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“*La Mère Humanité*”: Femininity in the Romantic Socialism of Pierre Leroux and the Abbé A.–L. Constant

Naomi J. Andrews

Humanity, my mother, since you have led me, by so many paths, to
conceive this design, support me, inspire me, affirm me.

—Pierre Leroux, “Invocation to my Muse.”¹

It was during the July Monarchy in France, in the era immediately preceding the Revolution of 1848, that the ideology we call socialism became more than an abstraction held by isolated intellectuals and conspirators.² A series of individuals, loose-knit associations, and more formal *écoles* were active during the 1830s and 1840s, developing a varied agenda of social reform, economic cooperation, or *association*, mystical Christianity, and women’s liberation. Roughly lumped under the pejorative rubric of utopian socialism, and perhaps more accurately called romantic socialism, this movement was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its diverse goals, but contributed significantly to the political discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³

Socialism at this stage of its development overlapped in many ways with republicanism, both being, to quote one historian of the latter, “an amalgam of responses to the Enlightenment, the 1789 Revolution and above all economic

¹ Pierre Leroux, *La Grève de Samarez* (Paris, 1979), 177.

² E.g., Gracchus Babeuf’s Conspiracy of the Equals of 1796.

³ Marx and Engels first used “utopian” to describe that socialism that preceded theirs in their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. Although a significant component of socialists were utopians, the term “romantic” better captures the breadth of influences on early socialism. Jonathan Beecher, *Victor Considerant and the Rise and Fall of French Romantic Socialism* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001), introduction.

change.”⁴ Many early socialists were also republicans, and socialist ideas influenced the ideology articulated by republicans such as Alexandre Ledru-Rollin and Auguste Blanqui. Louis Blanc, perhaps the best-known socialist of the decade surrounding the 1848 revolution, was and is known as a Jacobin socialist.⁵

From a certain perspective republicanism and socialism shared common origins and assumptions during the July Monarchy. Most socialists had come out of the political milieu of republicanism, whether through the carbonarist movement, opposition political clubs such as *Droits de l'Homme* and *Les Amis du Peuple*, or through the influential journalism trade of the Bourbon Restoration and early July Monarchy. Pierre Leroux, for one, had been a co-founder of the widely read journal *le Globe*, a bastion of liberalism, which he later turned over to the Saint-Simonians upon his conversion to their “church.”⁶ Although diverse in many ways, the left of this era did share certain core tenets, chief among them opposition to the Orleanist monarchy and, to varying degrees the belief in more democratic rule of the French nation.

To say this, however, might erroneously imply a unity that was certainly not a feature of socialism during this period. In fact socialism, despite its near mystical devotion to ideas of unity, was anything but singular during its pre-Marxian phase. The spectrum of socialist thinkers and groups ranged widely. Standing closest to the republicans in their beliefs about politics and the revolutionary tradition were Jacobin socialists, most usually associated with Louis Blanc. Blanc and others articulated a social philosophy that sought “to unite two distinct ideologies: Jacobin democracy and co-operative socialism.”⁷ Thus Jacobin socialism combined republican political priorities and commitment to national political processes in general and to a centralized state in particular with attention to economic change, to reforming the distribution process along more equitable lines and to putting the situation of working people at the center of political change. In this goal Jacobin socialism reflected, as did other strains of socialism, the economic instability of the era and the emergence of an organized working class movement which followed the aborted revolution of 1830.⁸

At the other end of the spectrum one might put the Saint-Simonians and the Fourierist *École Sociétaire*.⁹ Vehemently anti-republican, these groups shared

⁴ Pamela Pilbeam, *Republicanism in Nineteenth Century France, 1814-1871* (New York, 1995), 156.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶ Sebastian Charléty, *Histoire du Saint-Simonisme (1825-1864)* (Paris, 1931²).

⁷ Leo Loubère, “Intellectual Origins of Jacobin Socialism,” *International Review of Social History*, 4 (1959), 415.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 422. See Robert J. Bezucha, *The Lyon Uprising of 1834: Social and Political Conflict in the Early July Monarchy* (Cambridge, 1974); Bernard Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement: The Socialism of Skilled Workers, 1830-1914* (Berkeley, Calif., 1976).

⁹ Sebastian Charléty, *Histoire du Saint-Simonisme (1825-1864)* (Paris, 1931²); Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986); Beecher, *Victor Considerant*.

very little with the Jacobin socialists, other than a certain concern with the emerging working class, one of the few consistent features of early socialism. Unlike Jacobin socialists, these groups focused their theories of community at a very low level, having a strongly utopian component to their thinking. As a result, they tended to see national politics as irrelevant to the situation of ordinary people and even as a distraction from the real work of community and cooperative building. Thus many of them either ignored that realm entirely or articulated a relative compliance with the existing regime incomprehensible to either republicans or Jacobin socialists.

Between these poles, then, moved any number of individual socialists, many of whom traveled from one end of the spectrum to the other, often finding rest somewhere in between. The encounters between many of these thinkers and the Saint-Simonians in particular crystallized the inherent tension between individual liberty and social equity and drove them away in attempts to reconcile that tension. Two pertinent examples are Philippe Buchez and Pierre Leroux. Both had roots in the underground political organizations of the Bourbon Restoration and then joined the Saint-Simonians during the early 1830s, only to leave in disenchantment over the anti-democratic and anti-Christian tendencies emerging in the movement. Despite the bitterness of their disappointment, both retained significant elements of Saint-Simonian thinking as they went on to elaborate influential socialist philosophies of their own.¹⁰

What united all these disparate philosophies and what warrants their collection under the general rubric of romantic socialism was the vehemence and prominence of their critique of individualism. It was this opposition more than any other feature that put romantic socialism at odds with both Orleanism and republicanism. There were two distinct strains of individualist philosophy in circulation during this period: first, a political strain that focused on universal suffrage and representative democracy, both foundational to the 1792 Republican constitution, and second, there were the individualistic economic practices embraced by the English-style liberalism of the July Monarchy leadership. While certainly compatible philosophically, these two varieties of individualism at times appeared independently and even within opposing discourses. Thus while in general republicans adhered to political and economic individualism, some, including Jacobin socialists, were critical of economic individualism. Likewise, the industrial elites of the Orleanist monarchy were great proponents of economic individualism but much more suspicious of the mass democracy implicit in political individualism. Romantic socialists were outspokenly critical of economic individualism and tended to endorse some form of democracy, although a certain reliance on a centralized state is evident in the works of

¹⁰ François André Isambert, *De la Charbonnerie au Saint-Simonisme, étude sur la jeunesse de Buchez* (Paris, 1966). P.-Felix Thomas, *Pierre Leroux* (Paris, 1904).

some, such as Saint-Simon, Cabet, and Blanc, demonstrating the potential for authoritarianism feared by Leroux and by later commentators.¹¹

Unlike the so-called scientific socialism of the post-Marx era, utopian or romantic socialism was not primarily a critique of private property or even of capitalism *per se*. Romantic socialists, rather, focused on the moral and spiritual dimension of human existence.¹² For these thinkers it was not the economic system in itself that was corrupt, but rather the radical inequality between owners and workers that deserved attention. Thus early socialists such as Philippe Buchez and Flora Tristan promoted *association* and attempted to institute mutual aid societies and worker cooperatives through which the working class would own the means of production and participate in the capitalist system on a more equal footing with the bourgeoisie.¹³ Plans for cooperative communities abounded, on both community and national scales—for example those of the Fourierists and Cabet’s Icarians after 1847—and many attempts were made at their establishment. Beginning with their critique of individualism, or *égoïsme*, as they called it, romantic socialists formulated an agenda that would strengthen the ties between individuals within society and put socio-economic relationships on a different footing.¹⁴ Rather than dividing people by engendering competitive social practices as did capitalism, romantic socialists sought a social system that would be governed by ties of love and cooperation.

For many of these socialists early Christian communities provided the model for their ideal social structure, as did Essenes for Pierre Leroux.¹⁵ Romantic socialists sought to revitalize the spiritual aspects of the Christian faith in French people, while remaining profoundly critical of the power structure of the Roman Catholic Church. This aim is quite evident in many of their writings from this period, whether in those of the Saint-Simonian “church” led by le Père Enfantin, in Pierre Leroux’s *Doctrine de l’Humanité*, or in the innumerable catechisms devoted to *le peuple* produced by their contemporaries.¹⁶

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland, 1958); Georg G. Iggers, *The Cult of Authority* (The Hague, 1958); Albert Salomon, *The Tyranny of Progress* (New York, 1950).

¹² David Owen Evans, *Social Romanticism in France 1830-1848* (New York, 1969); Paul Bénichou, *Le Temps des Prophètes* (Paris, 1986).

¹³ See Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement* and Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia, 1989).

¹⁴ Romantic socialist use of the term *égoïsme* is problematic: etymological and historical dictionaries indicate that its use was usually limited to the psychological and emotional realm, as in Stendhal’s *Souvenir d’égotisme*, ca. 1821-30. The term *individualisme* had more regular use, as in de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, for political and public issues. However the romantic socialist sources used here make consistent use of the terms *égoïsme*, and *égoïste* to express the brand of individualism that they condemned. This use reflects the degree to which these thinkers saw private and public actions and attitudes as intertwined.

¹⁵ See Pierre Leroux, *De L’Égalité* (Boussac, 1848²).

¹⁶ See Frank Paul Bowman, *Le Christ romantique* (Geneva, 1973).

Of late, historians and literary scholars have paid particular attention to the feminism of romantic socialists, perhaps the most controversial aspect of the movement. In this feature socialism diverged sharply from republicanism, long hostile to any suggestion of women's political rights. While it would not be accurate to call all romantic socialists feminist, it is true that many of the most influential socialist thinkers of this era, including the Saint-Simonians, Fourier and his followers, Flora Tristan, and Pierre Leroux all shared a concern for the plight of women in contemporary society and especially under the Napoleonic *code civile* of 1804.¹⁷ More generally, the exaltation of femininity was an important theme in many writings of this era, both among republicans and socialists.¹⁸

Romantic socialists were not alone in either their feminism or in their preoccupation with the woman question itself. Indeed, their writings on women and their place in the world were fully consistent with the discourse on sexual difference that prevailed during the nineteenth century. Unlike many of their contemporaries, however, romantic socialists cast this restrictive femininity positively, seeing in their idealized womanhood the qualities they sought in their reformed world. Romantic socialists used this re-valORIZED womanhood as both symbol of and inspiration for their social vision; its role in the socialism of this era is the subject of this article.

The problem of the individual and the community—the obligations that bind them and the rights that differentiate them—was at the heart of romantic socialist politics and theories. (Not that there was anything unusual in this.) Early socialism, responding both to the atomization of traditional society brought by the French Revolution and to the emerging competitive economic practices of capitalism, focused attention on the newly identified “social” realm in articulating its agenda for the right society.¹⁹ Whether this entity was called *Humanité*, as it was by Pierre Leroux, or discussed more generally under such traditional rubrics as the Church or society, as it was by the Abbé Alphonse-Louis Constant, its dual life as group and individual was key to its significance to socialism during the pre-1848 period. The collective nature of human existence was the counterweight that socialism offered to the atomized individual upon which the emerging liberal order was based. Liberalism exalted individual rights while largely discounting the notion of a communal life. In contrast ro-

¹⁷ Susan Grogan, *French Socialism and Sexual Difference* (New York, 1992); Michèle Riot-Sarcey, *La Démocratie à l'épreuve des femmes* (Paris, 1994); Claire Goldberg Moses and Leslie Wahl Rabine, *Feminism, Socialism and French Romanticism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993); Marguerite Thibert, *Le féminisme dans le socialisme français, 1830-1848* (Paris, 1926); Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany, N.Y., 1984).

¹⁸ See Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle, Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880*, trans. Janet Lloyd (London, 1979); Stéphane Michaud, *Muse et Madone* (Paris, 1985); Grogan, *French Socialism*.

¹⁹ Jacques Donzelot, *L'invention du social* (Paris, 1984).

romantic socialists sought a different balance between the needs and duties of the individual and those of the group, one that would emphasize their commonalities. In presenting their views, they used metaphors that stressed the relational nature of human life, especially the degree to which human beings cannot separate their interests from those of their fellows.²⁰

Socialists deplored the struggle for survival inherent in the liberal marketplace. In seeking to alter this aspect contemporary reality, Pierre Leroux and the Abbé Constant both looked to overcome the social, sexual, and economic differences between people in French society. If differences were erased, that is, if each man served his own needs while serving those of the community, as Leroux posited, then the competition that was inherent in capitalist individualism would be undermined. Likewise, as in Constant's solution, if all humanity were to be melded into a single being, obviously individuals would cease to have competing aims. This insight into the nature of competition in their contemporary world was the nucleus of the socialism offered by its early proponents. Not surprisingly, the terms in which they elaborated their vision were deeply influenced by the very society they criticized. Their views on the individual and society were often presented in gendered language, providing a glimpse into the intellectual universe in which they operated. This had repercussions visible not only in the socialism they elaborated but also in the reach and limits of the feminism that romantic socialism helped to develop.

In 1834 Pierre Leroux wrote a seminal article that brought the terms socialism and individualism into opposition.²¹ At the time Leroux was a journalist working at the heart of the emerging socialist community. He had already traversed the political spectrum from liberalism to Saint-Simonian socialism in the previous five years, and he emerged from his years with the latter with a keen sensitivity to the danger to individual liberties presented by the new doctrines of society. Leroux continued to be a key player in the socialist world through the Second Republic. He was a close friend and adviser to George Sand, and many of his ideas were given wide audience in her novels. He and his brother Jules ran a cooperative community in Boussac at which Pauline Roland, the Saint-Simonian feminist and advocate of free love, found refuge with her three illegitimate children.²² In April 1848 Leroux was elected to the National Assembly and was one of the lone voices of support for the cause of

²⁰ Leroux used the term *semblables* to define this category throughout *De l'Humanité* (Boussac, 1848), first published in 1840.

²¹ Leroux took credit for coining the term *socialisme*, and though it is true that he brought it into widespread usage, he was not the first. See Jacques Gans, "l'Origine du mot 'socialiste' et ses emplois les plus anciens," *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale*, 30 (1957), 79-83. Ellen Koehler, "Religious Liberty and *Civisme morale*: Alexandre Vinet, French Protestantism, and the Shaping of Civic Culture in Nineteenth-Century France" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Davis, 2002), 245, 268.

²² Edith Thomas, *Pauline Roland* (Paris, 1956).

the workers in June of that year.²³ While never the center of a formal *école*, Leroux was broadly influential in articulating the emerging doctrine of romantic socialism.²⁴ “De l’Individualisme et du socialisme” was written in the immediate wake of a failed republican uprising in Paris which resulted in the massacre of workers by national guard troops at the rue Transnonain, and against the broader backdrop of ongoing conflict between the Lyon silk workers and merchants, whose efforts at mechanization were threatening the continued existence of the workers’ livelihood and profession.²⁵ In it Leroux designated individualism a selfish and “egoistic” enterprise that discounted the interdependent relationship between man and society.

At this point Leroux defined socialism as the disregard of the needs and liberties of the individual in the name of those of society. Speaking metaphorically, Leroux took aim at the inherently adversarial philosophies held by the Orleanist government—ruled by wealthy industrialists and traditional elites—and the corporate worker organizations that sought both to preserve their traditional prestige and maintain a living wage. Elsewhere he equated the bourgeoisie with “the sentiment of individuality and of liberty,” clearly identifying them with the regime.²⁶ In this article Leroux used the term *socialisme* to refer to those advocating “absolute socialism,” as in his view did the Saint-Simonians and Blanqui, in whose philosophies the state is the supreme ruler and individuals are reduced to obedient automatons.²⁷ After outlining the two positions and his objections to them, Leroux placed himself in the middle “with two pistols charged and in opposite directions.”²⁸

In *De l’Humanité*, published a few years later in 1838, Leroux further developed his definitions of man and humanity. The book opens with an epitaph from Saint Paul that defines human beings as part of one body, although several at the same time, and reciprocally connected to each other.²⁹ The quotation sets the tone for the work, in which Leroux defined the underlying tenets of his social philosophy: individualism, which he explicitly rejected, and the doctrine of Humanity. Leroux defined individualism as an erroneous ethic of the eighteenth century, developed by a series of philosophers beginning with Descartes, and including Leibniz, Kant, and Rousseau, for analytic purposes and with disastrous results. Selfishness characterizes it and competition is its most important dynamic. Thus Leroux admonished the individual, bent on following his “fantasies:”

²³ Beecher, *Victor Considerant*, 150.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Bezucha, *The Lyon Uprising*.

²⁶ Leroux, *Oeuvres*, 372.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 376.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 378.

²⁹ Leroux, *De l’Humanité*, title page.

[I]f forgetting that you are united to humanity, you make yourself an egoist, you would have the solitary pleasures of a single man, that is to say of a man horribly incomplete and who lacks the necessary milieu for his true existence; you would be an imperfect being, a sort of monster.³⁰

This monster is the logical result of competitive *égoïsme*, of the destruction, or ignorance, of the binding ties between people and the neglect of the spirit of the community. Leroux's stated goal was to "convert to humanity" the individual of rational philosophy.³¹

Leroux's task then, was to redefine mankind in terms more accurate than those of the rationalist tradition. In addition to bringing the discrete human being into the fold of humanity, Leroux had the further purpose of reforming the collective body so as not to "attach him ... to a cadaver ... to an immobile humankind, turning always in the same circle."³² This reformed humanity would recognize the sanctity of the individual while valuing the ties of community.³³

Leroux rejected the individualist definition of human nature in favor of a more spiritual and less rational one, characterized by the triad sensation-sentiment-knowledge, "indivisibly united."³⁴ He rested his definition of humanity on a conception of individual identity that was fluid and contextually formed: "Our self, our personality, our true life consists essentially and uniquely ... in our mode of existence in passing from one situation to another, from one point to another."³⁵ Furthermore, by Leroux's definition man is a creature of aspiration and of desire. Desire is the force that marks distinctions between men and divides them, thus constituting the self. The aim of Leroux's philosophy of humanity was thus to harmonize the desires of the one with those of the collective, thereby undermining its divisive power.

Leroux thus defined humanity as a hybrid of unity and individuality. Discrete human beings remain, but they are spiritually bound to the larger whole of humanity by ties of love and interdependence:

If there are yet in the world so many miserable and vicious men, if we are all overtaken with misery and vice, that shows us the ignorance and immorality that afflicts still Humanity. If humanity were less ignorant and more moral, there would no longer be in the world so many vi-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

³² *Ibid.*, 128.

³³ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

cious and miserable beings. We are all therefore responsible for each other ... from this follows also the condemnation of individualism.³⁶

This mutual sense of responsibility is a hallmark of Leroux's ideal society. Humanity itself is clearly not always a virtuous entity; it is corruptible by immoral social systems as are individuals. But by recognizing the tie that forms humanity, mankind gets a step closer to the realization of its potential virtue. The union of mankind into humanity and the eradication of individualism will be achieved, according to Leroux, when the *moi* and the *non-moi*, that is the self and the other, cease to view one another as separate beings, locked into competitive relations:

The life of men and of each man is therefore, by the will of the Creator, attached to an incessant communication with his fellows and with the universe. That which he calls his life does not belong to him entirely, and is not in him only; it is in him and outside of him; it lives ... undivided, in his fellows and in the world that surrounds him.³⁷

From this assertion it follows that each of us has reciprocal rights over our fellows "since his life is in them, the part of his life of which he disposes and that he calls *moi* has virtual rights over the other part of which he does not have fully sovereign control that he calls the *non-moi*."³⁸ It is when this reciprocal set of rights is disregarded, as in a society ruled by individualism, that competition and suffering result.³⁹

It should be clear that in Leroux's writing the notions of individualism and the individual are miles apart, the one being rejected and the other forming the foundation of his human community. In this Leroux was not unusual for his time, as the term *individualisme* carried negative connotations in the works of writers as diverse as Joseph de Maistre, Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Leroux himself. Those in favor of the underlying concepts of individual rights and free market economics tended to use *individualiste* as a modifier, eschewing the *-isme* as representing the destructive forces of atomization. The individual in the liberal thought of Constant and Tocqueville was the repository of rights and the foundation of modern society, whether negatively construed as in an atomized, chaotic world or positively as in a well functioning liberal democracy.⁴⁰

³⁶ Leroux, *Oeuvres*, 380.

³⁷ Leroux, *De l'Humanité*, 129.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁴⁰ Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford, 1973).

The individual of Leroux's doctrine is a somewhat different creature than that of liberalism. Whereas the liberal individual is defined by his very distinctness from his fellow man, Leroux defined man by relation to his fellow man, using the term *semblable*, defining the individual by that which is common rather than by difference. Through this definition Leroux maintained the notion of the separate human being while undoing the fundamental tenets of individuality by emphasizing the inherent similarities among people. His goal was to alleviate the conflicts between people by erasing the differences among them. This is significant for class differences as well as for sexual difference.

The Abbé Constant had a much less nuanced view of the problem of the individual and society. He saw egoism and socialism as diametrically opposed. Unlike Leroux, he seems to have been untroubled by the threat to the individual posed by socialism, as he foresaw—in joyous terms, no less—the absolute eradication of difference in the future. Indeed, Constant is a good example of the tendency that Leroux initially named *socialisme* in 1834, with his gospel of “the unity before which all egoism and all personality disappear.”⁴¹ Leroux feared the ascension of systems of thought that would deny the sanctity of the individual while assigning all rights to the community. Constant dreamed of exactly such a world. Despite this he employed a definition of humanity similar to that of Leroux in the many works he produced during the July Monarchy.⁴²

L'Abbé Alphonse-Louis Constant was not the mainstream socialist that Pierre Leroux was. Today he is better known for the name and identity he took up after 1848, Eliphas Lévi, historian of the occult and of black magic.⁴³ He is generally best known to scholars of the occult and of *pétit-romantique* literary circles.⁴⁴ His work merits the attention of historians of romantic socialism for a number of reasons. First, he was a prolific and to his contemporaries, well-known spokesman for an important component of romantic socialism, one that spoke from and to a decidedly Christian, albeit anticlerical perspective.⁴⁵ His invocations of Mary and Christ were presented in plain language comprehensible to those literate but not *lycée*-educated people that Leroux likely mystified. Constant's 1848 paper *Tribune du Peuple*, like the work of his friend and collaborator Alphonse Esquiros, was aimed specifically at the emerging work-

⁴¹ Abbé Alphonse Constant, *La Mère de Dieu* (Paris, 1844), 372.

⁴² Abbé Alphonse Constant, *L'Assomption de la Femme* (Paris, 1841); *Livre des Larmes ou le Christ consolateur* (Paris, 1845); *Le Testament de la Liberté* (Paris, 1848), and *La Mère de Dieu*.

⁴³ Paul Chacornac, *Eliphas Lévi* (Paris, 1926); Frank Paul Bowman, *Eliphas Lévi, Visionnaire Romantique* (Paris, 1976); David Allen Harvey, “The Social Vision of the Sage: Politics and Occult Philosophy in Nineteenth Century France,” *Proceedings of the 116th Meeting of the American Historical Association*, 2002.

⁴⁴ D. G. Charlton (ed.), *The French Romantics* (2 vols.; Cambridge, 1984).

⁴⁵ Bowman, *Le Christ Romantique*.

ing class. They used commonly accessible metaphors and images in their socialist re-readings of the Bible, *La Bible de la liberté* and *Evangile du peuple*.⁴⁶ That the Church responded so violently to both works as to prosecute the authors for “inciting hatred of the rich” attests to their appropriateness for their intended audience.⁴⁷

A second reason Constant merits further attention from intellectual historians is that he was also controversial and well-known among his peers. To quote the historian of the Icarians, “[t]he *Bible de la liberté* achieved a fairly wide circulation ... (it was often among the works found in the libraries of workers investigated by the ministry of Justice) and Cabet felt that its author’s influence was strong enough to warrant a brochure against him.”⁴⁸ Cabet disliked Constant and his work enough to write a lengthy polemic against him.⁴⁹

Constant was also active in the burgeoning feminist circles of the late 1830s and 1840s. He was close to the mystical circle surrounding Ganneau known as *Le Mapah* where he met Flora Tristan, the socialist feminist and self-proclaimed female messiah. Their friendship was productive for both of them; Tristan considered herself the inspiration for Constant’s work *La Mère de Dieu*, and left him her unfinished manuscript of *L’Émancipation de la Femme* which he published posthumously.⁵⁰ Constant was not unique in his interests. During the 1830s mystical religious pursuits mingled frequently with political and social concerns. Historian Susan Grogan aptly describes this atmosphere when speaking of Tristan’s involvement with these groups:

... in the late 1830s she was developing close contacts with “radicals” of various kinds—socialist and feminist sympathizers, artists, and writers as well as with the promoters of neo-religious sects. In fact, the same individuals sometimes belonged to each of these categories, as Tristan did herself. Alphonse-Louis Constant and Simon Ganneau were not simply radical theologians and self-appointed prophets but feminist and socialist sympathizers.⁵¹

Thus in the 1830s and early 1840s, when Leroux and Constant were producing the texts under review here, there was a significant confluence of mys-

⁴⁶ Christopher Johnson, *Utopian Communism in France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974), 70-71. See Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830-1852* (Princeton, 1984).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁹ Étienne Cabet, “Réfutation ou examen de tous les écrits our journaux contra ou sur la communauté: Refutation des trois ouvrages de L’Abbé Constant” (Paris, 1841); cf. his *Le Vrai Christianisme suivant Jésus-Christ* (Paris, 1846).

⁵⁰ Flora Tristan, *L’Émancipation de la Femme, ou Le Testament de la Paria*, Oeuvre posthume complétée d’après ses notes et publiée par A. Constant (Paris, 1846).

⁵¹ Constant, *La Mère de Dieu*, 193.

tical religious, socialist, republican, and feminist sentiment in educated circles in Paris. This suggests a final reason for including Constant in this study. Though he is generally relegated to the fringe of romantic socialist circles, both he and Leroux shared a metaphorical language in talking about the good society. This commonality calls attention to the arbitrariness of the distinctions intellectual historians have made in the past between the fringe and the center in this regard. Historically, those proponents of early socialism most deeply involved with the mystical Christian and feminist philosophies of the day have been deemed peripheral to the movement. For those deemed central, traces of feminist, religious, or “irrational” ideas have generally been written out of the story.⁵² Reading Leroux and Constant together demonstrates the arbitrariness of those past accounts as much as it does the importance of mystical and feminist ideas to early socialism.

In his style of presentation Constant’s work is very different from that of Leroux. Where Leroux presented his philosophy in the pedantic style of academic writing, reviewing the various sources for his ideas and quoting the original Greek, Hebrew, and Latin of the various texts, Constant’s philosophy is delivered in a quasi-novelistic and always highly poetic style. His *La Mère de Dieu* is the story of his own journey to utopia, led by a female messiah to meet the great mother, who presides over a human beehive.

Constant also differed from Leroux in that he was not in dialogue with Enlightenment philosophers but spoke more narrowly in traditional Christian language to describe his social vision. He was steeped in the language of the Restoration Catholic Church, with its agenda of reestablishing religious and secular authority for its hierarchy.⁵³ Furthermore, he drew on imagery of the Virgin Mary that had particular resonance in the era of the Saint Catherine Labouré who preached in Paris on the rue du Bac in 1830.⁵⁴ Yet despite their differences, Constant and Leroux both spoke in gendered terms about individualism and community.

Like Leroux, Constant envisioned humanity as a “unity in the multitude”⁵⁵ and offered the following description of it:

The new Eden was peopled with an immense multitude that moved harmoniously and without confusion in an atmosphere of peace and felicity... This whole people then grouped itself and reunited in a single

⁵² G. D. H. Cole, *Socialist Thought: The Forerunners, 1789-1850* (London, 1867); George Lichtheim, *The Origins of Socialism* (New York, 1969), exemplify this tendency.

⁵³ Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815-1830* (Berkeley, 2000); Guillaume de Bertier de Sauvigny, *The Bourbon Restoration* (Philadelphia, 1967).

⁵⁴ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (New York, 1976), 95.

⁵⁵ Constant, *La Mère de Dieu*, 273.

human form, like the thousand figures that break and cross in agitated water reunite in a single image of our face when the water becomes calm....⁵⁶

In Constant's vision humanity is a far more totalizing entity than it is for Leroux; the individual human being would disappear entirely in the face of the achievement of his utopia. "We, as individuals, weak and separated from humanity, we no longer exist."⁵⁷ Individual traits—particularly differences such as class and sex—would likewise cease to exist, and humanity would merge into a harmonious singularity. "[H]ere [in the new celestial city] there are no longer distinctions among the ranks or among the sexes."⁵⁸

In describing the nature of his personal connection with humanity, Constant illustrated Leroux's ideas about the reciprocity of the human relationship:

I felt living in the same celestial air and in the same light all that lived with me, and the life of the other beings became thus a part of mine; I would suffer in them, and I would rejoice in their happiness. I understood their soul in my soul and their thought in my thought; I felt their heart beat in my heart. To live more, I needed to amplify their life, and, in devoting myself to them, I worked always for myself. I sought myself in them, and I found them in myself, and we could no longer live one without the other, as members of the same body would not know how to live separated.⁵⁹

Thus Constant and Leroux in many ways operated with similar conceptions of the socialist project. They shared a reciprocal and interdependent notion of humanity, with the ultimate unity of mankind as the central goal. For both the reconciliation of differences that divide men—whether those of class or sex or those more specific to the daily duties of the marketplace—was their overriding agenda in the works considered here.

Leroux and Constant both employed images of femininity to symbolize the best in contemporary society and the essence of their utopias. The qualities embodied by "woman" were key to the integration of human life. The womanhood that romantic socialists exalted was not a novel one: it was thoroughly consistent with the wisdom on women according to romanticism, which emphasized the complementarity of the sexes and idealized the maternal role. Probably the best-known version of this mystical womanhood is the Saint-Simonian *attente* for the Female Messiah and the accompanying program of

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 292-93.

sexual liberation and maternal glorification. Although Leroux and Constant were clearly influenced by *Enfantin's* doctrine, the same tendency in French and European culture at this time was so prevalent that it is probably more accurate to say that all of them were drawing on a common language in their representations. Moreover, it was not only men who exploited this definition of womanhood, as the writings of both Jeanne Deroin and Flora Tristan demonstrate.⁶⁰

This representation was not complex and diverse or particularly reflective of real women, but rather it was an idealization, based on a reduction of all femininity to the purity and otherworldliness of the Virgin Mary. Woman's nature was defined in largely associative terms; she was mother, sister, partner, and lover but never woman independently. The qualities she represented were vaunted specifically for their relational nature: nurturing, loving, suffering, and self-sacrifice. Hers was a mediating role, cementing the ties between people. In many ways this idealization bespeaks a limited and limiting vision of womanhood, one defined by the roles "woman" plays in other people's lives. This vision of womanhood shares much with later Victorian ideas about separate spheres and the angel in the house, although in the early part of the century the fullest reaches of domestic ideology had yet to be achieved.⁶¹

Romantic socialists turned this definition of woman's nature into a source of power and a reason for her exaltation. It was woman's very relational quality that fit her for the future to which romantic socialists aspired. Woman was seen as less individualized and therefore less self-serving and less egoistic than man; she was thus both the appropriate symbol for and the ideal citizen of the new social world that they imagined.

Socialist use of this imagery was also a testimony to the pervasiveness with which political discussions were steeped in the masculine language of liberalism; the most logical, persuasive language with which to challenge individualism was gendered, and the most distant entity from the abstract individual of liberalism was woman.⁶² In articulating their rejection of individualism, romantic socialists employed images of femininity to represent their ideal, interconnected humanity.

Given the metaphorical importance of an idealized femininity to his project, it is not surprising that Leroux first illustrated his views on humanity using feminized metaphors in the very place where he first used the term *socialisme*.

⁶⁰ Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); Grogan, *Flora Tristan*; Karen Offen, "Ernest Legouvé and the Doctrine of 'Equality in Difference' for Women: A Case Study of Male Feminism in Nineteenth Century French Thought," *Journal of Modern History*, 58 (1986), 452-84.

⁶¹ Margaret H. Darrow, *Revolution in the House: Family, Class, and Inheritance in Southern France, 1775-1825* (Princeton, N.J., 1989); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes* (Chicago, 1987).

⁶² See Offen, "Ernest Legouvé," 453.

In “De l’Individualisme et du Socialisme” he described his vision of the human community as mirroring the relationship between a mother and child. His mother and child appear as antidotes to the isolated individual of liberal doctrine.

In describing the intangible nature of the ties between human beings within Humanity, Leroux repeatedly invoked imagery of the body: “society is a body, but it is a mystical body, and we are not members of it, but we live in it. Yes, each man is a fruit on the tree of Humanity.” Man is the product of society, as the fruit is of the tree, but is no less complete and perfect for being produced by another. Each man further contains all elements of humanity within himself: “he becomes himself the tree,” and reflects in his heart all of society in microcosm. Furthermore, just as Adam was really a symbolic representation of all mankind, “each man is Humanity.”⁶³

Leroux again used an analogy with the body in his description of man’s relation to society, and here it is clear that the Humanity is embodied in a woman’s form. Constant used strikingly similar terms to describe his vision of society: “Society is now a mother, and man is a child who rests on her heart.”⁶⁴ For Leroux the mother-child relationship explains the nature of man’s connection to society. The important characteristic of this analogy seems to be the relationship *between* the mother and the child:

...[if] after a certain time has passed, the mother separates from the fruit that she carries in her womb, and the mother and her infant form then two distinct and separated beings, would you deny the relationship that exists between them; would you deny that which nature shows you by the witness of your senses, to know that this mother and this child are, one without the other, beings incomplete, ill, and threatened with death, and that by mutual need, as well as love, are in fact a being composed of two beings?⁶⁵

Their connection to each other sustains them both emotionally and physically. This is the nature of man’s relationship to humanity. He is separate and individual in one sense, deeply connected in another: “Far from being independent of all society and all tradition, man draws his life from tradition and from society. Each man, like each generation of men, draws his sap [*sève*] and his life from Humanity.”⁶⁶

The nature of the connection between individuals and Humanity was a central concern for Leroux. In rejecting the absolutist socialism he abhorred, Leroux again invoked the tie between mother and child: “To want to enchain

⁶³ Leroux, *Oeuvres*, 378-79.

⁶⁴ Constant, *La Mère de Dieu*, 115.

⁶⁵ Leroux, *Oeuvres*, 379.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

men in this way, would be as if, having recognized the invisible tie that unites mother and child, and makes one being of two, one would then deny their personalities and chain them to each other.”⁶⁷ Yet to deny their interconnection is to deny God: “You would lead them through this to the previous state where they made strictly one being; and because of what they are now, you would constitute an even more monstrous and abnormal state than the state of absolute separation...”⁶⁸ Their relationship symbolizes the paradox of the individual and the community: they are “two, but they are united; there is relation and communion between them, but there is not identity.”⁶⁹

God is the uniting bond and the common thread between people: “The being that unites them is God, who lives at once in the one and in the other.”⁷⁰ And yet God separates them in order that their individual lives enrich the relationship between them, further uniting them. Their communal life will be made more energetic and rich by their individual experiences and their mutual happiness will be ensured by their individual joy. “If the mother is happy, the child will be happy; and if the soul of the child opens to enthusiasm and virtue, the love of the mother will be exalted.”⁷¹ It is through this reinforcing of the social cement of love that society will fulfill the Christian ideal of community. “Thus the social body will be more happy and more powerful through the individuality of all its members, than if all men were chained to each other.”⁷² Humanity is the web of ties in which each individual is suspended, supported, and nurtured. It is also the utopian space in which human beings would live more harmoniously and cooperatively, in true solidarity. Leroux was careful to defend the integrity of the individual within this unified body, but when the totality is described as such, it is the female body that he invoked to describe it. As the quotation with which this essay opens demonstrates, Leroux understood Humanity in abstracted but clearly feminized terms.

Just as Leroux drew on the metaphor of motherhood in explaining his notion of humanity, the Abbé Constant used feminine imagery to describe his utopia. Constant worked more explicitly within the Christian tradition, however, and he used the rich lore on Mary and the Church to describe the nature of the human community. Constant drew on a historical association, long made by the Catholic Church and more heterodox Christian thinkers alike, between the Virgin Mary and the Church itself. He identified the Church with the community of mankind; the Church served the same purpose in his socialist scheme that Leroux’s Humanity played in the Religion of Humanity.

⁶⁷ Leroux, *Oeuvres*, 380.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

The identification of Mary with the Church appears plainly in *La Mère de Dieu*: “A new prodigy appeared in the sky: A woman dressed in the sun, with the sun under her feet and on her head a crown of a dozen stars, and she cried in the pains of childbirth. This is the Church, and the prayer is the cry of her labor.”⁷³ Indeed, throughout this work, Constant equated Mary and the Church: “It is the Church that holds the baby Jesus on her knees to offer him to the adoration of kings and the wise men of the earth.”⁷⁴ Constant’s association of Mary with the Church was rooted in traditional representations of the collective as feminine and of the inclusiveness of Mary’s body; ultimately, however, Constant took the theme in rather unorthodox directions.

Constant collapsed the Church and society through identifying both of them with women. This association was first noted in a rather traditional looking piece of wisdom about Mary and Eve:

If Eve was the model of the ancient corrupt and adulterous society, and if the synagogue only offers the image of repentant and curbed Eve suffering for her fault, Mary is the model of the pure and faithful society that Jesus-Christ called to the liberty of the spirit; Eve was only a woman, Mary is a mother, and she is the mother of God!⁷⁵

This dichotomy, which depicts Eve as the root of evil and Mary as the source of all good, persists in his discussion. When describing Mary’s wondrousness, Constant depicted Babylon, the site of corruption, as an all-powerful female figure. “Now look at the animal society that is seated on the beast, and that rules by the ten brutal powers of sin over the seven capital vices. Contemplate this prostitute seated at the source of waters and infecting the human generation.”⁷⁶ The battle for humanity is thus presented as a struggle between an evil, corrupt society and a pure and virtuous one, with both being represented as female.

The twin associations of woman with society and Mary with the Church were bound together in Constant’s socialist vision. In presenting his “synthesis and his utopia,” Constant defined his object as “this gospel of the future, this mystical poem of the woman.”⁷⁷ Early in the *La Mère de Dieu* he declared: “When God created the first woman, he created society ... Eve was not only the mother, but the model for the ancient human association; and, in effect, society, in its formation, depends on woman.”⁷⁸ Woman thus represented the

⁷³ Constant, *La Mère de Dieu*, 113, paraphrasing from the apocalyptic books of the bible.

⁷⁴ Constant, *La Mère de Dieu*, 105.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 10, 93.

future and past forms of human society, with Mary symbolizing the best hope of mankind for social regeneration.

In Constant's discussion of the Church and society the full socialist implications of these associations can be seen. In the chapter "Mary and the Church" the Church blurs with society, and both terms are used to describe humanity in its relationship to God.

But here descends from heaven to earth in the city of the elected, the new Jerusalem, the grand triumphant Catholic Church, because here is what the Catholic Church means: all men constituted in a unity, and the human unity constituted in God through the transfiguration of his Word made flesh.⁷⁹

In this identification of the Church and society Mary represents both, thereby coming to represent all of humanity in Constant's utopia. Her body is the symbol of unity: to quote him again, "Society is now a mother, and man is a child who rests on her heart."⁸⁰ As was the case with Leroux's mother-child metaphor, the female body's quality of interconnection makes her a suitable symbol for the utopian future. Her qualities are those of the new society: "this great image of the mother of God, who symbolizes in so admirable a manner the characteristics, the privileges and the duties of the new society...."⁸¹ She is the key to the new social compact he envisioned, since, as he remarked, "she alone can teach men to unite themselves."⁸²

In describing the society to come, Constant used other images reminiscent of Leroux's. Society, or the "universal church," as he called it, is likened to a giant beehive, with the celestial mother presiding over it like a queen bee. In further metaphoric elaborations on this theme, he offered this description of humanity:

The proud dream of Babel paled before this reality, built by God himself, of a village and a tower that rose to heaven, no longer this time to challenge it but to unite it forever to earth. There were no more temples in this new city, because the entire city was a temple; there were no more palaces, because all the buildings were a single palace; and in this unique temple all of humanity prayed like a single priest; and in this universal palace reigned all of humanity, henceforth the unique queen of the world by right of divine birth and by a new and solemn adoption.⁸³

⁷⁹ Constant, *La Mère de Dieu*, 115.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 379.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 279.

As noted earlier, Constant proclaimed the absence of distinctions of rank or sex: "God alone is all in all."⁸⁴ Humanity remains a feminine entity, queen bee of the future society, while distinctions of sex among the other bees cease to exist. In this discussion the status of women in the population is particularly ambiguous; woman symbolizes and presides over the society to come, but as Constant has already said; distinctions of sex and class no longer exist. Furthermore, the beehive metaphor also implies the masculinity of the drones, or the rest of society. What is the woman who stands as icon in this case?

According to theories of gender, male and female are always relationally defined and do not stand in isolation from one another.⁸⁵ Given the degree to which the feminine and the interconnected are identified in the writings of Pierre Leroux and the Abbé Constant, one must seek the contrary of this female humanity in a masculine individual. Leroux's invocation of Mother Humanity as both metaphor and muse, and Constant's image of humanity as a beehive with a celestial queen on the throne, underscore the degree to which the whole enterprise of individualism was already in the 1830s understood in gendered terms. Furthermore they show the significance of a specific understanding of the feminine to the project of socialism in its inception.

Leroux and Constant, as well as others in the romantic socialist cohort, were bothered profoundly by the degree of competition inherent in the social relations of their day. They saw a world governed by people's selfish drives, not by their duties to one another. In describing a world in which these ills would be alleviated, both Leroux and Constant focused on difference, whether social or sexual, as the source of the problems. Their means of achieving harmony within humanity was to erase differences among people. Leroux's approach attempted to balance the need to eliminate difference with his desire to maintain the individual; the result was the erasure of individuality and the maintenance of the discrete human being. In Constant's scheme, even these distinctions were obliterated.

These attempts to end conflict implied a definition of difference, and specifically sexual difference, as socially constructed, one that saw human society and practice as the source of difference, rather than biology or some other source. However the way in which femininity was described and employed by these thinkers makes it clear that they did not see sexual difference in these terms, rather, they defined woman through her biological functions, a seemingly eternal definition. That their womanhood was the symbolic antidote to the divisiveness of their world only complicated the problem further, rendering her both necessary and impossible at once. If their vision of society were to be achieved, she would cease to be. The eradication of difference may have been

⁸⁴ Constant, *La Mère de Dieu*, 279.

⁸⁵ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).

the goal, but the use of essentialized feminine images to embody their ideal effectively undermined the potency of their imagery, since the very icon they used to symbolize their utopia would therefore be erased by its realization. This internal contradiction highlights the degree to which difference was both eternal and integral to their worldview. The language they used to describe their utopia was thoroughly steeped in the language of difference, so much so that despite their desire to eradicate it, they consistently used symbols of sexual difference in articulating their vision of the good society. Furthermore, their attempts to eradicate difference effectively wrote woman out of the human community they hoped to create, and this despite the feminist stance taken by both writers. Either there are no internal differences, and therefore no women or men, or woman is part of the community, and difference—and therefore one source of conflict among many—remains. Woman was the symbol of romantic socialist utopia and yet her existence served as a reminder of its unattainability.

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