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2. Poet of the Mississippi.

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Poet of the Mississippi.

(Chateaubriand.)

"I want to go to America! I will discover tremendous things ..."

"What will you discover? Christopher Columbus has done a good job ..."

"There are still unknown regions, I am told. I must find them. The north-west passage ..."

"What north-west passage? And why?"

"Besides I want to study the wilderness, the savages..."

"What good will that do you? Are you a naturalist? An anthropologist?"

"I am a poet. I will write the great epic of Man and Nature." -

Who was this ambitious, persistent youth who rushed through Paris, visiting influential people, bothering, amusing, vexing, delighting them? He asked for favors, he promised miracles. He needed money, letters of introduction, all kinds of advice. People received him, listened to him, and thought him very brilliant, although slightly confused. Perhaps he was a genius. Certainly, he seemed complex and puzzling. He was intense and melancholy, talkative, pretentious,

even arrogant, and charming, sometimes languid, sometimes reckless and energetic, sometimes desperate, and always very eager to make an impression, to startle and to surprise. He craved fame as a thirsty man craves water. "I am burdened with a super-abundance of life," he said of himself, yet he seemed at the same time to be fed up with life, and willing to jeopardize it for the sake of glory. He was very young, only twenty-two years old. His imposing name was François Auguste Vicomte de Chateaubriand.

He never forgot for a minute that he was descended from one of the most distinguished families of France. Two of his ancestors had been allied with the royal house of England, another had married into the ruling house of Spain. But all this splendor was now a matter of history. On the death of his father young François Auguste found himself on the brink of poverty, possessing nothing but his glowing imagination, his boundless vanity, and an unshakeable determination to make an amazing career.

He insisted, with stubborn enthusiasm: "I must go to America."

The noble ladies of the Faubourg St. Germain asked him: "Are you not afraid of the sea, cher ami?"

He seemed offended. "On the contrary, chère Madame. I was born at St. Malo, in Brittany - which is a sea-

port, as you may remember. My ancestors were familiar with all the wild whims of the ocean - and so am I. I adore its tremendous breath - le grand souffle de l'Océan ..."

The aristocratic ladies, however, were not so easily convinced. "They have dreadful savages over there, if we are not mistaken..."

The young adventurer, it seemed, was even more addicted to savages than to the open sea. "They are innocent, strong and good. Their unspoiled hearts answer to any noble, generous appeal. The vileness, ~~the~~ wickedness of human beings are a result of civilization, and of that alone. Man is fundamentally good. Oh, retour à la nature..."

The ladies nodded, thoughtful and delighted. For this persuasive tune was familiar to all of them: it was the seductive melody of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. People like to hear the same slogans again and again. The well-known maxim sounds trustworthy and calming - even when its real import happens actually to be dangerous and even revolutionizing.

The young poet continued his alluring argument. He wanted to visit the Mississippi, the true name of which, by the way, was Meschacebe. Its waters, its enchanting banks were calling him. It was a Memeric landscape that he was going to find there, the perfect beauty of the Garden of Eden. Had they not seen, and

admired, the engravings of Father Lafitau? There was a great artist and scholar, and a holy man. His idea of discovering the common origin of all human races: was it not enthralling? In the New World he had studied the Universal Religion which all the peoples of the earth once held in common - truly a noble and stimulating conception! - and had found significant traces among the savages of that lost religious community. In his pictures of the games and rituals and struggles of the American Indians, the savages were portrayed as having the charm and dignity of Greek statues, and the poet could not rest until he had seen for himself whether Father Lafitau was right. Were these uncivilized beings really as wonderful as he had described?

The ladies were mildly interested in Father Lafitau's theories of the Universal Religion. Their understanding increased, however, when their youthful visitor declared that he was sick and tired of civilization. The ladies agreed: things looked pretty bad. How far was the excited mob able and willing to go? And what might happen to His Majesty? Apocalyptic moods prevailed in aristocratic salons, in the Paris of 1791. Nobody was quite able to understand the frightening and gigantic events; but everyone had sinister forebodings. Civilization seemed to be on the point of falling back into chaos. This was a cataclysm sweeping away the very

foundation of morals, culture, religion. It was an earthquake. Everything seemed to be cracking and tottering: a social order - their social order - was bursting asunder.

The ladies of the Faubourg St. Germain admitted that the savages could hardly be more blood-thirsty, dangerous, and grasping than the Parisian revolutionaries. Why should a young fellow from a nice family not try his luck over-seas, since such abominable things were going on at home?

Other friends of Chateaubriand felt, on the contrary, that the place of any nobleman was in France - now, when the fury of incited masses was threatening all sacred traditions - and the privileges of the ruling class. The traditions as well as the privileges had to be defended. A young man like François Auguste should stay at home and fight, instead of planning a fantastic expedition.

The young Vicomte, however, became strangely evasive whenever those fellow noblemen questioned him about his attitude towards the present struggle. For there was a flaw, a sentimental confusion in his vivid mind. On the one hand, he was, intellectually, a child and product of his own period, educated and somewhat vaguely inspired by the doctrines of the philosophy of Enlightenment, by the revolutionary

pathos of Freedom, and, above all, by the delicate and at the same time iconoclastic spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. On the other hand, he had in common with his social class the natural aversion to disorder and chaos. Moreover, his aesthetic sense was appalled by certain ghastly and cruel scenes he had had to witness, and which any violent change of society inevitably brings forth. He was divided against himself, and he chose the most convenient and, in his own opinion, the most noble solution. " I have nothing to do with either camp", he exclaimed with arrogant resignation. " My real life is in higher regions... for me, the forests..."

Finally everything was prepared, he had bidden a sentimental farewell to his mother and the ancient family house at Cambourg, Brittany, and was ready to join a French expedition sailing from St. Malo to Baltimore. The St. Pierre was a slow and tiny boat of only one hundred and sixty tons, the sea was rough, and a group of seminarists hardly meant a very stimulating company. Moreover, the fresh water on board became scanty, and on May 6th., the St. Pierre had to interrupt her trip and anchor off the Azores. The enthusiastic young traveller, however, hardly noticed the inconveniences. His breast was filled with enchanting hopes, wonderful expectations, and his fanciful mind was excited by grand though nebulous meditations...

The New World! The concept was all-embracing, poignant with future and mystery. It promised not only the healing power of solitude, the beauty of savage life, but also the ideal fulfillment of the finest European traditions. For Chateaubriand expected an America which would be half a paradisiac wilderness, half the perfect Republic, populated by Roman heroes and virtuous Quakers - offering all the inspiring qualities and reasonable achievements of revolution, without its disagreeable, prosaic, and brutal counterparts.

When the St. Pierre finally reached Baltimore, early in July, 1791, the fanciful passenger was positively overwhelmed by his feelings and expectations. There it was, at last! - the fabulous continent unknown to the world of antiquity, and ignored even during many centuries of modern life.

He set foot on American soil - and the first being to welcome him in the land of the free, was a young slave, a fifteen year old Negro girl, belle comme la nuit, miserable and lovely.

The disappointment was inevitable since he had expected too much. But he was hardly disposed to admit it - even to himself. Only during the first weeks of his stay in America he occasionally confided to his diary that the New World was not quite what he had hoped. Where was the paradisiac wilderness? He

failed to notice it when he travelled to Philadelphia, by stage-coach, after having spent one day in Baltimore. The country, he felt with a certain apprehension, was neither fantastic nor picturesque but rather barren and flat - " with very few birds, few trees, some single houses, no villages at all." And Philadelphia was not much better. He found it " cold and monotonous" - : "No monuments!" he lamented. "Above all - no ancient monuments!" Even the Quakers," those virtuous descendants of Guillaume Penn", fell somewhat short of the ideal notion of them he had cherished. Indeed he even observed two unworthy Friends trying to cheat each other in a Philadelphia shop -: a scene he later described with abhorrence.

How did he spend his fortnight in Philadelphia? His diary fails to give any clear information. It is not even known whether he visited the artistic and scientific collections the city had to offer. One fact, at least, seems to be beyond any doubt: that he was once received by George Washington. Sceptical biographers used to question even this event, considering the complete lack of any authentic document with the exception of Chateaubriand's own not very trustworthy recital. Recently, however, Chateaubriand's letter of introduction to the President has been discovered. Since it was written by a man whom Washington

respected - Colonel Armand - it is likely he agreed to receive the poet. Yet the meeting could hardly have lasted more than a few minutes; for Washington, at that time, was overburdened with all sorts of petitioners.

The French visitor brought to play all his trained and sparkling eloquence in the effort to interest Washington in his project of "discovering the northwest passage"; but the President remained aloof. The poet tried to convince him: "It certainly is less difficult, Your Excellency, to discover the northwest passage than to create a nation!" - whereupon the great American replied: "Well, well young man.." And these four words were George Washington's total response to the passionate project of his visitor.

This was discouraging, even humiliating, considering Chateaubriand's proud sensibility. In order to compensate himself for so embarrassing a rebuff, he later invented a dinner invitation from the President. He recalled, in his memoirs, somewhat dreamily and vaguely to be sure, this charming meal ostensibly attended by Washington and "five other guests" - whose names were apparently too insignificant to be mentioned. Conversation during the meal dealt with the current events of the French Revolution, according to the report we find in "Voyage en Amérique." A certain

sense of shame, however, prevented the imaginative author from giving the details of his conversation with the American statesman. He refrains from quoting any remarks by his famous host, offering instead some rather general and blurred observations on Washington's personality - which he found "not surprising." This follows a lengthy comparison between George Washington and Napoleon, beginning with the statement that Washington does not belong to the "family of Ceasar and Alexander", who surpassed human size, as did Napoleon also. Washington, he tells us, he was not possessed by that demoniacal restlessness that haunted Bonaparte, driving him from Memphis to Vienna, from Cadiz to Moscow. Every feature, every episode of Napoleon's biography is spectacular, obvious, and tragic - while the actions and the personality of George Washington are shrouded in silence. There was no foolhardy adventurer but a man slow to act, always conscious of his great historical task, considering himself always as "the mandatary of the liberty of the future." -

By constructing psychological or historical parallels, Chateaubriand tried to divert his reader's attention - and perhaps his own mind - from the dreary fact that his visit to the President was simply a failure. He had therefore to renounce, at least for the time being, his confused and pretentious plan of discovery.

He found some comfort, however, in dreaming of another expedition to America. This first trip, he kept assuring himself, was only an insignificant prelude, compared with that second one which would be better prepared and would certainly be far more successful. The next time, he would stay in this country for about nine years; he would visit Canada, and California, and the sources of the Mississippi!....

He left Philadelphia, after a rather boring and empty stay of two weeks, and continued his journey, still seeking unheard of and incredible beauties, and jungles where mysterious dangers lay in wait ... For a few weeks longer we are able to follow his wanderings. We see him on his way to New York - which had no interest for him at all - ; from New York to Boston, where he inspected the battle fields of American liberty- : "J'ai vu les champs de Lexington!" , he exclaimed, and rushed back to New York, and then enjoyed a tour on the Hudson River - " rivière majestueuse!" - which tour was embellished by the delightful presence of a pretty Quaker girl from Philadelphia. She sang a heart-moving ballad on the death of General André, and the poet soon forgot ~~his~~ bitter feelings about those disingenuous friends in the Philadelphia store. A few days later, we find him in Albany, where he hired a Dutch guide and bought two horses; for now the real excursion into

the wilderness, the actual adventure was supposed to begin. "No more cities, no more narrow houses, no more Presidents, Republics, Kings; above all, no more men ..."

Strangely enough, however, the first human being he met in the wild forests was a Frenchman by the name of Violet - a former cook of General Rochambeau. It is like a scene in a classic French comedy, this extraordinary rendez-vous in the jungle between the wandering poet, fantastically disguised as an Indian, and his versatile compatriot, who had made a career as a dancing teacher of the Iroquois Indians. Monsieur Violet was very much respected by messieurs les sauvages and mesdames les sauvagesses, who regarded him as an expert in elegant manners and graceful steps. The poet, with his long beard, the flowing mane of his uncovered hair, and the bare neck, and the former cook, transformed into a maitre de plaisir of the savages, acted, in the thick of the woods, like two gentlemen meeting in a Parisian salon. Monsieur Violet wrote letters of introduction for Monsieur de Chateaubriand, recommending him to his friends, the Onondagas Indians - last remnant of six Iroquois tribes. Monsieur de Chateaubriand consequently, was politely received by the Indian chiefs, in their camp on the Onondagas Lake.

We can watch our amazing traveller in his thea-

trical masquerade - he had bought from the natives a complete and authentic costume -, on his way from Albany to Niagara Falls; conversing with Indian chiefs who understood a little French or English; courting sweet Indian girls who smilingly sang and danced for him. One of them, by the name of Mila, was especially attractive, and something like a little romance developed there in the forests - although certainly a purely platonic one ...He inspected the Genesee settlement, and was fascinated by the odd mixture of civilized and primitive life, and he made an excursion to interview a Frenchman named Philippe Le Cocq, who lived with the savages, had married an Indian woman, and had completely adapted his ways of life to the habits and rituals of the natives. Chateaubriand spent two days in his hut, and asked him, before he left: " Are you happy, Philippe?" Whereupon his estranged compatriot replied, after a long and thoughtful pause - vaguely and at the same time emphatically - : "Heureux? - - Oui...oui...: Heureux depuis je suis sauvage..."

This eventful tour from Albany to Niagara is the last episode of Chateaubriand's American journey described by himself in a satisfactory, trustworthy manner. With the very moment of his reaching the Falls his figure becomes more and more indistinct, as if the roaring water had veiled his features and gestures. He mysteriously disappears among the

fantastic scenery; for we should remember that the grand spectacle of Niagara, at that time, really still was fantastic, and not yet made common by advertisements, highways, railway tracks, hot-dog stands and monstrous souvenirs.

He faded away - or rather he transformed himself into a shadow, a vexatious will-o'-the-wisp hiding behind his amazing lies, the sublime absurdity of his inventions, like an acient God behind clouds. Scholars and biographers are still busy trying to reconstruct the blurred traces of his wanderings. The invisible traveller, however, constantly, deliberately, misleads them with his endless contradictions and boasts and distortions, his confusing or wiping out of the facts.

Where did he go from Niagara Falls? How much time did he have at his disposal, from his arrival at the Falls till his departure from America? About one hundred days - the scholars and biographers state, after a thorough examination of all the minutiae involved. Where and how did he spend those much-discussed hundred days - which are almost as important for French literature, it would seem, as the hundred days following Napoleon's flight from Elba for the history of France. What did he actually see? Did he see the Mississippi?

There are permanent doubts as to whether his corporeal eyes ever looked at the Meschacebé -The

beloved stream whose praises he later sang so enchantingly. He claimed, in some of his writings, to have made an extended trip, following the course of the Ohio River and the Upper Mississippi. He visited the Natchez - according to this not very convincing report -, and returned to civilized regions, by way of Nashville and Knoxville. All this sounds rather unlikely. For a single, unarmed European would have had but slight chance of surviving so daring an expedition, in those troubled days of the autumn of 1791, when many Indian tribes were in open revolt. There are striking contradictions, not only within the varied writings of Chateaubriand, but also between his accounts and the more reliable reports of contemporary travellers. In other cases he obviously appropriated for his own use the material of authors who had actually seen and described those regions. An expert in matters concerning Chateaubriand - the distinguished French scholar Gilbert Chinard - has discovered that the Vicomte quoted lavishly, within his own text, entire paragraphs, even pages, of Gilbert Imlay's Topographical Description of the Western Territories of North America (London, 1792). As a result of this plagiarism, Chateaubriand actually offered a picture of the Ohio as it had been in 1780 - when Imlay made his studies and observations-, instead of as it really was in 1791. We find, for

instance, detailed remarks on the ruins of Scioto, but no reference to a French colony which had been established more recently near the ruins. Nor did Chateaubriand mention the city of Marietta, founded in 1787, in honor of Queen Marie Antoinette. He certainly did not quote Imlay, however, nor any other serious scientist but was inspired by his own imagination, when he noted that there was an "admirable contrast" between vegetation, climate, and scenery of the two Mississippi banks ... Like a magician who fills the empty stage with innumerable white pigeons or colored eggs, all produced from the narrow pockets of his tuxedo - Chateaubriand, very generously, furnished the waves and banks of the Mississippi with an astounding multitude of fantastic flowers, crocodiles, parrots, and all sorts of enchanting or monstrous creatures.

Perhaps he did not travel at all, after his fatiguing trip from Albany to Niagara, but preferred to spend those mysterious hundred days with some Indian belle, in the forests, or simply at a modest inn, in Boston, Philadelphia, or New York. There can be no doubt that he did see the Mississippi River; but it may have been that he saw it only in his dreams and visions. To consider Chateaubriand a liar because he exaggerated and falsified his American experiences, would be to make a superficial, although probably accurate judgment/

What is truth - what invention in a poet's work?
Who would dare to define the delicate boundary between
artistic creation and vulgar lie? A great artist
once said that every work of art is " a more or less
convincing lie." As for Chateaubriand, he was thoroughly
and firmly convinced that his own interpretation of
things was more significant, more authentic, indeed,
more actual than any ordinary reality.

For those biographers, however, who stubbornly
insist on finding out the objective, prosaic, historical
truth, he re-appears as a man of actual flesh and
blood, shortly before his departure for Europe, on
December 10, 1791. He had read in an English paper
the shocking news of the flight of Louis XVI. An
emigrant army was organized at Coblenz, under the flag
of the French princes - and the young poet considered
it his duty, according to his own report, to join the
voluntary legion of noblemen. It might be, however,
that this explanation of his somewhat sudden departure
again does not quite correspond to the historical
facts. Certain symptoms indicate that the restless
traveller had already begun to be bored with those
much-praised " solitudes of America". Francois Auguste
felt it was more amusing to appear in Europe as the
man who had seen America - if only for five months -
than to extend his actual stay.

The fantastic ideas and illusions on the New World he had cherished before the journey, were still alive in his mind when he left - half sobered half inspired by the things he had seen. The disorder within his head was as chaotic as the lamentable state of the notes he had written down. Nothing had taken shape; everything was in an effervescent process of preparation and transformation. He had not yet decided whether he wanted to describe his real impressions of America, or his poetical dreams. What finally happened was that his memories of certain actual scenes became interwoven with the made-up stories, and supposedly objective reports with images and melodies from the dream world. In his Essai sur les Révolutions, in Voyage en Amérique, and in the autobiography with the mysterious title Mémoires d'Outre Tombe, he speaks with the pretension of a man whose statements deserve credence and serious consideration. In The Natchez - describing in grand epic style the rebellion of the Louisiana Indians "after centuries of suppression", - he claims the dignity and reliability of a great historian; in Génie du Christianisme he presents himself as the moralist and philosopher - while only in the two short Indian novels, Atala and René, does he admit to being what he actually was, in every line he ever wrote: a poet.

His American experiences - in spite of the shortness of his stay and the superficial character of his observations - represent, in a way, the spiritual center and backbone of his entire literary production. It is very curious to notice with how much economic sense this author used, again and again, the same material - notwithstanding the seemingly inexhaustible stream of his rhapsodic eloquence. His American souvenirs appear, and re-appear, in almost all of his books - which are, in a very strange manner, connected and intermingled with each other, forming in their entirety an inspired though not very reliable self-portrait. Atala, the story of the lovely Indian girl - "l'épopée d l'homme de la nature," as he called it himself, with a very Rousseau-like formula - was originally included in The Natchez, and later became a part of Génie du Christianisme, Chateaubriand's great religious and philosophical confession. René - the maudlin recital of a young Frenchman who, in the year 1725, arrived in Louisiana, "haunted by passions and misfortune", - is intimately connected with Atala and appeared in The Natchez before he became the problematical hero of the little book that bears his name. Essential elements of these exotic stories, however, are used in the varied essays as well as in the celebrated autobiography, Mémoires d'Outre Tombe. The early

contact with the American soil, the meeting with the savages was one of the decisive stimulations of Chateaubriand's intellectual development; the memories of this journey continued to dominate, in ever changing forms, all of his writings as a sentimental and artistic leitmotiv.

Most of his stories dealing with his " escapade into the wilderness", were written many years after his return from America; some of them even decades later. One of the most interesting chapters of Voyage en Amérique - a sort of conclusion or epilogue, entitled États Unis- is dated from the year 1825. Here Chateaubriand praises, and laments, the astounding progress made by the United States in so many respects, since his visit. " I would hardly recognize the country should I go there today", he says, before analyzing the impressive development of American civilization. The highways! - the post offices! - the steady increase in population - ; merely three millions and twenty nine thousand in 1790; more than seven millions in 1810 - and, in 1820, almost ten millions of inhabitants: the poet enumerates these figures with a kind of wistful enthusiasm. For, on the one hand, he regrets the wilderness, those beloved " solitudes" of the forests which are gradually vanishing, thrust back by the rapid advance of modern life - yet at the same time he betrays

a real pride in the imposing career which America - his America! - had made. "We have to imagine cities such as Boston, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Orleans, illuminated at night, full of horses and cars, offering all the joys of refined luxury ..."

In this un-lyrical chapter, Chateaubriand, the homme du monde, the politician expresses his point of view. He is intelligently concerned with realistic political problems rather than with sentimental or ecstatic moods. One of the topics interesting and disturbing him, is the recent establishment of the Latin- American Republics, neighboring the United States. Mexico, Chile, Columbia, and Peru might eventually turn out, in his opinion, to be an alarming danger to the U.S.A. Economic rivalry - he feels - sooner or later could lead to armed conflict. Yet his final conclusion is optimistic. For, "whatever the future may prepare, the spirit of Liberty will never disappear completely from America."

In other parts of Voyage en Amérique, Chateaubriand expresses himself as naturalist and explorer. The scientific validity of his Histoire Naturelle, however, is even more dubious than the accuracy of his political prophecies. His remarks on various animals he had supposedly seen in America, are of the most amazing naivety. We learn, for instance, that there are

three different sorts of bears in the United States - brown, black, and white bears - and the paragraphs dealing with deer, foxes, birds, rats, wolves, etc. are not much more instructive. As for the fish, our explorer restricts himself to this statement: " The fish in the lakes of Canada, and especially in the lakes of Florida, are of an admirable beauty." He also informs us that America is " the homeland of snakes - la patrie des serpents."

But it was neither Chateaubriand the naturalist nor the political prophet, whose writings fascinated and influenced French readers. It was rather the rhetorical romanticist who became famous; the visionary, the inspired rhapsodist. He was the one who poured out words - incessantly, irresistibly; enthusiastic words, tender, ecstatic, violent, lyrical words; a cataclysm of words, fireworks, cascades, streams of words. Generations were spellbound by the elegance and melancholia, the persuasive eloquence, the seductive melody of his poetical prose. Even now, when Chateaubriand's literary manner is apt to seem ~~fast~~ ^{lush}, and even spurious, we cannot but recognize the striking images, the captivating rhythm and verve of his style.

His contemporaries, the German romanticists, undeniably had a more profound message and delivered it with more honesty. But they had much in common- the

ecstatic grandseigneur from St. Malo and those ingenious dreamers in the provincial cities of Germany. Above all they shared that boundless melancholia which the Germans designate by the beautiful word Weltschmerz - two syllables loaded with all the sorrow of the world. It was this hopeless, bottomless melancholia which made René appear "savage among the savages." And Chateaubriand, transported by his own poetical despair, exclaimed: "Tu n'existe que par le malheur, tu n'es quelque chose que par la tristesse de ton âme et l'éternelle mélancolie de ta pensée..."

The German romanticists, seeking a remedy for their Weltschmerz, escaped into the twilight of the Dark Ages, into the magnificence and horror of Gothic frenzy and wisdom. The exotic scenery of the Mississippi mean to Chateaubriand exactly what the picturesque background of ancient castles, prisons, and cathedrals meant to his Germanic colleagues. While they populated their dungeons and palaces with valiant knights, noble ladies and wicked intriguers, Chateaubriand filled his fantastic wilderness with noble Indians, exchanging poetical phrases with errant young Frenchmen from good families. The Blue Flower, magic symbol of the German romantic school, transformed itself, in the French poet's imagination, into an exuberant, colorful tropic plant.

The notion of the noble Indian was one of the aesthetic and moral obsessions of that period. Chateaubriand, following the literary pattern of his time, simply deepened and intensified this conception which had originally stimulated and inspired his own impressionable mind. He presented in his stories a cast of romantic figures very much in line with the general taste and mood - : The dignified Indian Chief, Chactas - which means Harmonious Voice-, solemnly burdened with high age and sublime wisdom; Atala, the dark beauty, " full of passion and power; one was obliged to hate her or to adore her ..." ; the religious hermits preaching the Kingdom of God to the savages - until Atala ecstatically cries out: " Heaven sent you to save my soul, Holy man! I am Christian!" There are tears, and hymns, and prayers, and the sensual melody of the flute, and the majestic voices of forest, river , prairie. The blissful idyll, however, is occasionally disturbed by bloody struggles, heathen ceremonies, or gay hunting. And above this enchanted landscape there hovers, like a lucid cloud, the delicate spirit of the poet who has created and animated this world.

When Chateaubriand wrote Atala he was an unhappy man in exile, and he felt those noble, faraway Indians to be his tragic brothers-in-suffering. It was half in

pity for himself that he poured out his heart-breaking sympathy for those down-trodden, aristocratic savages.

"Unfortunate Indians! whom I have seen wandering in the deserts of the New World, with the ashes of their ancestors! you, who have afforded me hospitality, notwithstanding your wretchedness! I cannot recompense you at the present time; for I am wandering as well as you, at the mercy of men; and less happy in my exile, I have not brought with me the bones of my fathers."

The youth of twenty-three who left the United States, in December 1791, had little foreboding of what destiny was preparing for him - at home, in Europe, on the other side of the Atlantic. He went back, with all his pride and genius, his sadness and his ambition. One episode of his eventful life was finished -: perhaps the most significant one. New adventures and disappointments, new triumphs and disasters were already awaiting him. The period of exile, friendless, penniless, in London was still to come; the service as an officer in the French emigrant army; the return to the homeland; the diplomatic career under various rulers; the literary fame, the love affairs, the social and political intrigues, the voyages, the scandals, misery and glamour. Awaiting him was the solace of religion, le Génie du Christianisme he was to discover and praise, outgrowing the rebellious scepticism of his youthful days, overcoming Rousseau's philosophy too as one recovers from a dangerous disease. But he

was never to find peace. Growing old ~~Madame~~ was for him a time not of peace but rather of new bitterness, new grief, decline. Awaiting him was the last hour, on July 4, 1848, and a woman watching his agony: Madame Récamier, the devoted friend. France was writhing, once more, in the convulsion of revolution. Another King was being done away with: Louis Philippe, the bourgeois, with his funny umbrella. François Auguste Vicomte de Chateaubriand who had witnessed and survived the coming and going of so many a ruler, watched with ironic detachment this last catastrophe. The new Republic they had proclaimed with so much confidence and well-meaning jubilation - would it guarantee lasting peace? Ah, certainly not the Peace he was longing for ...

There was a whisper, sweet and dreadful - very near; very far away... Was this the message of Peace, finally comforting and calming a restless, pretentious heart? Was it Madame de Récamier, murmuring last prayers for the sinful soul of her departing friend? Or was it the melody of the ocean he had known and loved as a boy at St. Malo? Perhaps it was Chactas, the Harmonious Voice; or Atala's childish, seductive song - the eternal song of the River that he had invoked when he still was young and ambitious and eager for enormous deeds:

"Puisse mon récit avoir coulé comme tes flots, o
Meschacebé!"

Poet of the Mississippi.

(Chateaubriand.)

"I want to go to America! I will discover tremendous things ..."

"What will you discover? Christopher Columbus has done a good job ..."

"There are still unknown regions, I am told. I must find them. The north-west passage ..."

"What north-west passage? And why?"

"Besides I want to study the wilderness, the savages..."

"What good will that do you? Are you a naturalist? An anthropologist?"

"I am a poet. I will write the great epic of Man and Nature." -

Who was this ambitious, persistent youth who rushed through Paris, visiting influential people, bothering, amusing, vexing, delighting them? He asked for favors, he promised miracles. He needed money, letters of introduction, all kinds of advice. People received him, listened to him, and thought him very brilliant, although slightly confused. Perhaps he was a genius. Certainly, he seemed complex and puzzling. He was intense and melancholy, talkative, pretentious,

even arrogant, and charming, sometimes languid, sometimes reckless and energetic, sometimes desperate, and always very eager to make an impression, to startle and to surprise. He craved fame as a thirsty man craves water. "I am burdened with a super-abundance of life," he said of himself, yet he seemed at the same time to be fed up with life, and willing to jeopardize it for the sake of glory. He was very young, only twenty-two years old. His imposing name was Francois Auguste Vicomte de Chateaubriand.

He never forgot for a minute that he was descended from one of the most distinguished families of France. Two of his ancestors had been allied with the royal house of England, another had married into the ruling house of Spain. But all this splendor was now a matter of history. On the death of his father young Francois Auguste found himself on the brink of poverty, possessing nothing but his glowing imagination, his boundless vanity, and an unshakeable determination to make an amazing career.

He insisted, with stubborn enthusiasm: "I must go to America."

The noble ladies of the Faubourg St. Germain asked him: "Are you not afraid of the sea, cher ami?"

He seemed offended. "On the contrary, chère Madame. I was born at St. Malo, in Brittany - which is a sea-

port, as you may remember. My ancestors were familiar with all the wild whims of the ocean - and so am I. I adore its tremendous breath - le grand souffle de l'Océan ..."

The aristocratic ladies, however, were not so easily convinced. "They have dreadful savages over there, if we are not mistaken..."

The young adventurer, it seemed, was even more addicted to savages than to the open sea. "They are innocent, strong and good. Their unspoiled hearts answer to any noble, generous appeal. The vileness, the wickedness of human beings are a result of civilization, and of that alone. Man is fundamentally good. Oh, retour à la nature..."

The ladies nodded, thoughtful and delighted. For this persuasive tune was familiar to all of them: it was the seductive melody of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. People like to hear the same slogans again and again. The well-known maxim sounds trustworthy and calming - even when its real import happens actually to be dangerous and even revolutionizing.

The young poet continued his alluring argument. He wanted to visit the Mississippi, the true name of which, by the way, was Meschacebe. Its waters, its enchanting banks were calling him. It was a Memeric landscape that he was going to find there, the perfect beauty of the Garden of Eden. Had they not seen, and

admired, the engravings of Father Lafitau? There was a great artist and scholar, and a holy man. His idea of discovering the common origin of all human races: was it not enthralling? In the New World he had studied the Universal Religion which all the peoples of the earth once held in common - truly a noble and stimulating conception! - and had found significant traces among the savages of that lost religious community. In his pictures of the games and rituals and struggles of the American Indians, the savages were portrayed as having the charm and dignity of Greek statues, and the poet could not rest until he had seen for himself whether Father Lafitau was right. Were these uncivilized beings really as wonderful as he had described?

The ladies were mildly interested in Father Lafitau's theories of the Universal Religion. Their understanding increased, however, when their youthful visitor declared that he was sick and tired of civilization. The ladies agreed: things looked pretty bad. How far was the excited mob able and willing to go? And what might happen to His Majesty? Apocalyptic moods prevailed in aristocratic salons, in the Paris of 1791. Nobody was quite able to understand the frightening and gigantic events; but everyone had sinister forebodings. Civilization seemed to be on the point of falling back into chaos. This was a cataclysm sweeping away the very

foundation of morals, culture, religion. It was an earthquake. Everything seemed to be cracking and tottering: a social order - their social order - was bursting asunder.

The ladies of the Faubourg St. Germain admitted that the savages could hardly be more blood-thirsty, dangerous, and grasping than the Parisian revolutionaries. Why should a young fellow from a nice family not try his luck over-seas, since such abominable things were going on at home?

Other friends of Chateaubriand felt, on the contrary, that the place of any nobleman was in France - now, when the fury of incited masses was threatening all sacred traditions - and the privileges of the ruling class. The traditions as well as the privileges had to be defended. A young man like Francois Auguste should stay at home and fight, instead of planning a fantastic expedition.

The young Vicomte, however, became strangely evasive whenever those fellow noblemen questioned him about his attitude towards the present struggle. For there was a flaw, a sentimental confusion in his vivid mind. On the one hand, he was, intellectually, a child and product of his own period, educated and somewhat vaguely inspired by the doctrines of the philosophy of Enlightenment, by the revolutionary

pathos of Freedom, and, above all, by the delicate and at the same time iconoclastic spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. On the other hand, he had in common with his social class the natural aversion to disorder and chaos. Moreover, his aesthetic sense was appalled by certain ghastly and cruel scenes he had had to witness, and which any violent change of society inevitably brings forth. He was divided against himself, and he chose the most convenient and, in his own opinion, the most noble solution. "I have nothing to do with either camp", he exclaimed with arrogant resignation. "My real life is in higher regions... for me, the forests..."

Finally everything was prepared, he had bidden a sentimental farewell to his mother and the ancient family house at Cambourg, Brittany, and was ready to join a French expedition sailing from St. Malo to Baltimore. The St. Pierre was a slow and tiny boat of only one hundred and sixty tons, the sea was rough, and a group of seminarists hardly meant a very stimulating company. Moreover, the fresh water on board became scanty, and on May 6th., the St. Pierre had to interrupt her trip and anchor off the Azores. The enthusiastic young traveller, however, hardly noticed the inconveniences. His breast was filled with enchanting hopes, wonderful expectations, and his fanciful mind was excited by grand though nebulous meditations...

The New World! The concept was all-embracing, poignant with future and mystery. It promised not only the healing power of solitude, the beauty of savage life, but also the ideal fulfillment of the finest European traditions. For Chateaubriand expected an America which would be half a paradisiac wilderness, half the perfect Republic, populated by Roman heroes and virtuous Quakers - offering all the inspiring qualities and reasonable achievements of revolution, without its disagreeable, prosaic, and brutal counterparts.

When the St. Pierre finally reached Baltimore, early in July, 1791, the fanciful passenger was positively overwhelmed by his feelings and expectations. There it was, at last! - the fabulous continent unknown to the world of antiquity, and ignored even during many centuries of modern life.

He set foot on American soil - and the first being to welcome him in the land of the free, was a young slave, a fifteen year old Negro girl, belle comme la nuit, miserable and lovely.

The disappointment was inevitable since he had expected too much. But he was hardly disposed to admit it - even to himself. Only during the first weeks of his stay in America he occasionally confided to his diary that the New World was not quite what he had hoped. Where was the paradisiac wilderness? He

failed to notice it when he travelled to Philadelphia, by stage-coach, after having spent one day in Baltimore. The country, he felt with a certain apprehension, was neither fantastic nor picturesque but rather barren and flat - " with very few birds, few trees, some single houses, no villages at all." And Philadelphia was not much better. He found it " cold and monotonous" - : "No monuments!" he lamented. "Above all - no ancient monuments!" Even the Quakers, " those virtuous descendants of Guillaume Penn", fell somewhat short of the ideal notion of them he had cherished. Indeed he even observed two unworthy Friends trying to cheat each other in a Philadelphia shop -: a scene he later described with abhorrence.

How did he spend his fortnight in Philadelphia? His diary fails to give any clear information. It is not even known whether he visited the artistic and scientific collections the city had to offer. One fact, at least, seems to be beyond any doubt: that he was once received by George Washington. Sceptical biographers used to question even this event, considering the complete lack of any authentic document with the exception of Chateaubriand's own not very trustworthy recital. Recently, however, Chateaubriand's letter of introduction to the President has been discovered. Since it was written by a man whom Washington

respected - Colonel Armand - it is likely he agreed to receive the poet. Yet the meeting could hardly have lasted more than a few minutes; for Washington, at that time, was overburdened with all sorts of petitioners.

The French visitor brought to play all his trained and sparkling eloquence in the effort to interest Washington in his project of "discovering the northwest passage"; but the President remained aloof. The poet tried to convince him: "It certainly is less difficult, Your Excellency, to discover the northwest passage than to create a nation!" - whereupon the great American replied: "Well, well young man.." And these four words were George Washington's total response to the passionate project of his visitor.

This was discouraging, even humiliating, considering Chateaubriand's proud sensibility. In order to compensate himself for so embarrassing a rebuff, he later invented a dinner invitation from the President. He recalled, in his memoirs, somewhat dreamily and vaguely to be sure, this charming meal ostensibly attended by Washington and "five other guests" - whose names were apparently too insignificant to be mentioned. Conversation during the meal dealt with the current events of the French Revolution, according to the report we find in "Voyage en Amérique." A certain

sense of shame, however, prevented the imaginative author from giving the details of his conversation with the American statesman. He refrains from quoting any remarks by his famous host, offering instead some rather general and blurred observations on Washington's personality - which he found "not surprising." This follows a lengthy comparison between George Washington and Napoleon, beginning with the statement that Washington does not belong to the "family of Ceasar and Alexander", who surpassed human size, as did Napoleon also. Washington, he tells us, he was not possessed by that demoniacal restlessness that haunted Bonaparte, driving him from Memphis to Vienna, from Cadiz to Moscow. Every feature, every episode of Napoleon's biography is spectacular, obvious, and tragic - while the actions and the personality of George Washington are shrouded in silence. There was no foolhardy adventurer but a man slow to act, always conscious of his great historical task, considering himself always as "the mandatary of the liberty of the future." -

By constructing psychological or historical parallels, Chateaubriand tried to divert his reader's attention - and perhaps his own mind - from the dreary fact that his visit to the President was simply a failure. He had therefore to renounce, at least for the time being, his confused and pretentious plan of discovery.

He found some comfort, however, in dreaming of another expedition to America. This first trip, he kept assuring himself, was only an insignificant prelude, compared with that second one which would be better prepared and would certainly be far more successful. The next time, he would stay in this country for about nine years; he would visit Canada, and California, and the sources of the Mississippi!.....

He left Philadelphia, after a rather boring and empty stay of two weeks, and continued his journey, still seeking unheard of and incredible beauties, and jungles where mysterious dangers lay in wait ... For a few weeks longer we are able to follow his wanderings. We see him on his way to New York - which had no interest for him at all - ; from New York to Boston, where he inspected the battle fields of American liberty- : "J'ai vu les champs de Lexington!" , he exclaimed, and rushed back to New York, and then enjoyed a tour on the Hudson River - " rivière majestueuse!" - which tour was embellished by the delightful presence of a pretty Quaker girl from Philadelphia. She sang a heart-moving ballad on the death of General André, and the poet soon forgot his bitter feelings about those disingenuous friends in the Philadelphia store. A few days later, we find him in Albany, where he hired a Dutch guide and bought two horses; for now the real excursion into

the wilderness, the actual adventure was supposed to begin. "No more cities, no more narrow houses, no more Presidents, Republics, Kings; above all, no more men ..."

Strangely enough, however, the first human being he met in the wild forests was a Frenchman by the name of Violet - a former cook of General Rochambeau. It is like a scene in a classic French comedy, this extraordinary rendez-vous in the jungle between the wandering poet, fantastically disguised as an Indian, and his versatile compatriot, who had made a career as a dancing teacher of the Iroquois Indians. Monsieur Violet was very much respected by messieurs les sauvages and mesdames les sauvagesses, who regarded him as an expert in elegant manners and graceful steps. The poet, with his long beard, the flowing mane of his uncovered hair, and the bare neck, and the former cook, transformed into a maitre de plaisir¹ of the savages, acted, in the thick of the woods, like two gentlemen meeting in a Parisian salon. Monsieur Violet wrote letters of introduction for Monsieur de Chateaubriand, recommending him to his friends, the Onondagas Indians - last remnant of six Iroquois tribes. Monsieur de Chateaubriand consequently, was politely received by the Indian chiefs, in their camp on the Onondagas Lake.

We can watch our amazing traveller in his thea-

trical masquerade - he had bought from the natives a complete and authentic costume -, on his way from Albany to Niagara Falls; conversing with Indian chiefs who understood a little French or English; courting sweet Indian girls who smilingly sang and danced for him. One of them, by the name of Mila, was especially attractive, and something like a little romance developed there in the forests - although certainly a purely platonic one ...He inspected the Genesee settlement, and was fascinated by the odd mixture of civilized and primitive life, and he made an excursion to interview a Frenchman named Philippe Le Cocq, who lived with the savages, had married an Indian woman, and had completely adapted his ways of life to the habits and rituals of the natives. Chateaubriand spent two days in his hut, and asked him, before he left: "Are you happy, Philippe?" Whereupon his estranged compatriot replied, after a long and thoughtful pause - vaguely and at the same time emphatically - : "Heureux? - - Oui...oui....: Heureux depuis je suis sauvage..."

This eventful tour from Albany to Niagara is the last episode of Chateaubriand's American journey described by himself in a satisfactory, trustworthy manner. With the very moment of his reaching the Falls his figure becomes more and more indistinct, as if the roaring water had veiled his features and gestures. He mysteriously disappears among the

fantastic scenery; for we should remember that the grand spectacle of Niagara, at that time, really still was fantastic, and not yet made common by advertisements, highways, railway tracks, hot-dog stands and monstrous souvenirs.

He faded away - or rather he transformed himself into a shadow, a vexatious will-o'-the-wisp hiding behind his amazing lies, the sublime absurdity of his inventions, like an ^{old} ~~ancient~~ God behind clouds. Scholars and biographers are still busy trying to reconstruct the blurred traces of his wanderings. The invisible traveller, however, constantly, deliberately, misleads them with his endless contradictions and boasts and distortions, his confusing or wiping out of the facts.

Where did he go from Niagara Falls? How much time did he have at his disposal, from his arrival at the Falls till his departure from America? About one hundred days - the scholars and biographers state, after a thorough examination of all the minutiae involved. Where and how did he spend those much-discussed hundred days - which are almost as important for French literature, it would seem, as the hundred days following Napoleon's flight from Elba for the history of France. What did he actually see? Did he see the Mississippi?

There are permanent doubts as to whether his corporeal eyes ever looked at the Meschacebé -The

beloved stream whose praises he later sang so enchantingly. He claimed, in some of his writings, to have made an extended trip, following the course of the Ohio River and the Upper Mississippi. He visited the Natchez - according to this not very convincing report -, and returned to civilized regions, by way of Nashville and Knoxville. All this sounds rather unlikely. For a single, unarmed European would have had but slight chance of surviving so daring an expedition, in those troubled days of the autumn of 1791, when many Indian tribes were in open revolt. There are striking contradictions, not only within the varied writings of Chateaubriand, but also between his accounts and the more reliable reports of contemporary travellers. In other cases he obviously appropriated for his own use the material of authors who had actually seen and described those regions. An expert in matters concerning Chateaubriand - the distinguished French scholar Gilbert Chinard - has discovered that the Vicomte quoted lavishly, within his own text, entire paragraphs, even pages, of Gilbert Imlay's Topographical Description of the Western Territories of North America (London, 1792). As a result of this plagiarism, Chateaubriand actually offered a picture of the Ohio as it had been in 1780 - when Imlay made his studies and observations-, instead of as it really was in 1791. We find, for

instance, detailed remarks on the ruins of Scioto, but no reference to a French colony which had been established more recently near the ruins. Nor did Chateaubriand mention the city of Marietta, founded in 1787, in honor of Queen Marie Antoinette. He certainly did not quote Imlay, however, nor any other serious scientist but was inspired by his own imagination, when he noted that there was an "admirable contrast" between vegetation, climate, and scenery of the two Mississippi banks ... Like a magician who fills the empty stage with innumerable white pigeons or colored eggs, all produced from the narrow pockets of his tuxedo - Chateaubriand, very generously, furnished the waves and banks of the Mississippi with an astounding multitude of fantastic flowers, crocodiles, parrots, and all sorts of enchanting or monstrous creatures.

Perhaps he did not travel at all, after his fatiguing trip from Albany to Niagara, but preferred to spend those mysterious hundred days with some Indian belle, in the forests, or simply at a modest inn, in Boston, Philadelphia, or New York. There can be no doubt that he did see the Mississippi River; but it may have been that he saw it only in his dreams and visions. To consider Chateaubriand a liar because he exaggerated and falsified his American experiences, would be to make a superficial, although probably accurate judgment!

What is truth - what invention in a poet's work? Who would dare to define the delicate boundary between artistic creation and vulgar lie? A great artist once said that every work of art is "a more or less convincing lie." As for Chateaubriand, he was thoroughly and firmly convinced that his own interpretation of things was more significant, more authentic, indeed, more actual than any ordinary reality.

For those biographers, however, who stubbornly insist on finding out the objective, prosaic, historical truth, he re-appears as a man of actual flesh and blood, shortly before his departure for Europe, on December 10, 1791. He had read in an English paper the shocking news of the flight of Louis XVI. An emigrant army was organized at Coblenz, under the flag of the French princes - and the young poet considered it his duty, according to his own report, to join the voluntary legion of noblemen. It might be, however, that this explanation of his somewhat sudden departure again does not quite correspond to the historical facts. Certain symptoms indicate that the restless traveller had already begun to be bored with those much-praised "solitudes of America". Francois Auguste felt it was more amusing to appear in Europe as the man who had seen America - if only for five months - than to extend his actual stay.

The fantastic ideas and illusions on the New World he had cherished before the journey, were still alive in his mind when he left - half sobered half inspired by the things he had seen. The disorder within his head was as chaotic as the lamentable state of the notes he had written down. Nothing had taken shape; everything was in an effervescent process of preparation and transformation. He had not yet decided whether he wanted to describe his real impressions of America, or his poetical dreams. What finally happened was that his memories of certain actual scenes became interwoven with the made-up stories, and supposedly objective reports with images and melodies from the dream world. In his Essai sur les Révolutions, in Voyage en Amérique, and in the autobiography with the mysterious title Mémoires d'Outre Tombe, he speaks with the pretension of a man whose statements deserve credence and serious consideration. In The Natchez - describing in grand epic style the rebellion of the Louisiana Indians "after centuries of suppression", - he claims the dignity and reliability of a great historian; in Génie du Christianisme he presents himself as the moralist and philosopher - while only in the two short Indian novels, Atala and René, does he admit to being what he actually was, in every line he ever wrote: a poet.

His American experiences - in spite of the shortness of his stay and the superficial character of his observations - represent, in a way, the spiritual center and backbone of his entire literary production. It is very curious to notice with how much economic sense this author used, again and again, the same material - notwithstanding the seemingly inexhaustible stream of his rhapsodic eloquence. His American souvenirs appear, and re-appear, in almost all of his books - which are, in a very strange manner, connected and intermingled with each other, forming in their entirety an inspired though not very reliable self-portrait. Atala, the story of the lovely Indian girl - "l'épopée d l'homme de la nature," as he called it himself, with a very Rousseau-like formula - was originally included in The Natchez, and later became a part of Génie du Christianisme, Chateaubriand's great religious and philosophical confession. René - the maudlin recital of a young Frenchman who, in the year 1725, arrived in Louisiana, "haunted by passions and misfortune", - is intimately connected with Atala and appeared in The Natchez before he became the problematical hero of the little book that bears his name. Essential elements of these exotic stories, however, are used in the varied essays as well as in the celebrated autobiography, Mémoires d'Outre Tombe. The early

contact with the American soil, the meeting with the savages was one of the decisive stimulations of Chateaubriand's intellectual development; the memories of this journey continued to dominate, in ever changing forms, all of his writings as a sentimental and artistic leitmotiv.

Most of his stories dealing with his " escapade into the wilderness", were written many years after his return from America; some of them even decades later. One of the most interesting chapters of Voyage en Amérique - a sort of conclusion or epilogue, entitled Etats-Unis- is dated from the year 1825. Here Chateaubriand praises, and laments, the astounding progress made by the United States in so many respects, since his visit. " I would hardly recognize the country should I go there today", he says, before analyzing the impressive development of American civilization. The highways! - the post offices! - the steady increase in population - ; merely three millions and twenty nine thousand in 1790; more than seven millions in 1810 - and, in 1820, almost ten millions of inhabitants the poet enumerates these figures with a kind of wistful enthusiasm. For, on the one hand, he regrets the wilderness, those beloved " solitudes" of the forests which are gradually vanishing, thrust back by the rapid advance of modern life - yet at the same time he betrays

a real pride in the imposing career which America - his America! - had made. "We have to imagine cities such as Boston, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Orleans, illuminated at night, full of horses and cars, offering all the joys of refined luxury ..."

In this un-lyrical chapter, Chateaubriand, the homme du monde, the politician expresses his point of view. He is intelligently concerned with realistic political problems rather than with sentimental or ecstatic moods. One of the topics interesting and disturbing him, is the recent establishment of the Latin- American Republics, neighboring the United States. Mexico, Chile, Columbia, and Peru might eventually turn out, in his opinion, to be an alarming danger to the U.S.A. Economic rivalry - he feels - sooner or later could lead to armed conflict. Yet his final conclusion is optimistic. For, "whatever the future may prepare, the spirit of Liberty will never disappear completely from America."

In other parts of Voyage en Amérique, Chateaubriand expresses himself as naturalist and explorer. The scientific validity of his Histoire Naturelle, however, is even more dubious than the accuracy of his political prophecies. His remarks on various animals he had supposedly seen in America, are of the most amazing naivety. We learn, for instance, that there are

three different sorts of bears in the United States - brown, black, and white bears - and the paragraphs dealing with deer, foxes, birds, rats, wolves, etc. are not much more instructive. As for the fish, our explorer restricts himself to this statement: "The fish in the lakes of Canada, and especially in the lakes of Florida, are of an admirable beauty." He also informs us that America is "the homeland of snakes" - la patrie des serpents.

But it was neither Chateaubriand the naturalist nor the political prophet, whose writings fascinated and influenced French readers. It was rather the rhetorical romanticist who became famous; the visionary, the inspired rhapsodist. He was the one who poured out words - incessantly, irresistibly; enthusiastic words, tender, ecstatic, violent, lyrical words; a cataclysm of words, fireworks, cascades, streams of words. Generations were spellbound by the elegance and melancholia, the persuasive eloquence, the seductive melody of his poetical prose. Even now, when Chateaubriand's literary manner is apt to seem ^{lush} ~~just~~, and even spurious, we cannot but recognize the striking images, the captivating rhythm and verve of his style.

His contemporaries, the German romanticists, undeniably had a more profound message and delivered it with more honesty. But they had much in common - the

ecstatic grandseigneur from St. Malo and those ingenious dreamers in the provincial cities of Germany. Above all they shared that boundless melancholia which the Germans designate by the beautiful word Weltschmerz - two syllables loaded with all the sorrow of the world. It was this hopeless, bottomless melancholia which made René appear "savage among the savages." And Chateaubriand, transported by his own poetical despair, exclaimed: "Tu n'existe que par le malheur, tu n'es quelque chose que par la tristesse de ton âme et l'éternelle mélancolie de ta pensée..."

The German romanticists, seeking a remedy for their Weltschmerz, escaped into the twilight of the Dark Ages, into the magnificence and horror of Gothic frenzy and wisdom. The exotic scenery of the Mississippi mean to Chateaubriand exactly what the picturesque background of ancient castles, prisons, and cathedrals meant to his Germanic colleagues. While they populated their dungeons and palaces with valiant knights, noble ladies and wicked intriguers, Chateaubriand filled his fantastic wilderness with noble Indians, exchanging poetical phrases with errant young Frenchmen from good families. The Blue Flower, magic symbol of the German romantic school, transformed itself, in the French poet's imagination, into an exuberant, colorful tropic plant.

The notion of the noble Indian was one of the aesthetic and moral obsessions of that period. Chateaubriand, following the literary pattern of his time, simply deepened and intensified this conception which had originally stimulated and inspired his own impressionable mind. He presented in his stories a cast of romantic figures very much in line with the general taste and mood - : The dignified Indian Chief, Chactas - which means Harmonious Voice-, solemnly burdened with high age and sublime wisdom; Atala, the dark beauty, " full of passion and power; one was obliged to hate her or to adore her ..." ; the religious hermits preaching the Kingdom of God to the savages - until Atala ecstatically cries out: " Heaven sent you to save my soul, Holy man! I am Christian!" There are tears, and hymns, and prayers, and the sensual melody of the flute, and the majestic voices of forest, river , prairie. The blissful idyll, however, is occasionally disturbed by bloody struggles, heathen ceremonies, or gay hunting. And above this enchanted landscape there hovers, like a lucid cloud, the delicate spirit of the poet who has created and animated this world.

When Chateaubriand wrote Atala, he was an unhappy man in exile, and he felt those noble, faraway Indians to be his tragic brothers-in-suffering. It was half in

pity for himself that he poured out his heart-breaking sympathy for those down-trodden, aristocratic savages.

"Unfortunate Indians! whom I have seen wandering in the deserts of the New World, with the ashes of their ancestors! you, who have afforded me hospitality, notwithstanding your wretchedness! I cannot recompense you at the present time; for I am wandering as well as you, at the mercy of men; and less happy in my exile, I have not brought with me the bones of my fathers."

The youth of twenty-three who left the United States, in December 1791, had little foreboding of what destiny was preparing for him - at home, in Europe, on the other side of the Atlantic. He went back, with all his pride and genius, his sadness and his ambition. One episode of his eventful life was finished -: perhaps the most significant one. New adventures and disappointments, new triumphs and disasters were already awaiting him. The period of exile, friendless, penniless, in London was still to come; the service as an officer in the French emigrant army; the return to the homeland; the diplomatic career under various rulers; the literary fame, the love affairs, the social and political intrigues, the voyages, the scandals, misery and glamour. Awaiting him was the solace of religion, le Génie du Christianisme he was to discover and praise, outgrowing the rebellious scepticism of his youthful days, overcoming Rousseau's philosophy too as one recovers from a dangerous disease. But he