Chapter 13

The Romantic Historian under Charles X


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With the fall of the Napoleonic empire and the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty, France entered its most Romantic era, following in the footsteps of England and the German-speaking lands. However, as a former Catholic nation in the process of resuscitating a religion assaulted by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the revolution, and the separation of church and state, France had to reconcile new Romantic inspirations with a rather complex religious history. Fortunately, Romanticism was an artistic mode that embraced the mystical and the mysterious: as a consequence, the period’s historiography could sustain a number of contradictions in its emplotment. In this context, French historian Charles Lazare Laumier (1781–1866) published his Résumé de l’Histoire des Jésuites [A Summary of Jesuit History] (1826) in which he implicitly proposed a critical examination of the rise and fall of the Society of Jesus from the point of view of a double restoration: that of the Bourbon monarchy alongside that of the Society of Jesus. His fascination with the Jesuits was of a complex, and often perplexing nature.

In this chapter, I take a close look at the structure of this rather extensive Résumé, and question the historicity and objectivity of the text, as well as the ideological implications of Laumier’s work. I pay particular attention to Laumier’s insistence on synchronizing the extinction and restoration of the Jesuits as a natural phenomenon. His approach, mostly based on expertise in institutional history, ultimately projected a natural restoration of the Society of Jesus. This analysis attempts to determine whether Laumier’s work in the era of the Society’s restoration helped the Jesuit cause, or contributed to the formation of a Jesuit legend.

1826, when the Résumé was published, was a relatively quiet year in France, but the calm would not last for long. The revolution of 1830 ended the Bourbon attempt to restore absolutism, and gave way to a regime that tried to be more inclusive of the experience of the revolutions. The Bourbon monarchy had been restored in 1815 with the reign of Louis XVIII (1815–1824), followed by that of Charles X (1824–1830), Louis’ younger brother, who pursued a conservative agenda. Both Louis XVIII and Charles X were brothers of Louis XVI, the king who was guillotined in 1793 as the citizen Louis Capet, and both were rather
elderly when they took the throne. Consequently, it was more difficult for these monarchs to project an image of youth onto a regime that was already being called ancient, especially because they were supported by the Society of Jesus, a Catholic order culturally associated with the *ancien régime*. Moreover, Charles X’s monarchy would never match the strength, virility, and modernity of Napoleon’s. Scott Eastman writes that

> Historians have pointed to the fact that the French were looking for a great military victory abroad at the time, in order to reconnect with the Napoleonic age as well as to compete with Britain. They were also concerned to open up new markets to nascent industry. Perhaps most importantly, Charles X, the restored monarch of France, was looking to suppress internal dissent and reestablish absolute monarchy.¹

In the midst of this superficially calm period, when there was a need to provide the people with a clear understanding of their recent history, the discipline of historiography encountered a key moment of re-development and renewal: one urgent task was an evaluation of the restoration of the monarchy. The alternation of political regimes obliged historians to explain the past fifty years of national instability and to trace them back to their roots in the Renaissance. As a result, historians like Laumier opted to explain events within the framework of a three-century cycle, directly connecting the Renaissance and the Restoration. Historians, from Laumier’s point of view, were charged with recalling times of glory in the history the French monarchy, but they had to do so in an indirect fashion in order to give the appearance of objective and scientific evaluation.

Moreover, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the perception of the Renaissance as an apogee in French culture was enhanced by Romantic inspirations across the arts. Artists and historians of the restoration sought *synchronization* with the sixteenth century. The Renaissance became an idealized time period and many traveled to Italy in order to find Romantic inspiration in the well-preserved buildings of Florence or Venice: for example, the poets Alfred de Musset (1810–1857) and George Sand (1804–1876) while working on the play *Lorenzaccio*. Perhaps this was due to the common insistence on individual potentials, among which imagination was praised above all others and recognized as the essence of the human spirit, beyond life and death and revered in