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CHATEAUBRIAND'S "RENÉ" AS A PHILOSOPHICAL REACTION TO THE  
ENLIGHTENMENT AND EARLY ROMANTIC SENTIMENT

by

Christopher M. Flood

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of French and Italian

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

### CHATEAUBRIAND'S "RENÉ" AS A PHILOSOPHICAL REACTION TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND EARLY ROMANTIC SENTIMENT

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Master of Arts

For over 200 years "René," Chateaubriand's short fictional interlude in his grand argument for the restoration of Christianity after the French Revolution, has been read as the founding text of the French Romantic movement. While this text did in fact serve to define many of the characteristics of French Romantic literature, simply labeling it as such is anachronistic and obscures the more profound philosophical and theological claims Chateaubriand was actually attempting to illustrate. After an examination of the discrepancy between the author's intentions and the general perception, this study will briefly consider some of the traditional readings of "René," specifically in an effort to expose the inadequacies that have led to misinterpretation. At this point, an analysis of evolving philosophical and aesthetic ideals in the European tradition, particularly focusing on how Chateaubriand incorporated them into his Christian model, will reveal "René" as the author intended. While Chateaubriand has rightly been considered an anti-

Enlightenment thinker, this assessment exposes a generally unnoticed and decidedly anti-Romantic tendency in his writings. Once restored to these original literary and philosophical contexts “René” coincides quite clearly with Chateaubriand’s efforts to reinstate an eclectic, modernized, and aesthetically grounded form of traditional Christianity. Furthermore, it can finally be understood as an anticipatory effort aimed at disparaging rather than encouraging the burgeoning Romantic sentiment.

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## Introduction

When François René de Chateaubriand published his monumental work on Christianity and French culture in 1802, he was addressing a very different society than the one he had known in his youth. France was still suffering the effects of the Revolution's long and terrible aftermath, a condition he describes in his introduction to the work. In it, Chateaubriand laments the chaos enveloping his beloved France after it rejected both the monarchy and religion, the two institutions that had previously maintained order and fostered the creation of a grand, beautiful society. Inspired by this woeful state of affairs, Chateaubriand undertook an enormous project, an effort to reunite France with its traditional religion. Fortuitously, it was at this same time that Napoleon, striving to impose his own order on the nation, realized the invaluable role religion had played in the past and hopefully would again. Chateaubriand's work was welcomed by political and religious powers alike. However, the text, or at least one part of it, had an unforeseen effect on intellectual and artistic circles. This unintentional influence quickly extended to the general public as well.

“René,” a brief fictional interlude in the otherwise forthright Christian apology truly resonated with the French people. Within its pages, Chateaubriand managed to capture the sentiments of his time in such a way that this work would define art and literature for decades to come. The tragic title character, embodying the epistemological uncertainty that prevented post-Revolutionary France from reconciling itself to the modern world it had created, became something of a model for modern life. This notion has colored our assessment of the work since, and so even today we read “René” as the

quintessential Romantic work. While this largely resulted from Chateaubriand's own intentionally ambiguous and philosophically meandering style, it was actually quite contrary to the author's intention. So then, if Chateaubriand was not offering René as an imitable response to post-Revolutionary concerns, what was his goal?

This question can only be answered by a broad analysis of the work and the greater philosophical text of which it was originally part. While a somewhat anachronistic reading does indeed reveal the classic topoi of Romantic literature, situating the text within its historical and philosophical contexts yields a very different image of both the work and its title character. Specifically, such an analysis reveals much of Chateaubriand's overall project and offers important insights into early nineteenth-century France.

While most think of Chateaubriand simply as an author and historian, he was, first and foremost, a philosopher in the traditional sense. As illustrated by his later appointment to high-ranking diplomatic positions and his election to the Académie, Chateaubriand was well educated in languages, rhetoric, classic philosophy, politics, and theology. In his writings, Chateaubriand cites many intellectual influences including Hume, Rousseau, Augustine, and Plato (*Mémoires* 697, 750, 3566).<sup>1</sup> Chateaubriand's affinity for Plato may come as a surprise to some considering his generally disapproving view of ancient, "pagan" systems of thought. However, when one considers the underlying premises of Chateaubriand's arguments for a restoration of Christianity, much of which is firmly grounded in modified, Neo-Platonic aesthetic propositions, the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that his admiration for Hume was substantially limited to his works as a historian and not for his skepticism or aesthetics.

connection is quite logical.<sup>2</sup> In fact, this idea forms part of the foundation for my assessment of the texts in question.

René's story, while temporally limited within the narrative function of the text, actually spans centuries of European thought, particularly relating to aesthetics. In this short, philosophical work of fiction, Chateaubriand poetically encapsulates much of his grand argument comprised in *Le Génie du Christianisme*. "René" is a response to over 2,000 years of western philosophy, from Plato to Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Hume, and, quite significantly, to Chateaubriand's intellectual nemesis, Diderot. Chateaubriand skillfully constructs a new French, Christian experience within the grand framework of Neo-Platonic, positivist aesthetics, replacing overtly pagan subsets with modernized versions of *Ancien Régime* Christianity. Employing this method, Chateaubriand draws on the ancients, on the Church Fathers, on medieval poetry, on Renaissance Christian humanism and even on modern rationality to forge a new *old Christianity*; that is, a version of Christianity that could simultaneously incorporate traditional European Catholicism and the modern philosophical underpinnings of French culture, rendering it palatable to modern sensibilities yet wholly Christian.

One may still ask, how and why aesthetics can play such an important role in an argument for Christianity. This may seem even less clear to those who would consider

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that, while many of Chateaubriand's ideals seem to have been heavily influenced by Neo-Platonism, references to Plotinus are noticeably absent from his writings. In fact Chateaubriand only makes occasional passing references to the father of Neo-Platonism. Based on my studies of his method, I would venture to guess that Plotinus may have been too pagan for Chateaubriand's liking. He similarly manages to argue around Plato, referring specifically to Christian Neo-Platonists rather than their non-Christian counterparts. Likewise, Ficino is surprisingly left out of Chateaubriand's Neo-Platonically based Christianity. Here I believe the problem may have been one of nationality. As I will later show, Chateaubriand was specifically concerned with French Catholicism. His project was based much more on culture than theology.

“René” outside of its original context, as the significance of many images is lost without Chateaubriand’s exposition in *Le Génie*. The answer to this question of aesthetics is innately related to Chateaubriand’s discussion of ruins, the *fossilized remains* of prior cultures. They are, of course, often remnants of religious artistic creation, though time seems to render formal even that which was initially functional. These creations of man remain as a powerful testament to the greatness that preceded modern societies and, as was proven in the Renaissance, can inspire modern thought and shape current sensibilities. It is then no surprise that ruins are one of the most important and ubiquitous images in “René” and that the author devotes several pages to their study and aesthetic effects in *Le Génie*. In the latter, Chateaubriand distinguishes Christian ruins from those of non-Christian cultures; the sacred nature of Christian ruins compensating for their apparent lack of comparative elegance (Génie 2:44). He further separates ruins into two categories, those that are the work of time and those that are the work of man (Génie 2:40). In the ensuing discussion of ruins, he writes that those created by time are agreeable; they inspire contemplation. On the contrary, those created by man represent devastation. They are unnatural and disjointed from their surroundings. They bring to mind violence and despair. He writes, “elles n’offrent que l’image du néant, sans une puissance réparatrice” (Génie 2:40). René confronts the ruins of post-Revolutionary France, particularly his paternal chateau and country church, ancient Greece and Rome. The title character even carries out a sort of Rousseauian journey in search of lost purity, eventually finding Native Americans in the savage wilderness. Even here, however, nature is crumbling as it gives way to modern society with the invading Europeans forcing their way of life on untamed lands and peoples. Chateaubriand’s discussion of

these ruins provokes a contemplation of the clash between Christianity and the sensual world of the Enlightenment. Wherever he goes, René's world is one of ubiquitous philosophical and theological conflict.

Throughout his travels, René is constantly forced to assess Christianity. Specifically, it seems he must ponder fundamental questions about how religion can contribute to and detract from life on both individual and societal levels. The more René works to escape this dilemma, the more pointed and necessary it becomes. At home, his beloved sister becomes a nun, symbolically dying as she takes her vows. He flees to other countries, but finds the sites of Christian martyrdoms in Rome. While traveling in Protestant England, René is moved as he discovers the almost hidden statue of James II, the last Catholic to reign over that nation. Even in the savage wilderness at the ends of the Earth, one of René's spiritual and intellectual guides is a priest who unsuccessfully tries to teach him to imbue his life with Christian meaning after news of his sister's death destroys him.

"René" reflects an ongoing philosophical and theological debate. It is an intellectual dialogue on at least two levels. First and most apparent, it is an account of a conversation between three men, the one recounting his life of misery. Secondly, and more profoundly, it is Chateaubriand's brief fictional conversation with Europe's artistic and philosophical history, up to and including the European reeducation of indigenous Americans.

While it is true that, in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in Chateaubriand as more than a historian, a certain misunderstanding of his literature persists. Publications by numerous authors including Marc Fumaroli, Bruno Chaouat,

and Christophe Penot have illustrated some of the more profound dimensions I am attributing to the works of Chateaubriand. However, I fear that these studies continue to present an incomplete image of the author and his works. Furthermore, in what concerns “René,” there remains a tendency to rely on a somewhat traditional, autobiographical reading which I believe severely distracts from the philosophical subtext of the work.

I hope, through this historical and philosophical analysis of “René” and its parent text, *Le Génie du Christianisme*, to provide a more faithful and, thus, more profound assessment of Chateaubriand’s most famous work and of the author himself. Despite the limits of this project, I intend to thoroughly demonstrate the author’s philosophical debts through an evaluation of his overt references and reactions to, as well as his more discreet borrowings from, the history of European philosophy. With these insights into his work and his method, Chateaubriand will emerge as the clever philosopher he was. Similarly, the ingenuity of his Christian, aesthetic project, of which “René” is part, will become clear. Only then will we be able to discard many of the Romantic functions traditionally attributed to “René.” Then left standing bare, as a somewhat traditional philosophical dialogue following both literary and philosophical conventions established by ancient thinkers and carried down through European Catholicism, we can read it as it was intended. As a response to the Enlightenment and the Revolution, hinting at a sort of modernized, Neo-Platonic Christianity, but more importantly, disparaging rather than founding the burgeoning Romantic sentiment.

## “René” and Le Génie du Christianisme

In his introduction to Le Génie du Christianisme, Chateaubriand describes the social conditions into which he introduced his work. He writes, “la France sortait du chaos révolutionnaire; tous les éléments de la société étaient confondus : la terrible main qui commençait à les séparer n’avait point encore achevé son ouvrage ; l’ordre n’était point encore sorti du despotisme et de la gloire” (Génie 1: 43). Not surprisingly, the timely publication of this work coincided with Napoleon’s efforts to restore Catholicism though this cannot entirely account for his efforts (Bowman “Chateaubriand” 157; Vidler 609). Chateaubriand overtly declares some of his motives for writing the text. He continues, “ce fut donc, pour ainsi dire, au milieu des débris de nos temples que je publiai *le Génie du christianisme* pour rappeler dans ces temples les pompes du culte et les serviteurs des autels” (Génie 1: 43). By this description, Le Génie is a self-proclaimed apology for Christianity written in response to the general desacralization wrought upon French society by the Revolution and, more specifically, by the Terror.

Chateaubriand declared that to truly consider Christianity in all its facets we must examine it in two distinct parts, the doctrinal aspects and the poetic aspects, and compare these with other systems (“Défense” 278). Le Génie can essentially be reduced to an enormous, logical proof that Christianity is, by the author’s reasoning, both morally and aesthetically superior to all other religions and philosophies. He specifically targets “pagan” belief systems, e.g. ancient Greek mythology, and Enlightenment thought. Nonetheless, he understood that his world had already incorporated ancient wisdom and that it had come to respect, even rely upon, the Enlightenment concept of reason. So,

rather than attempt to entirely discredit the ancients or popular modern thinkers who had deviated from strict religious interpretation he tried to imbue faith and worship with “les couleurs de la sensibilité moderne” (Bénichou 105). This effort is reflected in the structure and content of the text as he strives to rationally demonstrate that Christianity does not necessarily refute these systems, rather, it improves upon them.

Chateaubriand devotes considerably less time to specifically outlining a moral, or doctrinal, argument for Christianity than to the more complex aesthetic argument. This lesser, non-aesthetically based portion of the work contains a simple, straightforward comparison of Christianity and other belief systems. For instance, he lists examples of wisdom from other faiths and traditions and then goes on to show that what good can be discovered therein is already subsumed, and often expounded or improved upon, in Christianity (*Génie* 1: 107-13).<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere he emphasizes the importance and beauty of mystery in the Christian religion, specifically in contrast to the presumptuous rationality of the Enlightenment (*Génie* 1: 60-66). However, even in this, he appeals to the aesthetic argument. In fact, throughout his discussion of the doctrines, beauty is often offered as at least a premise supporting, if not as conclusive proof of, truthfulness. It is the beauty of the doctrines, of Christian writings, of the ordinances, that makes them true. So, it is Chateaubriand’s aesthetic argument that merits the greatest attention, which, in spite of *Le Génie*’s self-proclaimed religiosity, might lead one to ask whether this work is truly centered on questions of religion.

It is true that his argument is clearly couched in religious terms, nevertheless, many have questioned the authenticity of Chateaubriand’s devotion (Switzer 30). Critics

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<sup>3</sup> He specifically cites commandments from the Zoroastrian, Indian, Egyptian, druidic, and Roman traditions along side the laws of Minos, Solon, and Pythagoras.



argue that much of Chateaubriand's reaction to conditions in France, his personal case of *mal du siècle*, resulted from self-interested despair over the displacement of his noble class (Crossley "Mal" 487). Whether his motives were altruistic or self-serving, *Le Génie* was a monumental and influential text throughout the nineteenth century, not so much for its theological or historical exposition, but rather as a "canonical reference for religious sentimentality" (Blum xxiv; Vidler 609). Conservative Romantics, among which Chateaubriand is generally classified, "revered the past as the repository of truth and value... and respected the ordering power of medieval Christianity" (Crossley "Romanticism" 715). Thus, in *Le Génie*, Chateaubriand is not necessarily seeking religion *qua* religion, but the pre-Revolutionary, social order that religion alone was able to establish. As Christopher Blum points out, "what dies with the French Revolution was not merely a political order, it was an entire way of life" (Blum xvi). France was in the midst of a cultural identity crisis, at least it seems that Chateaubriand labored under this impression. Blum asserts that "Chateaubriand had discovered the value of culture in the experience of its loss" and thus for him, "a cultural restoration [was] more important than a political restoration" (Blum xxi-xxiii).

This overarching cultural concern is apparent in the text. Throughout *Le Génie*, Christianity noticeably refers only to French Catholicism. With the exception of Jesus, Paul, and St. Augustine, the Christian geniuses Chateaubriand offers as exemplars are all French. The art, the music, the architecture, all examples given are specifically French Catholic.<sup>4</sup> Of course, as his argument specifically concerns the aesthetics of Christianity,

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<sup>4</sup> While he does in sections mention other Christian philosophers, e.g. Newton and Bacon, deference always goes to the higher authority and greater minds of French philosophers, in particular Pascal. Chateaubriand even makes overt attacks on English,

this is no insignificant fact. The better part of the religious sentimentality Chateaubriand is trying to evoke is based on the beautiful works of art that only French Christianity had inspired and which remained throughout the country as reminders of France's fairly recent past. Moreover, these remnants of French Catholicism were abundant and easily accessible to the masses.

His argument, then, goes something like this: "Christianity is true because it is good and beautiful," as proven by its beautiful doctrines and the beautiful works of art it has inspired; this "aesthetic, positivistic aspect of his apologetics was to have widespread influence" (Bowman "Chateaubriand" 157). Yet we must ask, how can truthfulness be derived from beauty? His logic here rings of the often-quoted and influential Bible verse stating that the goodness of something can be determined by an examination of what it produces, "ye shall know them by their fruits" (King James Bible, Matt. 7.16). But rather than turn to the authority of the Bible in his efforts to convince members of the overly-philosophized post-Enlightenment society, Chateaubriand uses his own modernized, eclectic, and Franco-centric reworking of Neo-Platonic aesthetics to make this point. Thus for his argument, beauty and truth are innately connected, as they are in the Platonic tradition, a fact that is logically provable and exemplified only in traditional, French Christianity.

For Chateaubriand, the Christian aesthetic experience is not secondary, or some by-product of greater religious experience, it is fundamental to the whole of religion. Conversely, the complete aesthetic experience is only possible within the Christian

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German, and Italian thinkers, artists, and schools of thought. See the *Défense*, pages 270ff. Goethe is included among his targets, which seems strange given similarities between the emerging German Idealist movement and some of Chateaubriand's own philosophical ideals.

framework. He explains that man has an infinite desire for the absolute, but there is a generally insurmountable gap between man and the infinite, God. The fruits of Christianity, the art it inspires, momentarily close this gap by permitting man to experience the infinite and the absolute. It is only through the religious aesthetic experience that man can be reconciled to the object his desire. Thus, Chateaubriand's concept of the aesthetic experience consists primarily of this brief union of the finite and the infinite. Experiencing Beauty in Christian art is synonymous with experiencing Truth in the form of a temporary communion with God. As such, beauty instructs and inspires. It is a reflected quality of God simultaneously serving as the justification for, primary function, and principle result of Christian art.

Art alone cannot achieve this; the religious aspect of the aesthetic experience is necessary. According to Chateaubriand's model, Christianity "satisfies the imagination and the emotions, inspires beautiful works of art, [and] contributes to civilization and progress" (Bowman "Chateaubriand" 157). Chateaubriand declares that, thanks to the unique spiritual nature of Christianity, its art is furnished with a perfect and abstract "beau idéal" that cannot be achieved by materialistic cults; it forcefully fights against and corrects ugliness, gives sublimity to the human form, and generally provides subjects that are more beautiful and richer than mythology (*Génie* 1: 393). In short, art that depicts Christian subjects is, by virtue of the subject matter, necessarily infinite and absolute whereas art depicting any other subject inevitably falls short. The Christianity Chateaubriand is trying to achieve through relative aesthetic comparisons to other systems is more than religious; it is cultural. Now then, we must ask how "René" fits into this argument.

Chateaubriand situates the short fictional interlude that is René's story in a chapter entitled "Du Vague des passions" under the greater heading of "Poétique du Christianisme" in a discussion of poetry's effect on man. Although it was written as part of the overall text for *Le Génie*, it enjoyed a far greater initial and enduring success when published separately. Removed from the original context, it inaugurated a literary revolution (Bowman "Chateaubriand" 157; Fumaroli 207). Within its original context, many understand "René" to function somewhat ambiguously as a cautionary tale (Crossley "Romanticism" 715). However, removed from that context, it became something quite different, the seminal work of the French Romantic tradition. This was quite contrary to the author's design. Jean-Christophe Cavallin comments on this discrepancy, he writes, "René fut lu comme un portrait peignant par le menu d'un certain état d'âme, quand il se voulait l'acte d'un grand principe ; il fut copié et non compris... son auteur avait eu pour intention d'y donner à lire 'le fond de l'humanité', autrement dit, la supériorité partout lisible des destinées humaines" (64). In fact, Marc Fumaroli records that Chateaubriand "va jusqu'à ne plus reconnaître *René* pour sien et souhaiter pouvoir faire qu'il n'ait jamais été écrit ni publié" (Fumaroli 207).<sup>5</sup>

As to the author's intentions, Chateaubriand himself elaborates on why he wrote "René" and included it in *Le Génie*. He emphatically declares concerning the final scene in "René" that "le Père Souël ne laisse aucun doute sur le but et les moralités religieuses de l'histoire de *René*" ("Défense" 271). It is, before all else, a story with a moral. The author explains that the text illustrates "la puissance d'une religion qui peut seule fermer

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<sup>5</sup> In the original text for *Le Génie*, Chateaubriand makes numerous references to the story of René, both before and after the chapter containing it. This would indicate that it was initially intended as part of the work. In later editions, he removed "René" and all references to it.

des plaies que tous les baumes de la terre ne sauraient guérir (“Défense” 269). He continues, “les folles rêveries de René commencent le mal, et ses extravagances l’achèvent... ainsi le malheur naît du sujet, et la punition sort de la faute” (“Défense” 270-1). Modern critics recognize further psychoanalytic warnings in “René.” Tom Conner writes that “René” illustrates the harmful effects of “selfish, if not asocial,” behavior and “of the libido unleashed upon itself” (Conner 118). Stylistically, these descriptions effectively color “René” as something akin to a Greek tragedy, and in a sense it does closely resemble that form. However, Chateaubriand argues that there are some important differences between his text and those ancient works.

Chateaubriand describes the events in “René” as a “catastrophe empruntée à la fois de l’antiquité païenne et de l’antiquité sacrée,” but that it has been sanctified by Christianity (“Défense” 271). This sanctification is principally the result of two aspects: the insertion of a just, Christian God; and the exclusion of fate. Ancient concepts of God, or gods, particularly in the Greek and Roman traditions paint an image that is all too human for Chateaubriand. Comparing Christianity and ancient traditions, he writes, “nous aurons même cet avantage, que notre Dieu n’agira pas injustement et au hasard comme Jupiter: il répandra les flots de la douleur sur la tête des mortels, non par caprice, mais pour une fin à lui seul connue” (Génie 1: 317). There is underlying purpose in Chateaubriand’s worldview and God oversees all with that purpose in mind. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Chateaubriand’s world is just and grounded in causal relationships, though neither fatalistic nor deterministic. René and Amélie experience the natural consequences of choices they freely made. The author succinctly states, “la racine du mal est la vanité, et la racine du bien la charité” (Génie 1: 283).

René's focus is always inward, whereas Amélie sacrifices herself, first metaphorically, in order to save her brother from sin, and then physically in caring for the contagious, suffering nuns. Thus, as he reminds the reader, "il ne faut pas perdre de vue qu'Amélie meurt heureuse et guérie, et que René finit misérablement" ("Défense" 271). So, for Chateaubriand, there is hope. Through the story of René, he showed that humans could, by choosing to overcome egotism, find joy and healing.

The Romantic reading gives quite a different image and, in fact, this image distorts the philosophical interpretation I propose. It is true that in "René" we find all of the quintessentially Romantic themes such as "spiritual longing, the inner void, solitude, restlessness, uncertainty, melancholia, the vanity of all things, and the obsession with love and death" (Crossley "Romanticism" 715). Similarly, "the settings – stormy sea-shore, wild nature, the Gothic chateau at Comberg – are in the Romantic melancholy mode" (Bowman "René" 684). Frank Paul Bowman writes that "the somewhat autobiographical hero exemplifies the *vague des passions* or *mal du siècle*, he feels that the past is dead and in ruins and the future offers little hope" (Bowman "René" 684). This Romantic idea of *mal du siècle* is generally defined as "the spiritual sickness of Romanticism... the manifestation of an alienated subjectivity seeking to unite with something greater than itself" (Crossley "Mal" 487). It illustrated "dissatisfaction with the present... [and] with the obstacles which were placed against the fulfillment of desire... [it] reflected a broader quest for meaning and purpose in the universe" (Crossley "Mal" 487). In short, "the malady arose on account of the discrepancy between the true object of human desire, which was the infinite, and the terrestrial goals which human beings could actually achieve" (Crossley "Mal" 487). To a great extent, these definitions

are drawn from Chateaubriand's "René." However, this perception of the problem essentially makes the situation seem entirely hopeless. So then, which is it? Both. Chateaubriand presents his story to simultaneously describe the sentiments of the day and encourage cultural Christian hope in the face thereof. Despite his intentions, "René" was to become the touchstone of Romantic hopelessness. So then, how were his story and message misappropriated?

French Romanticism essentially grew out of the same concerns that plagued Chateaubriand. Like the Romantics, he questioned "the capacity of reason to arrive at the truth," however, for Chateaubriand it was in response to what he saw as anti-Christian and anti-establishment aspects of the Enlightenment. For the Romantics, this "[valorized]... mystery and fantasy, dream and reverie" instead of reason (Crossley "Romanticism" 715). Chateaubriand admits reason, even relies upon it at times, but he accepts its inherent limitations regarding religion. He "blended Rousseauism with Catholicism, and marked a sharp reaction against the liberalism and individualism of the Enlightenment, which were held responsible for the social dislocation wrought by the Revolution" (Crossley "Romanticism" 715). The overall Romantic Movement similarly reflected this and was, by and large, a reaction to post-Revolutionary instability (Crossley "Romanticism" 715). Nonetheless, Chateaubriand distinguishes himself from other writers of the period by his hopeful outlook and belief that a return to certain traditions is necessary and possible. "René," once removed from its literary and philosophical contexts, only seems to illustrate the effects of the changing social and political environment on the individual. Later Romantic writers, and even average individuals

experiencing the aftermath of the Revolution, saw only a poignant reflection of the world they knew and not the author's intended hopeful message.

The context, or lack thereof, forced Chateaubriand's "René" into a niche that the author neither desired nor foresaw. While in modern thought, this is not necessarily of concern, it does cloud the discussion and obfuscate the true nature of the principle character and his story. Once we reinsert the work into its original textual and extra-textual contexts, "René" clearly illustrates Chateaubriand's aesthetic argument and his call for a cultural *rebirth*.



## Traditional Readings of “René”

Since it appeared in the early nineteenth century, there have been numerous interpretations of “René.” In this section, I will briefly consider three commonly accepted readings in order to better situate my argument. While none of the three necessarily precludes the others, nor do they preclude the philosophical approach that informs my project, they are not entirely compatible and offer generally incomplete images of the work, the author, and his time. In fairness to other scholars, I must admit that most critics work with some combination of these readings rather than committing themselves to one in particular. While this does create a more accurate image of the work, such approaches continue nonetheless to downplay the significance of Chateaubriand’s philosophical influences. A brief assessment of these different readings will illustrate both their strengths and shortcomings in relation to the intellectual context. Furthermore, this will enable us to separate the ideas from the superficial literary traditions and situate them within the context.

### Autobiography

Most prominent among the three readings is the autobiographical approach. Indeed, most critics take as given a certain autobiographical function in “René” (Bowman “René” 684; Clément 26; Switzer 15). There are numerous aspects of René that could lead one to imagine it as, to some degree, a literary reflection on and of Chateaubriand’s life. First is of course the name. René was one of Chateaubriand’s own given names as well as the name of his father. Moreover, the character confronts the same

epistemological crisis, that of post-Revolutionary France and the abolishment of religion, that Chateaubriand faced. Additionally, the character's social situation, displaced lower nobility, position in his family, the youngest, and the story's geographical locations all neatly correspond to the life of the author. Likewise, critics devote considerable attention to Chateaubriand's relationship with his older sister, Lucile. However, despite this seemingly overwhelming evidence supporting an autobiographical assessment, there is a very noticeable and intentional inconsistency that forces the reader to question it.

Chateaubriand himself makes the greatest argument against a strict autobiographical approach. As he asserts, there is no question as to the intention of the work in light of Père Souël's chastisement in the final pages. René is not held up as an example, rather he is scorned. He typifies the hopeless, futile, narcissistic reaction that Chateaubriand specifically decries in the greater text. He writes:

Mais, depuis la destruction des monastères et les progrès de l'incrédulité, on doit s'attendre à voir se multiplier au milieu de la société... des espèces de Solitaires tout à la fois passionnés et philosophes, qui, ne pouvant ni renoncer aux vices du siècle, ni aimer ce siècle, prendront la haine des hommes pour de l'élévation de génie, renonceront à tout devoir divin et humain, se nourriront à l'écart des plus vaines chimères, et se plongeront de plus en plus dans une misanthropie orgueilleuse qui les conduira à la folie ou à la mort. ("Défense" 270)

If "René" is indeed autobiographical, it could only be described as self-deprecation, a style to which Chateaubriand was not typically inclined. He was generally known among his contemporaries for his persistent pride (La Tour du Pin 198). In fact he spends a good

deal of his “Défense” cataloguing his credentials and expounding upon his personal qualification as a Christian apologist (262 ff.).

Most of the aspects previously listed can be accounted for by something other than autobiography. The name René, for example, could be explained in many ways. First, it is not so unusual if we consider it within an allegorical context. *René* of course means *reborn*. France and the individual Frenchman were reborn through the Revolution in an almost Christian sense of the word. As though baptized in the bloodbath of the Revolution, *le royaume* became *la République*, *les paysans* took upon themselves the name of *citoyens*. As the *Ancien Régime* died, a new regime that had been unwittingly nurtured within its borders took its place. This new regime was, like René, born only at the cost of its mother’s life. These more symbolic ideas aside, there are still others who assert that Chateaubriand chose this name for his contemptible character as an insult to a father with whom he shared a relatively brief and less than amicable relationship (La Tour du Pin 198-9). Locations, periods, societal questions, these may simply reflect what the author knew. After all, to borrow an old analogy, a painting cannot help but show the brushstrokes of the artist.

The most incriminating evidence of autobiography actually concerns Chateaubriand’s relationship with Lucile. It is well documented that the two were particularly close and many have questioned whether their relationship strayed beyond the bounds of propriety (Clément 25). There are some interesting similarities between Amélie and Lucile. Both took on a sort of mother function in relation to their younger brothers. While Lucile did not commit herself to a convent, she did marry and was thus inaccessible. Some might even point to the fact that both Lucile and Amélie died young,

this is of course irrelevant to the conception of the work as Lucile's unexpected death came after the publication of "René." However, when this question is posed to Chateaubriand biographers, even those who espouse the autobiographical approach to "René," they emphatically declare that there was no incest (Clément 26). Lucile was, nonetheless, quite upset by the story presented in "René" (Clément 26). In actual fact, incest was a fairly common convention in literature of the time, particularly in cases where a sister fills in for the displaced mother (Rank 427-30).<sup>6</sup> From the classical period on, certain rules and literary devices regarding incest were derived from Aristotle's Poetics and commonly employed (Rank 428).

This ambiguous, autobiographical aspect of "René" recalls François Ricard's discussion of another author's work. In it he describes four levels of autobiography forming what he refers to as "l'espace autobiographique" (24-5). Within these levels, there is room for straightforward autobiography, but also more ambiguous types. He goes so far as to propose that, for some authors, the characters who most closely resemble their creators are the least obviously autobiographical (29). René bears a strong resemblance to Chateaubriand in many ways, but these resemblances are generally superficial. Dissimilarities between the two are far more important and actually inform the whole purpose of the story.

"René" is necessarily autobiographical to a certain degree. The author colored the story with his own concerns and philosophical struggles. However, to call "René" autobiographical in a strict sense implies a specific intent on the part of the author. Chateaubriand was fairly clear about his intentions, and so we must dismiss this

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<sup>6</sup> Further examples of this convention can be found in the writings of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Lessing, and Goethe.

argument. Furthermore, one might wonder if such an interpretation could sufficiently account for the story's more mysterious substructure and relation to *Le Génie*. It cannot. While it certainly may provide some clarification, as a whole, it falls short.

### Allegory

Another common analysis of French Romantic literature, often specifically centered on "René," colors it as an allegory describing post-Revolutionary France and the dilemma facing many of its inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> As such, the characters become general symbols rather than representations of specific individuals. This approach tends towards a historical, rather than philosophical, analysis. Nonetheless, such an assessment is, more or less, congruent with the overall intention of the *Le Génie*. Actually, situated within this context, an allegorical reading of "René" fits much better than an autobiographical one.

Here the focus is on the rupture between church and state, and between old and new France. If we assume that the noble René represents *l'état*, in the vein of Louis XIV's declaration, then many other symbols quickly come into view. This representative function of the title character becomes clear when considering the early emphasis on René's status as a displaced noble having been thrust out from his father's home with virtually no inheritance, the images of the sold-off and decaying family chateau, and the way in which René distinguishes himself from the common man in their reactions to the

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<sup>7</sup> See Clément's discussion of Chateaubriand's writings as veiled moral and political histories rather than fiction in *Chateaubriand aujourd'hui*. See also Margaret Waller's "Cherchez la femme: Male Malady and Narrative Politics in the French Romantic Novel" for a general discussion of the allegorical function in Romantic literature and some specific discussion of "René."

church bells. Amélie, the nun, can be seen as the Church, or religion in general. Despite 'naturally' belonging together and their overwhelming desire to remain in that state, René and Amélie are forced to separate. René describes the joy that is only possible while with Amélie, and the absolute despair that comes with losing her (182-4). More to the point, René's own existence is meaningless in her absence. He loses all grounding and becomes a nomad.

Many of René's troubles result from his violent birth, which cost his mother's life (169). His father, whose death was not slow to follow, immediately sent him away to be raised by "des mains étrangères." René is, from the beginning, torn from the past. Like the new France created by the violent Revolution, there is no grounding, no connection to the former legitimate and traditional government or way of life. In his quest for meaning, René wanders Europe. He visits the sublime sites of nature, like Mount Etna. He visits the ruins of Rome and Greece, but in the end, nothing can fill the void. Similarly, Enlightenment ideals and the wisdom of ancient societies were incapable of restoring order to France after the Revolution. In the end, all that René wanted, the only thing that could imbue his existence with meaning was locked away within the gothic walls of a convent, irretrievably lost to him. The secrets of the pre-Revolutionary order brought about by the influence of Christianity were locked away and dying as Chateaubriand wrote in their defense. As such, "René" represents an urgent plea for the French people to return to their proper paths, those established by their ancestors throughout the centuries, before it is too late. After Amélie moves forever beyond his reach, René is himself lost forever. As the story closes, he is unable even to heed Père Souël's counsel and he returns to his sad, solitary existence.

There is much in this interpretation that leads to a contextual discussion of the philosophical influences and effects of the work. Particularly in René's quest to find meaning, Chateaubriand addresses the major social and philosophical questions that form the focus of the larger project. As these will be discussed in great detail further along in this study, I simply say here that an allegorical reading of "René" provides many critical insights absent from the autobiographical approach.

### Pre-Existential

To the extent that Pascal can be considered a forerunner to the later existentialist movement, so too can Chateaubriand. He praises Pascal as the greatest mind of his century, and possibly ever, calling him an "effrayant genie" (*Génie* 1: 426).<sup>8</sup> More to the point, Chateaubriand draws quite heavily on Pascal's model of Christianity and philosophical methods, going so far as to openly imitate his methodological assessment of man's dilemma in "René." In fact, Pascal's *Pensées* are replete with ideas that are easily rediscovered in "René" and *Le Génie*.

Most obviously derived from Pascal in these works is the vision of man's nothingness, particularly when faced with the infinite. Accepting this as an inherent characteristic of human existence, and in the absence of the meaning a belief in God gives to life, Pascal declares that the only option is to seek distraction (*Pensées* 139-143). This is exactly the pattern followed by René. He travels to Rome, Greece, and the American wilderness searching for some distraction from his otherwise pitiable existence. René's journeys are, in a sense, a constant dialogue with the unattainable

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<sup>8</sup> For a full account of Chateaubriand's gushing praise of Pascal, see *Le Génie* 1: 425 ff.

infinite and unfortunately, without a base in religion, he finds only a recognition of his nothingness and is forced to confront the vanity of life. By illustrating this hopeless quest, Chateaubriand warns against the aimless philosophical wandering that Europe has engaged in since the Renaissance. It is to be contrasted with Amélie who, by choosing religion and service to her fellow human beings, gives her life meaning and is healed.

The principle idea to be derived from this reading is that, for Chateaubriand, life is not inherently meaningful. Purpose is created, not found. This assessment rings of existentialist catchphrases popular in the twentieth century. As illustrated by “René,” Chateaubriand prized above all the idea that individuals steer their own lives by means of personal choice, which seems to partially conflict with Pascal’s discussion in *Pensée* 514. While he argues that man essentially lacks the power to call on God or to work out his own salvation, it is nonetheless a common characteristic of the righteous that they want salvation and strive for it. Chateaubriand draws more specifically on this second idea supposing that God offers salvation to all, thus permitting the possibility. Clearly René is not interested in salvation, he rejects it on each of the several occasions in which it is offered to him. He is, nonetheless, striving for what he does want, the fulfillment of his own vain desires. As Pascal further proposes, Christ’s purpose was to heal men and free them from the slavery imposed by self-love (*Pensées* 545). Chateaubriand seizes upon this idea, emphatically declaring that the root of all sin is vanity (*Génie* 1: 283).

Further similarities are apparent in Pascal’s discussion of morality and religious doctrine. Among them is Pascal’s insistence that philosophical reason’s function is primarily internal, resulting in confounding dissimilarities, the cure to this dilemma being truth (*Pensées* 439-40). However, it is important to note that Pascal, here also providing



a model for Chateaubriand, would partially subsume philosophical (Cartesian) reason within his model of Christianity while simultaneously disparaging its over-application. In other instances, Chateaubriand borrows the specific vocabulary and phrases employed by Pascal while reciting a list of things that only 'true religion teaches us' (*Pensées* 491-4; *Le Génie* 1: 278).

Chateaubriand's aesthetic argument similarly seems to have some basis in Pascal's discussion of truth and beauty. Pascal talks of poetical beauty in the same terms as mathematical and medical beauty, nonetheless, he admits that there is a significant discrepancy (*Pensées* 33). Mathematical and medical beauties have a clearly defined referent and means of verification. Poetical beauty, conversely, lacks the logical proof or healing result the others can provide, which leaves us with an obvious dilemma. If they are essentially similar as Pascal argues, then how can we derive truth from poetical beauty? Chateaubriand responds to this dilemma with his emphasis on the religious function of Christian art. If a work of art manages to collapse the gap between the infinite and the finite, then it has a verifiable truth function, which serves to prove poetics in the same way as proofs and healing do for their respective beauties. Moreover, this proof of the individual experience, in Chateaubriand's estimation, serves to further prove the veracity of the greater Christian experience. The aesthetic experience, for Chateaubriand, incorporates the relative moment of the individual experience but only as it relates to the infinite, objective, and metaphysical revelation of truth. Thus, it proves and is simultaneously proven by the spiritual qualities associated with it. Meaning is only discovered in the moment though this discovery is made possible by external forces. Similar to the individual choices that imbue life with meaning, Chateaubriand's Christian

aesthetic experience is not forced on the individual, rather he or she must actively participate in it.

While the connections to Pascal are numerous and apparent, it is interesting and perhaps revealing to note that Chateaubriand's writings, particularly "René," bear some resemblances to the works of another important pre-existentialist writer active shortly after, Soren Kierkegaard. There are, in fact, significant similarities between the two authors as well. First is the intentional use of ambiguity. The most prominent feature of Kierkegaard's work is his use of pseudonyms. Often written in the first person and addressing contemporary existential anxiety in realistic situations, Kierkegaard's style obscured the relationship between author and narrator leaving some sense of confusion regarding the true Kierkegaard (Hassan 424-5). More than creating confusion, this stylistic peculiarity permitted Kierkegaard to address his desired audience within a context he designed. He could write philosophically without overtly appealing to Enlightenment style reason. Similarly, he was able write to the general public without the rousing the usual self-imposed intellectual anxiety. In short, creating the façade ensured that a much greater portion of the population would read his works. Chateaubriand, of course, similarly employed this technique, though it was not as successful in his case. The veiled philosophical work, "René," was fundamentally incomplete without the rest of *Le Génie*. While it achieved half of that goal, opening his text to a larger audience, "René" taken alone could only ever offer a small part of his argument. In this sense, it seems that Chateaubriand is not entirely blameless when it comes to the later misreadings of "René." One could argue that, perhaps, this incompleteness was intentional; however, that Chateaubriand felt it necessary to compose

his “Défense” seems to indicate otherwise. In reality, Chateaubriand managed to capture the essence of life after the Revolution and, despite his contrary designs, the Romantics seem to have rather narcissistically fallen in love with his depiction of their condition.

There are, of course, more than stylistic similarities linking Chateaubriand to the Kierkegaardian pre-existential tradition. Some of the principle tenets of Kierkegaard’s Christianity include an emphasis on the choices human beings make and the effects these choices have on their existential status (Stumpf and Fieser 358-9). Particularly pertinent to the study of *Le Génie* and Chateaubriand’s aesthetic argument for Christianity, Kierkegaard also saw a progression from aesthetic to religious principles in what concerns an individual’s moral development. This emphasis on aesthetic experience became a crucial aspect of existentialism as it was later developed, particularly by Nietzsche.

While it is not difficult to situate Chateaubriand within this pre-existentialist tradition, the objective of this assessment is not to prove that he was definitively an existentialist in the tradition of Pascal, rather I hope to illustrate that his writings are much more philosophically grounded than readers typically admit. This being the case, I do in fact propose that, of the three approaches discussed in this chapter, an existential assessment provides the most compelling image of “René” as a portion of Chateaubriand’s argument for Christianity. A relative examination of the European intellectual context leading up to and including Chateaubriand’s time, when analyzed with these more philosophical interpretations in mind, will reveal a great deal within the text that will clarify many of the ambiguities that have led to the misinterpretation of “René” over the years.

## The Context:

### Evolving European Philosophy and Aesthetics

Art and the aesthetic experience composed a fundamental element of western culture. They were in actuality so important that, since ancient Greece, thinkers had devoted considerable time and effort to their study. Thus, when Chateaubriand composed his aesthetically based response to the *philosophes* and their Revolution, he was not simply reacting to contemporary ideas, rather he was participating in an ancient debate. However, it may still seem an enigmatic, if not arbitrary, choice, placing art at the center of the revived culture and religion.

In the historic discussion that follows, there are at least three recurring concepts that begin to explain why art became so important a topic in western thought and such a powerful tool in post-Revolutionary France. One is the fact that the aesthetic experience, unlike formal education, was available on some level to nearly everyone whether in the perception of some man-made object or of nature. Another is that the aesthetic experience seems to inherently incorporate a certain sentimental aspect despite Enlightenment efforts to overcome sentimentality. In fact, this might explain its primary appeal at the time; art could serve to directly contradict the cold Enlightenment reason that had led to the Revolution and Terror. A final, and probably most important, concept elucidating art's crucial inclusion in the cultural reconstruction following those events is that, as governments and religions dissolved or were destroyed, art appreciation remained as something of societal constant. But more than a metaphysical tie, the physical objects

of art survived long after the cultural systems that created them evolved or were lost, even if they only did so as ruins.

So, realizing the primary and ubiquitous nature of the aesthetic experience, Chateaubriand grounded his monumental project in the aesthetic experience of Christianity rather than in a strictly doctrinal assessment. While his approach demonstrated a keen insight into society, it was not original or even unique at the time. Many were striving to forge a new French cultural identity out of an appeal to nostalgia that was grounded in aesthetics. In the metaphysical vacuum created by the Revolution, Romantic artists took upon themselves a sort of prophetic role in a burgeoning cult of aesthetics (Bénichou 120). As art came to function in this religious capacity, many post-Revolutionary authors openly assumed their places as theological expositors. Drawing specifically on traditional religious texts, they worked to demonstrate a philosophical continuity from ancient to modern times in an apparent attempt to overcome, or at least veil, the impact of Revolutionary social displacement. Probably the two most prominent examples of this movement are Chateaubriand's *Le Génie du Christianisme* and Victor Hugo's *La Légende des siècles*.

Chateaubriand looked backward, going further and further until he found a metaphysical foundation that could support a new society. This process became the hallmark of Romantic thought. However, while most artists and writers of the time contented themselves with a heroic, medieval simulacrum, Chateaubriand drew out sound philosophical tenets and created a new form of the old Christianity within the modern, European context. This new system rested firmly upon the unique and incontestable capacity of the aesthetic experience to influence one for Christian good, but remained

wary of contrary artistic and, innately by virtue of Platonic ideals, philosophical or moralistic endeavors.

The following sections will present a survey of artistic and philosophical movements relative to Chateaubriand's project, beginning with Plato and leading up to the publication of "René." This study is crucial, as it will provide the tools necessary to adequately situate "René" within the greater project and within the ongoing philosophical discussion.

## Socrates and Plato:

### The origins of a philosophical and literary tradition

If Chateaubriand was indeed building on a Neo-Platonic foundation, then this research would obviously begin with Plato, which, while appearing obvious, is somewhat ambiguous in an assessment of Chateaubriand. He was explicit about his distaste for antiquity, particularly its “pagan” arts and learning. This in fact colors a good part of his argument for Christianity. So, we must remember that it was Platonism in its specifically Christian form that influenced the author. He was quite careful never to overtly dote on Plato; rather he focused on French Christians who bore the marks of Neo-Platonist influence, such as Racine, Rabelais, and the medieval troubadours.

A further difficulty here is that, while the general intellectual genealogy illustrating Europe’s Platonic heritage is well documented, linking Plato and his Socratic dialogues to post-Revolutionary Christian literature requires a bit of work. References to the early philosophers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are abundant, but they often occur in rather superficial contexts. For example, Rousseau proclaimed Diderot to be a modern-day Socrates, basing his declaration on methodical rather than doctrinal similarities, i.e. careful reasoning (Brookner 12). As to more profound similarities, a minor convention in Romantic literature developed in which Socrates was favorably associated with Jesus (Bowman French Romanticism 3 ff.). Some nineteenth-century, French authors in the Romantic historicist tradition went so far as to declare Socrates to be something of a proto-Christian martyr, having suffered death in the name

of virtue.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there is significant cultural justification for assigning Chateaubriand's "René," and the greater text of which it is part, to the Neo-Platonic tradition. Moreover, there is abundant intra-textual justification for the proposition that Chateaubriand tended towards a system derived from Neo-Platonism. Jean-Paul Clément wrote that Plato had become "un auteur de référence" for Chateaubriand (Mémoires 3548).<sup>10</sup> Throughout Chateaubriand's expository writings, he often invokes Plato as an authority, or at least as an exemplar of proper philosophical inquiry. The connection between the two authors goes far beyond mere admiration. There are discernable stylistic and philosophical similarities, particularly concerning aesthetics. So, the question becomes: How does "René" specifically relate to Platonism?

This question can be answered through a comparison of certain specific qualities of the principle characters in the two authors' works, Socrates, René, and Amélie, as well as a comparison of the authors within their respective literary and philosophical contexts. To do this, we must establish certain characteristics of Plato's works and ideas, which can be done by considering the following questions. In what ways does the fictional Socrates resemble or not resemble the real Socrates? How does the character of Socrates relate to the philosophical context of Plato's day? Why did Plato write dialogues? Finally, what influences did the character of Socrates and the style of the dialogues have on the overall philosophical context, both of the day and since?

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<sup>9</sup> See Dupuget's *Démon de Socrate*, Norvin's *L'Immortalité de l'âme, ou les Quatre âges religieux*. Some contemporary critics of this idea include Joseph de Maistre and Joseph Salvador.

<sup>10</sup> While Chateaubriand does not explicitly state his affinity for the ancient philosopher, he invokes Plato as justification for numerous premises and often uses him favorably in comparisons with other thinkers.



Comparing Plato's Socrates to the real person is, at best, difficult. Relatively little is known about the great philosopher. If Socrates wrote anything, it did not survive. Thus, the bulk of what we do know about him, and more importantly, about his teachings come from the writings of his contemporaries and students, specifically Plato. Though this may seem to present an inescapable paradox, there is in fact hope for discovering something of the real Socrates. While Plato's Socrates seems to evolve, the early dialogues present a Socrates consistent with descriptions in concurrent texts.<sup>11</sup> From this we can assume certain characteristics of the real Socrates, most importantly that he was primarily concerned with questions of virtue, defining it and examining its acquisition. By all accounts, he was an exemplar civic and personal integrity (Kraut 859). He practiced a rational, dialectical type of philosophy, principally composed of incessant questioning, which many found quite irritating. He insisted throughout his life, and even at his trial as recorded by Plato, that he "frequently received messages or warnings from a mysterious 'voice,' or what he called his *daimon*;" many later critics, specifically Christians, drew on this in their characterization of Socrates as a visionary man, in the prophetic sense, being particularly sensitive to "the moral qualities of human actions that

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<sup>11</sup> The chronological order of Plato's dialogues has been disputed over the years. In recent editions, the order has been established, at least in part, by examining the evolution of Socrates and the ideas presented as explained by John M. Cooper in his introduction to Plato: Complete Works. The Socrates of some dialogues is consistent with the works of Xenophon, another of Socrates's pupils, and even bears some resemblance to the parody in Aristophanes' Clouds and so it is assumed that these represent the earlier works (Kraut 859-60). However, as the content and context of philosophical discussions in the dialogues and the role of Socrates change, reflecting Plato's own ideas, we assume that this indicates the passing of time since Socrates's death. According to this system, the dialogues are grouped as 'early', 'middle', and 'late'.

make life worth living” (Stumpf and Fieser 37).<sup>12</sup> This of course presents an image that would have resonated with post-Revolutionary, French Christians after Voltaire (1756) and Schiller’s (1801) recent celebrations of Jeanne d’Arc.

All of these traits are portrayed in Plato’s early dialogues, though even here we cannot assume that Plato intended to present an accurate depiction of his teacher (Cooper xv). The Socrates of the middle and late dialogues is thought to represent progressively fewer of Socrates’ ideas and more of Plato’s until, eventually, Socrates “ceases altogether to be an active participant in the discussion” (Cooper xiii). So then we must ask, if the character of Socrates was not a true representation of the philosopher, what was Plato trying to do?

Socrates was, like all literary characters, an invention. Plato’s Socrates espoused different doctrines and confronted theoretical problems that the real Socrates never did, so, the real Socrates was of little use as a model. The character in Plato’s later dialogues was tailored to the situations he faced. As Paul Ricœur wrote in a discussion of narrative structures, “It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character” (148). Thus, for Plato’s Socrates, the philosophical dilemma preceded the essence. Though it is possible that this technique originated with Plato, it is certainly not unique to him. Philosophical writers such as Chateaubriand, Rabelais, Voltaire, Swift, Kierkegaard, and Proust have all employed similar methods. As for why Plato continued to use the character Socrates even after the two diverged philosophically, this implies another

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<sup>12</sup> While the word *daimon* (δαίμων) came to specifically signify an evil spirit in the Koine, and subsequently in western religion. In classical Greek the term simply denoted a supernatural being, which could be good or evil as defined by George Ricker Berry in his The Classic Greek dictionary. See also Strong's exhaustive concordance of the Bible.

question. Why did Plato first choose to make the character Socrates not only the principle personage in most of his dialogues, but his mouthpiece as well?

One can imagine many reasons why Plato would have borrowed the name, likeness and, for a time, theories of Socrates. His early dialogues may have been an attempt to preserve the work of his admired teacher. It is also possible that his choice was more or less pragmatic; the name Socrates, even after his execution, may have lent a certain credibility to the younger Plato's writings. One could even imagine a connection to Plato's doctrine of the Forms. Socrates, the philosopher par excellence, provides a model for proper philosophical inquiry. However, a more likely answer to this question arises from John M. Cooper's discussion of Plato's use of the dialogue form as an inherent result of Plato's philosophy. This, of course, addresses our third question. Why did Plato write dialogues?

In actuality, Cooper claims that the dialogue form naturally grew out of the Socratic method of investigation coupled with the author's own intellectual humility. Philosophers prior to Socrates and Plato saw themselves as wise men with a unique ability to access truth. They dispensed their wisdom as well developed arguments in the form of epic poems or in collections of remarks written in prose (Cooper xviii). For these men, philosophy set them apart from the rest of humanity. Socrates had a different method; without pretension, he discussed grand ideas with common craftsmen, students, politicians, poets, etc. Calling it his art of midwifery, Socrates' questioning enabled his interlocutors themselves to give birth to truth (Theaetetus 150b-151d). If Chateaubriand was indeed devoted to this idea, it could serve to explain some of his intentional ambiguity in "René." The reader is left to discover the message without having it overtly

presented. Returning to this concept of intellectual humility, Socrates is said to have declared that his greatest wisdom was in knowing that he knew nothing (Apology 23b). Such an admission of ignorance is key to Plato's philosophy. Plato and his Socrates claim to be seekers, not possessors, of truth. The dialogues can thus be seen as a methodological model for finding truth rather than as a wise man's proclamation of what he alone was able to discover. They function as signposts, indicating the path to pure knowledge and truth. Similarly, Chateaubriand is not calling disciples to himself; rather his goal is to send readers on their own journey in search of the truths only Christianity can possess.

The dialogue form is particularly important in a discussion of "René," which, despite lacking many of the overt dialogic indicators common to the genre, is essentially a dialogue. Chateaubriand's deviation from the norm is important to our later discussion of "René" as a response to the supreme Enlightenment dialogist, Diderot, who would have deemed the proper format necessary for clarity's sake (Sherman 147). In fact, his stylistic divergence from tradition is another way in which Chateaubriand was essentially honoring the philosophical traditions begun in ancient Greece. Furthermore, as the dialogue form inherently lends itself to even greater aesthetic consideration, Plato and Chateaubriand's use of it forces the reader or viewer to more carefully consider aesthetic claims made therein.

Plato and Chateaubriand rely in similar ways on the aesthetic experience as a primary function or moment in the quest for truth. For Plato, "the Good, the Real, the True, and the Beautiful" all merge in the Forms; thus experiencing pure beauty in art is tantamount to experiencing truth, reality and the supreme Form, the Good (Eaton 156;

Oates 60). Through this function, art has the potential to act as a conduit between the temporal and eternal worlds. For Chateaubriand, Christian art portrays absolute truth and can momentarily reunite man with God, the source of all truth and beauty. While both acknowledge a possible sacred aesthetic experience, they both also warn that the opposite is possible.

Chateaubriand argues that non-Christian art inherently lacks the ability to collapse the gap between the finite and the infinite. Furthermore, he argues that there is a great deal of art that is intentionally deceitful and leads away from God. Moved by similar fears, Plato goes so far as to banish art from his Republic, an action that often creates confusion when contrasted with his favorable accounts of artistic expression in the Ion and the Phaedrus. This seeming contradiction is not so perplexing if we accept certain propositions common to both authors concerning art. First, that there is inspired art, like the divinely mad poetry in the Ion or Christian art for Chateaubriand. Second, that there is art that is not inspired, rather it portrays or even glorifies the baser aspects of human nature. Thus, in Plato's assessment, art's value to society is directly proportionate to the degree that it leads to the pure and abstract embodiments that are the Forms (Eaton 156; Oates 60). Unfortunately, most art is of the second type and it is this more popular poetry and tragedy that Plato specifically denounces in the Republic. The true problem with this condemnable type of art, according to Plato, is that it rarely portrays the realities of harmful actions. Chateaubriand is attentive in his treatment of these concerns. Most obviously in that "René" is a cautionary tale, carefully depicting the negative results of René's destructive choices.

Plato has another underlying concern with art. It can never be more than an imitation, far removed from the truth of the Forms and, thus, it is fundamentally deceptive (Republic 598b). The question of imitation functions as a prime concern in René's story as well. The title character is lost in a world of false representation. He recounts his memories, subjective, ephemeral representations of things past. These representations are in fact the source of his malady. As the priest points out, it is René's false image of the world that has led to his woeful state.

In summation, it appears evident that Chateaubriand was building his system in the light of traditional Platonic discourse. It is true that many of the similarities may seem superficial at first glance; however, more intense study reveals many to be quite profound and intricate. To recount a few that are particularly pertinent, it is impossible to separate the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues from the ideas he presents. Similarly, René is formed by the philosophical dilemmas he confronts. Both characters are functions of the philosophies they dispute and defend. Additionally, rather than attempts at representational art, the literary styles of Plato's dialogues and of Chateaubriand's "René" are inherently tied to the philosophical ideals the authors are trying to portray. By Chateaubriand's time in fact, this process had fully developed into a common sort of meta-fictional function, that is to say that "part of the discourse of the novel [had become] a self-reflexive meditation on its own practice" (Donoghue 14). Still more profound, William Donoghue asserts that, in responding to skeptics and materialists, like Hume and Diderot, Chateaubriand is championing the same cause as Plato against Protagoras and Heraclitus (Donoghue 5).

This further serves to illustrate the underlying dilemma in studying “René.” Taken alone, that is outside of *Le Génie*, these connections are less than conspicuous, in fact they are almost entirely obscured. As such, “René” easily fits into the Romantic tradition. However, when examined together, “René” figures well within the European philosophical tradition and appears to be anti-Romantic.

## The Middle Ages:

### Neo-Platonism and Courtly Love

Chateaubriand's positivistic assertion in *Le Génie*, that Christianity is right and true because it is beautiful, was of course neither a novel concept nor was it one that he revived. It was a guiding principle throughout the Middle Ages. Based on a Christianized version of the innate connection between the Good and the Beautiful in Plato, many medieval scholars derived specific aesthetic principles. Plato explains one particularly influential idea in Book VI of the *Republic*. For him, the Good functions like the sun, illuminating all the other Forms which then reflect this 'light' for all to perceive (Republic 507a-511e). Early Christian writers, most obviously Neo-Platonists like Pseudo-Dionysius, seized upon this general concept and applied it to the Christian worldview. The medieval Christian then came to see beauty as a quality of God that was, to some degree, physically and metaphorically reflected in the world (Eco *Middle Ages* 18). Physical light came to metaphorically represent the divine 'light' emanating from God, which explains much about the architecture of gothic cathedrals.

In this system, the aesthetic experience, at least when it is divinely initiated, is essentially external. God's beauty, reflected in the world, moves the spectator from without to contemplate Him as the source. The Neo-platonic Christian model and its implications inform certain essential aspects of Chateaubriand's aesthetic model and establish a list of characteristics common to all things considered beautiful.

The most important commonality is the idea that if an object is beautiful, it is so universally. That is to say, the characteristics of an object that make it appear beautiful to



one individual, barring some inhibiting factor on the part of the spectator, will necessarily make it appear as beautiful to all others. The essential question is then one of subjectivity. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Bernard de Clairvaux, and Duns Scotus all dealt with similar questions regarding the processes of the individual and universal aesthetic experiences. Most great, Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages sided with this objectivist Platonic and Aristotelian idea. Even those who took a much more subjective approach than the others, Duns Scotus for example, still based the aesthetic experience on objective contemplation (Eco Middle Ages 70-2). Regardless of the particulars of the aesthetic debate throughout the Middle Ages, the religious setting of aesthetics had an enormous, though possibly unintended, effect on the overall intellectual environment down to and including the French Revolution.

From the earliest days of Christianity, and even well before Christianity took hold in Europe, the aesthetic experience was principally limited to a religious context. Even the beauty in nature, having been created by God, shared in this religious function. In fact, Chateaubriand greatly develops this theme in his own work, asserting that nature powerfully and undeniably declares the glories of God (Bowman Romanticism 128). Hence, aesthetic pleasure derived from experiencing nature retained a sacred, otherworldly character. Man-made objects, on the contrary, were essentially functional and largely ignored the formal aspects reserved for religion. At a time when the majority of life was little more than a constant struggle to survive, ornamentation was unnecessary and wasteful. Even the wealthiest royals inhabited functional fortifications rather than grand palaces. Moreover, there was a sort of philosophical tenet, established by Thomas Aquinas, arguing that an object's form should strictly conform to its intended purpose

(qtd. in Eco and De Michele History 88-9). Thus, beauty, whether natural or artificial, was rarely considered outside the limits of its primary religious function, that of reflecting God and leading to truth.

It was only toward the close of the Middle Ages that Europeans began to experience various art forms outside of a religious context. While this shift expanded the boundaries of aesthetic experience, the discourse was still limited, as this new experience remained available only to a small portion of the population. Peter Jones states, “only the middle and upper classes in great cities had opportunities for personal experience of such pleasures... [this] distorted the nature of both response and discussion” (Jones 15). Interestingly, the transition appears to have had a substantial impact on literature before the other arts. While painting was still principally limited to images of the saints or great Christian kings, courtly poetry, including the Arthurian legends of Chrétien de Troyes, drew inspiration from the *matière de Bretagne* and strayed from its traditional religious function. Despite focusing on characters and ideas superficially removed from religious inquiry, these texts were still morally grounded in the European-Christian tradition. Nonetheless, such works illustrated certain fundamental shifts in society. As societies and political systems became more stable, the division of labor permitted many outside the usual educated circles, clergy and royals, to practice and ponder art. One important consequence of this was the depiction of women, other than the Virgin and female saints, in art (Eco and De Michele History 154-160). Theologians, being mostly celibate monks, had little use for or knowledge of women whereas the new class of thinkers, mostly common men, did. This new inclusion of women opened new artistic possibilities, but it also led to a new dilemma. How should the artist portray them?

The Virgin was beautiful in the same way that God was beautiful, but what could be said of ordinary women, those who fell somewhere between Mary and *la femme pécheresse*? Thus began a study of feminine physical beauty and grace. A new notion of woman quickly took hold in the aesthetic world. Medieval poets idolized women and made their love both forbidden and a prize to be won. Mortal women, as portrayed in courtly poetry, suddenly possessed characteristics traditionally reserved for the divine; they were infinitely desirable and wholly unattainable. The women of courtly poetry frequently possessed characteristics that at least gave the impression of the supernatural, if not altogether confirming it. They drove men to madness, healed wounds, and inspired remarkable courage in those men who truly loved them. This new study of woman, with its reassignment of divine qualities and general shift toward the appreciation of physical beauty, would obviously provide the general setting for the Renaissance, but it also specifically impacted Chateaubriand's work.

Many of the characteristics of courtly love show up in "René." The love shared by René and Amélie is certainly forbidden. Despite societal taboos and religious injunction against incest, there is a sense in which their love is almost mystically justified and beautiful. Chateaubriand portrays it as natural, pure, solitary. Indeed many who have commented on "René" have described the two as an Adam and Eve whose actions brought no shame until the outside world intervened. This certainly has merit, but I see greater similarities to medieval characters, such as Tristan and Yseult. One important distinction between the biblical pair and Chateaubriand's characters is that the roles are entirely reversed. It is René, the male, who cannot withstand temptation. Amélie's faithfulness is rewarded by her eventual redemption. Furthermore, Adam and Eve are

expelled from Eden by an external force, but here the principle impetus forcing the lovers from their blissful state and into separation is Amélie's self-realization of her sin.

Further connections to courtly love follow their exile. As was common in medieval poetry, separation leads to desperation as René makes a final attempt at winning Amélie. He tries unsuccessfully to save his sister from the symbolic death she undergoes at the taking of her vows. It is here that Chateaubriand re-Christianizes his story. As for Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval, a renunciation of selfish desires enables Amélie to redeem herself and offer the opportunity at redemption to her brother. The nun Amélie, by virtue of her regained purity, could have fulfilled salvational role in René's life. Particular indications that Amélie is functioning as a Christ figure can be seen in the fact that René only reads of her self-sacrifice well after the sad event in which, it is critical to remember, she dies selflessly serving and physically healing others. Despite the separation, René is offered vicarious salvation from his sins. He chose otherwise. Amélie's final rejection of sin initiates her redemption whereas René's attachment to sin seals his damnation. This is the mystical Christianity of the Middle Ages. Though helplessly separated by time and space, the selfless death of one can redeem another. In an action reminiscent of the overt Christian symbolism in Chrétien de Troyes' Yvain, René adopts the title, "le frère d'Amélie," and the narrator follows form ("René" 195).

Chateaubriand resolves medieval and modern dilemmas in a way that subsumes both traditional Christian redemption and rational, existential accountability. Amélie, though not pure and divine from the beginning, is able to redeem herself through selfless and courageous choices. She begins as *la femme pécheresse*, but ends as a Christ figure having returned to the faith. The feminine, for Chateaubriand, holds the keys to

redeeming France. At a time when so much attention was paid to the replacement of masculine images, *l'état* and *le roi*, with feminine ones, *la liberté* and *la République*, Chateaubriand is trying to remind France of the other important feminine, *l'église*, represented of course by a woman (Hunt 82).

## Renaissance and Classical Aesthetics

While Latin and Greek texts had long been studied by European scholastics, the Renaissance began a gradual shift granting the general public greater access to these works. With the emergence of the bourgeoisie at the end of the Middle Ages, there was suddenly a great number of people who could not only read, but could also afford books. Fortuitously, the printing press appeared about this same time enabling publishers to satisfy the newfound literary appetite, which they helped create, with both modern and classical texts. The new class enthusiastically studied the classics and a mass obsession with ancient culture firmly implanted itself within the modern European sensibility, along with this emerged a principally formal aesthetic experience.

For the first time, the average European Christian was confronted with art that served no immediate cultural function. Statues and stories of the gods may have been created within the religious and cultural contexts of ancient Greece, however, once removed from that context their function was lost and only form remained. Renaissance Christians experienced, and were forced to judge, pure form free of any relative religious significance. The indissoluble bond between God and beauty, previously understood as a unique characteristic of God, was dissolved. If an object was beautiful, it was so in the absence of preconceived, Christian, metaphysical subtexts. After all, how could a pagan artwork reflect Christian godliness? This new aesthetic freedom, paired with the nobility and bourgeoisie's growing discretionary funds, permitted the artistic boom that comes to mind when one reflects on the Renaissance. New devotees of the arts commissioned portraits, sculptures, poems, grand buildings, and all manner of artistic creation, much of

which served purely as ornamentation and to glorify humanity rather than its Creator. To a large extent Christianity was replaced as the prime subject of artistic rendition.

About this same time, the Reformation had begun to further shake the religious foundations of Europe. The traditional church was losing its hold on the minds of the people and with it, the traditional aesthetic notions that had grounded artistic endeavors throughout the centuries. These monumental cultural shifts were accompanied by an aesthetic revolution that gave European Christians new intellectual tools and freedoms necessary to reassess their own artistic heritage in terms of form rather than the intended religious functionality.

The general displacement of God in European culture led to the resurgence of an ancient emphasis on human beings. Humanism, with its usual companions relativism and skepticism, replaced theism as the underlying impetus in European intellectual culture. Such writers as Montaigne and Rabelais denounced the scholastic tradition in favor of a Greek style, humanist education in which man merited his new exalted status by virtue of his unique qualities among which are reason and individual liberty. Whereas within the context of traditional Christianity, man was generally depraved, only to be saved from his fallen state by religion, the humanists stressed the innate goodness and capacity of man. As Rabelais expresses in his description of the abbey of Thélème, the only rule necessary was “fais ce que tu voudras,” for, as he continues, “les gens libres, bien nés, bien éduqués, conversant en bonne compagnie, ont naturellement un instinct et un aiguillon qu’ils appellent honneur, qui les pousse à agir vertueusement et à fuir le vice” (101).<sup>13</sup> This emphasis on human dignity obviously forms a great part of the foundation for

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<sup>13</sup> This is a reformulation of Augustine’s singular rule, “Love God and do what thou wilt.”

coming intellectual and aesthetic movements, i.e. classicism and the Enlightenment, but it also provides an essential grounding for the future French Revolution.

Chateaubriand addresses this disparity between differing views of mankind in “René” by offering two examples that illustrate both aspects. In all, he shows that man’s liberty permits him to choose good or evil, both of which are wholly possible. Notions of inherent good and evil both limit man’s capacity and tend towards the fatalistic worldview that Chateaubriand decries in *Le Génie*. If nothing else, they negate the power of personal choice. If man is inherently good, then choosing good is natural and not really commendable. If man is inherently fallen, then choosing evil is almost excusable. Chateaubriand presents an image of man that is simultaneously both and neither. Both good and evil influences act upon man, it is his choice that makes the difference. One of Chateaubriand’s most adamant stances in opposition to the French school of thought was his insistence on the moral character and importance of human action rather than on deterministic causes (Castillo 174). Chateaubriand emphasizes this view through the priest’s accusations in the final scene of “René.” Père Souël firmly declares that René chose his fate over the good he could have done (“René” 195-6). Everything has simultaneous dual potentialities for Père Souël. For example, the solitude in which René lives is miserable, but would it not have been so had he only lived there with God (“René” 196). The priest equally emphasizes that Amélie redeemed herself by means of wholly Christian action (“René” 196).

Seventeenth-century Classicism seems to have principally grown out of a similar clash between ancient and modern aesthetic systems, which was of course played out in the aptly named *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. While all admitted that ancient



art deserved a certain reverence, the authors generally classified as *les Anciens*, such as Boileau, Racine, and Bossuet, tended toward a strict mimetic style. *Les Modernes*, such as Corneille and Perrault, favored the establishment of a unique and modern French society. Judging by his profuse praise of Bossuet and Racine in *Le Génie*, it appears that Chateaubriand favored the *Anciens*. This, however, seems contrary to his insistence upon traditional French rather than pagan culture, particularly given his discussion of ancient ruins in “René” and *Le Génie*. Fortunately, Chateaubriand responds to this very question. He argues, specifically citing Racine as a prime example, that Christianity is able to transform the great works of other cultures making them more beautiful and imbuing them with truth (224-8). Thus, Christian art directly replaces ancient art by treating the same themes within the Christian framework. Chateaubriand permitted mimesis so long as it unmistakably bore the marks of modern Christianity. This is, to a certain extent, what happened in medieval Neo-Platonism. Wisdom and artistry was borrowed from the ancients, but it was only accepted after the Christian worldview was imposed upon it.

Regardless of general transitions in art and its relation to society, “mainstream philosophy in the first half of the seventeenth century [could] scarcely be regarded as having a favourable attitude toward the arts and the humanities” (Boros 25). Most thinkers leading up to the Enlightenment were principally preoccupied with carefully rational scientific discourse based on Descartes’ methods. These are truly the currents that established the intellectual environment in which Chateaubriand would labor.

## The Enlightenment

Chateaubriand was born in 1768, the height of the French Enlightenment, in St. Malo, the youngest of ten children in a noble family. In his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, he describes his birth as the day where “ma mère m’imposa la vie” (1: 92). By this time the family had exhausted its wealth, though his father was working to restore the fortune. Ultimately, the elder Chateaubriand purchased the chateau de Combourg where the author spent his youth (Switzer 16). Being a frail child and keenly aware of his place as a younger son, which in the old system meant he stood to inherit little or nothing of the family wealth, he described his childhood as one of isolation and fantasy in which he feared his father but remained quite close to his sisters (Switzer 16-7). He studied, as younger sons of nobles commonly did, for careers in the Church and the military, though neither ultimately satisfied him. In his early years, the *philosophes* had a great influence on the young author. He was particularly fond of Voltaire and Rousseau, and despite certain intellectual departures, Chateaubriand maintained this affinity throughout his life. As for other Enlightenment thinkers, Chateaubriand was quick to denounce them after seeing the embodiment of their thought, the Revolution. As this was Chateaubriand’s early intellectual environment, it merits some detailed study.

The Enlightenment’s impact on traditional, French Christianity and its aesthetics begins with the translation of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* at the end of the seventeenth century. Forming the groundwork of empirical philosophical inquiry, specifically of Diderot’s extreme materialism, this essay established experiential reason’s primacy in the Enlightenment search for truth. It provided a framework in

which topics previously debated in religious terms, such as the nature of good and evil, could be reduced to a comparison of pleasurable and painful experience (Brookner 10). Locke's ideas, which in his assessment still permitted genuine Christianity, were transformed within the French culture where the Enlightenment was inseparably bound up with Revolutionary sentiment. This being the case, these ideas provided justification for the subversive discourse that eventually overthrew the monarchy and the Church. The *philosophes* were working to establish an "alternative morality to that of Christianity, a morality 'less hostile to the things of this world'" (Brookner 12). The late Middle Ages and Renaissance's emphasis on the physical nature of things had drawn metaphysics and ethics into a principally empirical system. While Enlightenment thinkers were concerned with many of the same questions that had occupied thought for centuries, this break with tradition forced them to rely almost exclusively upon irreligious sources of knowledge. Gertrude Himmelfarb writes, "It was not only the *philosophes*' penchant, as Tocqueville said, for abstract principles that made them unique. It was a particular principle: reason." (151).

Reason jealously ruled the over Enlightenment and quickly became the sole acceptable grounding principle for most intellectual inquiry. However, we should specify that it was a particular kind of reason that invigorated Enlightenment ideals, autonomous reason. As Slavoj Žižek writes in his paraphrasing of Kantian thought, "use your own head, free yourself of all prejudices, do not accept anything without questioning its rational foundations, always preserve a critical distance..." (80). Enlightenment culture, building on Descartes' *cogito*, firmly established a new intellectual climate shifting the logical burden of proof from rational, empirical philosophy to all metaphysically derived

systems. Phenomena and experience that, particularly in the Middle Ages, could be accounted for by theological assertions were redefined in rational terms. The new philosophy of the Enlightenment was fundamentally revolutionary, specifically striving to displace all prevailing systems, both religious and civil (Goulemot 29). Chateaubriand on the other hand called for the world to return to the *Légende dorée* and “renoncer à son admiration acquise à des chefs-d’oeuvre de science et de raison” (Mémoires 791).<sup>14</sup>

As for art, what had previously been discussed as questions of taste or divine imitation was likewise forced into this strictly rational framework.<sup>15</sup> In 1735 Alexander Baumgarten first used the term aesthetics to describe a rational, scientific study of art and its effects. In his work, *Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus*, Baumgarten claims that the pleasure derived from art does not merely result from the perception of some conceptual representation, but rather from the perfection of sensory perception (Makkreel 66). He goes on to claim that “the task of the poet is not to describe in terms of abstract universals, but to portray vividly individuals ‘determined in every respect’” (Makkreel 66).<sup>16</sup> Whether or not this new aesthetic ideal includes or rejects traditional European theories of beauty is open to debate, but the emphasis within the experience shifted. Beauty remained an essentially transcendental

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<sup>14</sup> *Légende dorée* is a collection of fanciful hagiographies composed by Jacques de Voragine (1230-1288) in which he presents “une foi naïve, riche en miracles et légendes” (Jean-Paul Clément in notes to *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*).

<sup>15</sup> Horcher describes the Enlightenment concept of *buon gusto* as the capacity to make an accurate assessment of how one feels rather than what one feels in regards to an artistic object (158).

<sup>16</sup> There are some who argue that Baumgarten actually, by creating an aesthetic discourse separate from other philosophical domains, saved art from the more intensely rational analysis it would have undergone within those other disciplines. However, if this is can be said, it must be likewise stated that he nonetheless subjected art to his own rational philosophical system for the sake of consistency (Wessell 334).

concept, however its value was “subordinated to the subjective conditions of the possibility of our experience of it” (Kisbali 83). The new, pure aesthetic experience focuses on the mechanics of observation in the supposed absence of external factors, such as preconceived cultural and religious justifications. It was specifically Hume and Kant who, building on this model, laid the foundations of the aesthetic culture that Chateaubriand found so disagreeable.

The noted skeptic David Hume, incidentally one of Chateaubriand’s preferred historians, incorporated this supremely subjective concept of aesthetic experience into his philosophy of art. He argued that no absolute standard of taste is possible given the variety of taste and opinion (Hume 1-2). The notion that no objective standard is attainable necessarily conflicts with Chateaubriand’s argument on a foundational basis. The core of Chateaubriand’s aesthetic argument is that art acts upon all individuals in the same way, and that Christian art in particular will draw all who experience it to at least a momentary realization of absolute truth, which in terms of its object and means of transmission is fundamentally metaphysical.

Almost as though anticipating the religiously based objections to his concept, Hume goes on to concede that, despite its impossibility, we continue to seek some absolute standard of taste. In response to this human desire for absolutes, he proceeds to stipulate how we can arrive at reliable, empirically grounded aesthetic judgments. He compares two common methods of judgment, one is to base the judgment on sentiment and the other is to base it on reason. Basing judgments on sentiment is fundamentally flawed as sentiment can only ever be self-referential, it does not extend to the objective consideration of the object itself, rather it relates solely to internal reactions (Hume 2).

Beauty and taste, for Hume, are essentially relative terms used to describe sentiments.

Precluding these sentimental reactions, there remains the possibility of rational judgments concerning art; however, only a qualified judge meeting his logically derived, empirically based criteria can make them (Hume 4-10).<sup>17</sup> Such a scientific, anti-sentimental approach to art would inherently preclude Chateaubriand's ideals wherein Christian art can move the observer by virtue of its spirituality to commune with a supersensible God.

Particularly pertinent to the consideration of Chateaubriand's aesthetics is Hume's declaration that "Religious principles are also a blemish in any polite composition... they rise up to superstition, and intrude themselves into every sentiment, however remote from any connection with religion" (Hume 13). He continues, "It is no excuse for the poet, that the customs of his country had burthened life with so many religious ceremonies and observances, that no part of it was exempt from that yoke" (Hume 13). Hume struggled to wrest all experience, including art and the aesthetic experience, from the metaphysical sphere and restore it to a pure and rigidly structured empirical framework. Thus, he rejected the sort of abstract, universal concepts requisite for Chateaubriand's aesthetics.

Rather uncharacteristically, the great Enlightenment thinker and Hume respondent, Immanuel Kant, agreed with many of Hume's aesthetic assertions. Like Hume, Kant opposed the use of art to promote or teach religious ideas. However, Kant seems to circumnavigate the question of universals with his intellectual Copernican shift. Rather than arguing that the mind conforms to the perceived object, Kant asserts that

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<sup>17</sup> Hume lists six criteria for making proper aesthetic judgments, all of which are derived from or verified by experience. A judge must have 1) sound organs of perception, 2) delicacy of imagination, 3) practice (that is to say, familiarity with other works providing the judge with...), 4) the ability to form comparisons, 5) freedom from any prejudice, and 6) good sense (Hume 4-10).

exterior objects conform to the mind. If all humans are similarly constructed, then all would have similar reactions to the same work of art. His solution permits for subjective interpretation while simultaneously situating it within a somewhat objective system. While this superficially resembles Chateaubriand's concept of the aesthetic experience, Kant diverges and, in a distinctly Enlightenment fashion, overcomes the objective and possibly instructive nature of the experience. The emphasis rests on subjectivity as, for Kant, objectivity prevents free contemplation by imposing strict, external reason on the experience (Dufour-Kowalska 116). Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment has an epistemic rather than appreciative character (Fenner 43). So, his logical and subjective concept of the aesthetic experience is composed of four common moments all of which are necessary for proper aesthetic judgment, they are: disinterested satisfaction, universal validity, purposiveness without a purpose, and necessary satisfaction (Kant and Bernard §1-22).

Disinterested satisfaction describes a state in which the perceived object causes mental pleasure through, though not felt in, the sensory organs. In order for this pleasure to be disinterested, it cannot be derived from any preconceived notions or prior cognitive judgment. This, of course, precludes the religious aspect of art described by Chateaubriand. Universal validity actually fits in with Hume's understanding. Kant here argues that beauty is not an attribute of the object itself, rather that its perception results from a reaction within the mind of the beholder. Again, this precludes Chateaubriand's ideal that Christian art transcends the simple relation of the observer to the art. Fine art, as Kant would argue, at least gives the illusion of purpose; there appears to be a reason it exists and is experienced in the way that it is. This being said, he further asserts that art

is sufficient to justify its own existence without an appeal to external premises; the origins of Victor Cousin's *l'art pour l'art*. Finally, necessary satisfaction refers to his concept that, as humans are 'hard-wired' to experience the world in a certain way, we cannot help but experience beauty in the same way, inspired by the same objects. In regards to art, Kant calls this the *senus communis aestheticus*. Common aesthetic judgments are, to some degree, inescapable creating a sort of universal reaction that is not based on abstract universal concepts. Thus, for Kant the aesthetic experience is inherently self-referential and, while in itself rational, can only occur in the absence of preconceived logical subtext. In short, aesthetic judgment for Kant must be undertaken without any particular goal in mind, a stark contradiction to Chateaubriand's positivistic argument (Arbo 233).

Kant applies these same notions to his concept of the Sublime. More than beauty, the Sublime transcends mortal faculties and forces the finite individual to confront the infinite. To later thinkers, particularly in late Enlightenment and early Romantic traditions, interaction with the Sublime, as defined by Kant, seems to take the place of traditional religious experience. For Chateaubriand, this is unacceptable. In fact, René confronts this ideal in the text. As he travels Europe seeking meaning, he visits the ruins of ancient societies as well as the natural wonders of the continent, nothing manages to fill his inner void. After descriptions of the marvelous scenes he experienced, the immense volcano and the infinite sky that lay before him, all René can ask is that his interlocutors pity him for the emptiness these wonders cannot fill (174-5).

While Chateaubriand was both subtly and overtly responding to Hume and Kant, it was Diderot more than any other Enlightenment thinker whom he opposed. In his



*L'Essai sur les révolutions*, Chateaubriand harshly criticizes Diderot and his “secte des encyclopédistes.” He writes:

Quel fut donc l'esprit de cette secte? La destruction. Détruire, voilà leur but; détruire, leur argument. Que voulaient-ils mettre à la place de choses présentes? Rien. C'était une rage contre les institutions de leurs pays, qui, à la vérité, n'étaient pas excellentes; mais quiconque renverse doit rétablir, et c'est la chose difficile, la chose qui doit nous mettre en garde contre les innovations. (qtd. in notes to *Mémoires* 3418)

Elsewhere Chateaubriand records that his dislike of Diderot and his circle was so strong that the formerly beautiful countryside they frequented became for him “insupportable” (*Mémoires* 814). Philosophically speaking, Chateaubriand could find some common ground with the devoutly Christian Kant. Even Hume was able to compensate for his skepticism through literary ability. However, Diderot, Chateaubriand's philosophical polar opposite, was unredeemable. Still more importantly, Diderot, in Chateaubriand's reckoning, bore a great deal of responsibility for the Revolution.

The two authors clash, most importantly to this project, in their aesthetic concepts, but it is important to remember that those concepts grew naturally from their respective philosophical groundings. As illustrated in his *Le Rêve d'Alembert*, a well-structured, philosophical dialogue, Diderot professes a strictly materialist system. His absolute elimination of metaphysical possibility necessarily reduces the aesthetic experience from the religiously ecstatic experience of the Middle Ages to a biological function of the observer's brain and body. For Diderot, art is only a mirror, reflecting nothing more than the “creative energies” invested by the spectator (Arnold 17; Déan

361-2). The aesthetic experience begins with the exterior work of art, but then becomes an interior drama ordered by the spectator's mind. As Diderot claims that the world is innately disorganized, complex and unpredictable, he argues that we must navigate it how it is presented to us without relying upon the theological idea that pure, unmediated, organizing truth is attainable (Bates 53). He applies this same principle to art. For Enlightenment critics following Diderot's model, art must follow the pattern laid out in the scientific study of nature. Philippe Déan comments on this, he writes, "l'art sera donc... soumis à l'exigence de raison, et mesuré à l'aune de la raison pour savoir s'il recèle des contenus durables, authentiques ou essentiels," he continues, "Son contenu philosophique doit donc dépasser la mobilité du plaire et du déplaire, du plaisir ou du déplaisir propre à la psychologie du goût" (Déan 399). Here, art functions didactically, but in the absence of sentiment, Christian or otherwise.

As for religion and art, Diderot specifically decries the combination arguing that the use of images in religion leads to idolatry. He goes on to declare that when art is used in the religious context, it is maliciously used by "merchants of deceit" to control the masses and draw man into their control by means of deceitful aesthetics (Diderot and Goodman 1: 136-7). In fact, Diderot engages in an exposition of Plato's cave in which the shadows cast are none other than the intentionally misleading work of "kings, ministers, priests, doctors, apostles, prophets, theologians, politicians, cheats, charlatans, masters of illusion, and the whole band of dealers in hopes and fears" (Diderot and Goodman 1: 141-2). Aside from those rather accusatory assessments, and in direct contradiction with Chateaubriand's propositions, Diderot argues specifically that

religious subjects can never result in beautiful paintings (Diderot and Goodman 2: 294-6).

It was no secret that, from its origins, the French Enlightenment centered on the idea of breaking free from tradition. Numerous *philosophes*, including Voltaire, openly expressed their desire to see the Enlightenment turn into a popular revolution (Himmelfarb 181). Nonetheless, it was not until the eighteenth century that “political conflict and the Enlightenment [led] to a demystification and desacralization of the monarchy, undermining the very basis of the regime” (Campbell 27). As religion was eradicated from intellectual discourse, the theoretical justification for the *Ancien Régime* crumbled ostensibly permitting a rupture with the past. While this was the intended result, France seems to have never fully recovered from the terrible events of the Revolution and the Terror, as is particularly evident in the literature of the early nineteenth century.

## The Revolution and the Terror

Chateaubriand was a spectator to the events in Paris leading up to the taking of the Bastille. Prior to the Revolution he took a rather liberal political stance, drawing on Voltaire's philosophical letters and Rousseau's social contract, he favored the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. However, as the political situation began to erupt and safety became a greater concern, he fled. His visit to America became the inspiration for much of his later work, particularly of "René," though he never made it to the places he describes nor did he meet the Native Americans who became his subjects. In fact, his *Mémoires* recount a 1791 a meeting with President Washington in Philadelphia; however, the meeting never took place. The President was too ill to receive the young nobleman, and so, to save face, Chateaubriand published a fictional account of an imaginary meeting (Switzer 22).<sup>18</sup> Later, building on his imaginary Washington, Chateaubriand drew favorable comparisons between Napoleon and the American founding father.

Having exhausted his funds, Chateaubriand was forced to return to France where he witnessed the brutal spectacle of revolutionary executions followed by gruesome parades of peasants ecstatically bearing the recently guillotined heads on pikes. In 1792, Chateaubriand emigrated to join the counter-revolutionary Army of Princes at Coblenz, a period he later referred to as 'folly' (*Mémoires* 1: 554-89). During this time, he lost many family members and friends to the guillotine. His brother, mother and sister were all imprisoned and sentenced to death, though all were saved by the amnesty of the 9

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<sup>18</sup> For Chateaubriand's account of the fictitious meeting, see *Mémoires* 1: 411-413.

*Thermidor* (Switzer 27).<sup>19</sup> Shortly after Robespierre's execution and the end of the Terror, Chateaubriand began work on his monumental response to the Revolution and the philosophies that he believed had created it, *Le Génie du Christianisme*.

It is no overstatement to declare that “the principle actors in the drama [of the Revolution] were well aware that they were enacting the Enlightenment's plans for a new order” (Blum xv). But can we, or could Chateaubriand legitimately blame those events on the *philosophes*? Gertrude Himmelfarb responds that “one cannot fairly saddle the Enlightenment with responsibility for all the deeds, or misdeeds, of the Revolution. Yet there were unmistakable echoes of the *philosophes*, of Rousseau especially, at every stage” (Himmelfarb 183). Joseph de Maistre agrees, placing the bulk of the blame on Rousseau (Ecrits 121). Surely Robespierre's political ideal, as explained by Himmelfarb, rings of Rousseau's social contract. She writes, “*le peuple*, in whose name Robespierre established the republic, was not the people in any ordinary sense, still less *les misérables*, but a singular, abstract people, represented by an appropriately singular and abstract general will” (186). But it was ordinary people who suffered. Blum writes, “what dies with the French Revolution was not merely a political order, it was an entire way of life” (xvi). Unfortunately, reversing the effects of Revolutionary tyranny proved to be an incredibly difficult undertaking.

While the public had greatly suffered, there was a general distrust of counter-Revolutionary thought. The greatest fear was that the liberty won under the Revolution would be lost. This created a great linguistic challenge for the counter-Revolutionaries, that of preaching a return to tradition while not implying a “*délibération populaire*”

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<sup>19</sup> The date on the revolutionary calendar corresponding to July 27, 1794.

(Maistre and Manent *Considérations* 125, emphasis added). De Maistre emphasizes the irony of this fear, bearing in mind that the people were hardly a concern, except as pawns, to the Revolution (Maistre and Manent *Considérations* 125). This concern for the individual is critical to counter-Revolutionary thought. Far beyond political concerns, Philippe Bénéton proposes that the counter-Revolution presented a philosophical response to the “danger of abstraction present in modern thought” (Bénéton xiii). He writes, “the counter-revolutionary thinkers tell us that modern thought tends to lose sight of the real man, the man of flesh and blood and bones... it tends to cut up the human subject into his social roles... modern abstraction tends to level everything in the name of its sacrosanct principle of equality” (Bénéton xiii). A traditional social model could restore man to his rightful form, but the question of which tradition to invoke posed a great problem. To put it succinctly:

How does one set one history against another? How does one appeal to tradition while rejecting those which are forming and developing within modern regimes?... counter-revolutionary thought might well respond by saying that we must distinguish between true tradition, which was forged by the experience of the ages, and the false or corrupt traditions born from a violent uprising of theoretical reason. (Bénéton viii-ix)

Chateaubriand, along with most conservative, French counter-Revolutionaries pragmatically decided upon old France, before modern rational philosophy had turned it from its Catholic origins. They praised tradition as being “opposed to the *philosophes*’ pretentious and unrealistic use of reason. Yet they only ever defended some traditions, those of old Europe” (Bénéton viii). Counter-revolutionaries “sought to vindicate the

principles of the Old Regime not for their own sake, as if it were an antiquarian matter, but because they were convinced that these same principles could, if followed, again give birth to the kind of noble and truly human civilization that Europe had been at its best” (Blum xvi-xvii).

As one might surmise from the preceding discussion, when the Enlightenment reached full bloom in France, it created an environment in which it was not only acceptable, but somewhat stylish to mock Christianity and its art. Christopher Blum writes, “the Enlightenment in France had championed both secular reason and secular taste: Christian art and customs were ridiculed as the childhood of art and life” (Blum xx). Beyond this open hostility towards Christian art, the aesthetic environment created by the Enlightenment did not lend itself to religious artistic creation. Summarizing Chateaubriand’s criticisms of the period in his “Défense,” Blum writes, “The incredulity of the *philosophes*... had brought ‘abstract definitions, a scientific style, and neologisms: all fatal to taste and eloquence’” (Blum xxi; Chateaubriand *Génie* 2: 25). In order to counteract the rejection of the Christian faith, Chateaubriand was first forced to champion the cause of its art. Christian art, in the form of surviving cathedrals, paintings, and literature, remained as the sole physical evidence of the grand culture destroyed by the Revolution. Just as René visits the ruins of ancient Greece and Rome, Chateaubriand calls upon the French people to recognize the ruins of their once great society. He hoped that, as the Renaissance had accomplished for those ancient cultures, post-Revolutionary France would be able to revive its own illustrious past.

## “René” as Reaction:

### Restoring Tradition and Transgressing Philosophical Boundaries

My assertion, that “René” is a philosophical response rather than simply an autobiographical tale of despair, is actually quite easily proven, although this significant and enlightening fact has generally been forgotten over the years. “René” was part, and originally so, of an enormous, carefully planned aesthetic and philosophical text, so, I think a difficult argument would be to show that it is not a response to something. The question, which has been partially answered throughout this project, is: To what and whom is Chateaubriand responding? More specifically, how does “René” figure into the debate? If we begin by considering certain characteristics of the Enlightenment, it will become clear that Chateaubriand quite carefully and intentionally transgresses these criteria in “René,” often subtly but sometimes blatantly refuting them.

The Enlightenment was anchored in some basic ideas that are wholly at odds with Chateaubriand’s metaphysical worldview. First among them is empiricism. “René” is essentially anti-empirical. In *Le Génie*, Chateaubriand prizes sentiment over evidence, he “admonishes his readers to reject rationalist arguments about the existence of God and to follow an intuitive, emotional impulse,” a plea he carries over into “René” (Boime 79). One obvious example of his anti-empiricism comes in the form of René’s adopted father, Chactas.

Chactas’ wisdom supercedes, and even derives from the fact that he is blind. At the end of the story, Chactas’ perceptive poetry “appears to have its source in blindness: what he can personify and infuse with meaning is that which he cannot see” (Paulson



129). In fact, the author seems to argue that this is not some unique occurrence; rather that detachment from the sensual world is requisite for such peace and insight.

Chateaubriand, in the narrative voice, calls Chactas' infirmity "the price paid for serenity and the return home... For René, still tormented by regrets and impossible desires, there is no such reintegrative punishment and no end to exile, but Chactas, blind, is beyond the age of passions" (Paulson 130). It is precisely René's inability to escape his passions that confines him.

Along with the old native, Père Souël is able to peer into the heart of René's despair without any first person experience. Unlike Chactas, who had his saving blindness thrust upon him, the priest willfully cleansed his life of the passions that interfere with true perception. It is possibly for this reason that he acutely comprehends Amélie's journey toward salvation. The important point is that both of René's wise guides are removed from the world. Chactas is detached from both the 'civilized' and empirical worlds. The priest belongs to the civilized world, but he is detached from the sensual aspects of it. Instead, his wisdom is derived from unrelated religious experience. It is only in this detached state that they are able to objectively consider René's dilemma, comfort, and advise him. In stark contradiction to the Enlightenment emphasis on observational knowledge, the wise characters in "René" are those who have not personally seen, but rather have experienced the events through a mediated source. In fact, their source is probably the least reliable possible, an individual's memory.

Again, the Enlightenment thinker would have demanded some more solid experience. Nothing is reliable when it comes by means of something so ephemeral and subjective as memory. Particularly for Hume's skeptical empiricism, relying on another

person's memory is problematic. It entails accepting the other's sense impressions and means of transmitting them as valid, that is, accepting him or her as a qualified judge and then assuming that he or she is capable of relating those remembered sense impressions in such a way that they both correspond accurately to his or her experience and that they can produce an accurate, corresponding representation within the mind of the hearer. In short, relying on memory leaves too much room for error and is far too unverifiable for Hume's liking (Hallie 95). Furthermore, memory necessarily imposes narrative structures, which alters perceptions of the events remembered. All of these characteristics of memory offend Enlightenment sensibilities and rob the story recounted of the desired objective clarity, a quality Chateaubriand diligently shuns.

The story is quite intentionally replete with pervasive and confounding ambiguity. The main character's name, the settings, the events, in short all those aspects that lead some to consider the work autobiographical, serve to collapse the theoretical distance between fiction and reality. However, it is done in such a way that one can never quite definitively state that these similarities are in actuality reflections of the author's life. Chateaubriand is transgressing a prime tenet of Enlightenment aesthetic theory, that the boundary between reality and representation must be respected. Any truth-telling capabilities art may have had were stripped away by Enlightenment aesthetics in the name of autonomy and skepticism (Donoghue "Ends" 10). For Chateaubriand "art reveals an unfamiliar segment of reality, in which everything loses its unequivocal relation to truth, being true only by virtue of being false at the same time" (Utasi 323). Chateaubriand's art is constructed with truth-values in mind, but this is not permitted in Enlightenment art theory as truth-values necessarily collapse the theoretical distance and

make it difficult to discern reality from art. This in turn means that rational judgments become difficult if not impossible.

Passion, as a principle theme in “René”, is of course equally objectionable the Enlightenment mind. Passion is the antithesis of cold reason, and so we could assume that Chateaubriand embraces it, which he does, but in a unique fashion. Fabienne Bercegol describes Chateaubriand’s use of passion as a means of encapsulating society. She writes, “Chateaubriand emprunte à l’Histoire des épisodes qu’il détourne du domaine politique et collectif pour les réutiliser dans le cadre de l’histoire privée des passions” (624). Interestingly, Ferenc Horcher asserts that in late eighteenth-century literature, passion is almost always intertwined with madness. However, this is not necessarily undesirable. As he explains, this permits it to develop in two ways which he describes using classic models. One is the divine madness that Plato’s *Ion* calls inspiration (Horcher 122). The other is exemplified by Hamlet, where passion, often erotic but always obsessive, leads to madness and self-destructive behavior (Horcher 124). While René is obviously more closely related to the second notion, this is not the whole function of passion in the story. Amélie serves to illustrate that a Christian is capable of overcoming enslavement to ambiguous passions. Chateaubriand’s model of Christianity serves to illuminate the roots of passion thus enabling the Christian to essentially choose which passions to entertain. He writes:

Ne croyons pas toutefois qu’en nous découvrant les bases sûr lesquelles reposent les passions, le christianisme ait désenchanté la vie. Loin de flétrir l’imagination, en lui faisant tout toucher et tout connaître, il a répandu le doute et les ombres sur les choses inutiles à nos fins ; supérieur

en cela à cette imprudente philosophie, qui cherche trop à pénétrer la nature de l'homme et à trouver le fond partout. (Génie 285)

Bruno Chaouat points out that the title of the chapter in which we find René's story is "Du Vague des passions," which, particularly if the title is really to represent the text, could also be phrased "la passion vague" (Chaouat 64). René's passion is misguided, ambiguous, and, by his own choice, uncontrollable. Thus it imprisons him within a sort of indeterminate state where morality is lost as René confounds his relative identity.

Amélie, who remembers her relative identity, is able to return to and function within the Christian context. Rather than the self-evident truths of the Cartesian *cogito*, religion requires that we become self-aware by "finding ourselves in relation to other beings" (Milbank Word 125). Chateaubriand's "René" illustrates how this rather existential ideal supercedes strict rationalism.

The inclusion of religion likewise makes the story distasteful to Enlightenment criticism. Hume, Kant, and Diderot all denounced the use of art in moral instruction, particularly within a specifically religious context. Religion and moral action are the entire focus of this work. "René" is so grounded in these themes that it could almost be cast as a morality play, with a peculiar method in mind that, rather than following the pilgrim who receives salvation, Chateaubriand follows the one who chose poorly. The Enlightenment aesthetic sought to remove art from its relative context so that judgments could be objective and logical. Chateaubriand, on the contrary, tried to revive the relative cultural function so that certain artistic endeavors could again function in a Neo-Platonic capacity, that is, as part of religious discourse leading to sincere faith. This forms the bulk of his project. Chateaubriand is attempting to entirely reunite form and relative

cultural meaning, but more than reuniting them, he presents a case in which they are simultaneously functions of each other. This explains “René” within *Le Génie*, his grand aesthetic argument for Christianity, Chateaubriand offers an example of the Christian art he has described. Following directly from his discussion leading up to it, the short work of fiction Christianizes traditional “pagan” themes. René is a tragic hero in the Greek sense, but he and his story have been *baptized* into a non-fatalistic, passionate Christian faith.

Chateaubriand’s goal in relation to the Enlightenment is to overcome the disjunction it wrought on society. The Enlightenment had dissected man into social roles in its efforts to reduce the whole of society to a system based on logically accessible, self-evident, empirical truth. Unfortunately, man cannot be reduced to the set of his social functions; man can only exist as a whole. As, by this time, metaphysical religion had become so ingrained into society, it could not be disassociated from the larger context. The only possibility for extricating it was a complete societal reconstruction; this was the goal of the Revolution. However, the new system failed to meet the needs of society and the suffering masses slowly returned to the previous structure. Romanticism grew out of this failed rebuilding and subsequent search for the old ways.

The beginnings of Romanticism in France corresponded with the rise of the Napoleonic era. As it had in other countries, French Romanticism was marked by a particular taste for the Middle Ages and chivalry which led to the peculiar portrayal, particularly in the visual arts, of modern heroes in medieval settings (Peyre 70). This was a perfect fit for the emerging Napoleonic system, which was preoccupied with the monumental tasks of reestablishing order and glorifying the new regime by means of

traditional iconographies (Boime 10-2). Diverging somewhat from the artistic current and propagandistic pragmatism that was driving early Romantic aesthetics, Chateaubriand wrote, “la véritable religion nous enseigne que ce n’est pas par la force du corps que l’homme se doit mesurer, mais par la grandeur de l’âme” (Génie 1: 278). The Revolution and Terror were driven by force, the new society had to be based on something else. This led to what Saint-Beuve called the religious renaissance at the start of the nineteenth century (qtd. in Peyre 163).

Though average citizens may have been interested in religious faith, for the leadership of France, it was a tool. Napoleon quickly came to realize that religion had always been an important instrument for maintaining order. However, as John Milbank explains, it is not simply a question of religion generally, but of a specific religion. He writes, “The post-Enlightenment case, in a nutshell, is that while, from a formal point of view, any old *mythos* of power will do, in practice what holds societies together is not a formal ordering of the arbitrary, but rather the *content* of the arbitrary, or devotion to a particular *mythos*” (Milbank Theology 55). The only religion that could satisfy the cultural longings of post-Revolutionary France was the traditional Catholicism, the relics and ruins of which still marked the land. Napoleon worked to reestablish pre-Revolutionary Catholicism, which, while obviously political and social, naturally affected the aesthetic ideals of the time.

The rules of reason that had governed artistic discourse from Classicism to the Enlightenment gave way to a system grounded in sentiment and a pseudo-religious cult of art itself. Seeming to echo Plato’s Ion, mad, passionate inspiration became a necessary tenet of the new system (Mornet 199). While this appears a drastic departure from the

coldly rational aesthetics of Classicism and the Enlightenment, there were many, even Victor Hugo, who argued that the differences between the *classiques* and the *romantiques* were actually rather insignificant (qtd. in Mornet 261). This is of course an unusual, though explainable notion. First, we can consider that Hugo, being born after the Revolution, certainly did not experience it in the way that, say, Chateaubriand had. Further, an examination of history will show that when Hugo made this comment, France was again ruled by a Bourbon monarch and that Comte's positivism, an empirical school like the Enlightenment, was beginning to dominate French philosophy. So, the intellectual France of the 1820s and 1830s was not so different from that of pre-Revolutionary times. It was almost as though the Revolution functioned as a metaphorical mirror, reflecting forward what had preceded it in reverse order. Indeed, the similarities were numerous and significant. Karl Philipp Moritz described the shift as a gradual transition stressing commonalities, not disparities, between notions of beauty. He contended that beauty, common to both the natural and man-made worlds, is always based on the same elements. The most important being an underlying principle he called "Bildung," which he described as the "promethean theft of creation from God given to man" (Kisbali 88-9). It seems there was always an emphasis on divine influence in art. However, before the Revolution, a liberal inclusion of all art into this preeminent classification created confusion. Chateaubriand was eager to establish clear boundaries, favoring only explicitly Christian art.

For Chateaubriand, the Revolution was the great temporal dividing line, indelibly marking the drastic change in his personal life and philosophical ideals. Though this is the case, it is interesting to note that the Chateaubriand we know from *Le Génie* did not

immediately follow the Revolution (Richard 148). Prior to the 1789, Chateaubriand was essentially a liberal, Enlightenment thinker, but disappointment and exile took their toll. He, like many Frenchmen following the Revolution, swayed politically and philosophically from one extreme to the other, even claiming at times a sort of hopeless, historical fatalism relating the fall of France to that of the Roman Empire (Hemmings 111-9). Because of this, Chateaubriand's personal beliefs are difficult to classify; from his writings he seems to be sometimes an anarchist, other times a devout Christian, there are even moments when he appears to be following the intellectual evolution begun with the Enlightenment (Castillo 162). Throughout this period and regardless of these shifts, he was always driven by an overwhelming nostalgia for the past and, contrary to the general Romantic strain, he finally arrived at a powerful and motivating hope for the future. Rather than the superficial cultural iconographies that were taking hold around him, Chateaubriand delved deeper to find the underlying principles that originally created the traditional culture. In the end, he decided that Catholicism was the "fundamental principle of order" both in French society and in its art (Boime 79).

This emphasis on Christianity colors Chateaubriand's political writings as well. He even went so far as to declare that pre-Revolutionary France was something of a divine democracy. At a time when most political thinkers were struggling to reconcile the freedoms won through the Revolution with a new and necessarily strict societal organization, Chateaubriand was striving to show that those freedoms were actually incorporated in the old organization. He was one of the few thinkers of the *right* to arrive at democracy through a study of ancient France (Aureau 78). A theoretical move that was only possible through the mediation of the Christian religion.



First and foremost was Chateaubriand's insistence upon "l'alliance de la religion chrétienne et de la liberté" (Bénichou 109). The fatalistic tendencies of the pagan cultures and the scientific determinism of the Enlightenment stood in stark contrast to his concept of an all-encompassing, existential Christianity. He wrote, "Le christianisme est l'appréciation la plus philosophique et la plus rationnelle de Dieu et de la création ; il renferme les trois grandes lois de l'univers, la loi divine, la loi morale, la loi politique : la loi divine, unité de Dieu en trois personnes ; la loi morale, la *charité* ; la loi politique, c'est-à-dire *liberté, égalité, fraternité*" (Mémoires 2: 2978). Though he argues in favor of a political system that is derived from the Catholic religion, he firmly rejects "la collusion de la religion et du despotisme" that tended to arise in the *Ancien Régime* (Castillo 165). Instead, Chateaubriand endorses a constitutional monarchy grounded in Christian principles. However, before this can happen, Christianity must be restored.

Despite his insistence on Christianity as the solution to all society's problems, Chateaubriand's *Le Génie* "seems to have been a sort of Pandora's box," which, "while justifying Christianity in terms of its contributions to civilization, provoked a questioning of the history of the Church and, what is more important, raised questions about the nature of the Kingdom" (Bowman Romanticism 33). Among these perplexing aspects of the work are seeming contradictions in Chateaubriand's portrayal of Christianity in the world. In "René" and *Les Natchez*, "the Christian missionaries and other European colonists are the bearers of catastrophe, corrupters and destroyers of an authentic civilization still in the childhood of its development" (Paulson 125). Even the intently Christian portions of Chateaubriand's work come under scrutiny as Saint-Beuve asserts that, in his aesthetic discourse, Chateaubriand "était païen malgré lui," having

constructed his argument following Hellenistic models (qtd. in Peyre 70). This overlooks Chateaubriand's general assertion that Christianity subsumes, rather than dismisses, all truth wherever it is found. Likewise, Christian art reaffirms 'pagan' truths and improves upon them. "René" perfectly illustrates this function in its undeniable resemblance to and Christianization of ancient tragedy.

Chateaubriand's work bears the marks of the intellectual turmoil facing early Romantics. However, he separates himself by the hopeful and decidedly prescriptive nature of his writings. He was not simply portraying the world as he saw it, nor was he trying to portray an imagined past. He did not write lamentations, he wrote insightful parables aimed at saving France from the real *mal du siècle*, the inescapable torment of progress gone wrong and a rupture with the past. He was trying to restore a real identity rather than creating a mythical façade to shield society from the remembrance of its failures. Chateaubriand keenly understood the importance of cultural identity, having been forced to give up his personal identity in the Revolution. As is affirmed by his active role in the political life of the country after the publication of "René," he was working to rebuild a lost society and save post-Revolutionary France from itself.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I will answer one final question that I believe will accurately reveal the nature of “René.” The question is: Who is the hero of the story? Is it René for whom the story is named? No, René is a slave to his passions and lives a miserable unchristian life violating all of Chateaubriand’s admonitions in *Le Génie*. If it is not René, then it can only be Amélie. She, rather than permitting passion to control her, motivates herself through selfless, Christian compassion. Even in this, we find a contradiction with Enlightenment thinkers. Rousseau had argued that compassion or pity only appeared in the natural state as a balance for self-love in order to preserve the species (Himmelfarb 172-3). For Chateaubriand, compassion is the root of Christianity and his sentimental aesthetics. Christian art portrays true heroes who, rather than through a show of physical prowess, overcome spiritual ailments by an action of will which then precipitates physical and spiritual deliverance. They are then able to commune with God and their fellow man. He writes:

Pythagore, Platon, et Socrate, recommandent le culte de ces hommes qu’ils appellent des *héros*. Hiéroclès l’interprète exactement comme le christianisme explique le nom de *saint*. “Ces héros pleins de bonté et de lumière pensent toujours à leur Créateur, et sont tout éclatants de la lumière qui rejailit de la félicité dont ils jouissent en lui... héros vient d’un mot grec qui signifie *amour*, pour marquer que, pleins d’amour pour Dieu, les héros ne cherchent qu’à nous aider à passer de cette vie terrestre à une vie divine, et à devenir citoyens du ciel.” (Genie 1: 329)

It is the grandeur of Amélie's spirit that permits her to overcome selfish desires and redeem herself. Once redeemed, she is able to save others. At least, she is able to save those who would choose to be saved. Chateaubriand's Christianity is a religion of free will and moral action.

Chateaubriand's discussion of non-Christian art illustrates the essential core of his aesthetic and social philosophies. Virtue is drawn from the world as we experience and then act within it. He writes, "Les vertus purement morales sont froides par essence, ce n'est pas quelque chose d'ajouté à l'ame c'est quelque chose de retranché de la nature ; c'est l'absence du vice, plutôt que la présence de la vertu" (Genie 1: 277). René holds to his passions rather than letting them go. In this, he is a supremely anti-Christian character. He lacks faith and so lives his life in misery. This was the fate facing post-Revolutionary France.

Many scholars rightfully characterize Chateaubriand as an anti-Enlightenment thinker; however, as I have endeavored to show, he was also opposed to Romanticism as it eventually developed, contrary to common thought. In many ways, he shared in the general concerns of the day and portrayed these anxieties in his work. The difference is that Chateaubriand discovered a way of overcoming these concerns and resurrecting the once proud and beautiful society he had known in his youth. He pragmatically employed the only surviving aspects of that society, its art. However, he carefully focused on art that would lead to that system rather than art that might glorify another. "René" was a vital part of his argument. It offered an opportunity for his reader to attempt the kind of Christian aesthetic appreciation he had outlined. Hopefully, after practicing in that

elementary and quite plain setting, a reader could then apply those principles and skills to everyday encounters with the remnants of old France.

If this was his goal, one could ask why the story focuses on René rather than Amélie. As part of the overall philosophical response, “René” was something of an exercise for the reader. Finding the good behind the more noticeable bad would have been an important skill for those attempting to look back past the unfortunate evils of the *Ancien Régime*, which had been relentlessly emphasized during the Enlightenment and Revolution, to the glories it also comprised. Unfortunately, having been removed from its context, this function of the text was entirely lost. Readers mistook René for the hero of the story, thus, since its individual publication, Chateaubriand’s intentions have been lost. Ironically, French Romanticism was defined by this antithetical misconception of “René.”

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