“Le Cor” and “La Mort du loup”: The Scenic Imagination in Two Poems by Alfred de Vigny

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Introduction

Lyric addresses a lack. It might be the removal of the poet from the plenitude of life, or his disappointment in a shrunken present as compared to an expansive past (René Girard’s *broken promise*), or the intolerable emptiness of mere “buying and selling,” as William Wordsworth once put it in a famous sonnet. The advent of the bourgeois market in the early nineteenth century indeed intensified the poet’s sense of living in a late world, which offered no room either for the heroic gesture or for the chevaleresque distinction thereby gained. The last hero, Napoleon, rescuing France from the Revolution, nevertheless proved a disaster for the nation, as François-René Chateaubriand and Lord Byron would both lament. The new, middle-class order based on the market rejected Bonaparte’s Caesarean style of governance with its signature military adventurism. The July 1830 revolution imposed a middle-class monarchy that existed through popular sufferance. Adolphe Thiers, asked by the organizers of the insurrection to name a monarch, notably did not offer the crown to the Duc de Reichstadt, Bonaparte’s son; he offered it to the Duc d’Orléans, also known as Louis-Philippe. The first act of the new government was low-interest loans to small businessmen. Nor did the new society of shopkeepers and consumers, peaceable though it was, appear to place any great value on *artistic heroism*–rather the market demanded a popular art that assumed the legitimacy of the status-quo and appealed to the largest possible public. Such an art is not individually distinct but functionally anonymous, even when it carries a byline.

“The Romantic esthetic,” as Eric Gans has written, “appears in the specific historical conditions of the birth of modern bourgeois society” (*Originary Thinking* [1993] 165) and immediately assumes an “oppositional stance” (165) with respect to that society. Whereas “the neoclassical esthetic” of the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries served to legitimate the social order by reconciling the individual to it, the new “Romantic esthetic” reinforces the individual’s sense of alienation from the leveling system of exchange. It is natural and predictable then that what the Romantic proposes against the banal present is, typically, a bygone era whose fullness would compensate for the vacuity of the existing order. From Rousseau to the Brothers Grimm to James Fenimore Cooper, this is almost uniformly the case. Writes Gans: “Romanticism is in principle a radical esthetic, a return to the origin, even if the radicalism of the Romantic generation itself remained abstract in the face of the concrete tasks of artistic creation”; and “all art since the end of the neoclassical era may be called Romantic; once the self’s own experience becomes the guarantee of the originary event, no modernism, however radical, can exhaust the potential of this opening” (181).

Romantic artists show marked interest in savages, antiquities, rural people, customs of the countryside, and figures from classical and medieval legend. Present-day survivals of such phenomena likewise appeal to the Romantic’s cultural nostalgia. In this way, Adamic loneliness would be another mode of what Gans calls the “return to the origin.” Almost anything that is not a token of the commercial present, as the Romantic sees it, is preferable to the shop-keeping world, with its annoying predictability and purely banausic concerns. The very precariousness of life in earlier ages or in remote and uncivilized locales recommends them in compensation for the tedium of a bland modernity. The sympathy can extend all the way to the animal world.

Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863) possesses some of the traits of an oppositional Romantic, and two of his poems, “Le Cor” (1826) and “La Mort du loup” (1843), offer paradigmatic illustrations of Romantic textuality as what Gans calls the *return to the origin*. In both, the poet expresses his nostalgia for the distant and the archaic, and he articulates his dissatisfaction with the banality of contemporary life. Yet these two poems illustrate another, paradoxical aspect of Romanticism also noted by Gans: “The Romantic lifestyle,” which begins in the assumption of the *oppositional stance,* “is in fact a preparation for life and career in a market society” (166). In the bourgeois order, “the scenic world of culture is no longer analogous to the scene-less world of the market” (166) so that “the scenic center is no longer public but personal” (167). But precisely by taking up the *oppositional stance,* the Romantic artist creates a commodity, namely his perspective, of which he is suddenly the unique purveyor, and what “is thus affirmed is precisely what is required by the bourgeois order, where supply and demand replace ritual interaction as the basis for exchange and distribution” (166). Together, “Le Cor” and “La Mort du loup” demonstrate this cycle of alienation through deliberate opposition with final reintegration into the general pattern of market exchange.

The two poems demonstrate another phenomenon, not mentioned explicitly by Gans but implicit in his idea of Romanticism as an investigation of origins. In both poems, Vigny singles out the violence of the bygone era as the element of interest. In “Le Cor,” Vigny asserts violence to be an essential constituent of the archaic world, which makes that world preferable, in part, to the modern one. In “La Mort du loup,” however, the poet recognizes the same violence as morally tainted, something to be renounced.

I.

“Le Cor,” Vigny’s re-telling of the Roland legend, seems to come first in the chronological sequence although the compositional dates of Vigny’s poems are not entirely certain. “Le Cor” shows both a more pronounced oppositional stance on the part of the poet and a greater endorsement of violence or at least a greater willingness to exploit violence on esthetic grounds. Vigny casts the poem in four sections: (i) the poet’s reverie, (ii) Roland’s death scene, (iii) Charlemagne’s return, and (iv) the concluding expostulation. The first section establishes the esthetic receptivity, and even the prophetic clarity, that constitute the *bona fides* of the poet; this section also invokes images of a vanished age whose fullness would compensate for a presumably deficient present. “The heroic ages are favorable to poetry,” as Chateaubriand wrote, “because they have that antiquity and that uncertainty of tradition which are required by the Muses” (*Le génie du Christianisme* 262). The people of archaic ages, says Chateaubriand, “were at the same time savages in body,” hence in a manner sublime, while being “civilized in mind” (264), more or less. Something of Chateaubriand’s sense of archaic humanity is at work in “Le Cor,” but for Vigny the historical era differs from the present age particularly in being articulated around moments of brute force; it differs as well in the clear relation of audience to authority, or of periphery to center.

Vigny’s lyric subject consistently valorizes the numinous center over the banal periphery; Vigny hesitantly endorses the valorization. The center, the place of authority on which attention habitually fixes itself, constitutes the locus that the poet would like to appropriate for himself. The commercial world, by contrast, exhibits no center; it is dispersed, atomistic, and autonomous in its parts. By offering his revelation, the poet hopes to give form to the formlessness of mere exchange and to become salient within the new formation. “Je sens en moi,” Vigny delivered in his diary in 1835, “le besoin de dire à la *société* les idées que j’ai en moi et qui veulent sortir” [I feel in myself the need to say to *society* the ideas I have within me and that want to emerge] (*Oeuvres poétiques* 421).

“Le Cor” begins with an egocentric affirmation:

J’aime le son du Cor, le soir, au fond des bois,
Soit qu’il chante les pleurs de la biche aux abois,
Ou l’adieu du chasseur que l’écho faible accueille,
Et que le vent du nord porte de feuille en feuille.

I love the sounding horn, of an eve, deep within the woods,
Whether it sings the plaints of the threatened doe
Or the hunter’s retreat but faintly echoed
That the north wind carries from leaf to leaf.

The poet reports to his audience his own esthetic sensitivity to the sound of the hunting-horn, whose distinct acoustic signature represents, in the text, the pre-bourgeois order of feudal society, as exemplified in the combination of privilege and brutality of the hunt. The hunt is first of all an ancient activity, appropriately revisited by someone intent on a conjuration of origin; and the hunt, it should be noted, is an activity that became highly ritualized under feudalism. The hunt’s antique pedigree and its ritual character set it apart from anything in the modern, shopkeeping way of life. We note how the hunt assumes its structure through the intentness of all the participants on the quarry. The hunted animal in effect forms the sacred focus of the hunters considered as an *ad hoc* community acting in close coordination and in accordance with an existential goal.

This communal resolve thus has a recognizably ritualistic *Gestalt.* The market, by contrast, tends to de-ritualize life, dispersing authority from the central, sacred locus to the social periphery. In so doing the market provides the model of modern informality. One notes how the sound of the horn reaches the poet from deep within the woods, reminding him of shadowy and unseen precincts; it functions as the emblem of a wild world, sufficient unto itself, in stark contrast to the middle-class domesticity of towns and cities. A hunting-horn is thus not something that belongs to the usual acoustic experience of city-dwellers. They are more likely to hear the clatter of wagons and the rattle of shutters on the shop-windows, a cacophony of city-sounds that might occur in a novel of bourgeois life designating an all-too-familiar place far from the poet’s refuge.

It is the poet, therefore, whose attunement to archaic values has permitted him to feel the entrancement of “le son du Cor.” He apparently enjoys the freedom to venture outside the civic world–this, too, distinguishes him from the bourgeoisie–into the precincts of nature and rural life. There he enjoys the rare experience of seeing and hearing great displays of floral and faunal spontaneity without the distraction of the social mass. In his journal, in 1831, Vigny wrote that solitude constituted “une retraite où l’âme se puisse recueillir en elle-même, puisse jouir de ses propres facultés, et rassembler ses forces pour produire quelque chose

de grand" [a retreat where the soul can retire into itself, take profit from its own faculties, and concentrate its forces to produce something great] (*Oeuvres Poétiques* 419). In his solitude, then, and in confronting the forest wilderness, the poet finds his better self, preferable to the modern person because unmediated by the artificialities of modern existence. He comes to know again the feudal world that modernity has swept away, oblivious, it seems, to its archaic values of adventure, loyalty, and heroism in action. Nature here impresses itself on Vigny not only as the background to archaic human activity, but as an instance of the sublime. One should recall Thomas Weiskel's observation, made apropos of a discussion of Immanuel Kant, to the effect that, "the sublime moment offers to reason an occasion for self-recognition" (*The Romantic Sublime* 42).

Reason seeks intellectual clarity and helps to regulate life, but it does these things by drawing down the store of vitality and sapping the communal sense of ultimate meaning; reason is analytical rather than organic, methodical rather than spontaneous. According to Weiskel's analysis, glimpses of sublimity intimate to the percipient "man's ontological destiny" (44) and open the way to a revelation of "final things" (42).

Not only, then, does Vigny's lyric subject enjoy elite access to precincts of authenticity where he can, in Weiskel's terms, enjoy the experience of "self-recognition"; he also obtains knowledge of a deeper human condition than the one realized in the humdrum of commercial activity. The city-dweller by contrast possesses little familiarity with the forest world, which the faraway tone of a hunter's horn betokens; the bourgeois has little familiarity either with the sublimity, or so Romantic thought supposes, that lies beyond the appearances of the merely economic aspect of the world. The poet's privilege in his access to and possession of this knowledge, along with a certain implied superiority to the uninitiated, is precisely the point.

Nor, it follows, are the poet's readers likely fully to empathize with the quarry's plight as the hounds pursue her implacably. The animal's presumed terror represents a state of heightened emotion that the regulated orderliness of civic life under a bourgeois regime eliminates. The poet, however, remains aware of this dramatic and above all violent event, with its accompanying affect. The horn-call, emanating from the distance, speaks candidly of "les pleurs de la biche aux abois," pressed in flight by the hunter's dogs and destined to die under their assault. Weiskel, in his chapter on Burke, speaks of Romantic sublimity as not so much "the feeling of terror itself," but rather "a response to terror" (87). In the image of "la biche," indeed, one encounters the first important *scene* evoked by the poet, a scene with primitive sacrificial overtones. This is indeed the mode and moment of a "return to the origin," in Gansian terms, and a complicated "response to terror" in

Weiskel's. If the poet's presumptive announcement of his fondness for the sound of the horn seems unmotivated, his invocation of the lethal moment when the hounds bring down their quarry nevertheless fixes attention and establishes the logic to underpin the image.

The echo of the musical signal, carried by the north wind from leaf to leaf, reinforces the notion of distance, while telling that the quarry has been taken, that the predator has triumphed over the prey. Night, distance, predation, the unseen nobleman in the woods–all these symbols stand opposed to the normative order of things and belong to the very medieval epoch that the bourgeoisie has left, definitively, behind.

The hunter belongs presumably to the upper hierarchy of the barons and counts, a society of privilege, and one, significantly, that may exercise ritualized violence, as in the hunt. Vigny once confided to his journal that the common classes did not understand art. As Vigny writes: "Le peuple, il faut l'avouer, n'aime en France ni la musique, ni la poésie" [the people in France, one must admit, loves neither music nor poetry] (*Oeuvres poétiques* 419). It is likely that people's comprehension fails them, Vigny suggests, because the masses take no part in the activities from which art is born; rather, the bourgeoisie satisfies itself almost entirely with "vaudeville."

In the second stanza, Vigny raises the stakes: Here the aggression seeks its victim not in an animal but–so Vigny unavoidably implies–in a human being. Many a time the poet has heard, in some distant vibration of a wanderer's horn, a quality even more portentous than the quaintly musical, which sometimes makes him smile but more often than not makes him cry: He has heard, he says, the "bruits prophétiques" that sounded the death-knell for the knights of legend.

> Que de fois, seul, dans l'ombre à minuit demeuré,
> J'ai souri de l'entendre, et plus souvent pleuré!
> Car je croyais ouïr de ces bruits prophétiques
> Qui précédaient la mort des Paladins antiques.
>
> How often alone, in midnight shadows concealed,
> I have smiled to hear it, even shedding a tear!
> I thought to hear sounding prophetic plaints,
> Declaring the death-knell for knights of old.

The poet's ear thus becomes the acoustic witness of death, the demise, in particular, of bigger-than-life figures from feudal legend. The term *paladin* stands in opposition to the implied term *citoyen.*The present world belongs to *le citoyen,* the old world to *le paladin.* The poet allies himself with the knight against the citizen. The knight is authentic, a free agent, charged with the defense of civilization

against its enemies; his existence is full. The modern citizen, whose ethos the poet would disavow, is inauthentic, and his existence vacuous, for he merely submits to the bourgeois order, keeping his shop, paying his taxes, conforming to the trends. He does not, in the archly Romantic view, engage in largesse or nobility and perhaps fails even to recognize them. So moving is the heroic world of the ballads in its archaic fullness, indeed, that the poet takes inspiration and launches suddenly into a two-stanza apostrophe of the Pyrénées: “O montagnes d’azur! ô pays adoré!” The boulders of “La Frazona” and the “cirque du Marboré” become, under the poet’s inspired assertion, a uniquely enchanted site where one can hear and understand “les airs lointains d’un Cor mélancolique et tendre.” Seen under an archaizing optic, nature itself comes humanly alive.

Once again the poet has positioned himself in the center of the scene; he directs his audience’s attention (“C’est là qu’il faut s’asseoir, c’est là qu’il faut entendre” [it’s there that one must sit, it’s there that one must listen]), and in effect nominates himself as the one in touch with this more meaningful world, which his readers probably cannot know without his mediation.

The adjectives chosen by the poet to describe the horn signal, such as “mélancolique et tendre,” recall his equivocal description just a few lines earlier of his feelings whenever he hears the faraway music. Sometimes he smiles, sometimes he cries. Both passages betray the poet’s undecided feelings about what the horn symbolizes in this poem: Violent death. Weiskel provocatively notes that Romantic sublimity can take the form of a “mixture” of opposite emotions, such as “terror and delight” (88) and he quotes Burke’s formulation that sublimity amounts to “a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror” (Weiskel 88 [Burke *A Philosophical Inquiry* (123)]). Weiskel, in another reference to Burke, notes how the Romantic poet’s experience of sublimity sometimes consists of “an *episode in melancholy,*” ennui and alienation from the social round having played their part in making the individual ready to receive especially powerful influences from outside the sphere of everyday experience. In the case of Vigny’s poem, the “melancholy” tone carries us, by association, to the violent scene.

The subsequent stanzas (5 and 6) further exploit the allure of a partially concealed violence. The beauty of nature does not appear in a pristine way; nor does the poet feel that he can be absolutely candid about it. On the contrary, as anguish, danger, and death inhabit even the somewhat idyllic scene of a traveler lingering in the countryside, one must report this circumspectly. Vigny’s representation of nature in “Le Cor” suggests what Weiskel calls “the traumatic sublime” (97). To appreciate forest, mountain, and field, one must possess the fortitude to withstand the tumult and turbulence in the struggle for life that take place within these phenomena. If the poet appeared to love nature in an exemplary way, this appearance would stem

from his ability to confront the suffering that nature entails without flinching, or at least to conceal his faint-heartedness from others.

II.

In every image that Vigny gives us of nature in “Le Cor,” one finds hints and traces of something inimical:

> Souvent un voyageur, lorsque l’air est sans bruit,
> De cette voix d’airain fait retentir la nuit;
> A ses chants cadencés autour de lui se mêlent
> L’harmonieux grelot du jeune agneau qui bêle.
> Une biche attentive, au lieu de se cacher,
> Se suspend immobile au sommet du rocher,
> Et la cascade unit, dans une chute immense,
> Son éternelle plainte aux chants de la romance.
>
> Often the traveler, upon the noiseless air,
> Imposes his resounding voice of bronze;
> The bleating stutter of a lost lamb
> With his cadences harmoniously combining.
> An attentive doe stands rock-still, unconcealed,
> Poses herself on the granite height,
> While her cry eternal the great cascade
> Makes one with the sagas of old.

The “quiet air” offers a static image, but the “voice of bronze” (“d’airain”) breaks the silence. A kind of violence has already entered the scene: the violence of a human intrusion, however legitimate, on pure nature. But under the metallic designation the merely human intrusion becomes something else–the intrusion of the technical order, for “bronze” belongs to metallurgy, and to the social complication that metallurgy implies. For the Romantic imagination, this intrusion of the technical into the natural constitutes the essential sacrilege. That the transgressor might justify his transgression redoubles the offense from the Romantic perspective. The “voice” in Vigny’s stanza belongs to the hunter, among others, and so carries with it the overtones of predation *qua* profanation. The lamb whose bleating Vigny describes as “harmonious” is a classical candidate for immolation, with both Biblical and pagan associations. At the last minute, Jehovah offers to Abraham the kid that he might substitute for Isaac. Jesus is the familiar “lamb of God.” “The bleating lamb,” says Vigny’s contemporary Chateaubriand, “has something in it tremulous and wild, like the rocks and ruins among which he likes to climb” (*Le génie du Christianisme* 149).

The doe in her setting likewise constitutes a sacrificial image, this one created by the poet himself in his opening stanza where he makes this species the object of the hunt; the poet invokes the doe again as a recurring image elsewhere in the poem. We note that the doe apprehensively *listens* attentively to the horn, which signals the proximity of her pursuers. The anthropomorphism of this intentional act indicates the doe's apprehension over the hunters' approach; the intention itself forecasts imminent violence. Even the setting, with its great waterfall and its rocky summit, hints at the possibility of accident, injury, and death. The falls especially have a Tarpeian character; the sound of the waters becomes, in Vigny's phrase, an "eternal lamentation," as if for unnamed victims. Once more, we encounter the deep-seated ambiguity of the poet's response to violence revealed. Lethal events attract him, but they also call forth the sense that is required "lamentation" on behalf of the deceased.

Vigny in these lines subtly blends the vulnerability of hunted animals, the danger of the cliffs, and the "moaning" of the waters–sacrificial images all–with what he calls "les chants de la romance." Once again, as throughout the poem so far, the poet's appreciation of the beauty of a numinous alternate world ("j'aime le son du cor") serves, not so much to justify, but to explain the violence (as in the customs of the hunt, or the Crusades, or Charlemagne's wars against the heathen tribes) on which such a world may rely for its cohesion, just as the hunters achieve unity at the expense of the quarry.

When the poet explains that he now wishes to regale readers with one of the old epics, he indeed returns them to a pre-bourgeois world, that namely of the paladins, those larger-than-life figures, whom he has previously evoked. Like the natural world, the paladin-world is a world of enormity, of struggle, and of stratagem; it entails the deaths of heroes whose souls, as the poet suggests, speak "avec la voix du Cor." Similarly did the cries of the tortured doe mix with the hunter's horn at the beginning of the poem. Both are cases of pure *sonance* functioning in an ostensive mode to draw back a specifically modern consciousness to its own primitive origins. There is thus something restless and disturbing in the memory of the chivalrous age. There is also, however, a certain election in being receptive to that memory because the souvenir represents an intensification of an otherwise *devitalized* consciousness. "L'ombre du grand Roland," Vigny tells us, "n'est donc pas consolée" [the shade of great Roland is therefore not consoled].

For a poet sufficiently sensitive, one not dulled by bourgeois routine and the blandness of popular taste, echoes of ancient deeds still resound, provoking the renewal of vital awareness. The poet, again privileging himself as a central figure, will now articulate for his audience what they cannot hear, or do not remember, but which he senses clairvoyantly before him. As before, in the references to the hunt,

the poet's description of the victim undermines his attempt to valorize the older social order. For, as we have noted, Roland, killed by the Moors, rests uneasily in death. The paladin's posthumous unease demands moreover that the poet of the present age revisit the circumstances of his death. It is as though there were something unfinished in the narrative of Roland's exploits.

The second and third sections of the poem offer the reader Vigny's version of the hero's death from *La chanson de Roland*. As he does with respect to the natural scene, with its hunters and voyagers, Vigny's lyric subject evaluates the epic scene, with its knights and infidels, as preferable to the modern order, a default-judgment of Romantic thinking. Readers come upon Roland himself in the vale of Ronceveaux, surrounded by the Moors just as, in the first section of the poem, the hounds had surrounded the victim:

> Tous les preux étaient morts, mais aucun n'avait fui.
> Il reste seul debout, Olivier près de lui,
> L'Afrique sur les monts l'entoure et tremble encore.
> "Roland, tu vas mourir, rends-toi," criait le More[.]
>
> The bravos lay all dead, but none had flown.
> He remained afoot, Olivier by his side,
> While on the hills the host of Maghreb glowered yet.
> "Death comes for you, give yourself up," cried the Moor.

Weiskel says in his study that, "Greatness emerge[s] from the heart of defeat" (44). The death of Roland in "Le Cor" illustrates Weiskel's thesis. Roland in the ambush in this way resembles the poem's first image, that namely of the doe, killed by the dogs. The doe cries out as the dogs close in. Roland, sole survivor of the stalwarts, prepares to face his own death by a fierce enemy. In the first image, the sounding horn signals the moment when the dogs leap upon their prey; in the second, as the infidel closes, Roland will sound out his call for help on his own horn of ivory.

Roland resembles also the second animal placed by Vigny in the nature-tableau, the one who stands attentive and immobile at the top of a rock. Roland himself stands alone, listening to the insults of the Moors calling to him; the hostile shouts, like the signaling horn, augur a fatal result. When boulders tumble down from the cliffs and into the waters below, recalling the huge cascading waterfall of the earlier scene, Roland like the deer leaps to the top of one of the rocks and prepares his defense. One discovers a further parallelism: Roland's capacity to stare death in the face resembles the poet's willingness to look into the reality of nature, despite the violence that he finds there, and to identify the rightness of the victim's struggle. Nothing in the ethos of commerce could prepare a modern person to understand

Roland's heroism, and the moment must appear as what Weiskel calls a "discontinuity . . . between what can be grasped and what can be felt as meaningful" (21). The meaning resists being spelled out; it can be "grasped" only by identification between the poet and the object of his contemplation. To translate the archaic significance into bourgeois language would violate the symbolism.

This, then, is the ultimate Romantic scene, repeated now three times in the poem: As a group intent on violence surrounds its victim, the decisive moment remains out of view, but we infer it from the subsequent traces. The scene with Roland (minus the moment of his death) thus acquires pivotal importance in the poem. The ambivalence betrayed so far by the poet over the question of dignity and violence finally gives way, for now someone comes to *save* the victim. Roland's death might have been inevitable both as history and as poetry, but morally speaking, from the vantage of modern morality, Roland merited rescue. While the poet might well prefer to be elsewhere than in the bourgeois world, his embrace of an older order nevertheless cannot stand. The past age was too cruel. We should empathize with the victim. The sanctity of life outweighs the sublimity of death. When rescuers at last do heed the cries of the lost compatriots, as signaled by Roland's horn, they are Charlemagne and his nobles.

Whereas in the images of Parts I and II of "Le Cor," Vigny gives glimpses of minimal communities of hunters and detached, solitary wanderers, whose tie to society is tenuous, yet in the images of Part III, he shows us a larger society. Charlemagne's army on campaign obeys the laws of structure and organization. Its existence is variegated, the soldiers being differentiated into special roles. While its purpose is war, it brings with it troubadours and priests, and it can halt in camp for rest and relaxation. Charlemagne and his knights talk among themselves. The soldiers listen to a musician, drink wine, and flirt with shepherd girls. When Roland's horn finally sounds this same community rides to his rescue at Charlemagne's command:

> Arrière, chevaliers, repassons la montagne!
> Tremble encor sous nos pieds, sol trompeur de l'Espagne!
>
> Go back, knights, over the pass again!
> Tremble once more under their feet, treacherous soil of Spain!

The plural forms (*chevaliers, repassons, sous nos pieds*) emphasize the group. When the peers arrive, Roland has met the fate that seemed to await the animal in stanzas 5 and 6. Roland has been sent reeling from his rocky perch and lies dead in the waters below, his cries for help ending in death. The image thus assumes the characteristically centripetal form of a ritualistic tableau: the sacred object at the

center surrounded by a community for which it supplies a unique focus; the community contemplates that object with the awe that death-by-violence typically calls forth. Readers become part of the galvanized periphery of this scene as they are drawn into it vicariously.

Has Roland's soul now found consolation through the poet's re-telling of the tale? It would seem so. For now, at the end of the poem, in one final line, the poet returns to his opening image but with some significant differences:

> Dieu! que le son du Cor est triste au fond des bois!
>
> God! But the horn calls sadly from the depth of the wood!

The similarity with the beginning of the poem is obvious. The sound of the horn still comes from deep within the woods. The hunt belongs to an archaic order; the locus of its emanation lies at the maximum of remoteness from the bourgeois milieu. The horn hides within and sounds forth from the obscurity of dense nature. As does anything deliberately concealed, or by design only half-revealed, the horn signal exercises its predictable fascinating power on the consciousness that becomes–or is made–aware of it. The unseen horn becomes divine and oracular, the active *spirit* of the nature-realm.

But certain essential features, not shared, differentiate between the first and last images. The sound of the horn now makes the listener sad: Not bittersweet, or now sad but now happy, or any other ambivalent feeling; but unequivocally melancholy, as much as to say that the subjectivity implied by the poem now perceives in the *son du cor* an order that draws its cohesion troublingly from victimage. The adjective "triste" marks a preliminary, although not yet a definitive, step toward rejecting that archaic world. The invocation of God ("Dieu")–not really a religious invocation here, but more of an emotional outburst–shows the poet having recourse to a vocabulary that implies an ethical order, an ability to judge right and wrong. The poet judges at last that what "le son du Cor" signals, however awesome or alluring, is nevertheless brutal and unjust.

The "Dieu" of this line has replaced the "je" of the opening lines. Not that the poet is not still imaginatively present in the scene, mediating his discoveries for his readers; but he has declined to emphasize his singularity. To step away from subjectivity, in context, is to step towards objectivity. While the poet refrains from aligning himself with any collective, as the poet of "La Mort du loup" does, he does minimize the ego-assertion with which he had begun the poem. Withdrawing the first-person brings the composition a step toward the reintegration into society that

Gans' theory of the Romantic esthetic proposes, and that "La Mort du loup" more fully engages.

If "Le Cor" gave an instance of what Gans calls the oppositional stance, then "La Mort du loup" will provide the example of coherence within the community. Weiskel would recognize in "La Mort du loup" the "reactive . . . phase" (24) of the Romantic sublime, in which "a fresh relation between the self and its object" (24) leads to a reconciliation with the existing world. Read in the context either of Gans's claims about Romantic sociology or Weiskel's about Romantic psychology, "La Mort du loup" is the more emblematic of the two poems. It both describes a "return to the origin," giving us at the same time a glimpse into ethical enormity, and explicitly acknowledges the need for the poet to participate in the world and in the market–or to be reconciled with an order which, whatever its defects, cannot be wished away and in which therefore the poet must perforce live and adapt. Nevertheless, the later poem still has much in common with the earlier poem. It focuses on the allure of something primeval to which the bourgeoisie can find admittance only by attending to the poet's mediation.

III.

Consider the ominous imagery with which "La Mort du loup" opens:

> Les nuages couraient sur la lune enflammée
> Comme sur l'incendie on voit la fumée,
> Et les bois étaient noirs jusques à l'horizon.
>
> The clouds swirled around the flamboyant moon,
> Like reeks of smoke across a pyre
> And the woods were deep and black into the distance.

Here, as in "Le Cor," atmospheric prodigies augur imminent violence. Vigny has all but placed us again in the midst of the first scene of "Le Cor," the one evoked by the sound of the hunting horn, for we *("nous")* are immediately involved in the grim task of tracking an animal through the woods. The wandering wolf pack has left claw-tracks that show in the soil. As readers vicariously follow the spoor, they also descend from the bland present guiltily into the sanguine, viscerally exciting past. The chase gains on its quarry. The communal awareness concentrates on the prey. We note, however, how Vigny has transferred the terms. At the beginning of "Le Cor," the poem remains under the direct control of an ego (a *"je"*) who marks himself off as alone and therefore as apart from the social context.

The unseen hunter of "Le Cor," whose musical signal resounds in the faraway woods, appears to be equally alone; the term for him occurs, as we have remarked,

in its singular, not in its plural, form. If he were not alone, then he would be part of a minimal group. But the vocabulary of the stanza fails explicitly to acknowledge the group. In “La Mort du loup,” however, one discovers hunters in the plural with whom the narrator of the poem shares an *ad hoc* community. He is a participant in, rather than a contemplative observer of, the scene. His use of the first-person plural indeed implicitly extends that community to his readers.

Thus *we (nous)* together find ourselves in pursuit of the prey; *we* belong to the harrying interlopers of the natural realm. Through the fog and the brush the poet catches a glimpse of the wolves:

> J’apperçois tout à coup deux yeux qui flamboyaient,
> Et je vois au delà quelques formes légères
> Qui dansaient sous la lune au milieu des bruyères,
> Comme font, chaque jour, à grand bruit sous nos yeux,
> Quand le maître revient, les lévriers joyeux.
>
> Suddenly I saw two eyes that flamed,
> And I saw beyond them two slender forms
> That danced under the moon, upon the heather,
> As hounds do for the returning master in salubrious joy
> Making a great palaver with each leap as we watch.

The incendiary metaphors speak of heightened emotions, the adrenal rush, and indeed the life-or-death character of the hunt. The phrase “tout à coup” reinforces the gathering sublimity of the event and foreshadows the climax of the chase. The hunted animals have indeed acquired a majestic, larger-than-life quality as the party closes in upon them. Their eyes become fiery against the nocturnal backdrop of fog and darkness. This ocular fire recalls the sacrificial “vapeurs de flammes” that presage Roland’s death in “Le Cor.” Vigny now endows the harried creatures with an aura of preternatural virtue. The wolf-pups, whom the poet sees at play, do resemble their domesticated counterparts, but with one striking and unexpected difference: “Les enfants du Loup se jouaient en silence.” By cliché, wolves snarl or growl and their pups yelp. Here, the animals disport themselves soundlessly, with remarkable self-mastery and comportment. Their silence derives, says the poet, from the fact that they live under the constant threat of “l’homme,” who is, without qualification, “leur ennemi.”

“Leur ennemi” is–consistently with the interpretation so far–indissolubly identical with the first-person plural, the “nous,” of the community formed by the hunt and joined, vicariously, by the reader. The pups’ silence links them with the attentive and immobile *biche* that appears in the vicinity of the falls in “Le Cor.” The she-wolf

reminds the poet of the female animal who suckled Romulus and Remus, in the legendary age before the insuperable breach separated humanity from its bestial cousins in nature's bourn, before man became the animal's enemy.

The male wolf now makes a suicidal stand against his attackers, dogs and men, in order to save his mate and the two wolflings.

Le Loup vient et s'assied, les deux jambes dressées,
Par leurs ongles crochus dans le sable enfoncées.
Il s'est jugé perdu, puisqu'il était surpris,
Sa retraite coupée et tous ses chemins pris;
Alors il a saisi, dans sa gueule brûlante,
Du chien le plus hardi la gorge pantelante,
Et n'a pas desserré ses mâchoires de fer,
Malgré nos coups de feu qui traversaient sa chair,
Et nos couteaux aigus qui, comme des tenailles,
Se croisaient en plongeant dans ses larges entrailles,
Jusqu'au dernier moment où le chien étranglé,
Mort longtemps avant lui, sous ses pieds a roulé.The sire-wolf forward stepped, his forelegs tensed,
Digging with his claws for purchase in the dirt.
He judged himself lost, overtaken he was,
Encircled, with every escape cut off;
Then by the throat seized our bravest hound
In his fiery maw with one fatal snatch
And would not forfeit his toothy grip
No matter our bullets burned his flesh
And our sharp knives, like talons,
Plunged and tore among his guts,
Keeping his strangle hold
Until at last he dropped the dead assailant at his feetAnthropomorphic the attributions might be (the male "judges himself lost" as though he were capable of reason), hence anathema to the skeptical consciousness. Vigny paints a powerful tableau nevertheless. This moment constitutes the real scene-of-origin in the poem, made startling and memorable by the collective knife-blows of the tormenters and the victim's hopeless struggle. It is the scene of death that opens "Le Cor," but in which the poet did not show the critical moment, choosing instead to concentrate on ornamental aspects of the ancient sport rather than portray the sanguine reality of its logical conclusion. In Roland's death-scene, too, Vigny omits to give any direct depiction of the hero's destruction, only of his preparation for it and of the later discovery of the corpse. In "La Mort du loup," however, Vigny spares no element of the truth. As the wolf collapses under the collective assault ("nos coups"), he

becomes “tout baigné dans son sang.” The recurrent second-person pronouns reinforce the insight that this is how a community constitutes itself, in the collective expenditure of violence against a victim.

In *Homo Necans* (1972), Walter Burkert notes the connection between the hunt, whose telos is mainly practical, and ritual: “In the hunt, one might argue, killing is not ceremonial but practical and subject to chance; its meaning and goal, both quite profane, lie in obtaining meat for food; a wild beast must be seen in opposition to a tame animal. And yet the very similarity of hunting and sacrificial customs belies such a distinction. Killing can become ceremonial even among hunters” (15).

Burkert reminds us that the hunt affords the generative occasion of the *Männerbund,* the immemorial society of men: “At the core of this new type of male community, which is biologically analogous to a pack of wolves, are the acts of killing and eating” (18). “La Mort du loup” gives us no eating, but it does give us a graphic depiction of killing. Note how “La Mort du loup” also adjusts another aspect of the “Roland” section of “Le Cor.” There, Roland is the one, who dies for *us,* but he does not die by *our* action; he dies on the contrary, by *enemy* action, at the hands of infidels. (Invaders of the land!) The community–Charlemagne and his knights, defenders of the Holy Roman Empire, separated briefly from their compatriots led by Roland–reunites around the fallen hero and then destroys the enemy. In “La Mort du loup,” by contrast, the human community appears on stage already united and intrinsically aggressive; it constitutes a ferocious alliance, which forms a “sinistre croissant” around its noble and innocent quarry. The phrase “sinister croissant,” we note, is applicable to the Roland saga with another connotation.

As in “Le Cor,” Vigny hardly distinguishes between good-guys and bad-guys. No member of the human community can escape implication in the violent iniquity; and just so does the violent iniquity unify those complicit in its perpetration. The wolf dies without a growl or a whimper, just as the wolf-pups play, that is to say, silently. Wolfish silence signifies wolfish innocence. Speech belongs to the guilty. An episode of preternatural quietude now follows the violent passage.

In that quietude, the first-person plural of the “nous” reduces itself to the discrete “je,” as though individuality were generated by the act of collective violence. The “je” is indeed quick to separate himself from the pack of hunters whom he had previously joined, and whom he now disdains as they set off in pursuit of further sacrificial offerings in the form of the mother-wolf and her pups. But that “je” almost immediately gives up his own voice in order to let speak vicariously through him the victims themselves, first describing the fleeing mother-wolf’s ethical imperative to save her young, and, finally, channeling the anguish of the fallen male wolf. If the poet had hitherto yearned for the centeredness of archaic ritual, he would now find

himself unwilling to countenance the acts requisite to such centeredness, and he does:

J’ai reposé mon front sur mon fusil sans poudre,
Me prenant à penser, et n’ai pu me résoudre
A poursuivre sa Louve et ses fils, qui, tous trois,
Avaient voulu l’attendre, et, comme je le crois,
Sans ses deux Louveteaux, la belle et sombre veuve
Ne l’eût pas laissé seul subir la grande épreuve;
Mais son devoir était de les sauver[.]I leaned my pate against the smoking barrel,
Taken in thought, while yet resolving not,
To keep the chase after the she-wolf and her pups
Who, all three, would willingly have made the stand.
But for the wolflings the mother, somber widow now,
Would not have forsaken the sire in his stand,
Obliging instead to save her little ones.The poet attributes to the she-wolf the thought that she must act now to save her pups from hunger and so prevent them from ever making the “pacte des villes / Que l’homme a fait avec les animaux serviles” [the pact of the cities / That man has made with servile animals]. The poet apostrophizes the wolves and by extension the whole of the animal kingdom as “les premiers possesseurs du bois et du rocher” [the first owners of wood and rock]. Yet that “pacte des villes,” forged by humanity, has the same aim as the she-wolf’s bestial and inarticulate resolve. This resolve would entail the protection of the defenseless and the provisioning of life. Recognition, however reluctant, of the necessity of the “pacte” balances, on the other side of the equation, both the oppositional individual’s nostalgia for the pre-human world and his unease at recognizing that human order springs from the violent unanimity of a “sinistre croissant.” As Burkert puts it: “The power to kill and [the] respect for life [are able to] illuminate each other” (21).

The poet cannot escape his membership in the cruel phalanx. If it were the case, as the poet says, that, “seul le silence est grand; tout le reste est faiblesse,” [only silence is great; all the rest is weakness] he has nevertheless conspicuously not committed himself to suffer his fate, as do the animal-victims, “sans parler.” This is the moral dictum that the poet puts in the mouth of the slain wolf, the victim now held up before the poet’s readers as an ideal of existential sublimity. But *la parole* is the poet’s very stuff. Language indeed seems to spring, on the occasion described in Vigny’s poem, from the traumatic space opened up by the bloody killing. The scene becomes, to use Burkert’s language, “a central point where weapons, blood, and death establish a sense of human community” and “the irreversible event becomes a formative experience… provoking feelings of fear and guilt and increasing the desire to make reparation” (21). Vigny’s contemporary,

Chateaubriand, had a similar intuition, noting that “when a savage pierces a roebuck with his arrows . . . this action is poetic” (*Le génie du Christianisme* 263), but modern people by contrast cannot with equal legitimacy take innocent, even animal, life for sport.

Modern people are too much transformed, by their Biblically mediated ability to empathize, to kill dumb beasts with vain and guiltless abandon. (Harming an animal is a criminal offense.) Vigny certainly yields to his own capacity for empathy. In the stillness following the male wolf’s death, the poet suddenly feels compelled “to think” about the enormity that has just occurred. Only by exercising language, the unique property of man, can Vigny commemorate the sublimity of speechless animals. In exploiting this human specificity, however, the poet necessarily contravenes the ideal that he has discovered in the animal’s stoic dumbness. In offering the vision to an audience, furthermore, the poet indeed affirms his membership not in the sublime but in the market order; he has a commodity, his vision, to exchange, and he is more than willing to set up shop for the vending of it. He is thus a member of what the poem calls “le pacte des villes.” As such, he is one of the bourgeois types implicitly demeaned in the early, egocentric and “oppositional” stanzas of “Le Cor.” This fact will not be changed by the calculatedly Rousseauvian pose implicit in the poet’s Adamic claim to be able to decipher the wolf’s silent language on behalf of his otherwise stymied audience.

Gans speaks of “the constitutive hypocrisy of Romanticism” (*Originary Thinking* 166). The paradox of the poet’s claim at the end of “La Mort du loup” illustrates the meaning of the term. Yet in “La Mort du loup,” the poet appears to be aware of the hypocrisy in a way that he is not in “Le Cor.” If the poet of “Le Cor” is not quite, in Gans’s words, “ontologically prior to the collectivity” (166), he more than hints at his being spiritually superior to it. His commemoration of the medieval past certainly implies a deficiency in the present that those who are *of the present* cannot fathom until the poet has explained it to them. The fact that the poet of “La Mort du loup” has no difficulty in uttering the plural *nous* indicates that he has gone some distance towards relinquishing the “pose,” as Gans says, of someone not implicated in the existing order. Of course, the poet of “La Mort du loup” does distinguish himself in any number of ways, beginning with the fact that *he,* not his reader, is the poet, and that *he,* not some other member of the chase, appears to sanction the flight to safety of the she-wolf with her cubs.

IV.

The Romantic poet, as Gans writes, opposes himself, by virtue of his special insight, to the rest of society, but “the more subtle Romantic work figures this opposition . . . as the protection or *care* of a weaker and less eloquent figure (usually female) by

the stronger poet-narrator" (169). This is the very pattern of "La Mort du loup." Thus like Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire,* the Vigny-poet is superlatively sympathetic to animals and nature. Presumably, the poet's audience will approve of the poet's mercy and identify with his regret over the death of the he-wolf and the widowing of his mate. But to admit this is to admit further that the bourgeois audience is, in its way, superior to the archaic world represented by the chase; the bourgeoisie has learned to identify with and admire the selfsame victim, in this case the wolf, against whom the primitive sodality of men acts with fierce unanimity. Neither the hunter celebrated in "Le Cor" nor the rude trackers co-present with the subject-narrator in "La Mort du loup" gives evidence of having any sympathy for the beast at bay.

Gans writes that the content of Romantic art is "cognitive" (170). We might say with equal validity that a type of Romantic art is *theoretical,* that it insists on the active contemplation of the primitivism revealed in the imaginative return to origin. How does this work out in the poem? The opposition between poet and bourgeois audience now seems considerably relaxed. The poet of "La Mort du loup" effectively admits his bond with society. As the existing modern civic order typically does not engage in brutality such as the hunt, it seems indeed less guilty of ignobility than the archaic societies customarily extolled by Romantic poets. The bourgeois order is by no means as interesting as those archaic societies, but it offers a more humane milieu. What remains in the space opened up by this detente? After participating in the killing of the wolf, the poet rests pensively while leaning on his rifle. Late in the poem, the poet puts an unlikely call to mental action in the mouth of the vanquished animal:

Il disait: "Si tu peux, fais que ton âme arrive,
A force de rester studieuse et pensive,
Jusqu'à ce haut degré de stoïque fierté
Où, naissant dans les bois, j'ai tout d'abord monté.["]He said: "See to it that your soul achieves,
With all your strength resolved and all your mind applied,
The same high Stoic dignity,
That I, forest-born, so proudly to you have shown."The wolf has shown the poet that everything human, including the highest degree of thought, exists in a genetic relation with primordial violence, for violence has a uniquely unifying and mentally quickening effect. The term *stoic* appears through no accident, since the point of the Stoical system, especially in its Roman expression in writers like Seneca and the Emperor Marcus, is to enable the individual to comport himself decently in a world of violence that buffets him constantly. The poet has earlier given us a reminder of Rome in the image of the she-wolf suckling the divine twins. The wolf can even be said to substitute, in the poetic scheme, for a human victim. Man is the enemy, says

the poet, but he is just as much the enemy of himself as he is of the wild beast. “Man is beast to man,” is an old and true saying. Thus one of the twin founders of Rome, suckled by a she-wolf, killed the other; and Rome, like France, descended into bloody civil war. Modern France at the time of “La Mort du loup” had only recently emerged from a long period of recurrent insurrectionary disruption.

The revolution of 1789 quickly became a terror and a slaughter. The very logic of revolutionary terror lies in the identification of scapegoat-victims around whose immolation insurgent solidarity can be molded. Napoleon emerged from the terror but quickly embroiled the nation in his military debacles against foreign rather than domestic enemies. A restoration of the monarchy took place, but Charles X proved reactionary and incompetent. While the July 1830 revolution occurred on a smaller scale than that of 1789, it still saw several thousands killed, mainly in Paris, before Charles abdicated, yielding the throne to Louis-Philippe.

This shift of power represented a triumph of the bourgeoisie and coincided with a recovery of the depressed economy. If the placid, market-oriented present had sublimated ferocity into the great pattern of exchange, the bourgeoisie should be congratulated; but it should also be goaded into remembering that the peace of regular exchange is a dispensation expensively achieved and that it was not always so. Nor need it be always so, as recurrent social disruption has made all too clear. Will anything prevent the “croissant sinistre” of the “pacte des villes” from turning its ferocity once again on itself?

Vigny appears to arrive at a decidedly un-Romantic and yet entirely unavoidable conclusion: If we wish to defer violence, we have no alternative but to enter the cycle of exchange by participating in the market; the peace of the market supplies the conditions under which poetic revelations of “originarity” can be appreciated, and the poet is therefore really at home nowhere but in the bourgeois society that he pretends to despise. In Vigny, of course, spite is really too harsh a word. The ambiguity that he feels about the anti-bourgeois scenes that he invokes in “Le Cor” is already tantamount to a justification of the modern, largely non-victimary social order, even though the poet retains the pose of opposition. Once again a few words from Chateaubriand shed light on the movement that occurs in between “Le Cor” and “La Mort du loup.” We have already cited Chateaubriand to the effect that while primitive violence is legitimately poetic, identically violent acts, in a modern milieu, are not.

Chateaubriand goes on to say that: “In proportion as society multiplied its wants of life, poets learned that they ought not, as in past times, to exhibit every circumstance to the eye, but to throw a veil over certain parts of the picture,” whereupon, “having advanced to this step, they perceived that it was also

necessary to select" (*Le génie* 264). "Le Cor" is a poem, which, in Chateaubriand's language, conceals and *selects,* in order to create beauty*.* "La Mort du loup" rejects the poetics of *concealment* and reveals violence for what it is: An origin of consciousness and cultural forms, at the expense of a victim, and one which therefore should not be ritually reproduced in the context of a post-ritual or Christian society.

In this revelatory *logic of the victim,* certain conclusions become unanswerable. If the wolf were a truly noble creature, then it would follow that those who ignore him treat him better, in fact, than those who hunt him down and kill him with their collective knife-blows. If the price of sublimity were death, then it would be better not to incorporate enormities in the regulation of life. The well-ordered life offers a certain optimum of happiness, which happily relinquishes the Dionysiac intensity of antique passions. In the rise of the bourgeoisie, Gans argues, there appears for the first time: "An institution in which the moral or formal equality of membership in the community of exchangers of signs . . . becomes a model for participation in the society of exchangers of things. This institution is the free market" (*Originary Thinking* 59). In the free market, "the equality of participants . . . is their equal capacity to offer their goods and services at an impersonally determined market price"; and "it is by means of the formal equality of the market that the ethical principle of equality makes its long-deferred return to the social order" (*Originary Thinking* 59).

Gans also writes that, "It is the free individual's independence from central control that permits [him] to formulate a strategy of return and ultimately to prevail over the guardians of ritually guaranteed equality" (57). Yet bourgeois consciousness, despite being rooted in the fundamentally moral notion of reciprocity, is not without defect. In particular, it tends to the ahistorical, and it therefore insufficiently recognizes its own historical status as an optimally peaceful condition acquired through centuries of trial and error. The market needs its oppositional figures, like the poets, to remind contemporary humanity, whose thought is parochial and ahistorical, of the contrast between the current civic order and the quite different communal orders that antedate it. "La Mort du loup," for all of the poem's surface Romanticism, does this, and qualifies itself as a remarkably *post–* or *meta*-Romantic poem.

V.

Born under the Directorate, Vigny understood himself already in his late twenties as a child of catastrophic violence. He responds to a biographical inquiry from Paul Foucher (20 April 1828) by saying, "Ma vie est simple, monsieur. . . . Resté seul enfant d'une famille de Beauce très nombreuse et anéantie par la Révolution, où

périrent mes sept oncles” [My life is simple, sir. . . . The only surviving child of a very large Beauce family wiped out by the Revolution, in which my seven uncles perished] (*Plus belles lettres* 25). A few years later, to Auguste Brizeux (2 August 1831), concerning his father, Vigny writes, “Il avait sept frères, La Révolution les avait tué” [he had seven brothers, the Revolution had killed them] (41). The phrase in its repetition acquires a formulaic, even a Homeric, quality, like an epithet: *Alfred of seven uncles orphaned*. The comment is not an aside. Vigny conceives of himself early as a poet and he conceives of the poet in a specific, rather vatic way, as an inevitably unappreciated interpreter of humanity to itself. Thus to Brizeux also (30 March 1831), Vigny had written, concerning the life of letters, “Les parias de société sont les poètes, les hommes d’âme et de coeur, les hommes supérieurs et honorables” [the pariahs of society are the poets, men of soul and heart, superior and honorable]; moreover, “tous les pouvoirs les détestent, parce qu’ils voient en eux leurs juges, ceux qui les condamnent avant la posterité” (40) [all the powers detest them because they see in them their judges, those who condemn them in advance of posterity]. In context the word “pouvoir” also has a special connotation, referring as it does to the Moloch character of the Revolution, which demanded victims and devoured them sacrificially. The year 1830, of course, was the year of yet another revolution, in which Vigny had declared himself ready to take arms for the restored monarchy that the bourgeois uprising would disestablish.

Bertrand de la Salle, in his study of Vigny (1963), declares that there are two types of poet, the type who strives for a musical effect and the type who conjures images that he then offers for contemplation within the framework of his verse. “Chez Vigny,” de la Salle writes, “c’est l’image qui prédomine” [with Vigny it’s the image that dominates] (64). The seven uncles mentioned in the letters of 1830 furnish one such image, slightly paradoxical because they have been “annihilated,” as does the wolf in his final, mortal moments in “La mort du loup,” as does Roland when the Muslim ambush falls on him in “Le Cor.” Death and violence maintain an obvious connection, but death and nature are no less connected than death and violence. Nature implies death, as part of the natural process or cycle, and it therefore implies the negation of consciousness. The Romantic paradox of Vigny’s poetry emerges from the very inaccessibility of the *images* that de la Salle puts at the center of the poet’s esthetics.

Consider another of Vigny’s letters, this one addressed to Edouard de la Grange (September 1832) in which the opening topic is the natural sublime. Vigny writes, in reference to the Swiss Alps, “Il y a une chose qui doit consoler l’homme de sa petitesse en face des grands debris d’une gigantesque nature, c’est que son imagination soit assez puissante pour planer au-dessus de ces Pyramides lumineuses et les réduire en lignes géographiques en les mésurant sous les pieds, comme il mesure et pèse les astres sur sa tête” [there is one thing that should

console man for his smallness before the great wreckage of a gigantic nature, which is that his imagination is powerful enough to soar over these luminous Pyramids and reduce them to geographical lines by measuring them under his feet, as he measures and weighs the stars above his head]. Vigny adds that: “Je ne sais pourquoi j’ai toujours éprouvé une sorte d’indignation, pareille à la colère, en face de ces pierres ou ces eaux massives qui ont la prétention de nous effrayer et qui ne sont, après tout, que les choses stupides dominées par nous; j’ai montré le poing à la mer et aux montagnes et je ne les aime pas, parce qu’elles nous résistant” [I don’t know why I have always felt a kind of indignation, similar to anger, before these rocks and massive waters that presume to frighten us and which are after all no more than stupid things that we dominate ; I shook my fist at the sea and the mountains and I don’t love them, because they resist us] (*Les plus belles lettres,* 45-46).

The foregoing epistolary passages are obviously related to the nature-description in “Le Cor” and “La Mort du loup,” most especially to the alpine scenes in the former. The first passage puts brute nature and imagination in a kind of active contest in which the prize goes to imagination. On the one hand the mountains mock man’s “smallness” but imagination, the distinguishing human trait, “reduces” the mountains to concepts of geography, quite literally *to images.* On the other hand, consciousness cannot shake off the irrational appeal that nature exerts over it; nature might be “stupid” but it is also “resistant.” Mind can represent nature, but it cannot appropriate nature and it cannot rejoin itself to nature while remaining itself. Vigny’s nature has the qualities that Generative Anthropology associates both with the esthetic object and with the sign: It fixates attention but refuses appropriation; it becomes an object *par excellence* of the theorizing gaze. Therefore in the case of Vigny it is plausible to speak of what Gans calls “the scenic imagination,” on which the subject feels expelled from the center and forced into interaction with his co-specifics on the social periphery.

In *Chronicles of Love and Resentment 256,* Gans contrasts the Enlightenment’s notion of the human scene with that of the Romantic Era. Concerning the Eighteenth-Century mind, Gans writes: “The scenic imagination of the Enlightenment constructs an anthropological genesis for the ancients’ timeless conceptions of the social order, but remains on the level of politics, the interaction of represented desires. The language by which we represent these desires does not appear to require a collective scene of origin; it is conceived either as emerging from the indexical signs of natural appetite (Condillac) or as the product of a unique faculty of free contemplation (Herder).” As to the human scene proposed by those who repudiated the Enlightenment: “The Romantics abandoned generative hypotheses for representations of the nature we all presumably share beneath the divisive mediations of bourgeois exchange, and which hold out the promise of the

universal harmony that Romantic poets seek to incarnate in images."

These observations imply something, finally, for the actual development of the French nation, especially for its politics, in which Vigny was involved. According to Gans: "Romantic politics, exemplified in France by the most illustrious of [the Romantic] poets–both Hugo and Lamartine sat in the legislature of the July Monarchy and were active in the abortive Second Republic, the latter as its first provisional president–equated shared ideas and images with shared feelings, or, in political terms, with shared *interests.* In conceiving these representations as a source of harmony, the Romantic confuses their deferral of mimetic conflict with the final transcendence of mimetic desire." Earlier we quoted Weiskel on the presence in the Romantic worldview of a "discontinuity . . . between what can be grasped and what can be felt as meaningful," where "grasped" refers to reductive, rational understanding. We ourselves have argued that, in respect of Romantic esthetics, to appreciate forest, mountain, and field, one must possess the fortitude to withstand the tumult and turbulence in the struggle for life that takes place within these phenomena; and if the poet appeared to love nature in an exemplary way, this appearance would stem from his ability to confront the suffering–say rather, the anguish–that nature entails without flinching, or at least to conceal his faint-heartedness from others.

It should be added that, in reluctantly affirming bourgeois existence, the poet must also represent that anguish as irrecoverable in the orderly modern context. Lyric indeed addresses a lack, but it addresses a necessary lack. Two figures of speech, one from "Le Cor" and one from "La Mort du loup," take on renewed significance in this light. In "Le Cor," the poet has heard "les bruits prophétiques" that herald the end of chivalry; in "La Mort du loup," the poet makes reference to "Le pacte des villes," which denotes culture as against nature (man against wolf). To value "le pacte des villes" is to relinquish the atavistic desires conjured by "le son du cor." In so remarking we make way for the further observation that Vigny's poetry is something other –something ethically more developed–than generic Romantic poetry; that it is Post-Romantic, in a delicately self-conscious and anthropologically acute way.

To throw this special quality of Vigny's poetry into relief, one might put "Le Cor" in comparison with an earlier and a later poem on the thematics of the hunt. A useful specimen of earlier poetry would be Gottfried August Bürger's *Wilde Jagd* (1773), which Vigny might have known. A useful specimen of later poetry would be Jens Peter Jacobsen's *Gurresange* (1886). Here are the opening lines of *Das Wilde Jagd* in French:

Le cor retentit, on entend les cris du départ. Le coursier du comte hennit et

s’élance. Derrière lui se précipitent les valets et les piqueurs; détachés de la laisse, les chiens frappent l’air de leurs aboiements, ils se jettent à travers les champs, les ronces et les prairies.C’était le jour consacré au repos et à la prière. Les rayons du soleil doraient le clocher, tandis que le son harmonieux et mesuré des cloches appelait les chrétiens à l’office du matin. Déjà s’elevaient vers le ciel les chants pieux des fidèles assemblés.The horn sounds, one hears the cries of departure. The neighing steed of the count struts forth. Behind him rush the grooms and huntsmen; detached from the leash, the dogs hit the air with their barking, they lope through the fields and bushes and grasslands.It was the day dedicated to rest and prayer. The rays of the sun gilded the steeple, while the harmonious, measured ringing of the bells called Christians to the morning service. Already, sending skyward pious chants, the faithful assembled.A bit later, “Le son du cor s’accorde mal avec la voix pieuse des cloches et les chants du matin, lui dit d’un ton plein de douceur son compagnon de droite; reviens sur tes pas, ta chasse ne peut être heureuse aujourd’hui; écoute ton bon génie et ne te laisse pas guider par l’ennemi des hommes” [The sound of the horn sits uneasily with the pious voice of bells and singing in the morning, said in a gentle tone his right-hand neighbor; retrace your steps, your game can not be happy today, listen to your good spirit and do not let yourself be guided by the enemy of mankind]. Bürger (1748-1794), drawing on a medieval Danish legend, employs incipiently Romantic vocabulary to tell a story, the pointed moral of which is far less Romantic than it is Protestant and conventional. The Count, in flouting the obligations of the Sabbath, brings damnation on himself; he suffers the punishment of conducting the hunt eternally, without respite, in a ghostly, undead condition. In Walter Scott’s English: “Still, still shall last the dreadful chase, / Till time itself shall have an end; / By day, they scour earth’s cavern’d space, / At midnight’s witching hour, ascend.”

In *Gurresange,* Jacobsen (1847-1885) turns Bürger’s version on its head by validating the rebellion of the Count, identified by Jacobsen with the semi-historical character Valdemar of Gurre. Valdemar makes a Byronic break with God:

> Herre, ved du vad du gjørde,
> Da du Tove fra mig tog?
> Ved du at det var min sidste
> Fristed, hvorfra du mig jog?
> Herre, rødmer du ej af Skam,
> Det var den fattiges eneste Lam?
>
> Lord, wittest thou what thou hast done
> When thou from me my Tove dost take?
> Knewest thou not t’was my last asylum

When thou hunted’st me forth?
Lord, reddenest thou not from shame
That thou took’st from this poor herdsman his only lamb?

The first line, “God, knowest thou what thou has done,” echoes the Gospel and arrogates to Valdemar Christ’s own victimary primacy. Valdemar even says that God *hunted him* (“du mig jog”) *from his last refuge.* Jacobsen despite his late date is emphatically Romantic hence also militantly anti-conventional: Society for Jacobsen is the nemesis of individuality and authenticity. Sanctifying marriage, for example, over love, which is the topic of the just-quoted lines, God should “redden from shame.”

Das Wilde Jagd belongs to the Pre-Romantic esthetic, of which *Originary Thinking* asserts that in it “the . . . subject remains focused on the sacred center, but has already become aware that it is human desire that is supplying its language” (162). The symbol of order in Bürger’s poem is the church steeple, picked out by the sunbeam, but the action belongs to the blaspheming Count. Jacobsen’s *Gurresange* (the title is in the plural) belong to the Romantic esthetic, of which *Originary Thinking* asserts that it is “in principle hostile to the market” (166). Romanticism constitutes itself as “oppositional culture” in which “individual experience of the originary becomes a demonstration of the ‘unnaturalness’ of the market” (166). “Le Cor” and “La Mort du loup” fit neatly, however, in neither category. Vigny understands what an Arch-Romantic like Jacobsen does not. *Originary Thinking* formulates the insight this way: “The role of the individual as thus affirmed [by Romanticism] is precisely what is required by the bourgeois order, where supply and demand replace ritual interaction as the basis for exchange and distribution” (166).

The recentness of the Revolution–in which the “seven uncles” fell–has effectively deglamorized sacrificial violence for Vigny in his creative maturity; yet Vigny understands the relation of esthetic interest to the trophies of sparagmatic action. It is the original sin of the de-ritualized market to owe a debt to something that it, in its adoption and internalization of Gospel morality, has once and for all renounced and that it cannot re-institute without deconstituting itself. The modern self-conscious moral person must satisfy himself with representations. “Le son du Cor,” for example, as entrancing as it might be, must take its place as reportage carried, as the poem puts it, “de feuille en feuille,” by the winds. “Feuille en feuille” is nicely ambiguous, for it can mean “leaf by leaf” or “page by page.” For the modern consciousness, ritual has become “romance,” Vigny’s term, or textuality, as contemporary critics like to say.

What? "Romance" is the modern substitute for religion? Perhaps. The sacred center, no matter how much the subject yearns to recreate it or to be it, is from now on a matter of representation, another ambiguous word extending from the theory of language and consciousness to the practice of politics and the making of justice.

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The Bürger and Jacobsen texts are quoted from online sources.