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Poetry and the discourse of happiness in nineteenth-century France: the case of Vigny

Patrick O'Donovan

It is generally difficult, no doubt, to dissociate the question of happiness, individual or collective, from the wider question of values. But, in post-Revolutionary France, when deliberation on moral and political values in particular is conflictual through and through, this axis proves to be peculiarly intractable. A prolonged history of political instability generates, in turn, its own unhappiness. Here, I aim to conduct a case-study, seeking to identify what is distinctive about the attempts of Vigny in particular to say what happiness might amount to, given that the understanding of happiness which he rehearses in his poetry is in important ways negative, in other words, it is shaped by his efforts to deal with forces or experiences that cause unhappiness.

From the crisis of values that spans much of the nineteenth century, the question of happiness arises in two ways. First, events give rise to happiness or unhappiness. Benjamin Constant describes 1789 as 'notre heureuse révolution', because, being the first step in a process that leads to the adoption of a system of representative government, it helps to secure the conditions most likely to generate individual contentment within modern mass societies.[1] But, as he also acknowledges, the conditions under which this outcome was achieved were far from ideal. The conflicts of the Terror prompt him to attempt

[1] 'De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes', an essay first published in 1819, in *Ecrits politiques*, ed. by Marcel Gauchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), pp. 591–92.

a brief social psychology of the period. Anger is one of the passions which conflict arouses: 'On ajournait la liberté, disait-on, jusqu'à ce que les factions se fussent calmées, mais les factions ne se calment que lorsque la liberté n'est plus ajournée […] on s'agite dans un cercle vicieux […] La force rend de plus en plus la force nécessaire; la colère s'accroît par la colère'.[2] The Revolution generates a history from which unhappy experiences may still flow. Second, the scope of the political settlements characteristic of the modern state to cause happiness or unhappiness becomes a theoretical issue in its own right. Constant, once again, concedes that the typical trend of such societies is towards ever greater uniformity; the problem is that the resulting loss of local traditions is a source of discontent.[3] The constitution of the good society remains, as a result, something of an open question. A whole range of factors – social, political, structural, conjunctural – prove to have a bearing on well-being. Constant is concerned above all to argue for individual freedom of choice as the source of the kinds of *jouissance* to which we attach importance in the commercial stage of society.[4] Constant's thinking is permeated by a central paradox: the individualism of private members of societies, as they pursue their own diverse interests, generates beneficial public effects, notably enhanced collective freedom from the arbitrary exercise of authority and, in turn, the possibility that increased autonomy gives of attaining fulfilment.[5] And yet, while he regards this conception of freedom as

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[2]*De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation* (1814), in *Ecrits politiques*, p. 219.

[3]*De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*, in *Ecrits politiques*, pp. 170–71.

[4]See 'De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes', pp. 597–99. The theory of the four stages of society, those of hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce, is a pivotal element of Adam Smith's theory of social institutions, as first developed in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. by R. L. Meek et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, 27 (p. 14).

[5]Compare Adam Smith on the paradox of the 'publick happiness' that is typically generated by the self-interested actions of discrete groups in society who do not have 'the least intention to serve the publick', in *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, II, ed. by R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 422. Smith goes on to appeal to a metaphor that was to become a notorious commonplace, claiming that the individual, 'led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention', 'by pursuing his own interest […] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it' (p. 456). On the desire for individual self-betterment as a

paramount, together with the marked separation of the public and the private which it implies, he feels himself compelled at the end of 'De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes' to distinguish his stance from a thoroughgoing utilitarian outlook: 'L'œuvre du législateur n'est point complète quand il a seulement rendu le peuple tranquille […] Il faut que les institutions achèvent l'éducation morale des citoyens'.[6] The happiness of whole societies is somehow more than the sum of individual preferences. But, once again, just how virtuous collective outcomes might be achieved or sustained does seem to remain something of an open question.

In fact, the logic of individual choice has the potential to be supremely slippery, with paradoxical outcomes as far as the quest for happiness or joy is concerned. In *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky's narrator invites us to imagine a type who will 'go against […] the laws of reason'; precisely the most desirable advantage of all is to be able to repudiate those things which are held, on rational grounds, no doubt, to be 'appealing and useful'. He acknowledges to the full the distinctiveness of a modern, individualistic conception of freedom. But a perverse mobilisation of choice generates its own inverted and disruptive joy, that of achieving 'this primary, most advantageous advantage which is the dearest thing to him', however irrational it may otherwise seem.[7]

In brief, happiness emerges as an idea that is both unstable and contested. To this disputed space, Vigny brings his own shifting and complex response. In a brief fragment from 1830, Vigny admits the possibility of doubt as to the existence of God: 'Dieu, sais-je ce que vous êtes, et si vous existez?'[8] All of the conflicts and the ruptures we have witnessed have the potential to generate extreme unhappiness.

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source of social benefits, see Charles L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chs 2 and 7.

[6]*Ecrits politiques*, pp. 618–19. On this strand in Constant's thought and the tensions which sustain it, see Biancamaria Fontana, *Benjamin Constant and the Post-Revolutionary Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 112–16.

[7]*Notes from the Underground – The Gambler*, ed. by Malcolm Jones, tr. by Jane Kentish (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 23–24.

[8]*Œuvres complètes*, I, *Poésie – Théâtre*, ed. by François Germain and André Jarry (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1986), p. 320. Unless otherwise indicated, all further references to Vigny's poems will be to this edition and volume, and will be given by line number in the text.

And this is the possibility to which the title of this fragment – 'Colère' – seems to gesture. Here as elsewhere in his work, Vigny's 'je' hints both at the emergence, under conditions of modernity, of a distinctively secular view of life and at the feeling of loss bordering on desolation that accompanies it. The crisis is apparently one of belief, but it may also have political overtones, since it would have some bearing on an absolutist ideology in which religion and government are interdependent. In other words, in the thinking and writing of a poet, the question of happiness demands to be addressed in its full scope – existential, ethical, political. Both this outlook and these feelings are again rehearsed and explored by Vigny in a later poem, 'La Maison du berger', where the loss of familiar meaning is more fully and more painfully acknowledged. What we seem to witness is a shift in patterns of belief in tandem with the emergence of wholly new political institutions, beliefs and behaviours. What is distinctive about Vigny is just how this state of things precipitates a sustained, though discontinuous and tentative, reinvention of poetry as a universal medium, open to all of the problems of modern life and to its fleeting consolations.

The acute sense that an alteration both radical and troubling in the political basis of contemporary society comes to be voiced once again at the point where, later in the same year, Vigny happens to consider the case of Constant. On the day of Constant's burial in December 1830, Vigny reminisces on their one meeting, presenting him as an emblematic figure of disenchantment: 'La dynastie des Bourbons l'importunait, et il a contribué à la renverser; et la tristesse qu'il a confessée à la tribune lui est venue de l'impuissance où il se sentait plongé de rien fonder sur les ruines qu'il nous a faites'.[9] Vigny's comments, coming so soon after the July Days, are by no means incidental: they amount to a judgment on Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary France, the entire period spanned by Constant's ultimately unhappy career as a theorist of freedom. For Vigny himself, the experience of the July Days was almost fatal. Because he was reluctant, being a former soldier, to resist the Garde royale, he armed instead members of his household so as to defend it against any and

[9] *Œuvres complètes*, II, ed. by Fernand Baldensperger (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 925.

all intruders. In the course of 29 July, Vigny incautiously put his head out of a window: 'on m'a tiré trois coups de fusil dont les balles sont incrustées dans le mur au niveau de ma tête. Il ne pouvait être dans ma destinée de finir là!'. He goes on to draw a conclusion that is subjective in appearance, but which forms part of the same disabused attitude as he was to express when considering the case of Constant: 'En politique, je n'ai plus de cœur. Je ne suis pas fâché qu'on me l'ait ôté, il gênait ma tête. Ma tête seule jugera dorénavant et avec sévérité. Hélas!'.[10] Two distinct, if implicit, conclusions emerge: French society has undergone a decisive transformation; but, despite Constant's confident claims in favour of the distinctive freedom of the moderns, a form of politics equal to so far-reaching and, sometimes, so destructive a process has yet to manifest itself.

The brief fragment quoted above gestures towards a process of self-questioning amounting to an existential crisis. A major poem, 'Paris', was begun in the same year. Here, what is momentous about the modern world is that it seems to exceed even an apocalyptic perspective.[11] 'Paris' appears a contradictory poem, incorporating both an attitude of engagement giving rise to a series of sharply critical reflections on shifts in belief systems, be they political, religious, or ethical, and at the same time an apparently negative gesture of retreat. It records a series of exchanges between a *je* and a Voyageur concerning the state of the modern world, interspersed with passages of visionary description of Paris as the terrifying centre of a 'monde mouvant'. Ostensibly written on 16 January 1831, the poem takes a topical turn when it invokes the now disappeared figure of Constant:

> – 'Liberté!' crie un autre, et soudain la tristesse
> Comme un taureau le tue aux pieds de sa Déesse,
> Parce qu'ayant en vain quarante ans combattu,

[10] *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Baldersperger, II, p. 918.

[11] *Œuvres complètes*, I, pp. 105–12. Our response to Vigny is likely to differ from the uneasy complicity we feel when reading Baudelaire – or Villon, as Michael Freeman remarks in a striking *rapprochement*. But there are aspects of Vigny's work which can be linked to that of Villon, notably 'a feeling for an infinity which goes beyond the here and now and beyond the grave'; see Michael Freeman, *François Villon in his Works: The Villain's Tale* (Amsterdam /Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 24–26.

Il ne peut rien construire où tout est abattu.[12]
(ll. 115–18)

Constant is identified by Vigny as the unnamed focus of these lines in a footnote and the attitude ascribed to him – one of 'tristesse' – is the same as in the diary entry of December 1830. The implicit judgment on modern politics is unmistakable: ultimately, the outcome of the progressive urge in political theory and action has been unhappy. The emphasis throughout the poem is in the main secular: in every city of the modern world, people must submit to suffering and death (ll. 238–39). A prophetic strain would indeed be misplaced: once God is suspected to be dead, there must follow something of a collapse with regard to any providential narrative. Vigny's stance vis-à-vis the modern is equivocal for specifically poetic reasons. If it were to manifest itself in a prophetic vein, then the poetic engagement with politics, with '[les] choses de la vie', would be open to objections like those Vigny levels against Constant and against other thinkers. It is the ultimate exclusion both of the apocalytic and of the prophetic outlook that gives rise to a paradox which is, for Vigny, distinctively poetic: the refusal to prognosticate simply projects forwards the questions the poem asks.[13]

These different writings by Vigny, because they link questions of politics with those of belief, crystallise what could be termed a continental modernity, as well as the ambivalent, if not disenchanted, responses it occasions. The emergence of new forms of human association – those of the democratic polity, the economy, and the culture of the nation state – takes place across the West, together with

[12]Subtitled 'Elévation', it was in fact composed between November 1830 and the early months of the following year. I give a brief account of Vigny's meditation on the ultimate political significance of Constant's career, in 'The Death of a Liberal: Four Lines on Constant by Vigny', *French Studies Bulletin*, 100 (2006), 66–69.

[13]See Yves Bonnefoy, for whom poetry, as a distinctive kind of human entreprise, was exposed in the mid-nineteenth century to a most serious crisis, even though it is a medium in which, notably so in the work of Vigny, the human mind comes to grapple with the collapse of the belief that the order unpinning the world would ultimately be revealed to us; see 'L'Enjeu occidental de la poésie', in *L'Identité littéraire de l'Europe*, ed. by Marc Fumaroli et al. (Paris: PUF, 2000), pp. 205–21 (p. 216). (Bonnefoy's piece has now reached an anglophone audience through James Petterson's excellent translation, in 'At Stake: Poetry in the Western World', *Common Knowledge*, 8 (2002), 595–607.)

the dramatic expansion of individualism in the material sphere. These are complex changes and they generate their own instabilities.[14] In France, they coincide with a massive and fairly prolonged crisis of authority.[15] The gradual emergence of a system of representative democracy has a bearing beyond the political in ways that are themselves complex and sometimes difficult; and, in France, the fact that the social changes attendant upon industrialisation occurred later than in other countries, notably later than in England, means that economic and demographic factors bring their own political pressures.[16] The demise of absolutism was, then, protracted, violent and uncertain for several different reasons. In Vigny's 'Paris', the city becomes the focus, part historical, part mythical, for the difficult emergence of the politics of a free democracy, a feature of its identity that was to become a commonplace – highly visibly so in *L'Education sentimentale*, but also in works in other languages, like Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, where Strether senses 'as if excited and exciting, the vague voice of Paris' and imagines that he can recover something of 'the days and nights of revolution, the sounds had come in, the omens, the beginnings broken out. They were the smell of revolution,

[14]On these changes, on the tensions arising from the spread of republicanism through Napoleonic conquest, and on the kinds of political difficulties which novel forms of majoritarian democracy present, see Deepak Lal, *Unintended Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 99–125. The disruptive impact of such changes in absolutist monarchies can be gauged when these are compared with England, where, by contrast, a deeply embedded sense of individualism and a highly developed and individualistic market society existed from the thirteenth century; so argues Alan MacFarlane, in *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); see pp. 165–88.

[15]On the demand for freedom as a contestation of authority, see Constant: 'Que le pouvoir s'y résigne donc; il nous faut la liberté, et nous l'aurons', in 'De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes', p. 615.

[16]Tocqueville cites these as causes of the February Revolution in 1848, in *Souvenirs*, ed. by Luc Monnier (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 85. For a searching account of the anthropological and social as well as the political significance of democratisation in France, see Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Sacre du citoyen: histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). On France and Spain as absolutist monarchies which, because of their primary concern with the pursuit of political dominance, were vulnerable to long-term economic inefficiencies, see Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 120–31.

the smell of the public temper – or perhaps simply the smell of blood'.[17]

And indeed the emergence of the political and social institutions of modernity is vulnerable to disruption by continued violent spasms. This is precisely how Tocqueville interprets the revolutionary episodes to which, like Vigny, he was a witness. Tocqueville's experience of the February and the June Days of 1848, as he attempts to reconstruct it in his *Souvenirs*, was not happy. Like Vigny, Tocqueville belongs to the generation for whom the long-term impact of the Revolution was the critical issue in contemporary life. He begins his record by giving a mildly disenchanted view of the politics of the July Monarchy: the decades which followed the Revolution witnessed a 'lutte acharnée' between traditional aristocratic society and the emergent middle class, leading in turn to a period where the 'esprit particulier' of the latter became the 'esprit général' of the government. What seems to result is a 'très grand apaisement dans toutes les passions politiques'. Tocqueville claims to have sensed that this period of calm was about to come to an end; but the reaction he experiences is surprisingly violent, nonetheless. He views the February Days as an upheaval which puts into doubt the very possibility of sustaining a modern political settlement: 'je savais que, si une grande révolution peut fonder la liberté dans un pays, plusieurs révolutions qui se succèdent y rendent pour très longtemps toute liberté régulière impossible'.[18] The changes characteristic of Constant's world of the moderns now seem at once irreversible and strangely abortive – an outcome which occasions in Tocqueville feelings of deep and bitter unhappiness and which, in turn, mirrors Vigny's sense, eighteen or so years earlier in 'Paris', not just that things stand at an impasse, but that acute unhappiness is the very likely general outcome. When it comes to '[les] choses de la vie', the poet can only say '*Je ne sais*' (l. 251). The world may be on the verge of apocalypse – or not. We have no way of knowing. The Voyageur has the last word, voicing a conclusion that is at once sententious and a little flat: '*Pour longtemps le monde est dans la nuit*' (l. 258).

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[17]*The Ambassadors*, ed. by Christopher Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 401.
[18]*Souvenirs*, pp. 12–13, 88.

An ambivalent attitude towards the modern world, a sense of subjective crisis, an active concern with contingencies which are ominous because imponderable: all of these attitudes connect with 'La Maison du berger', which I propose now to consider in some detail. The poem, which first appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes* in July 1844, has a secular orientation not dissimilar from that of 'Paris', in that it again contests prevailing intellectual approaches to the modern social world, while presenting poetry as the space of a continuing engagement with the problems of life.[19] One of the poem's central enigmas is how it articulates a non-redemptive exploration of substantive unhappiness: it is through this exploration that a veiled and tentative conception of happiness can be said to emerge from its opposite.

The poem opens by seeking a desired identification between the 'je' and his interlocutor:

> Si ton cœur, gémissant du poids de notre vie,
> Se traîne et se débat comme un aigle blessé,
> Portant comme le mien, sur son aile asservie,
> Tout un monde fatal, écrasant et glacé;
> (ll. 1–4)

And at first glance, the stance which it appears to rehearse is one of withdrawal:

> Pars courageusement, laisse toutes les villes;
> Ne ternis plus tes pieds aux poudres du chemin; […]
> La Nature t'attend dans un silence austère;
> (ll. 22–23; 29)

But, as with 'Paris', its argument is more complex. The condition of desired identification is movement. What appears at the outset as a kind of desired solipsism *à deux* in fact combines with an unexpectedly diverse range of other stances. The opening gesture of retreat, it must in fact be understood, is virtual: the 'lettre' addressed to the absent Eva is a framework for reflecting on self–other and self–world relations, a line of thinking which is dramatically intensified, as we shall see, in the context of the poem's closing stanzas.

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[19] *Œuvres complètes,* I, pp. 119–28.

In brief, then, the poem is characterised by what could be termed a series of reflective as well as affective stances; these, as they succeed each other, result in sometimes abrupt shifts of register. The opening out of the poem to these diverse concerns, but not the shift in stance which is central to the poem's ultimate impact, comes about in a sense fortuitously, for it is not merely the sheer range of the poem, but also its genesis, that make it one of the most complex in Vigny's corpus.[20] So, the first nine stanzas of the first part represent the opening of the 'lettre' to an absent Eva, at the end of which the 'je' envisages submitting to chance in the intensely private space which is created as much in the imagined exchange with her as in the 'Maison du berger':

> Je verrai, si tu veux, les pays de la neige,
> Ceux où l'astre amoureux dévore et resplendit,
> Ceux que heurtent les vents, ceux que la mer assiège,
> Ceux où le pôle obscur sous sa glace est maudit.
> Nous suivrons du hasard la course vagabonde.
> Que m'importe le jour? que m'importe le monde?
> Je dirai qu'ils sont beaux quand tes yeux l'auront dit.
> (ll. 57–63)

What the 'je' seems to offer is a kind of *joie de vivre* embedded in the willed espousal of chance: such would appear to be the emergent significance of the gesture of retreat.

But there then follow four stanzas on a railway crash which occurred on 8 May 1842, followed by five stanzas on the scope, if any, of affective and intellectual autonomy in a globalised world. The name which the 'je' gives to this latter stance is 'Rêverie'. The contrast between these different threads is quite sharp, with the first two stanzas in the sequence on the train disaster following a different rhythmical pattern. In the face of the disaster, the 'je' articulates an

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[20]Very briefly, the composition of the poem extends from 1838, or possibly a little earlier, to November 1843; it is sent to the printers in May of the following year. The nine opening and the ten closing stanzas were initially elaborated as a single sequence and were separated only at the point where Vigny envisaged publication of the poem and was confronted with the problem of how to distribute his material into three more or less proportionate parts. For a comprehensive analysis of its genesis, see André Jarry, *Alfred de Vigny: étapes et sens du geste littéraire* (Geneva: Droz, 1998), pp. 683–97.

attitude of prudential caution, in that in the succeeding stanzas he reaches the conclusion that the development of commerce, and the transformation of social spaces which it implies, can be regarded as benign where it is also open to 'les généreuses choses' (l. 94), in other words, where the poetic impact of a reflective engagement with the human predicament can, if anything, be magnified. What this stance combines with, then, is the careful elaboration of an engagement of the kind which is a precondition of poetry in a world which is 'rétréci par notre expérience', a world in which chance is minimised, which is dominated intellectually by a conception of science that appears narrowly deterministic and where the actions of the individual are typically informed by rational and self-interested calculation. The progressive vision of 'publick happiness' which we found articulated in Smith and in turn in Constant is turned on its head: here the distinctive features of the modern world generate anxiety much more than they do contentment, though in the same opaque – or 'invisible' – way.

Poetry, by contrast, being implicitly connected to 'Rêverie' as something that is residually committed to now defunct ways of thinking and of being, can also represent a gesture of refusal – a paradoxical attitude, it must be noted, in that it seeks to exist on the margins of a view of the world which the poet does in fact acknowledge. At the end of the second part of the poem, this complex stance is strongly reaffirmed:

> Jamais la Rêverie amoureuse et paisible
> N'y verra sans horreur son pied blanc attaché; Car
> il faut que ses yeux sur chaque objet visible Versent
> un long regard, comme un fleuve épanché,
> Qu'elle interroge tout avec inquiétude,
> Et, des secrets divins se faisant une étude,
> Marche, s'arrête et marche avec le col penché.
> (ll. 127–33)

The stanza opens with the affirmation of the necessary independence of the attitude of 'Rêverie'; and the remaining five lines justify this claim, emphasising among other things the many ways in which anxiety has become a pervasive thread in human life. This way of reasoning creates of itself a forward movement which makes the unit of poetic value the stanza, rather than the individual line – a dimension of Vigny's writing that gives the text its characteristic

dynamism. Here, accordingly, no single line has the same rhythmical organisation; and further, it becomes clear, here as elsewhere, that the impact of a given movement within a single stanza results in part from how it comes to relate to the one that follows. In other words, there is a dynamism internal to the stanza which results from the interaction of the syntax with the rhyming scheme and from the rhythmical character of the stanza as a unit, subject to a forward movement which is perceived as the way in which a succeeding stanza can derive something of its own momentum from the one that precedes it.

The 'je' is entirely absent from the second part and indeed from the opening six stanzas of the third, returning only in the final sequence of ten stanzas originally connected to the poem's opening. After the first two stanzas in the second part, the poet adopts a negative stance vis-à-vis poetry, before returning in more trenchant terms to the temporal perspective of the first part, by insisting on the scope of the thought of the past, though no more than the 'Reste des nations mortes', to perdure. The critique of poetry on which the 'je' embarks forms part, then, of a larger movement, affective in origin, but merging once again with the complex stance of withdrawal and engagement, whose object is modernity and the discourses through which it defines and justifies itself, for instance, through the claimed identification with happiness and fulfilment. There is a fundamental shift in this part of the poem: the 'je' mounts a critique of features of the modern world – notably, parliamentary democracy – which is closely informed by the demands of the poetic stance. Vigny's adverse comment on political discourse could well be said to be simply reductive: he accuses politicians of populism, perhaps a little predictably. But, by the end of the second part of the poem, it is the imagination that is mobilised for the sake of the future benefit of societies which must exist on a quite different basis from those of the past. The poem offers some hints as to the essentially anti-positivist basis on which it proceeds to contest both populist politics and narrowly rational thinking:

> Mais notre esprit rapide en mouvements abonde:
> Ouvrons tout l'arsenal de ses puissants ressorts.
> L'Invisible est réel. Les âmes ont leur monde
> Où sont accumulés d'impalpables trésors.
> Le Seigneur contient tout dans ses deux bras immenses,

Son Verbe est le séjour de nos intelligences,
Comme ici-bas l'espace est celui de nos corps.
(ll. 218–24)

The paradox at this point is that the 'je' presents as almost sacred a kind of very marginal happiness which he will elaborate in the third part of the poem and which will remain essentially non-redemptive.

The 'lettre' around which the poem is organised resumes, as we have already noted, in the closing ten stanzas of the third part. The opening of the final sequence echoes the earlier introduction of the emblematic Maison du berger:

Il est sur ma montagne une épaisse bruyère […]
Viens y cacher l'amour et ta divine faute;
Si l'herbe est agitée ou n'est pas assez haute,
J'y roulerai pour toi la Maison du berger.
(ll. 43; 47–49)

The 'je' speaks to Eva in a familiar imperative ('Viens'), precisely the mode of address that links this gesture to the closing part of the poem, where the same natural scene is seemingly presented as a uniquely serene environment. What the enchanted atmosphere seems to betoken is some possibility of attaining a kind of joy, which, though very marginal, does seem tangible:

Viens donc! le ciel pour moi n'est plus qu'une auréole
Qui t'entoure d'azur, t'éclaire et te défend;
La montagne est ton temple et le bois sa coupole,
L'oiseau n'est sur la fleur balancé par le vent,
Et la fleur ne parfume et l'oiseau ne soupire
Que pour mieux enchanter l'air que ton sein respire;
La terre est le tapis de tes beaux pieds d'enfant.
(ll. 267–73)

The return of the identificatory movement in fact masks a further shift in direction: now the 'je''s thinking on the secular world is centred much more exclusively on a subjective outlook – neither positivist nor anti-positivist, neither self-consciously poetic nor committedly intellectual. Within the third part of the poem, there is a movement (vastly more complex in scope than the fragment entitled 'Colère' with which I began, though concerned with the same complex problems) from a phase where the 'je' first seeks to define how an individual could work out a coherent social and political stance in the

world of practical affairs to one where the concern is ethical, directed, that is, at the question of how to live.

The setting where the 'je' broaches this daunting enterprise is Nature. Because its temporality is not finite in the way human life is, Nature brings the question of happiness dramatically back into view.[21] There is, then, a sharp, if implicit, disjunction. The movement of identification which is at the root of the poem manifests an unexpected pathos: it will end in death conceived as absolute separation. This is what the 'je' concludes from his meditation on what Nature seems to say:

> C'est là ce que me dit sa voix triste et superbe,
> Et dans mon cœur alors je la hais, et je vois
> Notre sang dans son onde et nos morts sous son herbe
> Nourrissant de leurs sucs la racine des bois.
> Et je dis à mes yeux qui lui trouvaient des charmes:
> 'Ailleurs tous vos regards, ailleurs toutes vos larmes,
> Aimez ce que jamais on ne verra deux fois.'
> (ll. 302–08)

The ethical argument of the poem is consistently future-oriented, but ultimately is confronted with a temporality which it cannot control, yet which determines much of its meaning. The poem's closing argument consists in the inevitably difficult attempt to articulate a new stance, one which acknowledges the finality of death, but still seeks to draw some positive conclusions regarding human purpose and happiness. While it is clear that the apparent movement of withdrawal from the world at the beginning of the poem is deceptive, its closing enigmatic gesture does not entirely resolve the uncertainty that hovers over the 'je''s complex project:

> Nous marcherons ainsi, ne laissant que notre ombre
> Sur cette terre ingrate où les morts ont passé;
> Nous nous parlerons d'eux à l'heure où tout est sombre,
> Où tu te plais à suivre un chemin effacé,
> A rêver, appuyée aux branches incertaines,

[21]On the ways in which a fate that is death-directed both causes unhappiness and prompts a characteristically human search for meaning, see Jonathan Lear, *Love and its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. ix.

Pleurant, comme Diane au bord de ses fontaines,
Ton amour taciturne et toujours menacé.
(ll. 330–36)

The response of the 'je' is a global one in the sense that the poem's reach extends to questions of cosmic belief and of practical reason, while it also engages with the scope of poetry as a medium that probes such questions – and with the affective or existential responses which they provoke. Modernity precipitates a misrecognition of poetry in which poetry has been complicit: this was the burden of the second part of the poem. In the final part, there seems to emerge some implicit sense in which poetry can be the space of an effective response to the difficulties of a world in flux. Poetry is more or less explicitly identified with singularity. It is also identified performatively with a forwards movement, coinciding with an implicit self-reaffirmation and a relativisation of the characteristic value judgments of modernity, notably those concerning happiness. The closing part of the poem (originally, of course, part of the opening movement) opens up a new perspective: in addressing Eva, the 'je' articulates a panoptic vision which casts the earlier millennarian claims in a new light, in that statements regarding modernity are now juxtaposed with a much longer temporal vision which incorporates an account of thought as mobility in the face of death.[22] The culminating movement of relativisation is powerful, but veiled: Vigny, here again, engages with the discourse of modernity, while remaining oriented to a future where, even in the face of death, poetry can count for something. Thus the poem ends: with an acceptance of a purely human relativity in the face of nature and of death, where transience is the sign of a power that is distinctively human. At the same time, the future to which the poem is oriented remains provisional: it is essentially governed by chance and is linked to a process that is above all reflective. And, though the poem is predicated on an identificatory movement, in the end even this remains on the whole something virtual.

[22]For valuable comments on how the poem can be read as a response to an essentially 'nocturnal' crisis of belief characteristic of modern Western consciousness, see Bonnefoy, 'Vigny, le peintre', in *Vigny: romantisme et vérité*, ed. by Jérôme Thélot (Mont-de-Marsan: Editions Interuniversitaires, 1997), pp. 45–67.

The open, future-oriented stance is somewhat equivocal, then. Because so tentative, it remains exposed to the risk of effacement – such is the threat of the ceaseless resurgence of death, to say nothing of the enduring problem of human subjection to forces of alienation. Yet, for we readers of poetry today, a slightly different perspective perhaps emerges if we remember (breaking with the cult of isolation and of taciturnity with which Vigny himself increasingly identified) that the line of writing in which he contrives to situate himself proves to have, not just a past,[23] but a future. In 'Toast funèbre', Mallarmé was to confront the same problems of belief and, in the opening line of his commemoration of Gautier, insists on the viability, in the face of death, of a wholly secular kind of happiness: 'O de notre bonheur, toi, le fatal emblème!'.[24] Though the poet is indeed fatally subject to a shared mortal end (evoked by Mallarmé in terms which have a residual religious echo: 'l'heure commune et vile de la cendre', l. 13), the only valid aspiration to survival is that afforded by poetry, by 'la gloire ardente du métier' (l. 12) which Gautier so exemplifies. The poet's annihilation poses, nonetheless, a stark question: 'Est-il de ce destin rien qui demeure, non?' (l. 36). Consciously or not, the poet writes in the shadow of death and, when his own death comes, he prompts an aspiration in keeping with his 'gloire', one that is exclusively and defiantly poetic:

> Moi, de votre désir soucieux, je veux voir,
> A qui s'évanouit, hier, dans le devoir,
> Idéal que nous font les jardins de cet astre,
> Survivre pour l'honneur du tranquille désastre
> Une agitation solennelle par l'air
> De paroles, pourpre ivre et grand calice clair
> (ll. 39–44)

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[23]Bonnefoy appeals specifically to this history as a means of sustaining a kind of poetry that is somehow not 'volée de soi', citing notably Villon, whose poetry is distinguished by its commitment to the surplus of reality even in objects which derive from religion. Villon's anti-clericalism is exemplary in that it amounts to a struggle against the conflation of the moral with the religious ('L'Enjeu occidental de la poésie', p. 214). See also Freeman on the poet's anti-monasticism and its ultimately catastrophic outcome, in *François Villon in his Works*, pp. 66–68, 79.

[24]Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, I, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1998), pp. 27–28 (future references are by line number).

Or so writes the Mallarméan 'je' who bears witness to the 'geste' of the poet and to poetry. This story remains our own, that of the promise of flowers – 'de paroles' – which even the finality of death won't cause to fade – and, perhaps also, the promise of a subjectivity open to a kind of happiness no less impossible, but one which, through poetry and the risks and exhilarations it affords, remains somehow on the horizon.[25] For Vigny, the world we inhabit is one of menace. Anger is, as we have seen, one possible response. But the outlook of the 'je' in 'La Maison du berger' is elusive in ways that may prove beneficial.[26] The poem seems to offer its own ritual possibilities, chiefly a kind of loving commemoration 'à l'heure où tout est sombre' (l. 232).[27] The gesture which the 'je' invites Eva to share consists in refusing to surrender to the kinds of unhappiness which are indeed all too pressing and which must for this reason be acknowledged. But the poem closes on a barely discernible dissociation: the sombreness it evokes is that of the world, not

[25]A perspective to which Bonnefoy himself also gestures: 'La poésie en Europe, ç'aura été l'impossible: ce qui échappe à un être, au terme de son destin, comme l'immédiat à nos mots. Mais, s'il est donc vrai que la subjectivité soit aujourd'hui fracturable, et que poésie et science des signes puissent s'unir pour un rapport neuf du "Je" qui est et du "moi" qui rêve, quelle ampleur imprévue dans l'espérance, du coup! A l'heure où tant de nuit s'accumule, serions-nous au bord de la vraie lumière?', in *Entretiens sur la poésie* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1992), p. 202.

[26]On the ways in which an overt commitment to happiness as a teleological organising principle for human life can paradoxically give rise to discontent, see Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 60. Lear's response is to devise a theoretical practice characterised by 'the willingness to live without principles' (p. 165).

[27]Vigny repeatedly insists in his notes and sketches for 'La Maison du berger' on the distinctive kind of happiness which the poetic act can yield: thus, he links the claim that 'la Poésie est une volupté' to the line 'Poésie, ô trésor, perle de la pensée' (*Œuvres complètes*, I, pp. 276–77). In poetry, ethical questions can be productively displaced from a theoretical space in the direction of one from which the experience of joy is not excluded, even if it is not explicitly invoked in individual poems. Compare Wordsworth, for whom nature, above all else, offers the hope of some human renewal, even in the face of experiences of contemporary politics which are uniformly alienating; see Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787–1814* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 152, 318.

necessarily of the subject.[28] Its open stance extends to a portrayal of subjectivity through which we glimpse joys still accessible to us in a world which seemed at the outset 'fatal, écrasant et glacé' (l. 4) and, if we heed the successors who were to constitute something of Vigny's own future, in poetry.

[28]In 'Toast funèbre', the 'ombre/sombre' rhyme recurs as a couplet (ll. 37–38), though the order of the rhyme words is inverted. For an acute discussion of the 'ombre' which is all that will remain of the interlocutors in Vigny's poem, see Jarry, *Alfred de Vigny*, pp. 826–29.