

## THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF SCIENCE IN FRANCE: ERNEST RENAN AND THE *VIE DE JÉSUS*\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *The publication of Ernest Renan's La Vie de Jésus in 1863 is rightly regarded as a key moment in French history. The book served as an important symbol of science and free thought in the battles over the Republic and laïcité, and presented a thesis that characterized French scientific philosophy in the mid-nineteenth century. Jesus, for Renan, transcended his own culture, rejecting all social constraints in the pursuit of a unique ideal of the kingdom of God, becoming in the process the first true individualist in history. Critics ridiculed his arguments, but it was typical of the Romanticism of the French positivists. Renan's philosophy was rooted not in empiricism, but in an essentially pantheistic metaphysics, prizing the realization of God within oneself as the highest ethical achievement. This was an innovation of the highest importance in France, where a traditionalist, but post-Christian theism had marked social thought since the Revolution. Renan and his generation, notably Taine, dispensed with the traditionalist religious dualism that typified the social outlook of Tocqueville, Michelet, and their contemporaries. Far from articulating a materialist dead end in the history of ideas, their Romantic individualism was critical to later developments in European thought, including aestheticism and irrationalism.*

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### I

Renan's *Vie de Jésus* is a critical text in the intellectual history of France and its interest for the historian goes far beyond its place in the development of French Biblical scholarship. For its more extensive symbolic role in French political and social history, the book was a key event in the political life of the Second Empire. Renan's book entered the core mythology of French history and politics, just as the nearly contemporaneous *Origin of species* set its stamp on English debates. It is, however, remarkable that Renan, whose republicanism was at best lukewarm, rapidly took on a symbolic function for a wide range of radicals and free-thinkers under the Second Empire and the Third Republic. To be 'for' Renan was to be for reform, science, and usually the republic. Renan would have found some of these associations deeply puzzling. Far from proclaiming a radical democratic creed with clear anticlerical overtones, Renan was profoundly hostile to some of the ideas that his 'followers' proclaimed: materialism, democracy, and the demise of traditional authorities including the church.

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Renan was no simple conservative, but nor was he a democrat or an anticlerical. Many of our assumptions about the politics of the period in France are flawed because of a failure to take account of some of the subtleties of ‘positivist’ thought in France. To place Renan, like Taine, somewhere on a simple continuum between left and right is to ignore the foundations of his radicalism. In general, he stood aloof from ordinary politics, which makes such a positioning difficult in any case: yet when we penetrate his work more attentively, Renan’s work is no longer beset by these apparent contradictions. Innovation and social radicalism, far from being dropped in his old age, marked his work throughout. A certain Romantic individualism, far removed from the familiar cliché of scientism with which he has so frequently been associated, and certainly far from any proto-fascist collectivism,<sup>1</sup> was at the heart of his work.

How did Renan come to take on a symbolic role for radicals? Two anecdotes might help explain the genesis of the confusion here. First, the famous story of Renan’s first lecture at the Collège de France, when newly installed as professor of Hebrew in 1862. Renan had already attracted criticism for finally accepting the post from the imperial (and hence politically suspect) ministry of public instruction; nevertheless a certain strain of student opinion was eager to find a leader in him. First he alienated some of the radicals in his audience by slighting the Revolution, then he had the same effect on some orthodox Catholics in the audience by questioning the virtues of King David: but it was later in the lecture that Renan went on to use the notoriously objectionable tag for Jesus, ‘homme incomparable’, and unleashed an uproar of both outrage and enthusiasm. A small crowd gathered afterwards and went to acclaim Renan at his house in the Rue Madame: Renan had fled, claiming genuine bewilderment that his speech should mean anything to what he regarded as a mob – and the very pious Mme Renan *mère* was forced on to the balcony to receive the homage of the crowd as representative of the progressive intellect. In later life – in the short term his chair was suspended on public order grounds – Renan was cautious to take a less explosive public line in order to repel over-enthusiastic amateurs.<sup>2</sup>

A similar misunderstanding dogged Darwin’s early appearances on the French scene, notably the first French edition of the *Origin of species* (1859). The translator, a Mlle Royer, appalled Darwin by adding an introduction of substantially irrelevant anticlerical rant, including (she thought Renan’s recent ‘homme incomparable’ too mealy-mouthed) a short tirade against the personal failings of the ‘Rabbi of Nazareth’ himself: ‘Le mysticisme en général est pour les races humaines une sorte de maladie d’épuisement et de langueur. Partout où il apparaît il amène l’énervement et la torpeur morale.’<sup>3</sup> Darwin

<sup>1</sup> See D. G. Charlton, *Positivist thought in France during the Second Empire* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 86–126, and Ernst Nolte, *Three faces of fascism* (London, 1965), pp. 42–4.

<sup>2</sup> Mme Charles Darmesteter, *The life of Ernest Renan* (London, 1897), pp. 151–5, 250.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Darwin, *De l’origine des espèces* (Paris, 1862), p. viii.

had other reasons for dissatisfaction: Royer had changed the title to ‘the origin of species by means of natural election’, in place of *selection*; but Darwin’s feeling that his laboriously detailed work had been betrayed is not difficult to understand. The preface continues in similar vein for sixty-three pages. Renan, like Darwin, resented being saddled with the approval of the more aggressive anticlericals who would seize upon whatever might be converted into ammunition in this period. All the same, one wonders how far Renan’s modesty at the inaugural lecture was a pretence.<sup>4</sup> The first major official appearance of a scholar who already had a certain notoriety for his views was a rather obvious pretext for such a fracas, a set piece for a political opposition that was hobbled by censorship. Renan hardly shied away from a prophetic role, moreover: his later writings, particularly, show evidence of a considerably bloated intellectual vanity, but certainly no evidence whatsoever of virulent anticlericalism.

Renan became a symbol of the *libre penseur* thereafter, and his name continued to serve as a shibboleth for anticlericals after his death, as had Voltaire’s in the conflicts of the 1860s.<sup>5</sup> It was the commemoration of Renan at an unveiling of his sculpture at his native Tréguier that spurred the prominent establishment journalist Brunetière, editor of the *Revue des deux mondes*, to proclaim the need for national penitence after the anticlerical excesses that the radicals and their hero had unleashed. For Brunetière, and the consciously post-scientific right of which he was a part, Renan summed up all the follies of militant republicanism.<sup>6</sup> By the time of the controversy surrounding the separation of church and state in the first decade of the twentieth century, Renan had taken on immense importance as a symbol in determining the divisions of French society on the religious issue.

What are we to make of this contrast between Renan’s own outlook and the one that his followers and some historians have imputed to him? Our confusions in interpreting Renan are not an isolated matter: Taine, as I have argued elsewhere, has been the subject of similarly diverse interpretations.<sup>7</sup> I will be arguing here that, far from representing a stale scientism, the outlook of French positivism in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s was deeply coloured by Romanticism. Its conception of science came not from Comte, nor from any strict commitment to the rigours of an entirely empiricist approach to scientific study, but from a pantheism that accentuated self-development as a means of realizing God within oneself. This, as will become clear was, in its context, a genuine revolution in French thought. This article will further attempt to explore the implications of the Christ of Renan’s mature work: first, through a

<sup>4</sup> H. W. Wardman, *Ernest Renan: a critical biography* (London, 1964), pp. 76–8.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Bird, ‘The politicization of Voltaire’s legacy in nineteenth-century France’ (Ph.D. dissertation, London, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The secularisation of the European mind in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 242–4.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Pitt, ‘The irrationalist liberalism of Hippolyte Taine’, *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), pp. 1035–53.

discussion of science and its associations in the mid-nineteenth-century French setting; second, through a discussion of Christ's place in the wider context of French thought at mid-century; and finally through a detailed discussion of the reception given to, and the text of, the *Vie de Jésus* itself.

## II

To understand the meaning of science around 1848 takes considerable historical effort. Much of our understanding of 'modernity' has depended upon the narrative of its struggle against obscurantism, a perspective that can conceal much that was historically specific to the perspectives of the mid-nineteenth century. This was none the less the great founding age of positivism, and Renan's understanding of science left an imprint not only on his method, but also on the personality of his Christ. Positivism can be an unfortunate term. It conveys, when it is not associated narrowly with the philosophy of Comte, a degree of philosophical rigour that was alien to the generation that is most directly associated with it. This commitment to empiricism, this disassociation from metaphysics as an invalid approach to research, were characteristics of a later generation. Later on, advocates of a much stricter scientific method *would* emerge, particularly the physiologist Claude Bernard in his *La science expérimentale* of 1878. The book was a collection of a variety of articles intended for the non-specialist press, especially the *Revue des deux mondes*, in the preceding decade and a half. Bernard, more than any other, was the leading theorist of positivism per se, and a somewhat more convincing one than Comte, who remained largely unread. In the later 1860s and 1870s, a far more rigorous and austere exclusion of metaphysics and speculative reason than Renan was prepared to undertake was typical. By this stage it was to working scientists like Bernard to whom researchers, particularly in the social sciences, looked. Bernard's role in the development of modern science was highly symbolic: his work on the pancreas and the liver under the Second Empire brought several new perspectives to bear on the understanding of the body's capacity to synthesize complex organic substances. More importantly, his identification of the process of life not as an intangible spiritual essence, not as a metaphysical but as a physical process, a kind of *burning*, was a statement of immense significance: 'La vie est au fond l'image d'une combustion, et la combustion n'est elle-même qu'une série de phénomènes chimiques, auxquels sont reliées d'une manière directe des manifestations aloriques lumineuses et vitales.'<sup>8</sup> He had the prestige of a first-rank career in experimental work, and his influence is palpable on later generations of social scientists, including Durkheim's bitter rival for primacy in French sociology, Gabriel Tarde.<sup>9</sup> Tarde and Durkheim were at least twenty years younger than the figures under discussion here,

<sup>8</sup> Claude Bernard, *La science expérimentale* (2nd edn, Paris, 1878), p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the crowd psychologist Gabriel Tarde took Bernard's method as a model for the modesty that should typify the working social researcher, *Les lois de l'imitation* (Paris, 1891), pp. 12–13.

however, living their formative years in the 1860s and 1870s rather than the 1840s. Science for the earlier generation was a metaphysical question, and had a definite tinge of Romanticism: German philosophy may have played its part in it for Taine and Renan, but if there was one great cultural hero for the older men in their early careers it was Spinoza. Their later careers took very divergent courses, resulting in conceptions of science that were in some cases diametrically opposed. Nevertheless, the pantheism of their youth gave the generation first coming to public notice around 1850 a certain family resemblance that marks all the various strands of Second Empire 'positivism'.

For the earliest writings of this generation, we have a very valuable source in the review *La liberté de penser*, which was edited by the young Jules Simon.<sup>10</sup> The reputation for principled intellectual integrity that would later secure Simon considerable political prestige owed much to his radicalism in the period of the Revolution and the Second Empire. *La liberté de penser* borrowed some of the style and all of the physical appearance of the intellectually heavyweight, if conservative, *Revue des deux mondes*: a journal devoted to earnest papers by scholar-gentlemen on literature, philosophy, and politics, yet aimed at a wider, if intellectually minded, audience, a French intelligentsia. In its philosophical bearings, it was dominated by a marked radicalism of approach. Through the review Simon united a number of talents, some slightly older figures who occupied junior posts in the university, but also a range of new names: including Renan, Baudelaire, and the future political theorist, Lucien Prévost-Paradol. All would become distinguished critics of the Empire after various vicissitudes in the wake of Louis-Napoleon's *coup d'état*, which spelt a radical assault on the Republic's free-thinking intellectual establishment. The journal's articles are representative of the interests of philosophically minded youth around 1848. Physical science in the modern sense is more or less absent, but metaphysical essays touching upon the subject were entirely typical.

A recurrent theme in the early writings of this whole generation was an identification of matter and spirit as two versions of the same reality. God, in other words, was present in the material world. This identification of matter and spirit corresponded closely to Spinoza's view that mind and matter were simply two radically divergent ways of conceiving the same underlying reality, God. Matter was creation conceived as extension and mind was creation conceived as creative thought: the *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. Renan and his contemporaries were very conscious of their debt of Spinoza, and it is hard to overemphasize the extent of this obsession for young intellectuals in the late 1840s. The early French positivists were united in conceiving of a God who was far closer to humanity and to creation than for their intellectual predecessors.

<sup>10</sup> Simon was at this stage a teacher of philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, but would later occupy the highest political positions in the early years of the Third Republic: he was a member of the self-appointed Government of National Defence in the wake of the French surrender in 1870, and thereafter minister of public instruction and premier.

The loose, conservative, theism of their elders was a prime target of the writers of Simon's review. An article appearing in 1848 by Brouillier was typical, arguing for a more rigorous and rational conception of God as an unchanging being, with no role in human affairs except as the author of fixed and immutable laws.<sup>11</sup> He, like Simon, tended to uphold a rigorously rationalist theism, and was wary of a more extreme pantheism: yet the journal did give a voice to those who did not stop short of a doctrine that was nothing less than notorious for their elders.

In 1848, the translation of Poe's philosophical short story 'Mesmeric revelation' appeared in *La liberté de penser*. Here, a man under hypnosis is questioned on metaphysical matters and states that all created things are simply the thought of God; and that matter is the movement of thought, of spirit.<sup>12</sup> Again, remember Spinoza's distinction between matter as *natura naturata* and thought as *natura naturans*, two aspects of the same underlying reality. Renan was working along similar lines of inquiry in the *Avenir de la science* which was first published in 1848, arguing that science in particular was itself the expression of man's own God-nature – 'les grands hommes ont raison quand ils soutiennent que leur art est le tout de l'homme, puisqu'il leur sert en effet à exprimer la chose indivisée par excellence, l'âme, Dieu'. And who best represented the spirit of science? 'toi surtout, divin Spinoza'.<sup>13</sup> He was very explicitly critical of his elders' theories of providence that tended to limit the extent of the divine intelligence by suggesting that God had need of specific and occasional acts of direct involvement in society.<sup>14</sup>

Gustave Flaubert was working in 1849 on the first version of the philosophical drama that would later (it was published in 1874) become *La tentation de Saint-Antoine*, in which the protagonist, after being forced to survey all the heresies and religions of the globe, is allowed a final mystic vision of the unity of matter<sup>15</sup> – a moment of rare enthusiasm for Flaubert. Finally, Taine was working on an elaborate Spinozist theory while a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

<sup>11</sup> Brouillier, 'De l'abus du mot de la Providence dans la langue politique et religieuse', *Liberté de penser*, 1 (1848), pp. 553–66.

<sup>12</sup> For the original, see *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allen Poe* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 124–34.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Renan, *Avenir de la science, pensées de 1848* (5th edn, Paris, 1890), pp. 16, 84.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32: Renan here is specifically attacking Guizot's argument that God has special reasons for keeping a strict limit on the number of men of superior talent on earth at any given moment.

<sup>15</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Oeuvres complètes* (16 vols.), iv, p. 171: 'Antoine. (délirant): O bonheur! bonheur! j'ai vu naître la vie, j'ai vu le mouvement commencer. Le sang de mes veines bat si fort qu'il va les rompre. J'ai envie de voler, de nager, d'aboyer, de beugler, de hurler, Je voudrais avoir des ailes, une carapace, une écorce, souffler de la fumée, porter une trompe, tordre mon corps, me diviser partout, être en tout, m'émaner avec les odeurs, me développer comme les plantes, couler comme l'eau, vibrer comme le son, briller comme la lumière, me blottir sur toutes les formes, pénétrer chaque atome, descendre jusqu'au fond de la matière, être la matière! (Le jour enfin paraît; et comme les rideaux d'un tabernacle qu'on relève, des nuages d'or en s'enroulant à larges volutes découvrent le ciel. Tout au milieu, et dans le disque même du soleil, rayonne la face de Jésus-Christ. Antoine fait le signe de la croix et se remet en prières.)'

A few years later, he would discuss Louis-Napoleon's *coup d'état* in precisely the terms of political analysis set by Spinoza in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. All things are a manifestation of God: therefore all things that happen are right; it is right for the private citizen to have a wide range of political freedom; the state too is equally a manifestation of God, and it too has extensive claims to political right for the same reason, and so forth.<sup>16</sup>

Baudelaire, Flaubert, Taine, and Renan had not yet met at all, yet were working along very similar lines of inquiry in their very different fields. The coincidence is even more striking if we extend our gaze abroad: George Eliot was also now working on her translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*. There are minor variations here, but across the board there is evidence of a common philosophical agenda for the younger writers who would consistently appeal to a role for science in politics during the Second Empire. While they were critical of the more naive traditionalist providentialism of their forebears, they were moulded by the same Romantic setting of 1848 as the socialists, and a certain religious sentiment played a very large part in their initial introduction to science. Their outlook was informed by exactly the same intensity of religious feeling that marked *all* the various viewpoints of 1848: some form of pantheism was always at the very heart of their outlook, a sense that human imagination and creativity could fulfil and express the divine essence. It was this radical materialist individualism (in a French culture that was still marked by a traditional, if often unorthodox, theism) that was the most fruitful innovation of their political and social thought.

### III

How did this pantheism structure Renan's philosophy of science? *Imagination* occupied a special place in Renan's understanding of what science, the new life of the spirit, meant. This emphasis had special impact upon this method, since so much of the *Vie de Jésus*, to a far greater extent than the following volumes of the *Origines du Christianisme*, was a matter of pure imaginative reconstruction of the inner life of Christ. This differed markedly from Taine's attitude to scientific work. Their outer lives grew closer over the years; Renan, somewhat older, started corresponding with the less established Taine in 1857; both regulars of the Sainte-Beuve circle, they became closer and closer over the years, embattled, perhaps, as the two great enfants terribles of French intellectual life. A certain tension is apparent in their intellectual relationship, however. For Taine, Renan was a 'Kant poète et sans formule';<sup>17</sup> while in his later life, Renan was occasionally irritated by Taine's materialism and stifling, fact-bound, and dogged approach to historical scholarship. Amongst the scribbled notes left in his study at his death were two where the image of Taine

<sup>16</sup> Hippolyte Taine, *Sa vie et sa correspondance* (4 vols., Paris, 1905), 1, pp. 100–2. Compare Benedict de Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, in *Political works* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 124–35.

<sup>17</sup> Taine, *Vie et correspondance*, II, pp. 235, 268.

as a small-minded but industrious ant recurs: ‘Taine; fourmilière’; ‘Taine, Fourmis trop conservateur. Conservez quoi grand Dieu.’<sup>18</sup> Renan certainly had considerable eccentricities of method. One of his most notable lapses from a perspective of common sense was his preference for the testimony of the Gospel of John, on the strange grounds that by excluding so many supposedly factual references, it was truer than the more narrative synoptic gospels to what Renan regarded as the other-worldly spirit of the original teaching of Christ. His eccentricity here was regularly decried by scholars, and in the thirteenth edition of the *Vie de Jésus* he was hesitantly compelled to moderate his use of John, taking account of recent developments in German scholarship.<sup>19</sup> Taine’s ‘realism’ can seem directly at odds with Renan’s accent on the unfettered imagination. Yet they are habitually bracketed together as the vanguard of positivism, of course, and indeed were close after the 1850s. For all their divergences, however, they were commonly seen as a natural pairing, ‘deux astres dans ce ciel sans clarté’.<sup>20</sup>

Taine emphasized facts, Renan imagination: but neither were strangers to speculative metaphysics. Both, inevitably, came under the influence of the spiritualism of Victor Cousin that was the dominant force in French philosophy over these earlier years. Taine would reject Cousin’s work wholesale; Renan was more ambivalent. Both would approach it from their distinct dogmatic, pre-Kantian, grounds, however. The impact of Cousin’s *Du vrai, du bien, et du beau* (which was, according to the admittedly dubious testimony of Maurice Barrès, who had many axes to grind, the most thumbed book on Renan’s shelf)<sup>21</sup> is apparent in the first few pages of his earliest and most speculative work, the *Avenir de la science* of 1848. Casting himself as the advocate of a new spirit of science, Renan remarks that there are two sides to perfection, two processes at work in history: material improvement on the one hand and the development of the ‘pure forms’ of thought on the other. ‘Vivre de la vie d’esprit, aspirer l’infini par tous les pores, réaliser le beau, atteindre le parfait, chacun suivant sa mesure, c’est la seule chose nécessaire. Tout le reste est vanité et affliction d’esprit.’<sup>22</sup> Unlike Cousin, who had adopted an orthodox version (from a Christian point of view) of Plato’s theory of the form of the Absolute, Renan saw the good, the true, and the beautiful less as a divine reality than as a rallying-call for human progress. The forms were not transcendent, but a mundane creation; yet one that served nevertheless as a spur to a higher life:

Mais ce qui pourra devenir possible dans une forme plus avancée de la culture intellectuelle, c’est que le sentiment qui donne la vie à la composition de l’activité ou du poète, la pénétration du savant et du philosophe, le sens moral du grand caractère, se réunissent pour former une seule âme, sympathique à toutes les choses belles, bonnes, et

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Renan, *Notes de la fin de sa vie*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, NAF 14201, ff. 103–5.

<sup>19</sup> Darmesteter, *Life of Renan*, p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> Gabriel Hanotaux, *Mon temps* (4 vols., Paris, 1947), 1, pp. 366–8.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Barrès, *Huit jours chez M. Renan* (2nd edn, Paris, 1890), p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Renan, *Avenir de la science*, pp. 8–9.



vraies, et pour constituer un type morale de l'humanité complète, un idéal qui, sans se réaliser dans tel ou tel, soit pour l'avenir ce que le Christ a été depuis dix-huit siècles.<sup>23</sup>

A further investigation of the meaning of science around 1848 will clarify Renan's concerns. The assumptions that the Anglo-Saxon brings to French thought can be very misleading in this matter, and we must make a conscious effort to translate French ideas here. Annie Petit has explored the acute disapproval of English work in science that many French commentators voiced during the nineteenth century. Far from applauding English innovations in geology and natural history, the English approach to science could seem rather alien. National rivalries may have played a part here, but the French attitude reflected substantial divergence in method and in subject matter. Technical innovations, natural history, and economics were the prevailing interests of English science, while French *savants* focused on the more abstract physical sciences, astronomy, and mathematics, and on cultural studies in particular. In such an atmosphere, Renan, and not Darwin, was supreme.<sup>24</sup>

Etienne Vacherot, old university spiritualist and conservative liberal, who, like so many other pillars of the July Monarchy university, had fallen victim to persecution under the Second Empire, described his age in 1869 – 'Celui-ci n'est ni le siècle de foi, comme le XVII<sup>e</sup>, ni le siècle de la guerre, comme le XVIII<sup>e</sup>. Il est, et, quoi qu'on fasse pour l'entraîner hors de sa voie, il restera le siècle de l'histoire impartiale et de la critique désintéressé.' According to Vacherot, this 'positive' spirit, heir of Kant, found its best exponents in Comte, Littré, Sainte-Beuve, Renouvier, Taine, Feuerbach, Strauss, Alfred Maury, Renan, and Scherer.<sup>25</sup> Vacherot was a somewhat older man than Taine and Renan, but he was honoured by his juniors: the latter admired his metaphysics and Taine gave him some valuable legal advice that facilitated the annulment of a political prison sentence he had received at the court of appeal in January 1860.<sup>26</sup> Others saw science as part of a more general awakening of moral consciousness. All modern thought was part of a deep-seated moral reform for Duruy, appointed minister of public instruction – a significantly liberal choice – by the emperor at about the same time as Renan's controversial inaugural lecture. Physical science had improved the material well-being of society, he argued; historical science ('le livre des expiations et des récompenses'), the parallel interest of a 'profoundly religious' age, was teaching the century a higher sense of morality.<sup>27</sup>

For young men in 1848 science contained immense moral significance, and all its exponents imputed a special role to the intellectual, the *savant*, not as a pure scholar, but as a moralist. A failure to appreciate this integral aspect of

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Annie Petit, 'L'esprit de la science anglaise et les Français au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 17 (1984), pp. 273–93: on the comparison of English versus French disciplines, p. 286.

<sup>25</sup> Etienne Vacherot, *La religion* (Paris, 1869), pp. 6, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Léon Ollé-Laprune, *Etienne Vacherot, 1809–1897* (2nd edn, Paris, 1898), pp. 41, 45–6.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Duruy, *Notes et souvenirs* (2 vols., Paris, 1901), I, pp. 139, 154.

scientific thought at this stage is seriously to misinterpret the character of French positivism. Let us return to Renan's manifesto of 1849, *L'avenir de la science*.<sup>28</sup> His idiosyncratic assertion that the one true English scientist, in the fullest sense, was Byron, makes more sense with the awareness of this background:

Je ne sais si aucun Anglais, Byron peut-être excepté, a compris d'une façon bien profonde la philosophie des choses. Régler sa vie conformément à la raison, éviter l'erreur, ne point s'engager dans des entreprises inexécutables, se procurer une existence douce et assurée, reconnaître la simplicité des lois de l'univers et arriver à quelques vues de théologie naturelle, voilà pour les Anglais qui pensent le but souverain de la science. Jamais une idée de haute et inquiète spéculation, jamais un regard jeté sur ce qui est.<sup>29</sup>

Science, the 'philosophie des choses', was the renunciation of any kind of small-mindedness for Renan. In many respects the identity of science lay less in its subject-matter than in the perfection and personality of the *savant* himself.

The *savant* was a point of veneration for all: science excited not because it represented enlightenment for all (as it would for Jules Ferry and the educators of the Third Republic who made a secular saint of Pasteur), but because it represented the bravery and independence on the part of the intellectual who realized in his work something more important, something quasi-divine. Flaubert wrote to Georges Sand in the depths of the 1871 crisis that 'it matters a great deal that many men like Renan or Littré can live and be listened to! Our salvation now lies only in a *legitimate aristocracy*; and by that I mean a majority which will consist of something more than mere numbers.'<sup>30</sup> The *savant* was certainly not the researcher of Comte, but a serious worker (and this is the key) *self-developed* in the widest sense. Renan again:

Notre rationalisme n'est donc pas cette morgue analytique, sèche, négative, incapable de comprendre les choses du coeur et de l'imagination, qu'inaugura le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle; ce n'est pas l'emploi exclusif de ce qu'on a appelé 'l'acide du raisonnement'; ce n'est pas la *philosophie positive* de M. Auguste Comte, ni la critique irréligieuse de M. Proudhon. C'est la reconnaissance de la nature humaine dans toutes ses parties, c'est l'usage simultané et harmonique de toutes les facultés, c'est l'exclusion de toute exclusion. M. de Lamartine est, à nos yeux, un rationaliste, et pourtant, dans un sens plus restreint, il récuserait sans doute ce titre, puisqu'il nous apprend lui-même qu'il arrive à ses résultats non par combinaison ni raisonnement, mais par instinct et intuition immédiate.<sup>31</sup>

'Rationalism' in the strict sense was rather suspect to a Renan who looked back on the eighteenth century as the epitome of intellectual shallowness. He, like his contemporaries, expected far more from the *savant*. Despite the variety of this generation's approach to their work in different fields, the cultural expectations

<sup>28</sup> Renan later disowned the political radicalism of the book: nevertheless, he continued to profess loyalty to its basic philosophy. See the preface to the 1890 edition.

<sup>29</sup> Renan, *Avenir de la science*, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance* (4 vols., Paris, 1891–3), III, p. 56 (29 Apr.).

<sup>31</sup> Renan, *Avenir de la science*, pp. 65–6.

pinned upon the *savant*, as we have seen, provided one uniting theme for the positivists of 1848. Their pessimism concerning French culture is well known: but what about their hopes? Here their shared cultural outlook is striking. I have discussed the individualism of Taine's interpretation of the *savant's* work elsewhere;<sup>32</sup> a study of the context and arguments of Renan's *Vie de Jésus* provides the easiest means of approaching that of his contemporary.

#### IV

It is of course impossible to summarize the diversity of Renan's lifework with any justice in the space of an article. Nevertheless, the personality of Christ remained a perpetual fascination for him. Renan's philosophy, even his intellectual temperament, changed much over the years, yet he still clung to an image of Christ as an incarnation of the 'spirit', of the 'Ideal'; as an incarnation, that is, of Renan's idol, science. His obsession was not altogether idiosyncratic.

More and more, historical scholarship is revealing the continuing importance of Christ as a symbol in French culture well into the age of secularism. It is well known how far Renan identified with the historical Jesus. He retained a lifelong nostalgia for the Brittany of his childhood, which he saw as his own Nazareth; furthermore, he saw in Christ's development of his own mission following his departure from Judaism a parallel to his own attachment to the new faith of science in the wake of his separation from Catholicism.<sup>33</sup> To understand Renan's Christ is to understand his self-image: as we shall see, Renan saw Christ as one of the few real individuals of history, one of the few who had managed to cast off the trappings of his culture and conditioning and come face to face with divine reality. Renan thought himself equally estranged from his own social context, yet no discussion of Renan's Christ is complete without a fuller analysis of the symbolic role of Jesus within this same context.

We need to separate four different discourses about Christ in this period. First, that of the secularist French intellectuals; second, that of the traditional church; third, that of German scholarship which gave the initial impetus to Renan's study; and finally, that of popular religion. All four contributed something to Renan's work. This was, of course, the great age of secularization, yet the nineteenth century was marked by a Christianity that was itself modernizing. It is remarkable to what extent our own modern conception of Christ was being created at this stage, both by popular movements and by the more prominent thinkers. As is well established in the history of the left, Christ the carpenter had an obvious appeal for artisanal radicals attempting to forge a modern ideology.<sup>34</sup> We should not take too seriously the, in many ways

<sup>32</sup> Pitt, 'Irrationalist liberalism', *passim*.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Gaulmier, introduction to Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus* (Paris, 1974), pp. 25–6.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Berenson, *Populist religion and left-wing politics in France, 1830–1852* (Princeton, 1984), ch. 2.

attractive, claim that the love of Christ was an obsession for the left alone, held up as a banner against the austere and punitive God of the right. The suggestion that the secularist ruling classes favoured a Voltairean deism – particularly the liberal politicians of the July Monarchy whom the socialists of 1848 hated so much – has sometimes been presented with little supporting evidence.<sup>35</sup> The intellectual elite may not in many cases have been formal Christians, yet they were fascinated by their history and culture, in which Christ was of obvious importance. Indeed Christ (and not simply a dour God of duty and order) was a source of fascination that attracted elite thinkers increasingly as the century progressed: within the liberal camp for instance, we can chart a neat progression from generation to generation as Christ took a more central role in historical and philosophical work. As the work of a representative late Enlightenment theist, Benjamin Constant's *De la religion* is typical of the mood of the earliest decades of the century. The book amounted to a highly teleological study of the evolution of world religion towards modern Protestantism, and while it presented a rather traditional apologia for the personal God of Christian theology, it gave almost no place to Christ himself.<sup>36</sup> Greek philosophy, and in particular Plato, was deemed to have been the most important factor in the triumph of sound religious practice and feeling.<sup>37</sup> Such indifference was short-lived, however. Thinkers of the July Monarchy, particularly Constant's juniors Victor Cousin, Théodore Jouffroy, and Alexis de Tocqueville, were to a far greater degree intrigued by the personality of Christ as the author of a new dimension to human experience, the bringer of a new *egalitarianism* in Western society. All saw Christ as a world-historical figure in the realm of ideas. Tocqueville, as Kelly observes, may have disapproved of some of the consequences of democratization, but he nevertheless saw Christ as its most important historical source.<sup>38</sup> He habitually defined providence as a 'justice that transcends history', and frequently took comfort from the idea that if political modernity was confusing, it nevertheless bore the hallmark of divinity. Thus he reassured himself under the Empire in 1857: 'I cannot believe that God has for centuries now impelled 2 or 3 million men towards greater equality of conditions only to end in a despotism like that of Tiberius or Claudius.'<sup>39</sup> Christ, for Tocqueville, as for secular-minded liberals seeking to find a historical sanction for principles of 1789, was a rationalist: the original bourgeois revolutionary.

This liberal Christ in many ways is closest to Renan's ideal. But any account of Renan's intellectual debts cannot afford to neglect the extraordinary

<sup>35</sup> In, for instance, *ibid.*, pp. 36–7.

<sup>36</sup> Henri Gouhier, *Benjamin Constant* (Paris, 1967), p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Du polythéisme romain* (2 vols., Paris, 1833).

<sup>38</sup> George Armstrong Kelly, *The humane comedy: Constant, Tocqueville, and French liberalism* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 32–7. A clear description of Tocqueville's religious perspective is given in Larry Siedentop, *Tocqueville* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 96–112.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Jean-Claude Lamberti, *Tocqueville and the two democracies* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), pp. 38–9.

flowering of radical Christianity animating Renan's most formative political experience, the Revolution of 1848. Edward Berenson has convincingly discussed the importance of the role of images of Christ in cementing a radical coalition of peasants and workers in the later years of the July Monarchy and in the Second Republic. The liberals had already argued that Christ was an egalitarian, of course, but he was given a more radical democratic role by the *democ-sacs*, who sought inspiration in the fact that Christ was an artisan, who, in preaching fraternal love, was also the first *sans-culotte*.<sup>40</sup> The political literature of the 1848 Revolution abounds with references to Jesus, who, by 1848, had become a political obsession.<sup>41</sup> The 1848 Revolution was animated by evocations of Christ in a way that was unprecedented in 1789, 1792, or 1830.

It is no coincidence that Renan took to the study of Christ at just this moment. Renan, like the socialists, was eager to claim Christ for his own political purposes at a time of genuine Christian renewal.<sup>42</sup> His interpretation owed much to its sources in liberal and socialist thought, yet he saw in Jesus an individualism and an anticipation of the scientific spirit that was all his own.

## V

Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, unlike the majority of the great positivist texts of the 1850s and 1860s, remains a narrative of disarming beauty and simplicity. Jesus, it was argued, came as close to perfection as humanity ever could; and this perfection arose not from any divine spark, nor from any wider cultural flowering, but from the inner recesses of Christ alone. Simple, uneducated, and rustic, Christ came close to God by realizing to the highest extent his own personality, his own grandeur as a thinker on morality. The modern commentator has become habituated to the model of Christ presented by Renan, the democratic socialists of the 1840s, and popular Catholic imagery. It is hard then to understand the degree to which such an assertion, such a notion of Christ as the rustic genius, was offensive to contemporary commentators, secular critics, and churchmen alike. How did Renan's account arise?

First, Renan's unique position was that of a man who had given much of his youth to orthodox Catholic learning, one who had genuinely loved Jesus in an

<sup>40</sup> Berenson, *Populist religion*, pp. 36–73.

<sup>41</sup> To cite one 50 centime pamphlet, the anonymous *Jésus-Christ. Liberté, égalité, fraternité* (Paris, 1848).

<sup>42</sup> The author is conscious that the word 'renewal' is problematic. It is certainly appropriate for the many representative figures in English culture who, like Thomas Hardy's Angel Clare, idealized past ages 'when faith was a living thing'. Such an interpretation does not really fit French society, however, which was marked by a free-thinking elite and an overwhelmingly traditional-minded mass. As many recent commentators have pointed out, France was still a christianizing country for much of the nineteenth century, still marked by the persistence of paganism in popular culture in many regions: see Judith Devlin, *The superstitious mind: French peasants and the supernatural in the nineteenth century* (New Haven, 1987). Rather than renewal, we should perhaps speak of genuine innovation in the quality of Christian thought at the highest level: the radicals' *sans-culotte* and Renan's rustic individualist were, it should again be stressed, very novel at this stage.

entirely orthodox sense. His contact with German Christology was equally important, however, and left him with a key decision to take in relation to his idol. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835) was the most important of these German influences, where the historical value of the Biblical account of Christ's life was rigorously analysed and found fatally wanting. Renan digested the work thoroughly in the years before 1848. He seems in particular to have taken Strauss's concluding statement of the dilemma left to Christologists in the wake of recent scholarly criticism to heart: if Christ is to retain his meaning, argued Strauss, the 'ideal' of his life and teachings needs to be separated in some sense from the historical baggage which he had so carefully undermined. 'The attempt to retain in combination the ideal in Christ with the historical, having failed, these two elements separate themselves: the latter falls as a natural residuum to the ground, and the former rises as a pure sublimate into the ethereal world of ideas.'<sup>43</sup> For those unwilling to accept the failings and the false teachings of the historical Christ, Strauss surveyed the options that remained: with Spinoza and Kant, simply to elevate oneself to the knowledge of the *ideal* Christ, the wisdom of God in all things (to the church's horror, since this left no real role for Christ at all as a person, the historical Christ from whose words it derived its authority); and the course taken by Hegel, which gave Christ, as the meeting-point of God and Man, Spirit and Nature, a fuller role.<sup>44</sup> Renan, like George Eliot, was happy to turn his attention from Strauss to Spinoza, to a study of the purely 'ideal' Christ of the imagination. Renan's study of German Christology for *Liberté de penser*, in 1849, had a democratic cast. The role of the Christ as an individual, quite unlike the way it is presented in the later work, is altogether ignored. This was only a stop-gap for Renan, at a time when his attitude sounded most Straussian, most similar to the *Völkisch* currents of German thought. In the article he presented the beauty of Christ (with the analogies his story presents with the lives of the Buddha and Krishna) as a simple reflection of the beautiful aspirations of his faith's adherents through the centuries: 'The beauty of Beatrice belongs to Dante and not to Beatrice; the beauty of Krishna belongs to the Indian genius, and not to Krishna; and in the same way the beauty of Jesus and Mary belong to Christianity and not to Jesus and Mary.'<sup>45</sup> His later work would take a wholly different course, towards a marked elitist individualism. The 'ideal', a vague but ever present word in his writings, had been used in a populist way in 1848. To study Christianity was to study the aspirations of the Christian masses. By 1863, he had transferred his interest to those people who raise themselves and *embody* this ideal as outstanding individuals: the mass disappears, and the historical Christ comes to the fore again. He had returned, unlike Strauss, to a celebration of the historical Christ, but from a secularist's perspective.

We can illuminate Renan's approach by turning to the reception that his

<sup>43</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *The life of Jesus critically examined* (3 vols., trans. George Eliot, London, 1846), III, p. 425.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 425–39.

<sup>45</sup> Ernest Renan, 'Les historiens critiques de Jésus', *Liberté de penser*, 3 (1849), p. 469.

book received from its more critical readers in 1863. Renan's Jesus, as I have suggested, is consistently naïve and untutored. The most orthodox of his critics were often less offended by Renan's positivism, for instance his outspoken scepticism regarding the miracles, than by the impertinence of the view that the man-god was, to put it bluntly, ignorant. Jesus (wrote one critic) was for Renan 'a young villager looking at the world through the prism of his own naïveté'. This, he argued, was a complete misrepresentation of Jesus' depth of learning: he had been a learned rabbi, the critic argued, well able for instance to quote Daniel at will.<sup>46</sup> Another critic objected that Jesus surely must have known Greek.<sup>47</sup> The bishop of Algiers summed up this Christ with bitter accuracy:

Attendez: M. Renan a trouvé un secret unique d'exalter son Jésus au-dessus de toute créature humaine, et ce secret, voulez-vous le savoir? C'est d'en faire un illuminé, un fanatique d'amour-propre, un monomane acharné. Vous venez de le voir, Jésus ne sait rien, Jésus ne connaît rien, il n'a point de théologie, point de philosophie, point de doctrine, aucune notion ni des hommes, ni des choses, que des hommes et des choses de sa petite province de Galilée; mais il a une idée,<sup>48</sup> une, rien qu'une, sans trop le comprendre.<sup>49</sup>

One commentator compiled some of the more galling examples of Christ's ignorance from the book:

Jésus n'a aucune idée de... p. 127.  
 Jésus ne sut rien de... p. 40.  
 Jésus n'a pas la moindre notion de... p. 128  
 Jésus n'avait pas la moindre idée de... p. 257  
 Jésus n'avait pas l'idée de... p. 260  
 Jésus n'eût jamais une notion bien arrêtée de... p. 305  
 L'idéalisme transcendant de Jésus ne lui permit jamais d'avoir une notion bien claire de... p. 244.<sup>50</sup>

His list gives an altogether accurate impression of the text: given to dreams in the congenial setting of Galilee, Jesus simply weaves his mission, his unique interpretation of the kingdom of God, out of nothing. Renan's Jesus is in fact pure Romantic stereotype: Emile grafted into a Nazarene setting. This rustic Jesus, much as he was presented in Renan's account, has become quite typical of modern Christian sentiment. It takes, then, a definite act of historical empathy (or indeed a swift perusal of critical commentary in 1863) to appreciate the traditionalists' shock that God should be so presented.

<sup>46</sup> L'abbé H. B\*\*\*\*\*, *La vie et la mort de Jésus-Christ selon Renan, Havet et Ramée* (Paris, 1863), pp. 21–2.

<sup>47</sup> Le docteur Baubil, *Vive Jésus! Appel au peuple du manifeste décide de M. Renan* (Paris, 1864), p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> The 'one idea' referred to by the bishop was the universal inclusiveness of the 'kingdom of God' (see ch. vii, 'Développement des idées de Jésus sur le royaume de Dieu') for all who are animated by a simple heart.

<sup>49</sup> L'Evêque d'Alger (L. Pavy), *A chacun selon ses oeuvres!!!* (Alger, 1863), p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, pp. 130–8 (ch. 3). A. Gratry, *Jésus-Christ: réponse à M. Renan* (Paris, 1864), p. 81.

Renan went to great lengths to establish Jesus' innocence of virtually any direct intellectual inheritance. Even John the Baptist, surely a likely candidate for formative influence in a scientific reconstruction of Jesus' biography, constituted a mere distraction to the inner impulse of Christ's teaching:

En somme, l'influence de Jean sur Jésus avait été plus fâcheuse qu'utile à ce dernier. Elle fut un arrêt dans son développement; tout porte à croire qu'il avait, quand il descendit vers le Jourdain, des idées supérieures à celles de Jean, et que ce fut par une sorte de concession qu'il inclina un moment vers le baptême. Peut-être, si le baptiste, à l'autorité duquel il lui aurait été difficile de se soustraire, fût resté libre, n'eût-il pas su rejeter le joug des rites et des pratiques matérielles, et alors sans doute il serait demeuré un sectaire juif inconnu; car le monde n'eût pas abandonné des pratiques pour d'autres. C'est par l'attrait d'une religion dégagée de toute forme extérieure que le christianisme a séduit les âmes élevées. Le baptiste une fois emprisonné, son école fut fort amoindrie, et Jésus se trouva rendu à son propre mouvement. La seule chose qu'il dut à Jean, ce furent en quelque sorte des leçons de prédication et de prosélytisme populaire. Dès ce moment, en effet, il prêcha avec beaucoup plus de force et s'impose à la foule avec autorité.<sup>51</sup>

Jesus, for Renan, becomes the pure free spirit, careless of family ties,<sup>52</sup> respectful of no master, free of Hellenistic and Judaic traditions in the pursuit of purely personal convictions: and it is this inner impulse of Christ that counts most in the development of the Christian faith.

Nature was his only inspiration. The lyrical portrait of the countryside of Nazareth, and the forty days in the wilderness, focus unremittingly on the confluence of absolute individuality and the benign promptings of an exuberant nature. Rousseau would have felt very at home with this Christ. Christianity indeed becomes as much a creation of a particular landscape as of any cultural setting: brought up in an atmosphere of burning religious conflict and polemic, Jesus' defining greatness was nourished not by participation in any of the many Jewish sects of the time but by solitude, high seriousness, and a sense of beauty:

Nos hésitations, nos doutes ne l'atteignirent jamais. Ce sommet de la montagne de Nāzareth, où nul homme moderne ne peut s'asseoir sans un sentiment inquiet sur sa destinée peut-être frivole, Jésus s'y est assis vingt fois sans un doute. Délivré de l'égoïsme, source de nos tristesses, qui nous fait rechercher avec âpreté un intérêt d'outre-tombe à la vertu, il ne pensa qu'à son oeuvre, à sa race, à l'humanité. Ces montagnes, cette mer, ce ciel d'azur, ces hautes plaines à l'horizon, furent pour lui non la vision mélancolique d'une âme qui interroge la nature sur son sort, mais le symbole certain, l'ombre transparente d'un monde visible et d'un ciel nouveau.<sup>53</sup>

Forgetting the origins of so much of the Sermon of the Mount in traditional Jewish religious literature (and Renan was of course supremely familiar with such material), he wrote:

Il a créé le ciel des âmes pures, où se trouve ce qu'on demande en vain à la terre, la parfaite noblesse des enfants de Dieu, la sainteté accomplie, la totale abstraction des

<sup>51</sup> Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, p. 187.

<sup>52</sup> 'Like all men exclusively preoccupied with an idea', *ibid.*, p. 138. <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.



souillures du monde, la liberté enfin, que la société réelle exclut comme une impossibilité, et qui n'a toute son amplitude que dans le domaine de la pensée. Le grand maître de ceux qui se réfugient en ce paradis idéal est encore Jésus... 'Christianisme' est ainsi devenu presque synonyme de 'religion'. Tout ce qu'on fera en dehors de cette grande et bonne tradition chrétienne sera stérile. Jésus a fondé la religion dans l'humanité, comme Socrate y a fondé la philosophie, comme Aristote y a fondé la science... Quelles que puissent être les transformations du dogme, Jésus restera en religion le créateur du sentiment pur; le Sermon sur la montagne ne sera pas dépassé. Aucune révolution ne fera que nous ne nous rattachions en religion à la grande famille intellectuelle et morale en tête de laquelle brille le nom de Jésus. En ce sens, nous sommes chrétiens, même quand nous nous séparons sur presque tous les points de la tradition chrétienne qui nous a précédés.<sup>54</sup>

So finally, what was Christ's particular achievement?

La révolution qu'il voulut faire fut toujours une révolution morale... C'est sur les hommes et par les hommes eux-mêmes qu'il voulait agir. Un visionnaire qui n'aurait eu d'autre idée que la proximité du jugement dernier n'eût pas eu ce soin pour l'amélioration des âmes, et n'eût pas créé le plus bel enseignement pratique que l'humanité ait reçu. Beaucoup de vague restait sans doute dans sa pensée, et un noble sentiment, bien plus qu'un dessein arrêté, le poussait à l'oeuvre sublime qui s'est réalisée par lui, bien que d'une manière fort différente de celle qu'il imaginait.

C'est bien le royaume de Dieu, en effet, je veux dire le royaume de l'esprit, qu'il fondait, et si Jésus, du sein de son Père, voit son oeuvre fructifier dans l'histoire, il peut bien dire avec vérité: 'Voilà ce que j'ai voulu.' Ce que Jésus a fondé, ce qui restera éternellement de lui, ... c'est la doctrine de la liberté des âmes. Déjà la Grèce avait eu sur ce sujet de belles pensées. Plusieurs stoïciens avaient trouvé moyen d'être libres sous un tyran. Mais, en général, le monde ancien s'était figuré la liberté comme attachée à certaines formes politiques... le chrétien véritable est bien plus dégagé de toute chaîne; il est ici-bas un exilé; que lui importe le maître passager de cette terre, qui n'est pas sa patrie? La liberté pour lui, c'est la vérité.<sup>55</sup>

So far we have noted the reception of Renan purely from the orthodox Catholic position. His emphasis on the autonomous quality of Jesus' solitary mission is so heavy, however, that even his fellow secularists were uneasy. They, speaking generally, took a different scholarly route, seeking to embed Jesus in a historical context. They either (as did Scherer) emphasized Jesus' role as participant and contributor to the messianic tradition, or, with the more outspokenly free-thinking Havet (in his articles 'Le Christianisme et ses origines' in the *Revue moderne*), brought out Christ's role as a Jewish patriot in the political conflicts of the first century: 'Jesus was, then, a Jew, and he never performed one act, said one word, that was not essentially Jewish.'<sup>56</sup> Both viewpoints, unlike that of Renan, are of course familiar from twentieth-century secular accounts of the life of Christ. They have in some sense stood up to

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 418–20, ch. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 191–2.

<sup>56</sup> Vacherot, *La religion*, pp. 93–6. Ernest Havet, *Les origines du Christianisme* (4 vols., Paris, 1871–84), iv, p. 73; Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, p. 262.

modern scrutiny. Compare Renan's consistent claim that Jesus through imagination achieved a complete break with any external tradition. He partly modified the time-honoured view that Christ universalised monotheism, taking it away from Jewish exclusivism. He gave St Paul's age-old argument particularly forceful expression, however: 'L'orgueil du sang lui paraît l'ennemi capital qu'il faut combattre. Jésus, en d'autres termes, n'est plus juif. Il est révolutionnaire au plus haut degré; il appelle tous les hommes à un culte fondé sur leur seule qualité d'enfants de Dieu. Il proclame les droits de l'homme, non les droits du juif; la religion de l'homme, non la religion du juif; la délivrance de l'homme, non la délivrance du juif.'<sup>57</sup>

Critics from the entire spectrum of religious commitment all found the individualism of Renan's Christ unrealistic, if not impertinent. Why did Renan lay so much emphasis upon the self-sufficiency of Christ? Far more than his French predecessors, whose appreciation of Christ had been animated by a somewhat vague and rationalist theism, Christ is given back his critical religious role, but through the perspective of what might be called the *savant* cult, the elevation of pure and selfless thought. Renan's Christ occupies a middle ground between the truly historical character and the myth of Catholic tradition. In an important sense, Jesus remains divine in becoming the embodiment of unshackled, wholly authentic, imagination. So many themes developed in Renan's text did in fact correspond to the role of Christ in traditional Catholic dogma: Christ as the teacher of morality, Christ as the man of sublime feeling, the revolutionary in religious thought, the man who most embodies the spirit of God.<sup>58</sup> Renan's Christ is indeed the anointed, but his anointment comes from within. Renan's rather loose pantheism could accommodate the divinity of a *human* hero to a far greater degree than the spiritualist forebears for whom subordination of the will, subordination of the imagination and the flesh before God, was critical. Discipline no longer took pride of place: imagination and freedom were by contrast the linchpins of the social theory of Renan, and it was in his lifelong idealization of Jesus Christ that this important distinction was most evident. In a sense, Renan's Christ can paradoxically be seen as one of the first decadent heroes, one of the first explorers of inner sensation at the expense of the claims of society and of a narrowly conceived and limiting divinity. Liberation through a consistent pantheism was an approach, and not an affront, to God. A certain interpretation of individuality, had a much fuller role to play in his thought, as

<sup>57</sup> Renan places this development, temporarily, just before the first major episodes in Jerusalem and the Temple, where Jesus becomes a 'destroyer of the Jewish faith'.

<sup>58</sup> Critics were puzzled by this, and it is obvious that they would have preferred a more outspoken denunciation of Christ, which would have been more easily undermined from their own orthodox position. Some less sophisticated reactions asserted that Renan's love of Christ was purely a mask, the kiss of Judas: Abbé Anglade, *Impossible de nier la divinité de Jésus-Christ* (Paris, 1863), p. 14. Another portrayed Renan as a man with a 'Christian imagination' and an 'atheist's heart', 'denying with his reason what he affirms with another side of his nature' – B\*\*\*\*\*, *La vie et la mort*, pp. 24–5.

it had also in that of his closest and most significant contemporaries, Taine and Flaubert.

## VI

The novelty and depth of the individualism of this generation of social thinkers, embodied in Renan's Christ, has rarely been appreciated. Their elitism was not simply a matter of political despair and neurotic vanity (both interpretations have been suggested),<sup>59</sup> but represented a key development in the origins of modern social thought. Unlike their immediate forebears in politics and philosophy, the generation of 1848 confronted the universe without the dogmatic certainty granted by a theistic perspective that accentuated the reality of an afterlife, and of a divine sanction to the obligation to reject evil. Pantheism, in a sense, represented a transitional philosophy between traditional views and modern secularism, and it permitted a far greater individualism of social outlook than had hitherto been possible. In Renan's work, divinity enters society through the work of the creative individual, be it through the teachings of Christ or through the researches of the contemporary *savant*. For his predecessors (notably Tocqueville and Cousin), God was absolutely transcendent,<sup>60</sup> and politics could offer at best only an approximation to his will, an attempt to impose a *rational* order on a society marked by irrational, egotistical passions. Renan, placing God inside the individual, challenged this fundamental assumption of post-revolutionary liberalism. Republicans in many cases continued to argue that there was a special spirituality, or immateriality, to the reason characteristic of the democratic process, that the state provided a rational principle in a society in which egotistic passions run riot. Renan in this sense was disillusioned: bowed down by the vicissitudes of French politics after 1848, he decided that the only source of value in social matters was the fullest development of the individual's intellectual faculties.<sup>61</sup> Democracy could not tap into a realm of absolute truth, of spiritual reason, that did not exist. Only the transitory individual could hope to embody and express it a little in a universe that was mysterious and forever in flux. There are analogies here with Tocqueville's aristocrat: but Renan struck a far more optimistic note. For Tocqueville, the best palliative against despotism that democracy could hope for was a strong religious sense, bolstering morality and liberty through religious fear when society has lost touch with the true, aristocratic, virtues. For Tocqueville, America's unique achievement was to have retained just such a lively and unquestioned religious sense amidst the chaos of democracy. Renan was appealing to something far more positive;

<sup>59</sup> In, for instance, Kelly, *The humane comedy*, pp. 236–44, and Roger L. Williams, *The horror of life* (London, 1986), *passim*.

<sup>60</sup> For Tocqueville, pantheism was an 'overgeneralization' characteristic of the lazy habits of democratic thinkers.

<sup>61</sup> Renan's writings were constant references for Arnold here: see the juxtaposition of Renan and Bright in the 1869 preface to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and anarchy*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 197–8.

appealing to individuals to separate and perfect themselves within democracy. He did not assume that true individuality was confined to the past.

It was more for his lasting underlying impact than for his explicit political ideas that Renan is significant. As a political philosophy, his special brand of positivism was fruitless, and open to obvious and grave objections. Who decides who qualifies as a true *savant*? How can supposedly superior individuals be held responsible within a democratic society? Renan never addresses these issues, because he ultimately accepts the institutions of liberal democracy as the least of all evils. We should not leap to the conclusion that he was an early exponent of twentieth-century authoritarianism, however. To argue for the autonomy of the intellectual within a liberal order, of course, stops far short of Mussolini's claims that the superior individual has a right to infringe the rights of his supposed inferiors.<sup>62</sup>

A new optimism enters Renan's later work, a new sense that despite democracy's inadequacies it does manage to serve as the matrix for a certain cultural progress. From the depths of anti-democratic pessimism to which the Commune drove him, he found solace in a cheerful cynicism in his final decades.<sup>63</sup> His later writings return to a number of related themes: his critique of the crass materialism of the democratic age, his nostalgia for a childhood of faith, and the persistence of Brittany in his work as the symbol of a lost past. A pastiche by Proust is so accurate an evocation of the later Renan that it can almost serve here as a summary of the thoughts of these later years, coming from a series of Proust on the now forgotten Lemoine affair.<sup>64</sup> For the original, refer to Renan's *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*:

qu'on apprene demain à fabriquer le diamant, je serai sans doute une des personnes les moins faites pour attacher à cela une grande importance. Cela tient beaucoup à mon éducation. Ce n'est guère que vers ma quarantième année, aux séances publiques de la Société des Etudes juives, que j'ai rencontré quelques-unes des personnes capables d'être fortement impressionnées par la nouvelle d'une telle découverte. A Tréguier, chez mes premiers maîtres, plus tard à Issy, à Saint-Sulpice, elle eût été accueillie avec la plus extrême indifférence, peut-être avec un dédain mal dissimulé. Que Lemoine eût ou non trouvé le moyen de faire du diamant, on ne peut imaginer à quel point cela eût peu troublé ma soeur Henriette, mon oncle Pierre, M. Le Hir ou M. Carbon. Au fond, je suis toujours resté sur ce point-là, comme sur des autres, le disciple attardé de saint Tudual et de saint Columbian... Pour moi, les seules pierres précieuses qui seraient encore capables de me faire quitter le Collège de France, malgré mes rhumatismes, et prendre la mer, si seulement un de mes vieux saints bretons consentait m'emmener sur sa barque

<sup>62</sup> Though admittedly Renan's elitism was much admired by Mussolini, who had a good knowledge of his work, Nolte, *Three faces*, p. 246.

<sup>63</sup> A cynicism that found scholarly expression in his developing scholarly interest in the philosophy of the author of Ecclesiastes: Darmesteter, *Life of Renan*, pp. 230–54.

<sup>64</sup> It is one of a series of pastiches by Proust using the Lemoine affair, which dominated the papers in 1909, as their unifying theme. In 1907, Lemoine had persuaded the president of De Beers, Sir Julius Werner, that he had discovered a cheap method for the artificial manufacture of diamonds. Convinced, Werner handed over a huge sum. In 1909, the latter pressed charges against Lemoine, who was in due course sentenced to six years' imprisonment.

apostolique, ce sont celles que les pêcheurs de Saint-Michel-en Grève aperçoivent parfois au fond des eaux, par les temps calmes, là où s'élevait autrefois la ville d'Ys, enchâssées dans les vitraux de ses cent cathédrales englouties.<sup>65</sup>

Renan, like Taine, is perhaps best known in the contemporary literature of intellectual history for the introduction of racial theory into his critical studies, one means of embedding the individual in wider, collectively minded, social explanations. I would argue that his work could not be more seriously misinterpreted. His ideal was increasingly one of self-development: not for the greater perfection of society at large, but as a means of coming closer to *reality*, approaching, to the extent that this was possible, truth. This meant escape from the delusions of the classical spirit, of the near insanity of the French intellect (for Taine); as an escape from the flood-tide of bourgeois *bêtise* (for Flaubert); and as a step closer to the Ideal, to an ever-mysterious God (for Renan). God, no longer the Platonic locus of pure intellect, pure passionless reflection, that he had been for the spiritualists (and remained for some of their inheritors in the university),<sup>66</sup> but rather was *in* the fully developed, emotional, individual, in a way that was inconceivable for previous thinkers.

I would suggest that Renan's thought contributed greatly to a shift of emphasis in social thought that had repercussions far beyond the outrage it provoked amongst religious traditionalists. The liberalism that this generation espoused was to a great extent far more individualistic than that of its predecessors, for whom the relics of a Christian dualism, a condemnation of the nullity of anything which was not rooted in the spirit, entailed an accent upon curbs on the individual as social actor. 'Individualism', as a term in social theory, has to be clarified of course: Steven Lukes identifies a wide range of different ideas denoted by the concept, including economic individualism and self-development.<sup>67</sup> Renan could be depended upon to talk about the indispensability of 'private initiative' to the modern economy (the usual French term for economic individualism at this stage), and his cultural individualism sat quite easily with the economic version: there simply was no perceived conflict between the two. Renan's 'anti-materialism' was not necessarily a critique of *bourgeois* culture as such; it was, above all, a denunciation of modern impertinence, of the disregard that he felt had become nearly universal for the natural superiorities, the dilution of the mystique of the elite.<sup>68</sup>

A new Romanticism was on the threshold in social thought, the ideal that replaced that of Cousin and his readership of stoical rationalists. Energy was replacing restraint as the keynote of ethics, and as a result the political scene

<sup>65</sup> Marcel Proust, *Pastiches et mélanges* (Paris, 1919), pp. 53–4.

<sup>66</sup> Notably Jules Simon, who continued to issue philosophical works true to spiritualist orthodoxy – like *Le devoir* (Paris, 1854) and *La religion naturelle* (Paris, 1857) – throughout the years of the Second Empire.

<sup>67</sup> Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford, 1973), *passim*.

<sup>68</sup> Sociology too ran this risk for Renan – 'LePlay can only ever see workers: as if, in a great house, we only saw the servants. The purpose is not there.' Ernest Renan, *Notes de la fin de sa vie*, Bibliothèque Nationale, NAF 14201, f. 79.

would be transformed for good. The *savant*, replacement of the stoic sage of the spiritualists and the generation of 1830, was deified as the fulfilment of God, the apotheosis of intellect and of imagination. It was a short step from here to the irrationalism of the *fin de siècle* generations. It was a significant moment, closely related to the progressive consolidation of democracy in French political culture. The threat of Americanization, materialism, and an insolent spirit of aggressive egalitarianism, for Renan the hallmarks of democratic society, could be offset only indirectly by the unintended freedom it gave to genius. If the higher values are ignored by the masses, then intellectuals like himself will at least be left alone to pursue their work. Democracy was desirable even to that meagre extent for wholly unintended reasons: in a sense this is a curious restatement of the argument of Constant's 'Liberty of the Moderns'. Here, however, the benefits of democracy are confined to the practitioners of arts and science enjoying a new kind of liberty in a new age, a much more thorough individualism of perspective than that of his more conventionally religious predecessors. Democracy leaves them free to undertake the intellectual pursuit of truth, regardless of society's constraints. This almost certainly is partly the source of Oscar Wilde's conception of 'true' individualism in the *Soul of man under socialism*, in which Renan himself is held up as the type of the free spirit and genius to which *all* people might aspire to become in a properly ordered society.<sup>69</sup> Wilde was himself intrigued by the personality of Christ,<sup>70</sup> and Renan's portrait seems to have had its impact upon the view of art espoused by the most notorious of the aesthetes.

We should, therefore, be wary of identifying Renan too closely with a narrow positivism. Yet, as we have seen, writers like Brunetière used him as a symbol for the errors of an unimaginative and stale positivism, a statement typical of social thought after 1890. This was to miss the point of his work. Renan's radicalism cut across the traditional political continuum in many ways: he was no conservative, nor was he a materialist; except during the crisis of 1870–1, he saw no appeal in the return to a monarchy, yet nor could he countenance a republican order in which individuals were brought into line by a heavy-handed collective authority. Even the progressive and radical neo-Kantians upheld the rational authority of the state over the egotism of individuals. One need only consider Durkheim's view of the state<sup>71</sup> as the embodiment of a

<sup>69</sup> 'Now and then, in the course of the century, a great man of science, like Darwin; a great poet, like Keats; a fine critical spirit, like M. Renan; a supreme artist, like Flaubert, has been able to isolate himself out of reach of the clamorous claims of others, to stand, "under the shelter of the wall", as Plato puts it, and so to realize the perfection of what was in him, to his own incomparable gain, and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world. These, however, are exceptions. The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism – are forced, indeed, so to spoil them. They find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this.' Oscar Wilde, *The soul of man under socialism* (London, 1919), pp. 1–2.

<sup>70</sup> See Guy Willoughby, *Art and Christhood: the aesthetics of Oscar Wilde* (London, 1983), passim.

<sup>71</sup> Note for instance Durkheim's tendency to identify the state not as the locus of the monopoly of power within society (Weber's definition), but 'as above all an organ of reflection'; 'we must not

superior reason that serves an essentially moral role, curbing the egotism of individuals. Such an authority was anathema to the individualist Renan.

French thought took to materialism far more slowly than its English equivalent: notoriously, Darwinism was widely regarded with suspicion,<sup>72</sup> damned as it was by the essential conservatism of scientists like Pasteur, who clung to the idea of a divine plan revealed in biological evolution.<sup>73</sup> Renan made one of the first recorded favourable French references to Darwin,<sup>74</sup> and his boldness here was as much an affront to the unorthodox theism and neo-Kantianism of many of the republican radicals as it was to the conservatives of the church. It was in the individualism that accompanied his materialism, rather than in his science per se, that his true radicalism lies. Those who rejected ‘stale and soulless positivism’ in the period before 1914 were often merely extending the work of one of its most important representatives.

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say that it is the society that thinks and decides through the State, but the State that thinks and decides through it’. Anthony Giddens, ed., *Durkheim on politics and the State* (Stanford, 1986), pp. 39, 46. See also Lewis A. Coser, ‘Durkheim’s conservatism and its implications for his sociological theory’, in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *Emile Durkheim, 1858–1917* (Columbus, 1960), pp. 211–32. Coser discusses the repercussions of Durkheim’s somewhat eccentric view that the state embodies a ‘consciousness higher and clearer’ than that of society. This view – the state as the organ of reason – owed much to the neo-Kantian and ultimately spiritualist foundations of ‘official’ theories of the state in France.

<sup>72</sup> John Farley, ‘The initial reaction of French biologists to Darwin’s *Origin of species*’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 7 (1974), pp. 275–300.

<sup>73</sup> It should be remembered that Pasteur’s famous ‘swan-necked vase’ experiment, much publicized by Pasteur himself, was greeted with waves of public enthusiasm not only for the place it now has in the history of science (for disproving the possibility of the spontaneous generation of microbes), but more spectacularly because it was seen, by Pasteur and his audience, as a decisive rebuttal of a materialist and Lamarckian view of evolution. Lamarck and the majority of French biologists argued that there was an inbuilt tendency towards ‘progress’ within the succession of the generation of organisms. Why, then, after millions of years of evolution, did primitive organisms still exist? Upholders of Lamarck were compelled to argue for their spontaneous generation. By disproving this possibility, Pasteur felt he had virtually proved the existence of a God who supervised all the details of life on earth. Gerald L. Geison, *The private science of Louis Pasteur* (Princeton, 1995), pp. 121–42. On Pasteur’s political as well as intellectual conservatism, see Philip Nord, *The republican moment: struggles for democracy in nineteenth-century France* (London, 1995), pp. 36–7.

<sup>74</sup> Petit, ‘L’esprit de la science anglaise’, p. 287.