lost opportunities' that had derailed it, he needed a witness, constantly in motion, who had sometimes also been an actor, an interpreter who was involved from the inside while also keeping his distance, a free Frenchman, heir to the ancient French vocation for liberty, and consequently all the more acutely sensitive to what this vocation had turned into when given the chance to develop to the fullest." The author himself was the ideal person for this role. "The first person narrator of the *Mémoires* is endowed with contradictory qualities that allowed him to understand his century without being tempted to be its dupe" (700–01).

One major criticism of the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* as a literary work has always been Chateaubriand's decision to incorporate a lengthy life of Napoleon into his own narrative. Chateaubriand only met Napoleon on one occasion, so whatever insights he had to offer on the subject were not based on personal observation. Chateaubriand's justification for this mammoth digression was the

7 Philippe Lejeune, "From Autobiography to Journal, from Academia to Association: A Scholar's Story," keynote address to 2005 Kentucky Foreign Language Conference.

8 Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 25–6.

parallel between the lives of these two provincial French noblemen, born a few months apart and exposed to so many of the same historical events. Fumaroli defends Chateaubriand against the common charge that his life of Napoleon was the work of "an embittered scribbler who wore himself out trying in vain to tarnish the glory of a statesman who irritated him . . . " (624). The Napoleon sections of the *Mémoires* were in fact something of an atonement for the vitriolic pamphlet *Du Buonaparte et des Bourbons*, which Chateaubriand had unleashed against the Emperor at the precise moment of his downfall in 1814. In Fumaroli's view, it was in writing about Napoleon that Chateaubriand first learned to fully develop "this poetics of historical narrative that seeks to reveal the instability inherent in the human 'facts' that it remembers . . . " (641).

Fumaroli has unquestionably made his case for the importance of the *Mémoires* as a work of art and an essential element in the development of modern autobiographical literature. Karl Joachim Weintraub ended his classic study of that process with Goethe, whose *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, he claimed, "represents the moment in the history of autobiography when the self-understanding and presentation of an individual parallels the emerging historicist mode of understanding human life."[9] Fumaroli demonstrates that Chateaubriand deserves to share credit for this achievement. The *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* merit a place alongside *The Education of Henry Adams* as one of the enduring attempts to answer the question, "What does it mean to live one's life in history?" Autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin's description of the *Education* as "neither history nor personal history but a mixed mode: history as it impinges on the mind of the individual, personal history insofar as it is given over to . . . encounters with the forces of history," certainly applies as well to Chateaubriand's work as it does to that of Adams.[10]

Although the main purpose of *Chateaubriand: poésie et terreur* is to make a case for the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* as a literary classic, Fumaroli clearly also wants to make a case for Chateaubriand as an important thinker. More specifically, Fumaroli wants to place Chateaubriand, not where he has customarily been located, as one of the founders of French conservatism, but instead in the currently more fashionable tradition of liberalism. The final chapter of Fumaroli's book is devoted to Chateaubriand's relations with his nephew by marriage Alexis de Tocqueville. "Can one compare a poet and a historian?" Fumaroli asks. "Can one . . . compromise Tocqueville, who has become, with great difficulty, respectable on the left, by associating him with a reputation as reactionary as that

9 Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 368.

10 Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 147, 151.

of M. de Chateaubriand?" (720). He goes on to argue that in fact the two had more in common than is often realized, and that each learned from the other. Their family relationship had rarely brought them together, but after the publication of the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1835, Chateaubriand recognized his nephew as a kindred spirit, who had followed his own example in visiting the New World to gain perspective on the old. "The two great minds of the liberal aristocracy, one a surviving witness of 1789, the other, younger, of 1830 and of 1848, had separately, but not without keeping an eye on each other, meditated on the French revolutionary experience, stipulated the democratic future of the world, and tried to let each shed light on the other" (736).

Fumaroli is certainly correct to distinguish Chateaubriand from the other leading counterrevolutionary thinkers of his generation, Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald. The individualist streak he had inherited from his youthful reading of Rousseau made it impossible for him to reject the very principle of freedom, as they did, or to exalt absolute authority. He was also less capable than they were of imagining that the rupture caused by the revolution could be undone. Chateaubriand's romantic conservatism had a tragic dimension that their systems lacked: the world of the past attracted him precisely because, like the world of childhood, it could be remembered—in fact, the workings of memory meant that the past and the emotions associated with it could never be forgotten—but not recreated. Nevertheless, the tradition that associates Chateaubriand with conservatism is not without foundation. He was, after all, the man who gave conservative political philosophy its name: in 1819, Chateaubriand was the leading figure behind the creation of the short-lived but influential *Conservateur*, the first periodical to use that label in its modern sense.[11] He was also the first French intellectual to become a public success by renouncing the Enlightenment. With the publication of the *Génie du christianisme* in 1802, Chateaubriand became the first French celebrity author in nearly a century to defend religion against reason—and not just religion in the abstract, but the Catholic Church, with all its dogmas and rituals. The launching of his book was part of a broader campaign to use Napoleon's authority for the restoration of hierarchical institutions throughout French society, and Chateaubriand participated in at least one other important aspect of that effort, by including in the *Génie* a defense of the decision to reintroduce slavery in the French colonies. Denouncing the abolition law passed by the National Convention in 1794, and citing the violence of the slave

11 On the *Conservateur* and its place in Chateaubriand's career, see Pierre Reboul, *Chateaubriand et 'le Conservateur'* (Lille: Université de Lille, 1973). The title *Conservateur* had been used for a moderate pro-republican newspaper in the Directory period, but Chateaubriand's employment of the term had an entirely different connotation.

insurrection in Saint-Domingue, he asked: "Who would dare plead the blacks' case after the crimes they have committed?"[12]

Under the Restoration, Chateaubriand initially associated himself with the Ultras, the most intransigent proponents of a return to the past. He justified the arbitrary executions carried out after Napoleon's second abdication,[13] and his most eloquent defense of parliamentary and constitutional government, the pamphlet *De la monarchie selon la Charte*, was written as a defense of the Chambre introuvable, the Ultra-dominated parliament elected immediately after the Hundred Days and regarded as unacceptably extreme by Louis XVIII. Chateaubriand finally achieved ministerial office in 1823, when the Ultras had succeeded in dislodging the more cautious Doctrinaires, and his one great accomplishment was to provide the diplomatic cover for the French intervention in Spain on behalf of the Holy Alliance. Only in 1824, after disagreements with the prime minister, Villèle, and the new monarch, Charles X, did Chateaubriand break with the Ultras and drift into a de facto alliance with the regime's liberal opponents. In contrast to other prominent Ultra thinkers who also disassociated themselves from the regime in the 1820s, such as the journalist Joseph Fiévée and the religious polemicist Félicité de Lamennais, however, Chateaubriand never embraced a new political faith. He indignantly rejected the new monarchy imposed after the July Revolution of 1830, and his last political engagement was on behalf of the duchesse de Berry, the widowed mother of the Bourbon heir, whose effort to assert her son's claims to the throne in 1832 ended in a fiasco when she was arrested and then found to be pregnant. Although his career demonstrated that the boundary between the conservative and liberal camps was not always a rigid one, Chateaubriand was more often on the right of that line than on the left.

To say that Chateaubriand belonged more to the conservative tradition than to the liberal one is not to imply that his ideas were invariably wrong, or that they have no relevance in the modern world. As the European continent gropes its way uncertainly toward greater unity, for example, its citizens' reluctance to abandon old national institutions suggests that they share what Fumaroli sees as Chateaubriand's wish for early nineteenth-century France: "a modernity regulated by liberal institutions and held within limits by a sovereign power legitimated by old associations . . . " (680). In one respect, however, Chateaubriand clearly gave a push to a historical development that was highly antithetical to liberalism. He not only embraced religion as a necessity in human life, a position that aligned him with Benjamin Constant and with Tocqueville,

12 Cited in Yves Bénot, *La Démence coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992), 193.

13 Pierre Serna, *La République des Girouettes* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2005), 189.

but he specifically committed himself to Catholicism. Fumaroli points out that Chateaubriand was one of the first French writers to shift his loyalty from the Gallican church to Rome and the papacy (423–4). He would later distance himself from some of the excesses of the Ultramontane movement he had thus helped to launch, but his *Génie du christianisme* continued throughout the nineteenth century to serve as a weapon against any compromise between the church and the ideas of the Enlightenment and the revolution. Chateaubriand thus helped close the door on any possibility of a French Catholicism that might have stressed the compatibility of Christianity and democracy. One cannot help wondering how history might have been different if Chateaubriand's contemporary the abbé Grégoire, a far more consistent man of faith and himself the author of a volume of memoirs, had been able to make the case for his republican and racially egalitarian interpretation of the Christian message with the same literary skill as Chateaubriand.[14]

Although Grégoire's Catholicism would have been far more compatible with a liberal political order than the church that benefited from Chateaubriand's rhetorical skills, it is also true that Chateaubriand spoke to his readers' hearts in a way that Grégoire, a child of the Enlightenment as well as of the Gospels, did not. Chateaubriand's real strength was not as a theorist, but as a psychologist who understood that no set of institutional arrangements can safeguard human beings from the pain of loss and death. In the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, he showed that it is memory, with its unique ability to generate emotions, rather than reason, that defines the essence of the human personality. The most universal contribution that romantic conservatives like Chateaubriand offer to Western culture is this reminder that historical change inevitably comes at the price of suffering for those whose sense of self is tied to memories of what has been lost. As Marc Fumaroli has ably shown, Chateaubriand was one of those who most forcefully articulated this sobering lesson. *Chateaubriand: poésie et terreur* enables us to see the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* as one of modern literature's greatest meditations on the tragic dimension of human existence.

14 The abbé Grégoire's admission to the Pantheon during the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989 represented an official celebration of his effort to reconcile the Revolution and Christianity, but the French Catholic Church refused to participate in the ceremony. (Steven L. Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: Disputed Legacies, France 1789/1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 122, 124. The importance of Grégoire's religious thought is brought out in two recent studies, Rita Hermon-Belot, *L'Abbé Grégoire, la politique et la vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 2000) and Alyssa Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005). On Grégoire's memoirs, see Jeremy D. Popkin, "Grégoire as Autobiographer," in Jeremy D. Popkin and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *The Abbé Grégoire and His Causes* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Publishing, 2000), 167–81.