Masters of Disaster:

Controlling Nature and Revolution in French and Francophone Plantation Novels

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(French)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2016

Date of final oral examination: 12/8/2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my committee. My director and mentor Dr. Aliko Songolo never stopped encouraging me to complete my work. His kind words, advice, and wonderful sense of humor saw me through to the end of this project. To Dr. Anne Vila, I owe many thanks for her constructive criticism on the organization of my research, a more precise articulation of my thoughts, essential source recommendations, and also her kind encouragement. Dr. Florence Vatan, Dr. Gilles Bousquet, and Dr. Sandra Adell have my great appreciation for the time they spent reading my project, their comments and suggestions, and their proposals for potential avenues of further research.

A special thanks to Dr. Ullrich Langer and my dissertation writing class peers whose questions and comments helped me rethink and clarify my work. A very special thanks to Dr. Tom Armbrecht who bravely read the first draft of my first chapter and who still found positive things to say about it.

I have the greatest affection and esteem for my friends in 650 Van Hise and to those outside of the university. Their support and snark saw me through the dark and isolating moments of the writing process.

A final thanks and deepest love and appreciation to my family for their endless support, encouragement, and love.

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ABSTRACT

Violent revolution and natural disasters define the colonies of nineteenth-century French plantation novels, striking transformations from the utopic societies of eighteenth-century works. Using the Lisbon earthquake and the French Revolution to explain this shift, this thematic study examines the intersection between natural disasters and sociopolitical turbulence in eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels set in France's colonies and Louisiana.

While the French and Haitian Revolutions contributed to the prevalence of social turbulence in nineteenth-century French plantation novels, the consistent presence of natural disasters accompanying this upheaval can be attributed to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. The catastrophe sparked philosophical and scientific debate illustrating the mutual influence between European civilization and natural disaster. This intertwining of nature and civilization led writers and political figures to describe the French Revolution as both a social and *natural* uncontrollable phenomenon that would clear the way for the establishment of a stable republic. The violence of the Terror eventually forced them to reconsider this notion and provoked a desire to re-establish order over society and nature alike.

An example of the eighteenth century's paradisiacal representation of the colonies, Bernardin de Saint Pierre's depiction of a utopic microsociety in *Paul et Virginie* (1788) encourages the passive acceptance of natural turbulence and unjust social orders. By contrast, nineteenth-century writers call for domination over the natural world as a means of challenging unjust social hierarchies and directing revolution. Despite their inclusion of slavery and revolution in their novels, they still impose metropolitan French ideals on their imaginary locations. The rebel slave prince of Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* (1826) navigates subterranean

spaces to undermine the plantation hierarchies in what is arguably a defense of Royalism. Alexandre Dumas' hero in *Georges* (1843) uses his metropolitan education to dominate dangerous natural spaces in a justification for French imperialism. By contrast, Franco-American planter Alfred Mercier suggests in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* (1881) that nature can never be fully controlled, but that it is still necessary to struggle for sociopolitical ideals. Despite the authors' varied approaches, their novels share common threads alluding to the dangers of rationalizing nature, from the notion of a "natural" revolution to the "scientific" justifications of racism and imperialism.

INTRODUCTION

The Nineteenth-Century French Plantation Novel in Historical Context

Nineteenth-century French novels set in France's colonies and former colonies are often fraught with natural and sociopolitical turbulence.[1] Isolated pockets of violent upheaval, the colonies face hurricanes and earthquakes that destroy colonial plantations while slave rebellions tear down social hierarchies and claim the lives of slaves and masters alike. At the same time, such representations nevertheless deplore the destruction wrought by war and natural disasters. These themes of natural destruction and revolution are hardly surprising ones, persisting in literary works set in the French metropole throughout the nineteenth century. The popularity of the Count de Volney's *Les Ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791) attests to France's rising curiosity in the fall of past civilizations as the French came to terms with the aftermath of the Revolution and the rise and fall of the Napoleonic Empire. Characters in French Romantic literature especially demonstrate a preoccupation with ruins as well as a desire to see their own turbulent emotional state reflected by their natural surroundings.

The way in which the themes of natural and social destruction are presented in novels set in the colonies deviates from their use in novels set in the metropole, largely because of the presence of plantation hierarchies, but also because of colonialism itself. Plantation societies were based on wealth, race, gender, and slavery; and social status was complicated by people who did not neatly correspond to these categories. Free people of color who were also wealthy planters and slaves who were also the children of the planters, for example, made simple classification difficult. Racial ambiguity, additional hierarchies between house and field slaves,

[1] See for example Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's *Sarah*, George Sand's *Indiana*, Charles Testut's *Le Vieux Salomon*, Alexandre Dumas' *Georges*, Alfred Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars.*

and the tensions between poor white people and wealthy planters, whether white or people of color, all attest to the complexity of determining social status in a plantation society. Furthermore, plantation societies and classes varied depending on their geographical location.[2] While nineteenth-century writers such as Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore explore the social conflicts that arose from these blurred class lines, they tend to limit this exploration to miscegenation alone, presenting it either as a social evil to be avoided or as a ridiculous mode of discrimination against those who could pass for white. Their simplified depictions of plantation society suggest a preoccupation with social inequalities in the metropole rather than with the reality of French colonial plantation life.

In the eighteenth century, plantation society is largely absent from the literary world's depictions of colonial utopia. Writers long denied the colonies an identity that was not determined relative to the French metropole. During the eighteenth century, the so-called Age of Enlightenment, the colonies were settings in which writers could explore philosophical questions that pertained to continental France. In Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1772) and Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* (1767), for example, dialogues between Europeans and noble savages point to the problems and contradictions in European beliefs and traditions.[3] In Marivaux's *L'Île*

[2] For a detailed description of all of the intricacies of plantation societies' social hierarchies, see Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus, *Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality.* Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1999. 3-15.

[3] The "noble savage" was born out of the exploration of the world during the Renaissance, when explorers came into contact with non-European civilizations that they deemed "primitive." The cultural differences they noted in these civilizations prompted an examination of European cultural traditions. See for example Montaigne's essay "Des Cannibales" (1580). The Age of the Enlightenment saw a renewed interest in the question of the inherent goodness of man, a notion that Jean-Jacques Rousseau explored in his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754). In the context of philosophical and literary works of the Age of the Enlightenment, this character can be defined as man who lives outside of European or Eurocentric civilization and who, as a consequence, has maintained an innocence that allows him to point out the follies of certain aspects of European civilization, usually regarding religious customs and beliefs, definitions of morality, and the preoccuption with material wealth.

des esclaves (1725), the island is where Greek slaves find refuge from their masters, contrary to the reality of plantation colonies from which enslaved Africans had little hope of gaining their freedom. Louisiana becomes a location of both exile and escape for Prévost's two lovers in *Manon Lescaut* (1731), and l'Ile de France is an isolated site in which two children can build a virtuous and happy *petite société* in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's pastoral novel *Paul et Virginie* (1788). Most of these writers had never set foot in any of the colonies about which they wrote, but even when they had, their experiences did not necessarily find their way into the writers' depictions. Although Bernardin had spent time in l'Ile de France and had expressed in his letters in *Voyage à l'Ile de France* that he could not bear the heat and drought of the island, his discomfort does not prevent him from presenting the island primarily as an exotic escape from the corruption of French society.[4]

Eighteenth-century depictions of life in France's colonies depended largely on the authors' imaginations; their hypothetical colonies were given multiple identities that shifted as each author imposed on them his own vision of a natural utopia, and negative realities were softened by the idealistic simplicity of imagined colonial life.[5] While eighteenth-century writers decry the institution of slavery as cruel and inhumane in moralist and sociopolitical works such as Saint-Lambert's *Ziméo* (1769), Bernardin's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), and Raynal's *Histoire […]des deux Indes* (1774), they also often present it as a simple dichotomy; kind masters have happy slaves, while cruel masters have rebellious ones. The imaginary Creoles and indigenous

[4] Bernardin's complaints of the heat can be found in multiple letters. See for example his "Journal Météorologique" (50) or "Lettre 16" (66) in *Oeuvres Posthumes*. Vol. 1. Paris: le Dentu, 1840.

[5] For a comparison of Bougainville and Bernardin and their different ways of imposing European values and culture onto the landscapes of Tahiti and l'Ile de France, respectively, see Vladimir Kapor, "Shifting Edenic Codes: On Two Exotic Visions of the Golden Age in the Late Eighteenth Century." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*. 41.2 (2008): 217-230.

people live off the land, see little need for the materialism and customs of European society, and are generally happy with their simple and modest lives. Even when natural disasters strike, the Creoles anticipate and accept the violent hurricanes and earthquakes as frightening but normal occurrences. Natural dangers, the harsh climate, and the very real possibility of slave revolts are glossed over as if they are of little importance, reflecting, perhaps, the tendency on the part of the eighteenth-century French public not to see them as events that would lead to any significant change in the colonies. They were paradisiacal locations that writers could use to criticize the corruption of the metropole. However, these colonial depictions shifted away from this didactic use toward something more troubling in post-Enlightenment literature, as writers such as Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas transformed the once-beautiful and escapist settings into disaster zones with crumbling social structures. This raises one of the questions central to this thesis: What factors—literary as well as historical—underpinned this shift?

Léon-François Hoffmann cites the French Revolution as the event that put the colonies on the metropole's historical timeline, meaning that they could no longer be atemporal locations impervious to sociopolitical or natural events.[6] As the French struggled to establish social equality and a republican form of government, they became more sympathetic to the plight of the enslaved and advocated for the abolition of slavery. Abolitionist literature intensified during the Revolution only to decline for several years following the chaos of the Terror and the Haitian Revolution. The Terror attested to the unrestrained destruction created by a social revolution that had slipped out of the control of the administration, and the French viewed the Haitian

[6] For Léon-François Hoffmann's examination of the effects of the French and Haitian Revolutions on French writers' imagined colonies, see *Le Nègre Romantique ; personnage littéraire et obsession collective*. Paris : Payot, 1973. 101-116.

Revolution as exceedingly and unnecessarily violent. The two events incited a desire for order on both sides of the Atlantic; and although slavery was abolished in 1794, many of the French were initially content to see Napoleon reinstate the institution in 1804 as part of a return to order.

The trauma caused by the Terror and the Haitian Revolution necessarily had an effect on literary depictions of both the metropole and the colonies. Ernest Renan observes in his essay on nationhood that violence is the origin for all nations, but that the citizens remember the glory of their origins while suppressing the memories of violence to avoid threatening the national unity. "L'oubli, et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation [. . .]."[7] Applied to works of literature, this observation might suggest that authors would be inclined to acknowledge that the revolutions had occurred but would avoid detailed portraits of bloodshed and devastation. However, Deborah Jenson argues that, on the contrary, French revolutionaries were determined not to suppress the violence of the Revolution, but rather, to display it, an interpretation that she supports with an analysis of the Musée des Monuments Français and Romantic writers' preoccupation with ruin.[8]

Romantic novels set primarily in the metropole seem to adhere more closely to Renan's theory. The fascination with the end of empires and the aftermath of the Revolution reflect what nineteenth-century authors referred to as the *mal du siècle*, the emotional trauma of the wars and the uncertainty of the changing administrations. Some Romantic authors explore the desire of their protagonists' need to "become heroic in a society that no longer recognizes heroism," as

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[7] Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" Sorbonne. Paris, France. 11 March 1882. Ed. Philippe Forest, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Littérature et identité nationale de 1871 à 1914.* Paris: Pierre Bordas et fils, 1991. Print. (34). Cited by Deborah Jenson, *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 33.

[8] Deborah Jenson, *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 33.

illustrated by Musset in *La confession d'un enfant du siècle* (1836).[9] Musset describes the mental state of the generation of young men whose fathers had fought in the Napoleonic wars and whose grandfathers had fought in the French Revolution. This generation found itself in a sort of limbo in this "siècle présent, en un mot, qui sépare le passé de l'avenir, qui n'est ni l'un ni l'autre et qui ressemble à tous deux à la fois, et où l'on ne sait, à chaque pas qu'on fait, si l'on marche sur une semence ou sur un débris" (11). This state of sociopolitical uncertainty, as well as the past glory of their fathers and grandfathers, caused this generation to feel as if they had no purpose. Chateaubriand's title character René (1802) wanders through classical ruins and nature, finding solace in nature's reflection of his profound ennui and emotional turmoil. Stendahl, on the other hand, offers an example of the desire for continued conflict in his character Julien who dreams of crushing the aristocracy to climb the social ladder in *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830). Romantic depictions that take place in the metropole tend to focus on this *mal du siècle* as an emotional problem that the characters never fully externalize and direct towards a great new social uprising. Rather, if their protests occur at all, they remain rather pitiful attempts to disrupt the social hierarchy on an individual level only.

By contrast, in novels set in the colonies, revolutions come to life once again and offer the characters the coveted chance for heroism. As French sympathies towards the enslaved slowly began to re-emerge during France's Romantic Movement, the enslaved African once again became a prominent character in French novels. While the plantation experience had been only a vague peripheral element in eighteenth-century works, plantations became a central part

[9] Robert T. Denomme and Roland H. Simon, eds and intros. *Unfinished Revolutions: Legacies of Upheaval in Modern French Culture.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. 97.

of literary settings in nineteenth-century novels.[10] Novels such as Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* (1826), Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's *Sarah* (1821), Alexandre Dumas' *Georges* (1843), and Charles Testut's *Le Vieux Salomon* (1858) all focus on the experiences of masters and slaves on the plantation and the strict but increasingly fragile social hierarchy. These writers also depict war and violent natural catastrophes in horrifying and glorious detail in their plantation novels. Their depictions might seem to support Jenson's argument that the violence of the Revolution was displayed rather than suppressed; however, these same novelists also express a desire for social change without the immense destruction and heavy casualties of war. While these authors' depictions do not entirely correspond to Renan's observations about the violence of the Revolution needing to be suppressed, they suggest that it could at least be controlled. Even as these writers illustrate the horrors of war and natural disaster, they endow their heroes with the capacity to direct these conflicts, or at least survive them; and the colonies thus go from being exotic locations of the *bon sauvage* to savage but controllable territories. Fiction offers these novelists a medium through which they can *rewrite* the Revolution, or at least *a* revolution, in keeping with their desires for social change as well as their conflicting desire to avoid the destruction and casualties that the French and Haitian Revolutions and the Terror had wrought.

In this context of the Romantic preoccupation with the aftermath of the Revolution, the colonies' plantation hierarchies take on a significant role as fictional representations of European social structures. With their aristocratic patriarchs and stringent social roles, they provide a sociopolitical order that resembles a fiefdom, or a micromonarchy that is threatened by both violent natural phenomena and revolution, usually at the same time. The writers' focus on the

[10] As an exception to this, Hoffmann cites *Oronoko* written by an Englishwoman named Aphra Behn and translated by Antoine de la Place (*Nègre romantique* 59).

threatened plantation structure is similar to the later plantation novels of the American South. Like their French forerunners, American plantation authors center their stories on a planter family living in an isolated and often idealized patriarchal community that is constantly threatened by the outside world.[11] In the nineteenth century, primarily postbellum American accounts written by American Southerners, deplored the loss of what planters considered a gloriously prosperous and legendary era.[12] However, French metropolitan novelists knew little about the colonies and plantations that they choose as their settings. Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas relied on government documents and personal accounts from colonists and travelers to give their stories more credence, but otherwise, their novels were products of their imaginations that likely reflected their own metropolitan experiences.

As eighteenth-century writers had done, they imposed their own vision onto the colonies rather than trying to depict the reality of colonial plantation life. As such, their novels illustrated their own impressions of the differences between metropolitan French people and Creoles, be they white or people of color, masters, or slaves. Furthermore, rather than presenting the plantation as a social structure that should have been preserved, they condemned it as part of the barbaric institution of slavery. This is not to suggest that they agreed on how this hierarchy should be dismantled or on the kind of administration or social order that should replace it. Their slave revolutions were lauded as an opportunity for glorious heroism or decried as a nightmarish descent into chaos. Their depictions not only revealed their view of the colonies, but also their

[11] For a more in-depth presentation of the genre of the American Southern plantation novel, see John M. Grammer, "Plantation Fiction." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Ed. Richard Gray and Owen Robinson. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2004. 58-75.

[12] Lucinda Mackethan, "Genres of Southern Literature." *Southern Spaces*. 16 Feb. 2004. Web. 31 July 2015. <http://southernspaces.org/2004/genres-southern-literature>

criticism or praise of the post-Revolutionary metropole. The French and Haitian Revolutions may have placed the colonies on the timeline of French history, but colonial identity was still defined only by the metropole.

Natural Disasters in the French Plantation Novel

The French and Haitian Revolutions thus offer a partial explanation as to why literary depictions of the colonies shifted from stable settings to ones that could be irreversibly affected by sociopolitical upheaval. However, they do not, upon initial examination, explain the significant increase in the presence of violent natural phenomena in novels depicting the colonies. Hurricanes and earthquakes in French plantation novels always accompany any rebellious activity, often serving as ways of further disrupting the social order. The most simple explanation lies in the reality of the novels' settings. These fictional plantations are located on islands in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean just off the eastern coast of Africa, and Louisiana, regions that are naturally more susceptible to hurricanes and, in the case of the islands, earthquakes. However, this explanation alone is unsatisfactory because of the omission of natural disasters in French depictions written before the middle of the eighteenth century. Surely if writers wished to illustrate the dangerous reality of the colonies' geographical location and geological precariousness, violent natural phenomena would have made an appearance in fiction well before this time. Furthermore, the geographical setting does not explain why catastrophes so often go hand in hand with revolution. The sudden significance attributed to natural disasters by post-revolutionary metropolitan writers, and their tendency to tie natural disasters to sociopolitical upheaval suggest that they were prompted by something other than the island colonies' natural vulnerability to catastrophic geological and meteorological events to include

these details in their novels.

Guillaume-Thomas Raynal asserts that the French ignored natural disasters and other misfortunes in the colonies because in general, they did not consider the colonies part of France or as locations that significantly affected their lives. Distance was a primary factor in the metropole's indifference. In *Histoire philosophique et politique des isles françaises dans les Indes occidentales* (1784), he observes that if « la fureur d'un ouragan ait enseveli des milliers de ces malheureux sous la ruine de leurs habitations, et le dégat de leurs possessions, nous nous en occupons moins que d'un duel ou d'un assassinat commis à notre porte » (205). Indeed, over the course of the eighteenth century, more than two-hundred earthquakes struck France's colonies in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, including the devastating 1751 Saint-Domingue earthquake that left only one building standing in Port-au-Prince. In addition to this regular and potentially destructive seismic activity, the colonies also faced hurricanes on a regular basis. Yet, prior to the middle of the eighteenth century, natural disasters are notably absent in literary works depicting the colonies, suggesting that the French became more interested in the colonies' disasters only after they themselves had experienced the aftershocks of one.

In 1755, the Lisbon earthquake destroyed Portugal's capital city, claimed thousands of lives, and sent aftershocks throughout Europe and across the Atlantic, reportedly as far as Boston. This earthquake has been described as the first "modern" disaster because of the state response it necessitated as well as its far-reaching effects on the Western world.[13] It was also one of the first major natural disasters that people did not try to explain through religion alone; the

[13] Russel R. Dynes. "The Lisbon earthquake of 1755: the first modern disaster." *The Lisbon earthquake of 1755: Representations and Reactions*. Braun, Theodore E. D. and John B. Radner, Eds. Oxford, England: Voltaire Foundation, 2005. 34.

earthquake was not a divine punishment meant to destroy those who had committed immoral acts. While the clergy did make this assertion and while this remained a popular belief among some in the general public, the response of the Enlightenment's *philosophes* was secularized to varying degrees. Rather than focusing on the existence of a wrathful god, they sought explanations grounded in the physical world itself. This is not to suggest that they all came to a consensus on the reasons or lack of reason behind such destruction, nor did they agree on man's role in the extent of the damage.

As part of their endeavor to understand the Lisbon earthquake, the *philosophes* sought to isolate the natural reasons for its occurrence, which in turn led to some conjecture whether or not such destruction had a purpose. Some theorists tied their hypotheses to the existence of a divine creator, reasoning that such a catastrophe must signal the presence of a divine being. In his *Réflexions sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1756), Laurent-Etienne Rondet regards the earthquake as an aberration of nature because it did not seem to fit into the rest of the ordered world.[14] Rather, it opened a window into the inner workings of a universe and a god that man was incapable of fully comprehending. Bernardin's reaction was similar, but unlike Rondet, he sought a positive explanation for the existence of natural catastrophes. In Tome 3 of his *Études de la nature* (1784), he suggests that all aspects of the natural world serve a purpose specific to man's experience on earth. Bernardin theorizes that hurricanes occur as a way of cleansing the ocean of impurities while melons are segmented in such a way as to be more easily shared among families (57). In *Système de la Nature* (1770), Holbach mocked the assertion that natural occurrences had a specific purpose related to man, and as an atheist, did not see them as evidence for the

[14] For an examination of Rondet's perspective, see Marie-Hélène Huet. *The Culture of Disaster*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 46.

existence of God (66). Despite this, his hypothesis concerning the earthquake intersected with Bernardin's in his belief that nature was self-regulating. If disasters occurred, it was because through them, nature could return to a more balanced state; violent natural phenomena had a purpose even if it was less specific than what Bernardin proposed.[15] (M. Miller 23).

More significantly, the *philosophes* saw human activities and modes of living as inextricably tied to a chaotic natural world. The Lisbon earthquake was not a purely *natural* catastrophe (Huet 5). The human race necessarily influenced the effects of natural disasters, either alleviating or exacerbating the degree of damage. The Lisbon earthquake prompted Rousseau to reflect upon man's role in the extent of disaster. In his "Lettre à Voltaire sur la providence" (1756), Rousseau placed blame on the victims: he argued that had the city of Lisbon not been so crowded and had the individuals living there not been so concerned with their material possessions, fewer people would have perished. While his comments are undeniably insensitive, they also indicate that he never considered man as being fully sheltered or separated from the natural world, an argument that drew harsh criticism from Voltaire (Huet 53).

Voltaire's most famous reactions to the earthquake are in his poem "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne" (1756) and in his satirical novel *Candide* (1759), a refutation of Rousseau's "Lettre." Lamenting the unpredictable and unavoidable loss of so many lives within just a few minutes, he expresses deep compassion for the victims of the earthquake as well as a profound helplessness in the face of the lack of meaning behind such destruction. For Voltaire, there was no reason or purpose behind the earthquake; it was simply part of a chaotic world in which man was no more significant than the rocks and the trees. In *Candide,* he criticizes the

[15] Mary Ashburn Miller. *A Natural History of Revolution*: *Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789-1794*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. 23.

notion of Optimism or the idea that such phenomena would be a necessary step towards the best possible end. Voltaire shows how disastrous events and the resulting suffering have no meaning. The world is not harmonious, and Voltaire suggests throughout *Candide* that reason fails to explain the truths of the world.[16]

Sade took this idea of natural disharmony as well as the criticism of Providence and Optimism and applied them to civilization, showing that exercising morality in the hope of avoiding misfortune is nothing more than a naïve fantasy. His most virtuous and innocent characters suffer the gravest hardships, as in the case of *Justine*, while those who are willing to accept society's vices and participate in debauchery experience great rewards, as in the case of Justine's sister Juliette. While Sade's philosophical conjectures seem to stretch far from the reaction to the Lisbon earthquake, they are significant because they break the illusion that man is somehow separate from and superior to nature and its evils (Neiman 184).

The *philosophes* forayed into a secular understanding of the world in their various rational hypotheses that nature's fluctuations always served to return the world to a stable state. This understanding was particularly significant in light of the emerging idea that man, as a natural being, was also subject to the eternal flux of the natural world. Periods of decadence and peace would naturally be followed by ones of scarcity and conflict (M. Miller 15). As a part of nature, man was also capable of producing the same kind of disastrous chaos, but in the form of social revolution. Although the *philosophes* largely rejected the notion of a divine being watching over and intervening in human lives, violent natural and social forces still existed to bring nature and civilization into balance.

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[16] Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought : An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. 148.

Understanding civilization as prone to the same kind of turbulence as the natural world held dangerous implications for the way French revolutionaries regarded the Revolution. After all, one could argue that violence against others was simply a form of destruction that was leading to rebirth and eventually towards a natural equilibrium. As the eighteenth-century metropole increasingly questioned its rigid social constructions and classes, violent natural phenomena became metaphors for the downfall of the Old Regime and the birth of a new social order. Both historical documents and literary works show that the French Revolution was regarded not only as a social phenomenon, but also as a natural one, comparable to volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tempests (M. Miller 44). After the fall of the monarchy, the metropole saw itself facing the opportunity to build a newly structured society based on the natural law that was so revered in Enlightenment works.[17] It stood on the cusp of a new "golden age" in which laws and government were not created by a sovereign ruler but instead relied on nature as a political guide (Edelstein 119). As the people relinquished personal responsibility for the turbulent sociopolitical movement, their trust in nature as a guide carried them through the Revolution and directly into the Terror.

During the tumultuous first years of the First Republic, acutely violent incidents were excused as necessary and inevitable occurrences. In *Révolutions de Paris* (1792), for example, Prudhomme responds to the counterrevolutionaries who were comparing the September Massacres to the Lisbon earthquake, but he still demonstrates, even in his sarcasm, a justification of this violence :

Eh bien! petits intrigants, plus dangereux cent fois que les agitateurs dont vous parlez,

[17] Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, & the French Revolution.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 118.

> plus séditieux, plus funestes à l'harmonie sociale que ceux que vous accusez de prêcher contre l'aristocratie des riches; [. . .] Vous faites d'éternels reproches à Paris pour les jugements populaires du 2 et 3 septembre ; ils furent terribles comme le tremblement de terre de Lisbonne. Les ames pieuses en ont-elles fait un crime à la providence ? Rien n'arrive sur ce globe, ont-elles dit, sans l'ordre et la permission de Dieu.[. . .] Apparemment c'est Dieu qui châtie les hommes; il faut adorer et se taire. (462)

The Glacière massacre was also attributed to the uncontrollability of a popular movement that resembled a natural disaster. Seismic activity, particularly the volcano, became a symbol of nature's justice, its devastation regarded as positive and as providing an opportunity for regeneration. This not only absolved the participants of any responsibility for their violent actions, but also allowed them to justify these incidents as part of the natural process of a revolution. This justification slowly evolved into the idea that revolution was a phenomenon that corresponded to nature's movement towards a stable equilibrium. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1794 reinforced this idea when it prevented Italy from collaborating with England in the counterrevolutionary movement. This cataclysm's timely destruction of Italian cities further contributed to French revolutionaries' impression that nature was an ally, that the French were a chosen people, and that nothing could stop their advancement towards a utopic republican administration (M. Miller 161).

Although this was the general consensus among revolutionaries, skeptical government officials could see the dangers of allowing nature to "run its course" without any restraint. For them, the volcano and other natural disasters did not signify an opportunity for regeneration, but rather, unchecked revolutionary fanaticism (M. Miller 163). If the Glacière and September

Massacres had raised serious concerns among some, it was the violence of the Terror that finally shattered the metropole's dream of a utopic republic based on natural law. Arguably justified by the same principles that had promised opportunities for an egalitarian social order, the Terror's massive extermination demonstrated that natural law, in its vagueness, could be wrongly used to justify any action against perceived threats to the republic. The mountain and volcano, once symbols of the Jacobins, lost their significance and were associated, even among the revolutionaries, with the fervor of political extremists (Edelstein 257; M. Miller 163).

Whereas the *philosophe*s had moved away from religious and superstitious explanations of natural disasters in favor of the rationale that violent natural phenomena were necessary to achieve balance, this same rationalization was disastrous when applied to sociopolitical upheaval. The catastrophic magnitude of the revolutionary wars of France and Haiti was comparable to violent natural events, but there was no intrinsic movement towards a new and stable equilibrium. Jean-Marie Roland stated in *Le Ministre de l'intérieur aux Parisiens* (1792) that the government could not allow this social evolution to continue, unchecked, as if it were an unpredictable and uncontrollable natural phenomenon:

> [D]e même que l'orage prolongé ravage les campagnes et détruit la récolte de plusieurs années, de même les mouvemens [sic] continués du peuple nuisent à ses propres interêts, et amènent une anarchie dans laquelle on cherche longtemps les elemens [sic] confondus de la justice et de la félicité. 1

Social destruction was not necessarily, as Sade had suggested, the movement towards an evolutionary end; society required laws to be able to exist without the chaos of constant strife. Sociopolitical upheaval became a phenomenon that man needed to control, not only in the

interest of preserving lives, but also for personal social advancement. Because civilization and nature were understood as being mutually influential, this need for control also crossed over into the natural world and translated into a desire to control violent natural phenomena.

In the plantation novels examined in this thesis, French and Francophone authors present the consequences they imagine resulting from the domination over natural and sociopolitical evils. As this dissertation is designed to show, they explore the intersection between the rationalization of natural and social catastrophes and the need to control them. Just as the occurrence of violent natural phenomena could be explained as necessary events with a specific purpose in the physical world; the French Revolution was also described as a natural event, also with a specific purpose. Because of the intertwining between nature and civilization, the eventual desire for more control over the Terror might also have prompted a desire for more order over the natural world. If the French could take measures to rein in the violence of the Terror, perhaps they might also be able to rein in the violence of a natural world that had the potential to topple a still fragile social order.

These authors write against this backdrop of the realization that natural and social disasters could in fact cause the collapse of social hierarchies, which triggered greater efforts in the metropole to re-establish order at all costs. While nineteenth-century novels set in the metropole present the traumatic emotional response to the French Revolution, those set in the colonies suggest a desire and ability to prevent or control the actual trauma of this upheaval. The domination over a violent natural world translates into sociopolitical power that can effect social change. If nature's evils do not have a discernable purpose, the novels' heroes invent a purpose that works to their own advantage. By successfully navigating the open seas and all of their

perils, by braving hurricanes, and by moving stealthily through the savage wilderness to subvert the planters, these novels' heroes manage to challenge if not dismantle the oppressive social hierarchies they have been facing. Their ambition and success vary, as does their belief in the degree of autonomy they have over their lives; but in all of the novels, they express a desire for social reform. Rather than waiting for the extreme fluctuations of natural forces and social unrest, the characters direct and control these shifts. At times, the *philosophes*' hypotheses in regard to the Lisbon earthquake surface in these novels, particularly at moments when the characters seek to establish meaning and order somewhere in the chaotic social and natural (r)evolutions.

Chapter Overview

I start with Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's iconic novel *Paul et Virginie*, published in 1788, as an example of a work that subscribes to Leibniz's optimism regarding the role of God and natural disasters. The novel first appeared as in the fourth volume of Bernardin's teleological philosophical work *Etudes de la Nature* in which he applies natural law to the story of two innocent children living in an isolated *petite société* in the colony of Ile de France. In this novel, Bernardin defines what it means to live according to nature and virtue through his two title characters and advocates for simplicity as well as the passive acceptance of one's social status and worldly events as part of a divine plan. Although he lived in the colony of Ile de France for a time and wrote many negative observations in *Voyage à l'Ile de France*, his depiction of the *petite société* on this same island is nearly utopic (Kapor 221). The discrepancy between the two works, Bernardin's glossing over of slavery, and his harsh criticism of the metropole suggest that the work was less about life in the colony itself and more about how the metropole needed

significant social reform. I chose this novel as a foundation for this study in part because it was published just before the French Revolution and emphasizes the changes in nineteenth-century depictions of the plantation colonies, but also because of its profound and extensive influence on so many subsequent literary works of France, including ones in this corpus.

In Chapter 2, I examine Victor Hugo's novel *Bug-Jargal* as a work that demonstrates France's shift towards a desire for more power over natural and sociopolitical upheaval, as suggested by the characters' control or lack of control over nature and the Haitian Revolution. Hugo presents both the exotic beauty of the island of Saint-Domingue and its infernal destruction as the revolutionaries set fire to the fields and houses. His ambiguous view on slavery and racial prejudice have drawn much debate from scholars who have deemed him abolitionist, royalist, and racist. The first version of the story depicting the traumatically violent Haitian Revolution was published in his ultra-Royalist journal *Le Conservateur Littéraire*, an ostensibly puzzling choice for a politically conservative journal.[18] However, Hugo's viewpoint is decidedly Royalist in this work. He frames the novel with a scathingly critical representation of the First Republic and the revolutionaries. At the same time, he suggests through his noble slave prince Bug-Jargal that without a leader who is truly noble by birth and who exemplifies all of the qualities of leadership and sense of duty to his people, civilization will fall into chaos. This powerful hero is the only character in the novel who can easily move through the natural world, passing freely between both the plantations and the battlefield. He is a noble savage-like protagonist who

[18] Victor Hugo and his brother, who both carried Royalist viewpoints at this time, wanted to start a journal in honor of Châteaubriand of whom Hugo was a great fan. The two brothers founded and served as editors of the literary counterpart of this conservative political journal: *Le Conservateur Littéraire*. Their goals were similar to the ones that Chateaubriand described. "Les rédacteurs de ce recueil, voulant défendre les intérêts de la littérature, n'ont pu s'empecher de manifester en même temps un esprit général de conservation, qui a donné à leur ouvrage une couleur monarchique et religieuse" (Tome 3, 5)

recalls the eighteenth-century paradisiacal depictions of the colonies even as he is leading a revolution. While Hugo raises criticisms regarding the social status of free people of color and miscegenation, these problems serve more as the backdrop for a story about "pure" noble heritage and kingly duties. There exists the possibility as well that Hugo published the second version of *Bug-Jargal* as a way of showing support for Charles X's decision to recognize Haiti as an independent country.[19]

In Chapter 3, I study the positive role of the metropole and the power that comes with the control over the natural world in Alexandre Dumas' *Georges*, a novel that can arguably be read as a response to both *Paul et Virginie* and *Bug-Jargal*. Dumas disputes the criticisms of Bernardin and Hugo that the metropole is morally corrupt or chaotic, instead choosing to depict it as a mecca of scholarly study and culture with opportunities for social equality. The metropole takes on the qualities of the false utopia that were once reserved for the colonies; historically speaking, it was hardly a picture of political stability nor was it a place where Dumas himself was sheltered from the racial prejudice of his peers.[20] Nevertheless, Dumas focuses on the merits of knowledge in continental France as well as French civilization's ability to dominate the natural world, a theme that could be read as a justification for imperialism. The noble savage does not exist, or if he does, he is ineffective compared to the educated metropolitan man. Dumas' hero Georges, educated in continental France, demonstrates an individual agency that defies his social circumstances and the natural world's destructive forces. Throughout the novel,

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[19] Frauke Gewecke, "Victor Hugo et la révolution haïtienne: Jacobins et jacobites ou les ambiguïtés du discours négrophobe dans la perspective du roman historique" Calle-Gruber, Mireille and Arnold Rothe (eds.), *Lectures de Victor Hugo*. Paris: Nizet, 1986. 56.

[20] For examples of the discrimination Dumas faced, see Léon-François Hoffmann. Introduction. *Georges.* 1974. By Alexandre Dumas, Paris: Gallimard, 2003. 14.

Dumas makes allusions to Napoleon as a way of condemning divine right and as a way of advocating for individual ambition and self-defined societies.

In my fourth and final chapter, I examine Alfred Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, distinct from *Paul et Virginie*, *Bug-Jargal*, and *Georges* in that it was written by a native Louisianan author, rather than a French one. The novel serves as an American counterpoint to the first three French plantation novels. While Mercier deals with the same themes of slavery, war, and control over the natural world, he does not establish the same kind of colonial/metropolitan hierarchy. Louisiana and France are equally sophisticated, cultured, and able to participate in a mutual exchange of the knowledge they have gained through their different experiences. France's politics make appearances in the novel, but they do not overshadow the plantation family's own struggles and the impending American Civil War. *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* was published on the cusp of France's Naturalist Movement, and in its presentation of the natural environment as being uncontrollable and as being a force that shapes the personal dispositions of his character, Mercier's novel corresponds to the fundamental ideas of this literary period. Throughout his novel, he criticizes the superstitious beliefs of his characters and opposes them to the rationality of scientific study. He defines "superstition" as a belief supernatural external forces, such as those of ancestral spirits, God, or destiny, prevent one from having any autonomy, or from taking responsibility for his behavior or choices. While he lauds the calm reason resulting from scientific thought, he also suggests that his characters can never fully change principal personality traits that have resulted from their biological inheritance. If a destiny determined by divine powers does not exist, perhaps biological destiny does. Mercier dispels the idea that nature can be fully controlled, either in the self or in one's

surroundings. Accordingly, it also does not translate into political power. His suggestion that the control of nature is an exercise in futility might seem pessimistic, but he tempers this seemingly bleak outlook with the idea that man can find meaning in his life in the struggle for his personal idealistic vision.

Each of these four authors presents differing degrees of control the characters might have over the natural world and the differing sociopolitical consequences of that control, making this a thematic study rather than a theoretical one. Ultimately hearkening back to the eighteenth-century's philosophical questions regarding the mutual influence of the natural and civilized worlds, these four writers reveal the possible extent to which natural disasters can blur the lines of social classes. Whether these authors' natural catastrophes bring together communities or help catalyze a great revolution, they all point to the arbitrariness of social classes and the injustices faced by the lower classes. Even as they advocate for social reform, they demonstrate a desire to avoid the destruction and violence of a revolution.

CHAPTER ONE

Tragic Providence: The Sociopolitical Failure of Optimism in *Paul et Virginie*

The massive destruction of the Lisbon earthquake prompted philosophers, scientists, and the clergy to conceive of a multitude of hypotheses regarding the reasons behind this seismic event. The disaster evoked both religious and scientific explanations and sometimes a combination of the two. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, writer, botanist, and traveler, held a perspective that straddled the secular and religious worlds. His studies of nature were grounded in the physical world; all life on earth and all natural phenomena played a specific role to maintain balance in the natural world. These characteristics and changes were tied to a divine creator who had shaped and planned everything on earth with the purpose of serving man. At the center of this world in motion, man was an inextricable part of it, subject to its abundant beauty as well as its horrors and destruction. Bernardin's inquiries toward finding the meaning behind nature's destructive forces are characteristic of the Age of the Enlightenment's rising interest in scientific study; but his effort to find positive effects of violent natural phenomena attest to a persistent need for consolation when nature's evils claimed the lives of loved ones. Nature may have revolved around man according to Bernardin, but he also admitted in his *Études de la nature* that "le pouvoir de l'homme est faible quand il lutte contre celui de la nature" (345).[21]

Man's helplessness in face of the Lisbon earthquake and nature's destructive forces did not dissuade Bernardin from his conviction that man needed to live more in harmony with the natural world rather than trying to distance himself from it. Violent natural phenomena might result in tragedy, but Bernardin observed that they also caused people to become less concerned

[21] For analysis of Bernardin's perspective on the relationship between man and nature, see Jean-Michel Racault, "L'Homme et la nature chez Bernardin de Saint-Pierre." *Dix-Huitième Siècle.* 45.1 (2013): 305-328.

with material possessions. Terrible destruction gave rise to beautiful social harmonies in which inequalities were momentarily erased and people supported one another: “Lorsque Lisbonne fut renversée par un tremblement de terre, ses habitans [sic], en s’échappant de leurs maisons, s’embroissaient les uns les autres; grands et petits, amis et ennemis, inquisiteurs et juifs, connus et inconnus, chacun partageoit ses habits et ses vivres avec ceux qui n’avoient rien.”[22] This observation suggests that if people were less preoccupied with material wealth and were satisfied with simpler lifestyles, social harmonies would be more prevalent.

Bernardin’s critique of France’s social inequalities and their effects on man’s relationship with nature appear in his first work, *Voyage à l’Ile de France*, a series of letters in which he recorded his impressions and observations during his travels to Mauritius. In reaction to his first encounters with the less privileged classes, he expressed surprise and dismay at their difficult lifestyles and malnourishment; but he is also awed by how much they could potentially benefit from nature’s bounty.[23] According to Bernardin, man was meant to cultivate the land, and the harvest and enjoyment of crops would bind communities together. Unfortunately, because the aristocracy controlled so much land and hoarded the crops for their own financial gain, many poor people were deprived of the opportunity to develop their own small farms and remained at the mercy of the upper class.[24] (Howells 761). The decadent lifestyles of the aristocracy were not only discordant with nature, they also directly contributed to the suffering of the poor. Robin Howells asserts that the natural and sociopolitical themes found in *Voyage à l’Ile de France*

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[22] Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Etudes de la nature*. Vol. 3. Paris: Deterville, 1804. 198.

[23] See Lettre 23. “Esclaves, hottentots, hollandais. L'abondance du pays se répand sur les esclaves. Ils ont du pain et des légumes à discrétion. On distribue à deux noirs un mouton par semaine.” 92.

[24] Robin Howells, “Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Founding Work: The *Voyage à L’île de France*.” *The Modern Language Review*. 107.3 (July 2012): 762.

influenced all of Bernardin's subsequent written works, including *Paul et Virginie.*

In Bernardin's pastoral novel, a hermitic Old Man recounts the story of two children, Paul and Virginie, who are raised by their mothers, Marguerite and Madame de la Tour, in an isolated and utopic *petite société* on the island of l'Ile de France. The first half of the novel illustrates the happiness that results from this life of innocence and simplicity. In the second half, Bernardin focuses on Virginie's sexual maturation and the end of this utopic society as the social and cultural expectations of metropolitan French society enter this space. At the bidding of Madame de la Tour and the governor of the colony, Virginie leaves the island to live in the metropole with her wealthy aristocratic aunt who has named her heir to her vast fortune. There, she must learn the customs and traditions of continental French society and conform to them in preparation for the possibility of an eventual marriage to a nobleman of her social standing. Her departure and Paul's resulting new awareness of social inequalities result in his profound unhappiness as well as the regret of the Madame de la Tour and Marguerite. Invaded by the corrupt values of the metropole, the petite société can no longer exist. Virginie, having lost the innocence of living in isolation from the rest of civilization, can never return to the island; and she perishes in a hurricane that strikes just as her ship enters the harbor.[25]

In this chapter, I examine Bernardin's depictions of his characters' interactions with nature and civilization to pinpoint how he determines what degree of personal responsibility and action is acceptably within the boundaries of his advice to live according to nature and virtue. Despite Bernardin's encouragement to admire Virginie's choice, his depiction of her death also raises the question as to what degree of action against nature's upheaval remains within the

[25] Daniel Grélé. "L'utopie inversée : le paradis de 'Paul et Virginie' de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre." *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*. 12 (2003) : 290.

boundaries of virtue. It is, after all, acceptable for Paul to risk his life reinforcing the family homes during the first hurricane that strikes the island; but it is unacceptable for him to risk it to save Virginie. Paul and Virginie are each exemplary models of living simply and virtuously, their lifestyle a desirable combination of cultivating the land and enjoying the exotic and isolated beauty of Ile de France. Once the corrupt values of continental France enter this microsociety, Bernardin's model for happiness becomes less clear and leads one to question how much control one can exert on his life and how much one should allow the natural world to determine his future.

While Bernardin uses the death of Virginie to criticize the immorality of continental French society, he also uses it to address the problem of man's relationship with the violent upheavals of the natural world. Her tragic end has provoked much scholarly debate regarding virtue and its link to a "natural" existence as opposed to one that has been influenced by the corrupt practices of metropolitan France. Some scholars criticize Virginie's decision to remain clothed as an act that hardly indicates a harmonious existence with nature; rather, her sense of modesty is a result of the arbitrary moral values she has learned in continental France.[26] Her decision to surrender her life is a result of her abandonment of a natural existence for an entry into the corrupt world of the French metropole.

Unlike the scholars who see this Virginie's death as a departure from nature, I argue in this chapter that this scene illustrates how Virginie finally succeeds in coming into perfect balance with nature and virtue. As the hurricane tears through the harbor, she must face the

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[26] Lieve Spaas,"*Paul et Virginie :* The Shipwreck of an Idyll." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 13 (2001): 322. Jean-Michel Racault, "Virginie entre la nature et la vertu : cohésion narrative et contradictions idéologiques dans *Paul et Virginie*." *Dix-huitième siècle.* 18 (1986) : 399.

raging ocean, one of her greatest fears; and to demonstrate her acceptance of the natural world, she must do it alone. In the knowledge that the terrifying ocean's enormous wave will mean her death, she still faces it with serenity. In this brief period before she succumbs to the storm, she achieves the happiness for which Bernardin is advocating throughout his novel. For this reason, and not for the reasons of virtue or modesty alone, her actions are meant to be understood as admirable. While this helplessness perhaps proves unsatisfactory for the contemporary reader, it corresponds perfectly to the natural and sociopolitical upheaval France was facing at this time. Even as Bernardin maintains Virginie's virtue and innocence, he shows how social inequalities and ambition for great wealth contribute to the destruction caused by violent natural phenomena, a perspective that corresponds to eighteenth-century France's growing social unrest. Man's role in face of natural disasters and nature's role in the existence of social inequalities were still pertinent questions at this time. In *Paul et Virginie*, Bernardin brings to the forefront the problem of determining to what extent man can take an active role in resisting nature's hardships and to what extent his actions will have an impact on his social status.

Having written *Paul et Virginie* on the cusp of the French Revolution, Bernardin examines the intersection between disastrous nature and corrupt society in a way that suggests that he saw nature's upheaval as a way of carrying man towards social harmony. Even in its destruction, nature cannot be viewed as "evil," a concept he underscores in the colony's united reaction to Virginie's death caused by a hurricane. Soldiers, children, the wealthy and powerful, the common people, and slaves all join together to grieve Virginie's tragic death. Bernardin notes that even people of different cultures and religions come together to mourn because "la perte d'un objet aimable intéresse toutes les nations, et tant est grand le pouvoir de la vertu

malheureuse, puisqu'elle réunit toutes les religions autour de son tombeau" (162).

Although Bernardin accepts nature's evils, he specifies that he does not see violent social upheaval as an extension of nature's cyclic destruction clearing the way for new growth. Social revolution and its inevitable violence are not natural phenomena beyond the reproach; and in the second half of the novel, Bernardin condemns the idea of man pushing society violently towards a utopic state (219). Through his encouragement for passive observation rather than action, both in nature and in society, Bernardin discourages the lower classes (including slaves) from attempting to change their socioeconomic status or challenge the ruling classes, a conviction that echoes socioeconomic interpretations of the Biblical verse that the meek shall inherit the earth. That is to say, natural disasters can have positive effects on society, while social uprisings and ambition take heavy tolls. Whereas the hurricane and Virginie's resulting death bring together everyone on the entire island, the desire for material wealth divides the two families and underlines the class differences betweeen Paul and Virginie.

Through a sociopolitical lens, Virginie's death marks the culmination of a series of events that Bernardin suggests are caused by the moral corruption of France's aristocracy. Virginie's tragic demise is not only a demonstration of a virtuous and complete trust in God, but also a resignation to European society with a tragic emotional appeal to the upper class for the reformation of French social structures.[27] The hurricane could not have been avoided once Virginie boarded a ship set for Ile de France, but she and her family and the rest of the colony could have avoided this entire situation had they not been so interested in the aunt's financial offer. The aristocracy's materialistic values infiltrate this *petite société* that was founded

[27] Catherine Labio, "Reading by the Gold and Black Clock ; Or, the Recasting of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*. 16.4 (2004): 683.

precisely in reaction to the aristocracy's desire to maintain class barriers; the upper class' greed and preoccupation doom to failure the two families' simple retreat. It would thus seem that nature and society work in conjunction with one another to lead to Virginie's fate, but Bernardin shows them to have different results. Bernardin advocates for living according to nature and virtue through a passive acceptance of natural turmoil. Although he criticizes French society for its decadence and corruption, his response to social inequalities is similar to his response regarding nature. The lower classes should simply accept their status as a situation beyond their control. That said, Bernardin never clearly defines what this passive acceptance means. He does not explain what it means to live "naturally," nor does he draw a clear line between excessive ambition and the minimum action necessary to survive.

Confronting Social Inequalities

This critique of French society in conjunction with an anti-revolutionary stance is apparent from the beginning of the novel; after all, Paul and Virginie are born out of socially unequal relationships. Marguerite is a peasant woman while Madame de la Tour is from a wealthy and noble family; each chooses a romantic partner outside of their social class. Madame de la Tour marries beneath her social status while Marguerite enters a love affair with an aristocrat who leaves her with child and will not marry her. Both women leave France in exile for the scandal of their choices, but at the bottom of each scandal lies the problem of material wealth. Madame de la Tour's husband does not have nobility or enough money to be considered a suitable partner for his wife; he cannot provide her with the lifestyle to which she is accustomed. Her family, rather than giving up any of their money in order to support the couple, prefers to disown her. Similarly, Marguerite's lover cannot marry her since she, a mere peasant

without noble lineage or money, would never be accepted into the aristocracy.

Furthermore, the two women can do nothing to change their situation. As a peasant, Marguerite has little recourse other than exiling herself, and she views her new life on the colony as a sad consequence of her mistake. In confessing to Paul the truth of his origins, she says, "Lorsque j'étais fille, l'amour me fit commettre une faiblesse dont tu étais le fruit. Ma faute t'a privé de ta famille paternelle, et mon repentir, de ta famille maternelle" (124). But even members of the noble class face difficulties when they lack the affluence of their peers. Madame de la Tour and her husband attempt to rebuild their fortune by buying slaves in India; but Monsieur de la Tour falls ill and dies while there, leaving his wife in an even more precarious situation. Madame de la Tour's subsequent appeals to her aunt for forgiveness and assistance are met with silence (91).

In this presentation of social inequalities, Bernardin also addresses the problem of slavery, but only as the simple dichotomy of the kind master with happy slaves and the cruel master with rebellious ones. Paul and Virginie and their mothers live in similar houses as a blended family, along with their slaves Marie and Domingue who are happily married to each other. The two families wear the same type of clothing as that of Domingue and Marie, what Labio describes as a way of inverting European hierarchies, and a clear protest to the laws dictating what Africans were allowed to wear (Labio 679). It is arguably less of an inversion and more of a way of minimizing class differences even when inequalities exist. Bernardin depicts the *petite société* as the best model for which one can hope at a time when the institution of slavery was still prevalent. Just as in the case of the aristocracy, all of the responsibility for a society's happiness comes from the upper classes rather than the lower ones; because Marguerite

and Madame de la Tour are kind to their slaves and do not have lifestyles that differ too greatly from theirs, the slaves are happy.

Bernardin uses a master/slave relationship on a nearby plantation as a point of contrast to the slavery of the microsociety, but even as he illustrates the misery of a fugitive slave with a cruel master, he asserts that the lower classes should not take action against the upper ones. In this example, a fugitive slave stumbles into the microsociety and asks Virginie for help after having been wandering in the forest for weeks. Clearly a miserable creature, dressed only in rags and on the verge of starvation, the runaway slave can do nothing other than what those of a superior class deem best. In this case, Virginie naïvely decides it is virtuous to return her to her abusive master. The slave requires the meager food and shelter of the planter, even at the risk of her own life, because trying to survive alone in the forest is impossible for her. A fugitive who cannot return to the plantation, she is also exhausted from trying to elude the dogs and slavemasters searching for her. She has found almost no sustenance and has received no aid before coming upon Paul and Virginie's plot of land. Disobeying the cruel planter has only resulted in suffering and an inability to survive without direction from the planter or another unenslaved person.

Although Bernardin was critical of slavery, he does not suggest that slavery itself is the reason for such misery; rather, the cruel nature of the planter has determined the unhappiness of the slave. Had he been kind, the slave would not have run away in the first place. In Bernardin's representation of her, however, he still suggests that she is partially responsible for her condition. Not only has the slave refused the direction of this master, her poor physical condition suggests that she also has refused the guidance offered from prayer.

The slave's experience in the forest is put in direct contrast with that of the children in a way that suggests that their return of her to this planter is a virtuous act and that they do not suffer because of their faith in God. A group of maroons even explain that they wish to thank Paul and Virginie them for their good deed of returning the runaway slave to the plantation and asking the master for forgiveness: "Bons petits blancs [. . .] nous vous avons vus passer ce matin avec une négresse de la Rivière-noire; vous alliez demander sa grâce à son mauvais maître; en reconnaissance, nous vous reporterons chez vous sur nos épaules" (99). There does not seem to be any possibility that this group of marroons might have helped the fugitive slave themselves. The implication is that they wish that a white person would only return them to their shackles and beg their former masters to spare them any punishment as well. Bernardin represents them as being unfortunately doomed to live out the rest of their days of freedom together in the forest. Even at Virginie's funeral, the slaves wish only that they could have a master as kind as Virginie (162).

This is perhaps the most explicit example of Bernardin's criticism of any attempt to move up the social ladder; slavery's contradiction to the otherwise idealistic portrait of this life according to nature and virtue makes it even more shocking. Through the stories of the two mothers as well as that of the fugitive slave, Bernardin points out the problems caused by social and economic inequalities, but he also underscores the helplessness of the lower classes to do anything about it. Rather than aspiring to the wealth and comforts of the aristocracy, they should seek happiness by living "according to nature and virtue," a model that he only vaguely defines but that favors faith in God and in nature over ambition and action.

Living According to Nature and Virtue

The significance that Bernardin assigns to nature and virtue can be pieced together mostly through the observations of the Old Man, a hermit who has sequestered himself from society both in continental France and in l'Ile de France. A liaison between the values of continental France and the simplicity of a life in this microsociety, the Old Man is at once a voice of wisdom to Paul and Virginie and a critic of the corruption of the metropole. He also serves as an example of a continental Frenchman who has rejected the life of the metropole in favor of a more rustic existence in the colonies. (136)

While "virtue" is largely based on Christian teachings and remains vague throughout the novel, the Old Man partially defines it at several points. He observes that Virginie's self-description as "toujours agitée mais constante" would appropriately define what it means to be virtuous (103). The quote effectively ties together the agitation that man will inevitably experience during his life and the importance of maintaining his faith in God despite the turmoil of the material world. There is no way to escape this agitation which may have an emotional source or a physical one, but one can still control one's trust in a greater universal plan. Faith is an indispensable characteristic of virtue, but not the only one. The Old Man again partially defines virtue in his consoling dialogue with Paul, in which he refers to Virginie's patience and the desire to help others as essential characteristics of a virtuous person. "La vertu est un effort fait sur nous-mêmes pour le bien d'autrui dans l'intention de plaire à Dieu seul" (150). Other than these traits, the understanding of virtue remains a vague collection of what is generally considered religiously moral, for example, that one should be married before engaging in any sexual relationship, that an incestuous relationship is immoral, and a lack of modesty and

obedience are rejections of virtue.

Robert Mauzi suggests that virtue and nature are in opposition to each other and that the novel is split into two parts: the first half in which the children live according to nature, and the second, in which they are required to turn to virtue.[28] However, it can also be argued that nature and virtue are interconnected and interdependent. Bernardin associates nature with simplicity and objective limits, but also shows that its violence and destruction can bring people together, as in the cases of Virginie's death and the Lisbon earthquake. Faith, patience, and education are necessary to restrain the intense emotions that result from natural violence and to direct them towards constructive outlets, but Bernardin also suggests that suffering can have positive outcomes. On the other hand, while it is not possible to be "too virtuous," Bernardin shows how the desire to do good can be misdirected if there is no foundation in the simplicity of nature. He characterizes the pursuit of wealth and social status, for example, as "unnatural" and shows that even if the motives behind the desire to amass great wealth or attain a superior social status are virtuous, such goals will inevitably lead to vice. "Voyez comme un pas vers la fortune nous a précipités tous d'abîme en abîme" (167).

In his call to the noble class and his discouragement of action on the part of the lower ones, Bernardin draws a parallel between the natural and social worlds and their ruling bodies. Just as the lower classes cannot control or direct the violent natural phenomena that can potentially destroy them and should always defer to God, Bernardin suggests that they also should not try to control or change their socioeconomic status. "Que Dieu soit votre unique patron, et le genre humain votre Corps! [. . .] Mais pourquoi voulez-vous être distingué du reste

[28] Robert Mauzi, Preface. *Paul et Virginie*. By Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966. 13.

des hommes? C'est un sentiment qui n'est pas naturel" (143). Through this advocacy for acceptance, Bernardin implies that the upper echelons of French society should strive to be models for the lower classes and abandon their decadent lifestyles in favor of simpler ones, in this way, also deferring to a trust in God rather than to the supposed protection of their material possessions. In the meantime, the lower classes can find happiness by living according to nature and virtue and passively waiting for the aristocracy's renunciation of their wealth to occur while focusing on their rewarding existence beyond the material world.

Because of Bernardin's vagueness of the definition of his model for happiness, however, he must illustrate the degree of agency his characters can demonstrate while still remaining virtuous. In so doing, he explores how each of the children will react to the evils of both society and nature while varying the active role each one takes. Paul tends to take action and risks while at the same time demonstrating a naïve and natural faith that no harm will befall him. He plays in the ocean's crashing waves, and he does not ever imagine that he is risking his life when he climbs the steep cliffs of the island's volcanic peaks. "Paul s'avançait quelquefois sur les récifs au-devant des lames, puis à leur approche il fuyait sur le rivage devant leurs grandes volutes écumeuses et mugissantes qui le poursuivaient bien avant sur la grève" (108). He demonstrates a talent for bringing an ordered aestheticism to the natural world while still respecting its limitations. His arrangement of flowers and crops on the plot of land, planted in ways that optimize their growth and propagation, attest to his harmonious relationship with nature. "[E]n assujettissant ces végétaux à son plan, il ne s'était pas écarté de celui de la nature" (101).

By contrast, Virginie is much more cautious in her interactions with the natural world even as she recognizes its beauty. She plants the seeds of the fruits that Paul has brought to her,

feeds the birds and watches them play, and appreciates the beauty of the flowers, a reaction that attests to her capacity to enjoy and thrive in an area nearly untouched by European settlers (105). At the same time, she shows no desire to be as enthusiastic as Paul in manipulating her surroundings to make them correspond to her desires. Content with the abundant vegetation near their homes, she expresses concern for Paul's safety when he gathers fruits and flowers for her from the mountaintops. "Je demande si instamment à Dieu qu'il ne t'arrive aucun mal! Pourquoi vas-tu si loin et si haut me chercher des fruits et des fleurs?" (113). Unlike Paul, she is afraid of the deep Rivière Noire and does not dare wade into the ocean, suggesting a greater awareness of her own mortality and desire to preserve her life. "Le bruit de ses eaux effraya Virginie; elle n'osa y mettre les pieds" (95).

Paul and Virginie's complementary differences become more evident when they get lost on their way home after accompanying a runaway slave back to the plantation, an excursion into the unknown. Always the one to act rather than waiting, Paul focuses on practical ways of surviving and retracing their path. Through his knowledge and skills, he and Virginie are able to find enough food to recover their strength (94). When they reach the Rivière Noire, Virginie is too afraid to cross, so Paul carries her across the rocks amidst the churning waters. While Paul's efforts bring the two of them closer to home, they are unable to arrive without Virginie's faith. At the moments that they feel worried about their situation, particularly when Virginie cannot continue walking, she says that God will have pity on them. "Dieu aura pitié de nous [. . .] il exauce la voix des petits oiseaux qui lui demandent de la nourriture" (94). The first time she says this, she and Paul, hungry and thirsty, hear a spring flowing nearby. Later, when it looks as if they will have to spend the night in the forest, she suggests that they pray again. No sooner has

their prayer ended than they hear the barking of their dog Fidèle who arrives with the slave Domingue. Even the meanings of the names of the dog and the slave, Faith and "Of the Lord" respectively, emphasize the importance of faith in God in times of difficulty. Divine help does not end there. Domingue is too old to carry the children home, and as he laments his age aloud, a group of maroons arrives and offers to help. At this, Virginie exclaims, "Oh mon ami! Jamais Dieu ne laisse un bienfait sans récompense !" (99). In this first part of the novel, Bernardin thus establishes the significant effects of faith and prayer. While Paul's actions may help the two children at first, divine intervention is what ultimately allows them to return home safely.

Social Expectations and Moral Corruption

It is one thing to be able to live virtuously in relative isolation from the rest of society; and because of the lack of conflict or danger from outside sources, Paul and Virginie can more easily maintain their simple and virtuous lifestyles, a paradisiacal but admittedly unrealistic situation. During this time, the two children avoid most interaction with the people living in the nearby town. They even avoid returning to ask the planter for help when they are lost because they do not want to accept anything from someone so cruel. Bernardin introduces conflict into the two families' lives through two natural experiences: Virginie's puberty and a hurricane, both of which provoke the *petite société* to re-open its doors to the values of continental France.

Virginie's adolescence is not in itself evil but rather symbolizes a confrontation with the social expectations of French society. While the innocence of childhood has allowed Paul and Virginie to live "according to nature," this changes once Virginie is confronted with the prospect of her own marriage and children. Her adolescence serves as a reminder that this innocent paradise cannot last forever, that the two mothers and their slaves Domingue and Marie are also

aging and will eventually be unable to provide for Paul and Virginie. This realization raises a number of concerns and worrisome hypothetical situations regarding the future of these two families, especially because the two mothers have only their own terrible romantic experiences on which to base their projections. The unknown future looms before them, threatening and frightening as the two mothers anticipate hardship rather than continued happiness, their anxiety magnified by their perception of Virginie's own troubled emotional state. Because of their fear, they see only the difficulties that they will eventually face because of their relatively harsh environment; and they cannot clearly see the benefits that this same environment offers them.

Bernardin thus suggests that the *mal* that the family faces originates internally rather than externally. Their fears revolve around what *might* happen rather than what they are facing in their present reality and cause them to imagine a future of suffering. By maintaining a complete faith in God and an acceptance of all possible difficulties as holding a greater meaning, the characters could avoid such inner turmoil and would continue to see the benefits of the world around them rather than all of the hardships. Bernardin does not pretend that having such faith will be easy, as he illustrates with Virginie's dilemma as she develops deeper feelings for Paul; but he also does not offer much advice concerning how to address those feelings and what action, if any, to take.

Virginie's changing attraction towards Paul causes her to question her morality in view of their relationship as siblings. Bernardin offers no way of determining whether one's natural feelings are also virtuous, or perhaps, if they are not, whether they are still a part of a universal plan. Despite the author's unwillingness to consider immoral acts as the social counterpart to nature's violence, both of them contributing to God's universal plan towards a perfect state,

Virginie's *mal inconnu* and the possible immorality of her feelings point to this problem. Interpreting the morality of one's feelings and deciding whether to act on them depends arbitrarily on the subjective determination of one's virtuous or unvirtuous motivations.[29] Instead of offering a resolution to this problem, Bernardin shows only how Virginie's emotional turbulence casts a shadow on her perception of her natural surroundings.

When she visits her Place de Repos in the hope of finding a sense of calm on a particularly hot night, her "mal inconnu" contrasts with her memories of her innocent relationship with Paul. As she reflects upon her interactions with her dear friend, her thoughts of Paul are "plus douces que les parfums, plus pures que l'eau des fontaines, plus fortes que les palmiers unis" terms that describe a love that is innocent and associated with the strength and beauty of the natural world as well as a pleasant clarity associated with the physical senses (113). This is the friendship of her childhood, of the past, and finding comfort in its familiarity, she is once again briefly able to see tranquility and beauty in her environment. When her memories of their innocent friendship eventually dissolve into new, more passionate feelings, the clear beauty of nature becomes obscured by darkness, isolation, and danger. "Elle pense à l'amitié de Paul [. . .] Elle songe à la nuit, à la solitude, et un feu dévorant la saisit. Aussitôt, elle sort, effrayée de ces dangereux ombrages [. . .]" (115). Just as her body has become foreign, so does her favorite spot on the island, and Virginie projects her fear of the unknown onto this Place de Repos. The spring is no longer pure and cool but has become burning and threatening, with dark shadows that frighten her and contrast with the tranquility she usually associates with this area. The

[29] Chateaubriand explores this very problem in his novel *René*, 1802, in which the title character is confronted with his incestuous feelings for his sister. Rather than rely on a vague sense of natural virtue, Chateaubriand encourages guidance from organized religion.

burning corresponds to the physical transformation and new desire Virginie is experiencing while the darkness is representative of her incomprehension and the terror that it evokes. While she is capable of seeing beauty and innocence in her surroundings, the same surroundings can become dark and forboding depending on her internal emotional state. Despite her fears and her ignorance regarding her circumstances, she manages to maintain her faith and virtue even as she suffers. “Plusieurs fois, voulant raconter [à sa mère] ses peines [. . .] Plusieurs fois, elle fut près de prononcer le nom de Paul, mais son cœur oppressé laissa sa langue sans expression” (115). Madame de la Tour advises her only to pray, and although she has her own motivations for keeping Virginie’s feelings a secret, Bernardin still depicts Virginie’s waiting and observing as the most likely path towards virtue.

Expanding the conflict between action and inaction to natural phenomena beyond the personal experience of the changing body, Bernardin draws a parallel between Virginie’s adolescence and the extreme natural phenomena of a heat wave and drought followed by a hurricane. Although Virginie’s changing body and emotions are not disasters, or at least not ones on the same scale as a hurricane, they still share some characteristics with this kind of phenomenon in the sense that they are entirely out of her control. Just as one cannot prevent a natural disaster and may not understand why it is occurring, Virginie cannot prevent her body from maturing, nor can she change the way she feels. In the same way that the darkness at her Place de Repos corresponds to her confusion and agitation, the heat wave affecting the colony hinders the ability to see clearly. “Ces chaleurs excessives s’élevèrent de l’océan des vapeurs qui couvrirent l’île comme un vaste parasol [. . .] Les sommets de montagnes les rassemblaient autour d’eux, et de longs sillons de feu sortaient [. . .] de leurs pitons embrumés”(115). Finally

the heavy showers that accompany a violent hurricane are described as “cataractes” a figure of speech referring to torrential rains, but also undoubtedly connoting the medical condition that obscures one’s vision (115).

The parallels between Virginie’s adolescence and the storm are significant because they both illustrate the necessity of accepting the unknown. In a demonstration of their faith, Virginie, Madame de la Tour, and Marguerite seek shelter in Madame de la Tour’s cabin where they tremble and pray for their safe delivery. Just as Virginie does not reveal her feelings to Paul but instead chooses to pray for guidance and strength, she does nothing but wait and pray during the hurricane (115). It would seem then that Bernardin asserts that it is best to regard and accept natural turmoil without resistance. However, it is impossible to limit his viewpoint to this assertion because of Paul’s reaction to the storm. Unlike Madame de la Tour, Marguerite, and Virginie, Paul demonstrates his own faith through his comfort and lack of fear in the natural world as well as the naïve certainty that they will all survive. “L’intrépide Paul [. . .] allait d’une case à l’autre malgré la fureur de la tempête [. . .] il ne rentrait que pour consoler la famille par l’espoir prochain du retour du beau temps” (116). Although the storm rages around him, his innocent and trusting emotional state allows him to view this situation with eternal optimism. His reaction can also be read as a contrast to Virginie’s experience at the pond. Whereas she views her environment as threatening because of her inner turmoil, Paul’s inner tranquility allows him to regard even a life-threatening hurricane as a temporary natural phenomenon that will soon give way to serene weather.

Bernardin thus presents two situations that are potentially destructive and shows that the characters react to them through prayer, faith, and action to ensure their well-being; but he

cannot entirely delineate what level of agency is acceptable. Paul's actions do not, of course, involve questioning his virtue, but as with Virginie's circumstances, they again demand how much agency one can have and how much one can be passively carried along by a divine plan. In the case of the storm, Paul's reinforcement of the two rustic houses is a perfectly acceptable measure to increase the family's chances for survival. It remains ambiguous as to whether or not his actions are necessary, but it is worth noting that he is acting out of a sense of practicality rather than fear of the storm.

Paul's actions and Virginie's passivity fall acceptably within Bernardin's boundaries of nature and virtue, but their choices become even more difficult to determine once they are faced with the values of metropolitan France. Bernardin presents these values as being born out of a fear of a future suffering. Unlike Paul and Virginie and their different but complementary ways of choosing to act or observe, the metropolitan French tend to act entirely out of fear. In an attempt to protect themselves from nature's uncertainties and violence, they close themselves off from the natural world, surround themselves with wealth and material goods, and then spend their lives trying to preserve their possessions for themselves and their families. Bernardin depicts this fear of nature and the consequential material hoarding as the root of the evil that eventually invades and corrupts the lives of Paul and Virginie.

Differentiating Between Necessity and Excess

To differentiate between divine and earthly benevolence as well as the difference between basic human needs and the desire for unnecessary comforts, Bernardin draws a parallel between the noble classes and God in his depiction of the families' praying and in Madame de la Tour's many letters to her aunt. God responds to the children's prayers for food, water, and safe

delivery from the forest where they are lost. By contrast, Madame de la Tour's pleas to her aunt for financial assistance to live beyond the most basic provisions are never answered, until the aunt requires something in return (118). The criticism is two-fold. Unlike the children's requests for help, Madame de la Tour's requests are desires rather than absolute needs. Moreover, the aunt's stinginess and scorn towards her niece contrast sharply with the divine benevolence that the children experience. This could be read as Madame de la Tour's decision to put her faith into a figure who can bestow upon her only conditional material wealth.

Madame de la Tour's appeal to her aunt for financial help once again brings into question the problem of virtue and autonomy. Her desires to ensure that the children have enough money to enjoy a life of more ease and comfort can hardly be called selfish; she is only wishing to shelter them from hardship. Nevertheless, her desires are unnecessary, and therefore unacceptable, although Bernardin never defines how much is considered excessive. Instead of relying on her faith that Paul and Virginie will be able to manage, and that if they do not, they will surely be embraced in the celestial afterlife, she guesses that the future holds only grief and misery. She actively tries to prevent this imagined future from occurring largely by sheltering Virginie from her maturing body and feelings.

Ideally, Madame de la Tour should have faith that this physically turbulent time for Virginie is a natural phenomenon that will eventually evolve into a more stable and tranquil state of being. Her decision to withhold knowledge from Virginie reflects her desire to prevent any potential future hardships from occurring. Furthermore, she believes that all hardships can be avoided through the accumulation of wealth. While she advises her daughter to turn to God for guidance, her counsel serves the purpose of allowing her to postpone a discussion of the

changing relationship between the two children. By not talking with Virginie, Madame de la Tour believes on some level that she can also prolong her daughter's childhood, as if her denial of Virginie's maturation will actually prevent it from occurring; by doing this, she hopes in the meantime to find a way to provide her daughter with enough money to live comfortably.

Through the children's calm and rational innocence, Bernardin shows that Madame de la Tour is misguided in her actions and that her desires are excessive, and therefore veering away from virtue. Her proposal for Paul to go to India recalls her own husband's failed plan to purchase slaves and as a result, his untimely death. Although her idea for Paul has been modified such that he would be selling items from the colony and would go to India during a more moderate season, the similarities between her late husband's voyage and this potential one, as well as the similarities of her past motivations, immediately provoke a sense of foreboding.

In addition to this, Paul's response suggests that her fears concerning the children's ability to survive are unfounded or at least exaggerated. "Si nous voulons faire le commerce, ne pouvons-nous pas le faire en portant notre superflu d'ici à la ville sans que j'aille courir aux Indes?" (118). While she believes that they are barely able to make ends meet, Paul observes that their garden produces so many crops that they could easily sell the surplus in town; there is no need to go to India. Similarly, when she is trying to convince Virginie of the advantages of going to the metropole, her daughter points out that traveling in the hope of obtaining a vast fortune is unnecessary, and that they will be happy as long as they work hard and have faith in God. "Jusqu'à présent, [Dieu] ne nous a pas abandonnés, il ne nous abandonnera point encore. Sa providence veille particulièrement sur les malheureux" (121). Through the two children, Bernardin demonstrates how a combination of faith and a willingness to adapt to natural

conditions can help alleviate fears concerning the future.

In spite of the faith of Paul and Virginie, the combination of fear and the temptation of financial fortune spreads like a contagion to Marguerite, the governor, and even the religious missionary of the colony, a criticism of the implicit role of governmental bodies and organized religion in the perpetuation of this desire for excess as well as class inequalities. Again, knowing what to interpret as a sign of Providence proves problematic for Bernardin's characters. Both the governor and the missionary view the possibility of the acquisition of this financial gift as a sign of Providence; any one who would not accept it would be demonstrating a lack of common sense as well as a refusal of God's will. The governor Monsieur de la Bourdonnais remarks, "La fortune ne vient pas tous les jours. Consultez-vous. Tous les gens de bons sens seront de mon avis" (120). Similarly the missionary thanks God for this fortune and frames it as God's will that Virginie go to France, despite her own protests that they do not need such wealth and that God has never abandoned them even in their poverty. "Dieu soit loué! Vous voilà riches [. . .] Il faut obéir à la Providence, à nos vieux parents, même injustes. C'est un sacrifice, mais c'est l'ordre de Dieu"(122). Madame de la Tour herself uses this sentiment in her attempt to convince Virginie that going to France is the right decision. "Songe maintenant que [la] fortune [de Paul] dépend de toi"(121).

And yet, this decision ultimately leads to tragedy. When Madame de la Tour engages with her metropolitan family once again, she unwittingly brings Paul and Virginie under the power of the upper classes and makes them dependent on their fortune. Virginie's experiences, and eventually her death, all turn on the fears and desires of the aristocratic aunt and the governor and their capacity to impose their will on those of inferior status. Bernardin makes it

clear that Virginie is virtuous in her obedience of her family and in her desire to act according to God's will, but he also shows that the ulterior motives of the governor and the missionary are not virtuous despite what they tell the young girl. Because of their social status, their fears do not remain contained but are instead imposed on others under the guise of an interest in helping the less fortunate.

Bernardin condemns the governor and the confessor for their greed and corruption while at the same time showing that any resistance to their desires is futile. Just as the aunt holds power over the fate of the families, the governor exerts a similar degree of authority. When Paul is threatening to swim after Virginie's ship to follow her to France, for example, he does not talk about the ocean as being a barrier; rather, he defiantly tells the Old Man that Monsieur de la Bourdonnais will not be able to stop him, in this way qualifying the governor's influence as more powerful than nature. "Le gouverneur m'en empêchera? M'empêchera-t-il de me jeter à la mer? [. . .] La mer ne saurait m'être plus funeste que la terre"(127). The family decides that Virginie will stay in Ile de France rather than go to the metropole, but their will has become irrelevant in face of the governor's desire. That night, Virginie is carried away against her will and against the will of her family, a sacrifice for the colony's greater material wealth. Once the social and cultural values of the metropole invade the *petite société*, the families' well-being becomes dependent on the whims of the ruling classes. As if they are still dealing with the powerful forces of Providence and nature, they are helpless to resist being swept along by the desires of the aristocracy. Monsieur de la Bourdonnais' desire to bring great fortune to the colony sets into motion a series of events that the simple families cannot stop.

The Case Against Ambition

Once Virginie leaves, Paul succumbs to the anxiety that has been plaguing Madame de la Tour. Just as Virginie's inner emotional turmoil causes her to see her environment as dark and foreboding, and just as Madame de la Tour's anxiety causes her to see only hardships ahead for the children, Paul sees only savagery in his surroundings once Virginie parts for France. He isolates himself from his family, refusing to offer them any comfort during this stressful period, and climbs to the top of the tallest cliff in the hope of seeing Virginie's ship on the horizon. He thus surrounds himself not with the stability of his family but rather with the savage wilderness of nature. He sees the mountaintop as a "lieu sauvage, toujours battu de vents, qui y agitent sans cesse les sommets des palmistes et tatamaques," but these same cliffs were once a source of pleasure for him, a place where he happily risked his life to gather fruits for Virginie (129). Once she is gone, he focuses all of his reason for existing on her, attributing to her qualities that many would reserve for God. "Sans elle, je n'ai rien; avec elle, j'aurais tout. Elle seule est ma naissance, ma gloire, et ma fortune"(144). He finds little comfort in prayer without Virginie's presence. He turns his attention to all the possible ways in which he can be reunited with her and in which he can close the gap between their social classes. His inner turmoil and changing view of nature pushes him towards the European values he once shunned.

Labio points out that Paul wishes for a war in India so that in his death as a soldier, he could escape the pain of living without Virginie (Bernardin 151). He also decides that it would be acceptable to purchase a large number of slaves in the hope of amassing a great fortune, another nefarious aspect of colonialism that again results from his individual dissatisfaction with his life (Labio 681). It would seem that Paul's only virtuous recourse is patient passivity and

faith in God. While Bernardin's perspective opposes the excesses of the aristocracy, it also suggests that ambition among the less privileged classe would be detrimental to the well-being of the rest of the society and would cause even more misery among the poor.

This includes education to some degree, which Bernardin discourages as a way of achieving social advancement.[30] Bernardin tends to show that not only is it unnecessary, but it also leads to greater unhappiness. The Old Man encourages Paul to read, telling him that "Un bon livre est un bon ami," and that he can find comfort in the writings of past scholars who also suffered (152). However, Paul's reading only draws him deeper into his state of misery. He has decided to study because he believes it will bring him closer to Virginie's social status, but much to his disappointment, his learning will have little bearing on his future interactions with his friend. Furthermore Bernardin observes that the French are not interested in intellectual or scientific pursuits unless they can lead to greater wealth. As if that were not discouraging enough, he notes that "Le meilleur des livres, qui ne prêche que l'égalité, l'amitié, l'humanité, et la concorde, l'Evangile, a servi pendant des siècles de prétexte aux fureurs des Européens" (145). One can read about past injustices and suffering, but to try to protest such suffering is useless. Paul's history lessons are little more than lists of wars and conquests, further examples of different civilizations being unable to accept their circumstances and causing more misery through violence. As if that were not vexing enough, the novels that Paul reads only illustrate the immorality of continental France and cause him to imagine all of the ways in which Parisian society could corrupt Virginie. In response to the Old Man's suggestion to read to find happiness

[30] For a discussion of the incoherency of Bernardin's view of education, see Bernard Bray, "'Paul et Virginie', un texte variable à usages didactiques divers." *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*. 89.5 (1989): 856-878. Bernardin used Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as a model for education and his discouragement of the use of books. See for example "Lettre 12 à Julie" (40-55).

and consolation, Paul replies, “[J]e n’avais pas besoin de savoir lire quand Virginie était ici [. . .] [Q]uand elle me regardait en m’appelant son ami, il m’était impossible d’avoir du chagrin” (152).

Through Paul, the reader sees how the struggle to rise to the status of the upper class can cause one to turn away from nature and virtue. Instead of working the land as he always did when Virginie was present, he spends his time dreaming of ways in which he can be reunited with her. All of his reveries involve gaining the esteem of others or amassing a great fortune so that he may be worthy enough to marry his dear friend. He defines his worth according to the metropole’s social criteria and once again feels inadequate because of his lack of possessions and nobility (147). Madame de la Tour’s plan for him to go to India to make his fortune suddenly seems perfectly reasonable, also attesting to his increasing dissociation from a life of nature and virtue. The Old Man discourages such ambition, telling him that his desire to distinguish himself from others is “unnatural” and that if everyone wanted to do this, the entire world would constantly be at war (143).

The Old Man then advises Paul to be satisfied with his situation in life because as a person raised in the solitude of the natural world, he is free of the expectations and constraints of others and can live a life without vice (142). It is little wonder that Paul falls into a state of depression; he has been shown all of the violent and immoral acts of European culture and history and then been told that he can do nothing to try to change it. As it is, his learning only plunges him into a state of despair and causes him to see even the natural world as threatening. Through Paul’s suffering, Bernardin makes the case for blissful ignorance. Paul clearly would have been happier with only his natural education based on his senses and practical experiences

(Bray 863).

At the same time, Bernardin suggests that Paul and Virginie are the victims of the French aristocracy, who, as the ruling class, has a responsibility to benevolence towards its subordinates. In describing the nobility as clouds obscuring the sunny rays of a benevolent king, Bernardin ties his depiction of the aristocracy to the hurricane that destroys the families' farm and gardens and that also obscures the skies: "Le roi est un soleil que les grands et le Corps environnent comme des nuages; il est presque impossible qu'un de ses rayons tombe sur vous" (142). Through this comparison, he suggests again that the best possible action the family can take is to patiently pray for safe delivery from this turbulence. The aristocracy, on the other hand, is charged with the responsibility of not destroying the lower classes.

The aunt exemplifies all that is wrong with the nobility's preoccupation with material wealth. After becoming more aware of her mortality following a brush with death, she does not look towards the celestial world but rather, focuses on finding an heir to her great fortune. In a clear comparison between the aunt and the colony's cruel plantation master, Bernardin criticizes the heartlessness of the aristocracy, an acerbic commentary at the height of the abolitionist movement. Although the aunt's treatment of Virginie lacks the violence of slavery, she effectively purchases her niece. She sends a large sum of money to the colony, and Virginie is literally carried away against her will and shipped off to the metropole. "[L]e gouverneur, suivi d'une partie de son état-major et du missionnaire, était venu chercher Virginie en palanquin; et que, malgré ses propres raisons, ses larmes et celles de Marguerite, [. . .] ils avaient emmené sa fille à demi-mourante" (129).

Once she is in France, she loses her freedom despite her entry into the upper echelons of

French society. She spends most of her time in a convent receiving an education so that she can shed her rustic education fit for servants and become a countess. Her aunt intercepts all of her communication with her family, dictates all of her activities down to the detail of her clothing, and decides who she will marry. She is not allowed to return to the colony until her aunt finally abandons the notion that Virginie will ever be able to conform to metropolitan standards (153). By depicting this relationship as similar to the one between a master and slave, Bernardin at once shames the upper class for their corruption and appeals to them to avoid being like this slave master. He offers the counterexample of the relationship between the two families and their slaves Domingue and Marie.

The aunt's curious desire to control who inherits her fortune as well as her tendency to believe that no one deserves it attests to her need to impact the future even after her death, an extreme example of Madame de la Tour's own fears regarding the fate of the *petite société.* Accordingly, she never finds any kind of rest, an example of the eternal suffering that the aristocracy will bear as a consequence of their unnatural and decadent lives and designates her as another character whose inner turmoil affects her view of her surroundings. Just as Virginie and Paul wander the island in search of inner peace, the aunt seeks peace everywhere, vacillating between atheism and superstition, and falling into a state of near madness. Unlike Paul and Virginie, she has no faith because she never lets go of the material world enough to become spiritual. Rather than reforming or truly repenting, she attempts to buy her way into God's graces by making large donations to the church. Haunted by imaginary ghosts and her own guilty conscience, and then confronted with the knowledge that the fortune she has been protecting for so long will be inherited by family members that she despises, she never does find a satisfying

and peaceful state. Bernardin characterizes this as a divine punishment. “[C]ar le ciel, le juste ciel, envoie aux âmes cruelles des religions effroyables” (174). The antithesis of the model noblewoman for the upper classes, the aunt is also an example that even with great wealth, she is not immune to the turbulence of nature and civilization.

The aunt’s drawn-out demise is depicted as a punishment for her cruelty and miserliness, a contrast to the death of Virginie and the subsequent passing of the families. Although Paul, Madame de la Tour, and Marguerite never recover from Virginie’s death, it does serve the purpose of causing them to become less attached to the material world. The greatest fear of Paul, Madame de la Tour, and Marguerite has come to pass; they have lost one of the most precious elements of their lives, and as a result, the rest of the material world seems inconsequential. Although all of them pass away not long after Virginie’s death, their passing in itself is also not meant to be viewed as a complete tragedy. They suffer from a profound sadness, but none of them fear death any longer. Furthermore, all three of them experience a prophetic dream in which Virginie guides them up to Heaven, an allusion to their past fear of the future and what it held for them as well as Paul’s desire to be able to see the future. God, in a response to their grief, offers them a glimpse of the celestial repose that awaits them, and Bernardin presents their deaths as a welcome reunion with Virginie.

Thus for Bernardin, the promise of a celestial afterlife outweighs all earthly experiences, effectively discouraging any kind of extreme action on the part of civilization. In his pacifism, he avoids regarding man as a natural being who could resort to the extremes that nature demonstrates in order to restore equality in the imbalanced social order. While Bernardin admits that great passions lead to great advances in science and the arts, he is not willing to admit that

they could also lead to great advances in social organization.[31] Instead, he defines moderation and constancy as the only path towards happiness, and consistently demonstrates that any movement away from the social norms results only in despair. His depiction of social change as coming from the top of the social hierarchy rather than from the bottom avoids the possibility of any type of violent social upheaval; and in his advocacy for a simple and virtuous lifestyle, he is appealing to the upper classes in particular to avoid being like the evil aunt whose cruelty has resulted in the tragic deaths of virtuous people. Had the aristocracy been more humane and egalitarian with Madame de la Tour and Marguerite, none of this would have occurred. Even if the aunt had been able to show some unconditional kindness towards her family, they would not have suffered. Instead, she embodies all that is evil about the upper classes, and her cruel judgment and preoccupation with material wealth contribute to the immense suffering of the *petite société*. *Paul et Virginie* can thus be read as an appeal to the oppressed classes not to revolt and as an appeal to the aristocracy to avoid inciting revolution.

In the greater context of this study, Bernardin's novel is an example of a pre-Revolutionary understanding of nature and social upheaval. Underlying this work is the persistent belief that living according to nature, with only the minimal individual agency essential for survival, will intrinsically result in a virtuous society. Although Bernardin discourages social unrest in *Paul et Virginie*, his tendency to look to nature for guidance is consistent with a cornerstone of the philosophical foundation of the French Revolution. The implicit trust in nature as a guide allowed revolutionaries to justify the atrocities of this great social uprising.

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[31] See *Paul et Virginie*, "Sans doute c'est aux jouissances que se propose cette passion ardente et inquiète que les hommes doivent la plupart des sciences et des arts" (130).

The three post-Revolutionary novels that make up the rest of this study's literary corpus echo some elements of *Paul et Virginie*, if they do not allude directly to Bernardin's pastoral novel. However, while each of the three nineteenth-century authors demonstrates a desire to minimize the violence of a revolution, he also shows that the characters cannot accomplish such a feat if they accept nature's violence with Bernardin's encouraged passivity. Rather, their ability to direct and negotiate nature's destruction translates into the ability to minimize the brutality of social upheaval.

CHAPTER TWO

Into the Mouth of the Revolutionary Abyss :

The Significance of the Grotto in Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*

In the effort to assign meaning to natural disasters, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre observed the good that might come out of them, suggesting that in nature and in society, hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions all had the potential to lead to greater harmonies. In light of this, it was perhaps not surprising that revolutionaries wanted to apply this concept to sociopolitical upheaval. If natural disasters pushed the physical world towards new growth, it was possible that revolution might do the same for civilization by razing the Old Regime to clear the way for a republican form of government.

The September and Glacière Massacres tested this notion when revolutionaries in two different towns executed hundreds of people and justified this act by deeming it necessary to move the country towards a stable republic. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius that prevented Italy from invading the new republic confirmed the revolutionaries' impression that they were on the right path. Suddenly, revolution was not simply *like* a natural phenomenon; it had become one with the forces of nature. French political figures used the image of the volcano as a passionate symbol of the new republic in their writing and speeches. In a letter concerning France's conflicts with England, Joseph Fouché wrote to Public Safety Committee member Bertrand Barère, "[T]he entire republic will form a single volcano that hurls upon them a devouring lava" (M. Miller 149).

The hundreds of executions under the Terror, however, gradually began to convince the republican administration that social upheaval was not an uncontrollable natural phenomenon.

No longer willing to excuse criminal acts as unpunishable natural offenses, the French began to implement laws directed towards crime. Eventually, the volcano became a symbol of the overzealous revolutionary, a warning that trusting too much in nature and idealizing the revolution would lead to indiscriminate destruction. This change in thought more closely resembled the viewpoint of the counterrevolutionaries who saw the war as the fall of civilization and the advent of chaos. Mary Ashburn Miller cites a verse added to the end of a revolutionary song "Le Reveil du peuple" as evidence of the changing viewpoint towards the revolution and the terrible massacres born from it. "If you save yourself alongside terrorists / You will sleep on volcanoes. / It is not enough to hate crime. / You must destroy it. / If you don't close up the abyss, / the abyss will swallow you up" (162).

In Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*, the characterization of the start of the Haitian Revolution as a volcanic eruption draws the social upheaval in the Caribbean closer to the metropole's own turbulence. The last two lines of "Le Reveil du peuple" could easily be the counterrevolutionary response to the rallying battle cry of *Bug-Jargal*'s rebel army: "Bouleversons la terre pour qu'elle engloutisse les blancs!" (103). In this short sentence, Hugo elicits connotations of death, burial, and possibly an infernal afterlife for the small but oppressive slave-owning population. In Hugo's personification of the earth, the land becomes a hungry, living giant that is capable of destroying the white population and that the rebel slaves believe can work in their favor. In the context of the revolutionary French metropole and its ties to nature, this expression reveals a belief that the Haitian Revolution, an uprising that Hugo saw as an extension of the French Revolution, was also synchronized with nature's forces, leaving its opponents helpless to stop it.

By weaving together images of both hurricanes and volcanic eruptions, Hugo suggests

that the revolution is not only an uprising of slaves, but also an uncontrollable revolt of nature itself against the planter community. As the revolution unfolds, “un flot des noirs” rises and falls against fortress walls (72). A “mer de flammes” and “torrents de fumée” engulf the plantations (71, 62). As fires cut across the forests, “la fumée monte et verse en s’envolant un flot de cendre rouge, qui pleut longtemps sur la terre” (79). The comparison between this metaphorical sea and volcanic eruption emphasizes the oppressive heat of this inferno and conveys a sense of complete helplessness against a powerful natural element that moves quickly and forcefully across the island and that cannot be contained. Additionally, these catastrophic representations of the revolution correspond to Hugo’s use of the mouth as mode of destruction. The flames “devour the air” and are like a tongue that lashes out to burn through the forest: “Tout à coup une langue de feu débouche par l’une des extremités de cette fraîche ceinture [. . .]” (79). The revolution is a seemingly natural phenomenon that defies the civilization of the plantation society and that allows the natural wilderness to reclaim the land of the white planters.

While those fighting for a new social order would likely have seen this violence as a necessary evil directing them towards a more just social order, counterrevolutionaries would have seen it as further evidence of the end of civilization. Rather than presenting the revolution as a collaboration between the natural and civilized realms to create a utopic new society, Hugo shows both nature and revolution to be the uncontrollable bearers of meaningless destruction, an anti-revolutionary viewpoint that corresponds to the publication of the first version of *Bug-Jargal* (1820) in the ultra-royalist literary journal *Le Conservateur Littéraire*. Although Hugo does not write specifically about natural disasters, he describes the rising revolution in terms of natural catastrophe, particularly geological phenomena, consistently referring back to this idea of

the abyss that will inevitably lead to the demise of both revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries if allowed to remain open without limitations. In contrast to Bernardin's recommendation to be passive and content with one's social status, Hugo shows that struggle and control are necessary and that the failure to act can be devastating.

In this chapter, I explore how Hugo depicts geological natural features as locations subversive to the plantation hierarchy and how he uses natural catastrophic imagery in his presentation of the Haitian Revolution to mirror the metropole's natural vision of its own revolution. In particular, caves and other mouth-like structures become menacing features that threaten Saint-Domingue's sociopolitical hierarchy and that reiterate the rebels' opening battle cry. The rebels' effective use of the island's natural caves suggests that they can navigate and manipulate the natural world in ways that the French army and the white planters cannot; and their cry to "open up the earth" takes on a more literal than figurative meaning. The various underground caverns allow the rebels to define their spaces and visions of a new order independently of the yoke of the plantation hierarchy, but even man-made cave-like structures located on the plantations are cast in a subversive light when the rebel leader Bug-Jargal uses them to infiltrate and challenge the plantation hierarchy. I trace the slow invasion of Bug-Jargal's rebellion into the life of the main character Léopold d'Auverney, and the natural ensuing chaos that together erode the sociopolitical foundation on which d'Auverney has built his entire life. As the plantation's sociopolitical structure crumbles, d'Auverney becomes incapable of understanding what is happening around him precisely because the revolution does not correspond to a familiar social structure in which all of the members have a defined role. As he tries to make sense of this great social uprising, he moves through different subterranean spaces

that the slaves have claimed as their own, an intrusion of the rebel camps that parallels Bug-Jargal's entry into his own life on the plantation. Together, d'Auverney and Bug-Jargal make up a dichotomous pair representing the respective points of view of the counterrevolutionary and the revolutionary, views that Hugo presents equally as tragically misguided idealism.

The presence of caves in *Bug-Jargal* corresponds to France's way of viewing their revolution through a natural lens, but Hugo, in a nod to Rabelais, also shows them to be the mouths of the earth, images of the grotesque (and the sublime) in his presentation of this sociopolitical upheaval. While this study will focus little on these nevertheless important aspects of Hugo's novel, it is worth noting that the grotesque takes on a sociopolitical significance in the context of the mouth, the cave, and the revolution. In accordance with the war cry Hugo gives the slaves to swallow the whites, Bakhtin observes that the mouth is "the most ancient symbol of death and destruction," a point that echoes the viewpoint of the counter-revolutionaries (*Rabelais and his World* 325). Kathrine Bonin also points out that Hugo presents the Terror as an act of cannibalism, an image that occurs throughout the novel ("Signs of Origin" 197).

While this is an astute interpretation from the point of view of d'Auverney, it ignores Bug-Jargal's perspective regarding the revolution, as well as the dual nature of this grotesque imagery. Bakhtin points out that traditionally, death also causes a "renewal in the earth's fertility," leading to the birth of something new, a perspective that corresponds more to Bug-Jargal's vision for a new social order. The various grottos serve as a passageway for Bug-Jargal to move freely about the plantation, challenge the social order, and eventually effect a revolution. The other rebel leaders Biassou and Habibrah also use the natural caves as hidden bases where they judge and execute white planters, and where they plan their strategies for the revolution.

Because of the caves' role in this great social uprising, they are very much like mouths that will eventually consume the old plantation society and give birth to something new. Whether this new beginning will be beautiful or monstrous remains ambiguous throughout the novel.

Although natural caves do not make up any part of the planters' properties, man-made cave-like structures are strikingly present and, as Jullien Dominique observes, form idyllic and nefarious pairs, with the natural caves and man-made cave-like shelters serving as antitheses of each other ("Bug-Jargal" 81). The plantation's pavilion and Bug-Jargal's cave are an idyllic pair, locations that demonstrate the possibility for hope even under the yoke of slavery or in the midst of a revolution. By contrast, the Fort Galifet's prison and Biassou's cave are both places of imprisonment and violence that are meant to quash any hope of freedom or happiness. It is important to note that the caves of Biassou and Bug-Jargal, although antitheses of each other, are still always defined according to the rebels' desires, demonstrating an element of their control over these natural structures. By contrast, the man-made structures do not always conform to the will of the planters. Rather, they too are spaces that Bug-Jargal reappropriates to correspond to his plans. The presence of other caves or cave-like structures as well as their various functions suggests a greater significance than the simple dichotomy that Dominique presents. The rebel leader invades the man-made structures of the plantation, altering and redefining them while the planters struggle to maintain the original functions of their own structures, a possible critique of their dependence on their socioeconomic position under the institution of slavery. Their adherence to their established social practices, including class hierarchies and defined spaces makes them weak compared to the rebels who redefine spaces and objects as they struggle for their freedom.

Hugo presents this weakness through his protagonist Léopold d'Auverney whose astonishing level of ineptitude stems from his dependence on the plantation hierarchy as a defining factor in his identity. To establish a basis for d'Auverney's eventual difficulties in coming to terms with the consequences of the revolution, Hugo describes d'Auverney's life before the Haitian Revolution as idyllic. The young Frenchman is wealthy, enjoys the privileges of being white, lives in a luxurious house with the woman he loves on an island that is beautiful and always offers the warmth and botanical abundance of summer. His sense of identity and superiority are contingent on the social order that the wealthy planters are intent on maintaining; and within the context of the plantation's social order, it becomes clear that he is hardly more than a pawn whose role is to carry on the family name. D'Auverney's personality, sociopolitical beliefs, and class status have been determined entirely by his planter uncle and his metropolitan family who have mapped out his entire life for him. Sent from the metropole to the colonies when he is a child and betrothed to his cousin Marie, he will eventually take over the role of planter on his uncle's plantation. In the meantime, he holds the position of lieutenant in the army only because of his social status and not because of any formal training or military knowledge (52). Ill-prepared to live without the support and influence of his uncle and family, d'Auverney finds himself lost when this social structure falls, and he is left with a nightmarish, "uncivilized" world.

In the first few chapters of his novel, Hugo presents nature as part of the plantation structure that supports d'Auverney's role and status. The planters' relationship with the natural world is to create order and comfort for themselves, and profit from it to maintain their lifestyle. The plantation of d'Auverney's uncle covers most of the plains of the North, and he owns more

than eight-hundred slaves from whom he expects complete and immediate obedience. His house resembles the manor of a feudal lord, surrounded by cultivated rose bushes. At the edge of his estate, isolated from the rest of the plantation in the shade of a nearby forest, he has had a pavilion built as a respite from the season's heat waves and a place of relaxation for his daughter Marie.

Upon the first stirrings of the Haitian Revolution, the ordered environment of the white planters begins break down, most evident when the rebels set fire to all of the fields and destroy the source of the planters' economic prosperity. However, even before this moment, Hugo conveys the imminence of the revolution by depicting nature's wilderness as an ominous presence that starts to invade and break down the structured nature of the plantation society even before the rebels' terrifying battle cry. Caves and cave-like structures serve as passageways through which nature can reclaim the land that has been ordered by the planters and through which slaves can (re)claim their freedom. Through natural and man-made mouth-like structures, both natural and social forces will eventually consume the plantation society.

Invasion Through Mouths

Bug-Jargal enters d'Auverney's idyllic life in a slow and fragmented infiltration that starts in the plantation's pavilion, the site of d'Auverney's continued courtship of Marie, his cousin and fiancée. Each day, d'Auverney has roses carefully arranged in this pavilion as a way of demonstrating his affection for her, a gesture symbolic of his preparation for the next generation of planters. Wild marigolds are the first natural sign of rebellion against the social order. As Marie's mysterious suitor, Bug-Jargal makes his interest known by tearing down all of d'Auverney's traditional roses and causing them to wither, a sign of the fragility of this carefully

cultivated flower. He replaces them with hardy and freshly picked wild marigolds or *soucis sauvages*.

The flowers Bug-Jargal chooses are significant, not only in their name, but also in the way they tie a human relationship to natural phenomena. A homonym to the word *souci*, or *worry* in French, the flowers hold some significance as a source of inquietude for both Marie and d'Auverney. However, the name originates from the Latin terms *sol sequia* meaning that which follows the sun and making reference to the marigolds opening at sunrise and closing at sunset, a characteristic that corresponds to the suitor's courtly song emanating from the forest in which he sings of his and Marie's racial differences in terms of day and night. "Tu es blanche et je suis noir; mais le jour a besoin de s'unir à la nuit pour enfanter l'aurore et le couchant qui sont plus beaux qui lui" (41). Just as the flowers follow the sun, he follows Marie; and his song suggests that she should return his affections for her. By associating this courtship of Marie so strongly with the natural world, Bug-Jargal disregards any social laws and customs that forbid interracial relationships and implies that such a union would not only be natural, but also beautiful. His amorous gestures also specifically threaten the relationship between Marie and d'Auverney, a union which has been planned for nearly twenty years and which represents the next generation of white planters. Considering the implications of the dissolution of this betrothal, Marie's secret admirer is not merely challenging d'Auverney, but is also sabotaging the future of the plantation.

Through this forbidden courtship, Bug-Jargal also implies that d'Auverney is too weak to protect Marie. Having been raised in the luxurious shelter of the plantation, d'Auverney has never had to struggle for his happiness, and Bug-Jargal's song about him compares him the aesthetically pleasing but often impractical fountain, primarily a source of beauty and leisure.

While the fountain provides water to the palm tree, a representation of Marie, it offers no shelter from harm. In his song, Bug-Jargal describes the impending revolution as a hurricane that engulfs both objects in a whirlwind of fire that dries up the fountain. Because the fountain can no longer provide the palm tree with water, nor protect it, the tree dies. By contrast, Bug-Jargal is symbolized by a bird that is able to move freely away from danger, a representation suggestive of the transcendence of his slave status and that foreshadows his ability to move freely through both the natural and civilized worlds. Unlike the fountain, he is not a static construction, but rather a natural living being. In the song, he is able to protect the palm tree from the hurricane by flying it away to a cistern, a reservoir for water that is traditionally protected from forces that might destroy it and that is often underground. The cistern is similar to the fountain in function, but as an isolated location that only Bug-Jargal can reach and as a cave-like structure, it represents a new social order built independently of the plantation society and its European origins.

The meaning behind this song, while revelatory of Bug-Jargal's power and capabilities, also carries with it the more foreboding suggestion of the rebel invasion throughout the island. Bug-Jargal cannot be contained in one area, but will eventually infiltrate multiple locations, breaking down the plantation society wherever he goes. The rebels' goal for nature to engulf the plantation society to make way for a new social order is emphasized by the image of the mouth that Hugo has placed throughout the novel. The melancholy yet vaguely threatening song, one of the first signs of social unrest in this novel, comes from the rebel slave's mouth while he is hidden in the forest. Unseen and unknown, Bug-Jargal is nothing more than a disembodied voice, a mysterious force defined only by this song. As he becomes more bold in his courtship of

Marie, his body begins to take form, but even then, the only features that d'Auverney can first distinguish are his eyes and his mouth. "[D]eux yeux ardents étincelaient dans l'ombre […] et une double rangée de dents blanches […] s'ouvrait … » (36). Hugo's focus on the mouth reiterates that it is a threatening feature that originates in this slave and that will eventually engulf the planters' world and transform it into something different.

Bug-Jargal's ability to control natural and "civilized" spaces becomes more pronounced as the date of the revolution approaches, but as he becomes more defined as a character, his actions suggest that he does not necessarily want all aspects of the plantation society to be destroyed, suggesting a variation in revolutionary thought. Bug-Jargal's desire to protect his fellow rebels as well as Marie and d'Auverney reveals a fragmented desire for a more moderate and collaborative effort to come to an agreement regarding the abolition of slavery. His idealism first becomes apparent when he finally makes himself known to Marie and d'Auverney and finds himself caught between two mouths.

A crocodile from the nearby river enters through a hole in the wall of the pavilion, a more literal invasion of the island's wilderness into the plantation. Bug-Jargal demonstrates his capacity to control this slow undermining of the plantation hierarchy by coming to Marie's rescue. Up to this point, Hugo has depicted Bug-Jargal as being a part of the wilderness that attacks the structure of the plantation society. His struggle with the crocodile opposes him to the natural world without placing him squarely into the hierarchies and rules of the plantation society. Instead, he can decide what aspects of the planter community can be destroyed and which ones are worth saving. The slave hero holds open the animal's jaws to prevent it from attacking Marie, an image that corresponds to his role as the discriminating rebel leader as well

as the image of the consuming mouth. Just as Hugo focuses on Bug-Jargal's eyes and mouth during his encounter with d'Auverney, he also focuses on the eyes and mouth of the crocodile as its most threatening features.

Once Marie is safe, Bug-Jargal does nothing to prevent this potential threat and destructive force from carrying out its natural inclinations. Despite his being the direct target of the crocodile, he does not hold the same fear or contempt of the creature that d'Auverney demonstrates. The incident could also be read as foreshadowing Bug's role in a revolution that is depicted as a force of nature. Trusting that the crocodile will not harm him, he turns his back on it and leaves himself open to attack. In a similar vein, although he is one of the leaders of the revolution and able to direct and guide thousands of slaves, this great social uprising is too powerful for him alone to control, implying that despite his leadership and vision, it will eventually swallow him up too. In the case of the crocodile, d'Auverney saves Bug-Jargal by firing his rifle into the creature's mouth, but the rebel leader's ensuing protest, "Pourquoi l'avez-vous tué?" attests to his willingness to sacrifice himself and to his faith that he is in control of the natural world.

The slave leader's philosophy towards nature and the revolution contrasts strikingly with that of d'Auverney who subdues the creature without hesitation. "L'animal, foudroyé, ouvrit et ferma encore deux ou trois fois sa gueule sanglante et ses yeux éteints... » (45). D'Auverney's focus on the crocodile's mouth rather than the rest of its body suggests a fear, not only of the most threatening characteristic of the animal, but also on the greater threat of being consumed by the natural world, a fear that corresponds to the perspective of France's counterrevolutionaries. D'Auverney saves Bug's life by killing the crocodile, but he is also arguably acting out his desire

to take Bug-Jargal's life for pursuing Marie. Considering the parallel Hugo draws between the physical characteristics of the crocodile and the slave and d'Auverney's struggle against them both, it is not out of the question to suggest that d'Auverney sees both Bug-Jargal and the crocodile as similar beings in that they are both threatening to Marie and to the future of the plantation.

By making himself known, Bug-Jargal has abandoned his mysterious status as Marie's secret admirer, an identity that resists the plantation hierarchy's classification because of its enigmatic nature. He has thus removed himself from nature's wilderness and entered the plantation's social order where he goes from the identity of mysterious suitor to that of an insubordinate slave. However, this does not mean that he has completely left behind the natural world. Rather, he is able to navigate between both domains, keeping his true identity as a rebel leader hidden and submitting to his slave name Pierrot. That said, once he has begun freely navigating the planters' world, he can hardly return to his unknown status and he instead implicates himself further into d'Auverney's plantation life as his actions against the planters escalate.

The destruction of the planters' ordered world moves out of the confined space of the pavilion and into the open plantation itself. In this open space, the episode of the pavilion repeats itself to some extent, drawing a parallel between the mouth of the crocodile and the mouth of the planter. In an incident that is recollective of Bug-Jargal's removal of d'Auverney's rose arrangements in the pavilion, a slave has accidentally crushed a carefully cultivated rose bush, inciting the wrath of d'Auverney's uncle. The action, although unintentional and lacking the mystery that Bug-Jargal was able to maintain, is nevertheless similar to Bug's destruction of

d'Auverney's flowers. The uncle's reaction to the crushed plant is also similar to his nephew's. Just as d'Auverney attempted to attack the mystery suitor for the invasion of the pavilion and the destruction of his roses, his uncle attempts to attack this slave. Bug's intervention in this assault parallels his intervention in the crocodile's attack on Marie. At the moment that the planter is about to strike the slave for destroying this plant, Bug-Jargal prevents him from doing so by seizing his arm and leaving the planter momentarily speechless. His eyes bulge and his cheeks puff out while his mouth remains closed, a grotesque depiction signifying a temporary impuissance against this slave.[32] The planter's speechlessness is comparable to the crocodile's own inability to attack. His mouth closed and his arm stayed, he can neither command his subordinates to submit to his will, nor physically attack them.

This episode illustrates Bug's power over threats in both the natural and civilized worlds, particularly their mouths, the sources of danger in both of these incidents. He is precariously caught between the mouth of the nature's destruction, represented by the crocodile, and the mouth of the plantation's social order, represented by the planter. If he trusts too much in nature and revolution, it will destroy him; at the same time, he cannot continue to submit to the despotic will of the planter or the social structure that upholds his power. He thus implicates himself in the dangers that both sides pose, confident in his assessment of the revolution as a positive force that he can control and certain of his ability to escape the bonds of the plantation's social order.

The slave leader's strength becomes apparent as he consistently finds or creates openings to escape his captors. Bug-Jargal's imprisonment demonstrates the planter's effort to contain this

[32] Bakhtin cites a scene from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* that presents very similar imagery in the case of a stutterer whose words are finally "born" from his mouth when Harlequin punches him in the stomach (304). *Bug-Jargal* offers a variation of this in that it is a prince, rather than jester, who prevents speech rather than facilitating it.

burgeoning resistance from the slave community and signifies the dark side of the planter community's ordering of the natural world. His prison cell is located in Fort Galifet, a structure that d'Auverney describes as a "hole in the ground," terms that lend it a cave-like quality. Thus, Bug finds himself engulfed in the bowels of the earth as if he has been swallowed whole by the planter class before he can launch the revolution. However, this imprisonment ultimately proves futile as Bug still manages to come and go as he pleases by pushing aside a large rock to create an opening. At first, he uses this opening only so that his dog Rask may leave to find food, but it eventually becomes an escape route for him as the date of the revolution's outbreak approaches. In this more literal sense, he is the slave who is "opening the earth" so that he may eventually lead a war to bring down the institution of slavery. This incident marks his ability to move easily between the plantation society and the natural world and use this subversive movement to undermine the authority of the planter community while continuing to make preparations for the impending revolution.

Because Bug-Jargal escapes in order to lead the rebel slaves into the first battles, his breakthrough marks not only a refusal to submit to white laws, but also a physical undermining of white establishments for the purpose of building something new. He makes an opening that compromises the structure of the prison and its purpose, thus reappropriating it as a space that only he can control. The white planters do not have the strength to move the boulder and are thus unable to use the prison cell as an opening into or out of the fort. This doorway proves advantageous to Bug-Jargal alone once the revolution begins. He is the only one capable of rescuing Marie from the burning structure because he is able to enter without being stopped by the French soldiers. In reaction, one of them communicates to d'Auverney his exasperation at

Bug's destruction of the fort. "[V]otre Pierrot est un sorcier, un obi … ou au moins un diable. Nous tenions bon ; vous arriviez et tout était sauvé quand il a pénétré dans le fort, je ne sais pas par où, et voyez !" (74). Bug-Jargal's surreptitious movement through the pavilion, the sugarcane, his prison cell, and the fort all suggest a weakening of the foundation of the plantation society. Through his courtship of Marie, his intervention in the punishment of the slave, his own escape from his prison cell, and his free movement through France's military base, he refuses to submit to his slave status. His personal rebellion slowly expands to affect more and more of the slave and planter community until, combined with seismic and geological imagery, it finally culminates in a catastrophic revolution comparable to the destruction caused by natural disasters. Together, these seemingly "natural" catastrophes engulf the plantation community in a representation that corresponds to Bug-Jargal's serenade to Marie and to the slaves' battle cry to open up the earth to devour the whites.

The Dangers of Passive Observation

D'Auverney's passive disposition contrasts with the persistent responsiveness of Bug-Jargal, defining the two characters as idealistic antitheses of each other. Although d'Auverney fights as a soldier for the French republic, he nevertheless represents the counterrevolutionary establishment of the hierarchical planter community, a social structure that he wants to preserve but for which he is unwilling to fight. Bug takes all action necessary to implement sociopolitical change while d'Auverney resists acting, in the hope that his old lifestyle can somehow be preserved. As the French military base burns down with Marie trapped inside, d'Auverney watches from the outside where he is helpless to save her while Bug places himself in the midst of the chaos to rescue her. D'Auverney's confusion and consequential failure to act continues

when he sees Bug exit the fort with her. Amidst the smoke and fighting, he fails to follow Bug and cannot even understand what it is that Bug says to him before the rebel leader disappears. This is the first of a series of incidents in which d'Auverney finds himself on the periphery of the action rather than in the midst of it, suggesting an inability to accept that the occurring nightmare is real. This denial continues even as d'Auverney unwillingly becomes more and more deeply implicated in a revolution that he sees only as a breakdown of social structures and a path to chaos. While Bug-Jargal does not hesitate to implicate himself in the messy political depths of the revolution, d'Auverney struggles to remain on the surface of it all.

By focusing on d'Auverney as a weak hero and narrator who fails to understand the events occurring around him, Hugo criticizes his protagonist's idealized understanding of plantation society. Even while d'Auverney condemns his uncle's cruelty and attempts to shield some of the slaves from the planter's wrath, he is certainly no abolitionist, nor does he believe that people of color are his equal. Furthermore, as the nephew of a wealthy planter, he has grown complacent in his lifestyle and although sympathetic to the suffering of the slaves, he is unwilling to oppose slavery or to relinquish the role he will inherit as planter. In fact, as long as the slaves' lives do not directly affect his future with Marie, he remains largely unconcerned with them.

D'Auverney's apathy regarding sociopolitical events that do not directly affect him are apparent even when the revolution has not yet begun. He complains about the meetings he is obligated to attend; and in his relationship with the other planters, including his uncle, he remains more of an observer than a participant once the sociopolitical upheaval begins. During the planters' meeting concerning the small social rebellions that have started taking place, he

does not contribute to the debate regarding the slave community's unrest but merely listens and allows his opinion to be swayed by one of the other planters. On more personal level, even in his disagreement with his uncle about Bug-Jargal's punishment, he is powerless to persuade him to act differently and instead waits for Marie to find a way to manipulate her father into freeing the slave leader. He resists involving himself with those around him, apart from Marie, and through this self-imposed isolation, is able to maintain his idealistic view of plantation life. Having never been able to regard the slaves as anything more than human chattel, he projects his impressions of their personalities onto them, in this way conforming them to his own limited impressions. He misjudges Habibrah as a loyal slave who was slain by the rebels and believes Bug-Jargal to be a rival who will eventually take Marie away from him.

Because d'Auverney has never had to plan his life himself, he has no idea how to proceed once his social order has collapsed, to the point that the reader can become frustrated with his seemingly exaggerated obtuseness. Nevertheless, d'Auverney is not so much intellectually limited as he is simply unwilling to accept this social change. When the revolution starts and he realizes that he has lost the promising future that he once had, he finds his life no longer seems real; all of the violent events occurring around him take on dream-like qualities. At the beginning of his narrative, he qualifies his future as an illusion, and even his fellow soldiers call him a "dreamer," as someone who is not completely engaged in the present or in reality. His reaction is the result of his understanding of the revolution as a movement towards complete disorder; as a planter's nephew, he cannot find a place in this new order and is incapable of moving beyond the edges of this uprising. Whereas Bug-Jargal enters the plantation society through the pavilion and the fort and intentionally implicates himself into the lives of the planter

family, d'Auverney tends to remain on the periphery of the events occurring around him. Instead, he focuses only on the life that he might have had. While the island burns, he still looks at the beauty of its natural settings as a nostalgic reminder of his lost past and the promise of a future that will never be. His efforts to separate himself from the war are futile as both his enemies and his allies repeatedly confront him with the reality of his situation. The battles themselves should sufficiently force d'Auverney to see that his life has been irreversibly altered, but he stubbornly clings to the dream of his perfect life with Marie.

Although Marie is at the center of d'Auverney's motivation to preserve his old lifestyle, his blindness to reality causes him to consistently make the wrong choices in his actions, effectively diminishing this possibility.[33] When he finally enters into battle, he is confronted with the different fragmented possibilities of the revolution's sociopolitical consequences which are presented to him through a series of caves or cave-like structures. In these spaces, he is forced to see that his old plantation life and his assessment of his slaves have never been anything more than a fantasy. He is pushed to decide what path to take towards his survival and possibly towards a happy, although different, life with Marie. Each of the caves, these openings into the earth, threaten to swallow him. Although this engulfment is not necessarily synonymous with death, but perhaps only with a new beginning, d'Auverney cannot accept that there is no escape from this change. By remaining an observer of the revolution, or at best, an unwilling participant, he can more easily reject the reality of it and continue to dream about the life he could have had. In other words, he consistently tries to avoid being "engulfed" by the revolution and its promise of different possibilities of a new social order.

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[33] Jullien Dominique, "Bug-Jargal : La Révolution et ses doubles." *Littérature* 139 (2005): 82.

D'Auverney's first battle takes place on the Grande Rivière, an experience that he finds difficult to recount to his audience, emphasizing a possible need to distance himself from it even years after it has happened. His lieutenant Thadée picks up the thread of d'Auverney's story, and through him, the listening soldiers learn that d'Auverney's company was ambushed from the cliffs on either side of the river. To avoid the assault of rocks and arrows and seek shelter from the canopy of vegetation that covers the river, d'Auverney's sergeant Thadée proposes that the French army enter the water. The canopy created by the creeping vines covering the water is the first completely natural cave-like structure to make an appearance in the novel. Out of fear of drowning in this wild and cave-like space, d'Auverney at first refuses to enter the river. He takes no action until the rebels target him with large rocks and he sees that the dense vines covering the river are the only possible form of shelter available to him. However, this natural space has already been claimed by the rebel army. Whereas the pavilion and the fort exist for the leisure activities and security of the white planters, the natural canopy over the river provides a hideout for the rebel slaves. Once the French army enters the water, they are ambushed by a group of rebels who have used this dense vegetation to lie in wait without being seen.

As d'Auverney attempts to distance himself from the reality of the revolution, he views all that is happening as a theatrical drama. Just as he does not breach the barrier of the burning fort, he also lingers behind and observes as if he were watching a spectacle unfold before him. He even describes the vegetation covering the river as a "curtain." This natural shelter, under the control of the rebels and a trap for d'Auverney's men, does not seem entirely real to him. He describes the ambush as a "scène," designating himself once again as a mere observer to the battle that he is supposed to be leading. The only reason that d'Auverney's army triumphs is that

Bug-Jargal calls for a retreat once he is captured so that the rebel slaves will not lose their lives fighting to free their leader.

D'Auverney is also captured, but unlike his rebel counterpart, he again remains a passive prisoner, waiting and observing without knowing how to respond to the rebels' acts. His movement into the slave camp resembles entering a cave into the foreign darkness of the unknown and the unplanned. He descends from the peak into a dark valley where the enemy has made its camp, finding himself in nature's wilderness, where even during the day the sunlight does not entirely reach the bottom of the valley. The rebels' torches and campfires define this space as theirs, and d'Auverney is acutely aware of the foreignness of this community to him. Although a prisoner, he is left on the outskirts of the camp from where he observes the activity of the former slaves surrounding him.

He focuses in particular on the *griotes*, the African women responsible for remembering their history and passing it from generation to generation. Hugo thus places two storytellers in the same space: d'Auverney who shares his experience with his fellow officers, and the *griotes* whose own stories and customs are completely foreign to him. The *griotes*' grimaces, the whiteness of their teeth, and their eyes, are physical details that recall his first encounter with Bug in the middle of the night and his subsequent encounter with the crocodile in the pavilion. Just as Bug and the crocodile threaten his well-being and the future of the plantation through their eyes and their teeth, the *griotes* in the camp do the same, and Hugo's imagery of these isolated body parts again suggest that d'Auverney will be swallowed up by this rebel army. It is not simply this fear that he will be harmed physically by his enemy, but also the idea that their history, their experiences will not only contradict his own beliefs but will also eventually

invalidate them. While the rebels have everything to gain in their quest for independence and autonomy, d'Auverney has everything to lose, including his life, his future with Marie, and his nostalgic view of his supposedly idyllic past. His negative view of the rebels allows him to resist their experiences as reality, and demonstrates his fear of being consumed by their history and culture that prior to the revolution, remained unknown to him.

As d'Auverney watches the *griotes*, he finds that he is not impervious to the images before him. His mental state slowly deteriorates in the face of the trauma he has experienced, to the point that his life takes on a dream-like quality. "Le malheur qui arrive ne semble pas un réveil, mais seulement un songe […] Si cette position violente de l'âme se prolonge, elle dérange l'équilibre de la pensée et devient folie" (144). As if he has already started to lose his sanity to the seemingly carnavalesque dance occurring before him, a *fou rire* escapes his lips. Traditionally an involuntary gesture of the grotesque and carnavalesque, he announces his presence much in the same way that Bug-Jargal announced his own with his song to Marie. This uncontrollable laugh draws him deeper into the world of the rebel slaves, forcing him to become a participant rather than a mere observer. Once the *griotes* notice him laughing, they decide to make him the sacrificial part of their ceremony. He becomes a part of their story in which he is no longer at the top of the social ladder and in which he finds himself at their mercy. In this sense, their story is at once enveloping and invading d'Auverney, forcing him to question his beliefs and life up to that point. Thus d'Auverney is compelled to implicate himself further into the rebel camp.

Because the rebels have other plans for d'Auverney, he does not suffer further involvement in the dance of the *griotes*, and is led away by a disguised Habibrah. While

Habibrah's intervention saves his life, it also places d'Auverney back into the position of the observer rather than the participant. However, at this point, he is no longer on his own turf. He has entered the story of the *griotes* and is forced to acknowledge that the revolution is really occurring, that his future with Marie is uncertain, and that if he does not become a willing participant in this mass uprising, he will lose both his sanity and his life. Despite his reluctance, he abandons his dreams of a paradisiacal future through the help and guidance of Bug-Jargal.

Caves of Disillusionment

This process involves moving through a series of three caves in which all of his illusions concerning the past are slowly stripped away from him as he continues to observe the reality of the rebel uprising. The caves themselves, by their very nature, correspond to this idea of the earth engulfing the white community, and they contrast with the planter community's own cave-like structures, namely the pavilion and the fort, locations integral in maintaining the plantation hierarchies. As a series of underground spaces appropriated as refuges by the slaves, the physical nature of the caves that potentially compromise the stability of the island's terrain symbolize the fragility of the foundation of the island's plantation order. The planters have had their slaves build their socioeconomic well-being on volcanic land that periodically shifts from seismic activity, a literal interpretation of a fragile foundation that threatens the entire social order. Furthermore, in these underground features, the rebels have the freedom to define their own social orders and create spaces that correspond to their desires, a less concrete yet very real threat to the plantation society.

Biassou, Bug-Jargal, and Habibrah each bring d'Auverney to a different cave where they reveal their ambitions that challenge d'Auverney's sociopolitical beliefs. With each displacement

from cave to cave, d'Auverney leaves further behind the security of the structures and privileges of plantation society. At the same time, these dark, "grotesque" structures threaten to consume him, first by leading him to question his past beliefs regarding the slaves as well as his sanity, and eventually by threatening his very life. He moves from one covered or subterranean structure to the next, losing a part of his old identity and incapable of building a new one. Because the rebel slaves do not correspond to his old perceptions of his plantation slaves, he can no longer define himself relative to them. Without the familiar points of comparison of his former life on the plantation, he has no meaningful sense of self, an observation he makes himself in his analysis of his life as a terrible dream: "[L]a vie n'est plus pour l'infortuné qu'une vision, dont il est lui-même le fantôme"(144).

The first true cave he enters has been appropriated as a headquarters for the rebel leader Biassou, but just as d'Auverney regarded the first real battle as a scene, he sees Biassou's cave as another setting for a performance. Before he enters, one of his guards pulls back a curtain serving as the makeshift door to this space, and d'Auverney views it as one would view the set of a theatrical drama in which everyone has a role to play. The cave, decorated in an assortment of republican, royalist, French and Spanish flags not only conveys the rebels' shifting loyalties between the various factions involved in the Haitian Revolution, but also contributes to d'Auverney's personal sense of confusion.[34] He inwardly mocks Biassou's appearance with the ill-fitting uniform he is wearing as well as the odd assortment of stars and épaulettes he has crudely attached to his jacket in order to distinguish himself as the chief of this army. In addition

[34] C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins : Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage Books, 1963. 101-110.

to this, Biassou has two white slaves serving him, demonstrating the extent to which the world has turned upside down. Biassou's cruelty characterizes this cave as the dark side of the revolution, the nefarious counterpart of France's Fort Galifet, and a place in which the motivation of the rebel soldiers consists of fear tactics and propaganda.

Biassou's cave has been decorated according to his vague impressions of what a throne room and a cathedral should look like. In this way, it shares some conceptual similarities with the palatial plantation house that d'Auverney's uncle had had built in his fantasy of being a feudal lord. Nevertheless, d'Auverney is blind to this parallel between the two domiciles and refers to everything that he sees in Biassou's cave as a "spectacle."[35] D'Auverney's interpretation of this space as theatrical is emphasized by the opening and closing of the curtain draped across the mouth of the cave. During a religious ceremony, a healing, and a trial, d'Auverney watches from his seat as if he is watching a play; and he refers to each event as such. As Habibrah commences his "healing" of injured slaves, d'Auverney describes his actions as "un autre spectacle, un autre genre de charlatanisme." Once Habibrah has completed his medical treatments and turns his attentions to fortune-telling, d'Auverney qualifies this as another theatrical act. "Une autre scène, dont l'obi voilé était encore le principal acteur, succéda à celle-ci" (106). Once this act is complete, d'Auverney calls it a "scène étrange" and a "comédie ridicule que Biassou et l'obi venaient de jouer" (116).

While d'Auverney's lack of participation in these events is hardly surprising, considering his status as a prisoner as well as the exoticism of what he is watching, his role as an observer rather than as a participant continues even when the event is directed towards him as a planter.

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[35] Kathrine Bonin, "Signs of Origin: Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies.* 36.3-4 (2008): 197.

D'Auverney witnesses a cruel trial in which Biassou forces a biracial man to prove that he is loyal to the rebels by killing a white man. He calls this "un nouveau drame" and even admits that as a white planter, he was expecting to "jouer bientôt mon rôle." He even waits for Biassou to turn his attention to him, but this never happens. Biassou's relative indifference to d'Auverney is based mainly on Habibrah's desire for personal vengeance against the nephew of the planter who humiliated him his whole life. However, this still places d'Auverney in a passive role, a character waiting for his life to be decided for him.

Bug-Jargal is the next rebel leader to present d'Auverney with an alternative to Biassou's vision of a new social order. When the slave hero finally seeks out d'Auverney in Biassou's camp, he breaks the Frenchman's dream-like state mainly because he is the only one who can provide answers regarding the whereabouts of Marie, the only aspect of d'Auverney's old life that still exists. Accordingly, the possible future he offers d'Auverney is the only one that lends him any sense of hope. Bug-Jargal's cave, in contrast with Biassou's, serves as the idyllic counterpart to Marie's plantation pavilion and as such, is very nearly paradisiacal. In an untouched natural forest, in a location known only to Bug-Jargal, it corresponds to his promise to rescue Marie and take her to a refuge. Covered in flowers and inhabited by Marie, the cave is like a natural version of the plantation pavilion, and in this way combines d'Auverney's nostalgia for his past with the reality of the rebellion. The cave, with its flowers, seclusion, and the virginal Marie, symbolizes this promise of an ideal social order and arguably lends a political rather than a romantic meaning to Bug-Jargal's song about marrying white with black to create

something more beautiful than separate races.[36] Bug-Jargal's cave represents the possibility to start a new life in new circumstances as well as the slave leader's own vision of the eventual consequences of his revolution. Happy even in these uncertain circumstances, Marie tells d'Auverney that she would like to live with him in this cave (162).

This episode marks a passage away from d'Auverney's unrealistic vision of an ideal life on the plantation with Marie and the opportunity for him to understand Bug-Jargal's true intentions and his history. This is the crux of the story, in which d'Auverney could take action that would likely still allow him to build a future with Marie. He recognizes Bug-Jargal as a "brother," and in avoiding his own execution by Biassou, he could save Bug's life as well. Out of the obstinate need to prove that as a Frenchman, he is honorable, he refuses to do this and chooses death by execution instead. D'Auverney's decision brings into question his motives for having to prove his honor. Considering the parallels between his decision and Bug-Jargal's own decision to remain a prisoner at the fort even when he could easily have escaped, it is likely that d'Auverney chooses this fate out of his persistent rivalry with the slave leader. By accepting the life that Bug-Jargal has arranged for him and his wife, he is not only proving that he has no sense of honor, but he is also proving that he is incapable of independently building a life with Marie. Even as he regrets his moral obligation to keep his word, he cannot bear to embark on a new life that does not correspond to his old one as the heir to a great plantation. He refuses this possibility, seeing it as another way of being consumed by the revolution, even if it holds the potential for a happy future with his wife.

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[36] The heroic rebel leader's positive outlook suggests that Hugo's presentation of revolution and royalism is more nuanced than Bongie supposes in his argument that Hugo scapegoats the mulatto. See *Islands and Exiles:The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. 232. Print.

He returns to Biassou's camp where Habibrah takes him to the final cave which offers only death. As he marches with Habibrah towards the place of his execution, they pass through a beautiful valley that stimulates his need to cling to his old life. Once again, he experiences a moment of nostalgia for the illusory and fleeting happiness of his paradisiacal past. "Que de fois, dans les temps plus heureux, je m'étais assis pour rêver sur le bord de ces beaux lacs […] Il s'élevait de tous les points de ce sol vierge un parfum primitif comme celui que devait respirer le premier homme sur les premières roses d'Éden" (176). Through this nostalgia, the entire valley seems beautiful again, and he is able to forget briefly that he is in fact heading to the end of his life. His viewpoint remains dangerously filtered through the notions of his old life until it becomes too late for him to save Bug and later, Marie. Once again, without Bug-Jargal's guidance and Marie as a beacon towards reality, d'Auverney falls victim to his daydreaming.

In the last natural cave which Habibrah has chosen as the place of d'Auverney's execution, the would-be planter must finally choose between his dreams and reality or lose his life. The natural imagery in the cave itself is symbolic of d'Auverney's dilemma. A waterfall flows from a large crevice into the cave where it forms a dark abyss. The tree in the cave in the cave marks this meeting of the bright outside world and the deep chasm and is recollective Bug-Jargal's song at the beginning of the novel in which a palm tree symbolizes Marie and her fragility in the face of the revolution. In this cave, the tree is arguably a representation of d'Auverney. It is both being killed by the waterfall that strips it of its new growth and being kept alive as the waterfall also nourishes its exposed roots. Similarly, D'Auverney is kept alive by his hope for a future that is based on a social order that no longer exists. Because he clings to his identity that is based entirely on this order, he cannot adapt to the changes that the revolution has

brought.

In this final natural cave, d'Auverney's last illusions about his past are shattered. Throughout the novel, D'Auverney's disconnection with the present has perhaps been the most obvious in the case of Habibrah. Although he sees that Biassou's *obi* is wearing Habibrah's hat, is of the same stature, and is feared as an *obi* just as Habibrah was, he does not recognize him because he is wearing a hood over his face. Such blindness suggests that it is not that he remains unaware of who Habibrah is, but rather, that he refuses to accept it. Seeing Habibrah for who he really is would tarnish his nostalgic impressions of his plantation life before the revolution, in which this character was his uncle's happy and loyal slave. It would also mean that his past, the only part of his life that he deems "real" at this moment, was an illusion that was merely veiling all of the violence and vengeance that has finally erupted into a revolution. Habibrah's revelation that it was he who murdered d'Auverney's uncle is the final piece of information that shatters d'Auverney's nostalgia for the past. Whereas he saw his uncle's treatment of Habibrah as kind and loving, in reality, it was humiliating and cruel. Hugo's inclusion of this information in the novel is less of an argument against slavery and more of a way to further impact d'Auverney's life. In discovering this knowledge, d'Auverney realizes that his nostalgic past is just as illusory, if not more so, than his present and dim future. He demonstrates his unwillingness to let go of his former impression of Habibrah when he chooses to take the former slave's hand to prevent him from falling into the abyss. Still true to his nature, Habibrah clutches the roots of the tree while also trying to pull d'Auverney into the abyss with him. The roots again symbolize d'Auverney's unwillingness to relinquish all of his impressions of the past in order to move through the chaos of the revolution. At this moment, he is facing the great danger to which the entire novel has

been alluding; the earth is finally going to swallow him up. He is rescued by Bug's dog Rask who pulls him back from the edge of the cliff with his teeth, another reference to the significance of the mouth. D'Auverney is momentarily caught between two mouths: that of the abyss and that of Bug's dog. He is faced with death in the abyss or with the reality of the revolution, a scene that recalls Bug's own ensnarement between natural revolutionary violence and the despotic planters.

The natural "mouth" of the abyss and Habibrah pulling d'Auverney are also similar to Bug's situation with d'Auverney's uncle. Whereas Bug was able to stay the arm of the cruel planter and momentarily render him speechless, d'Auverney has no control over his predicament. Although he was the one to grab Habibrah's arm to prevent him from falling, the former slave gets the upper hand by making it impossible for d'Auverney to let go. The abyss yawns before him, impossible to close. Rask is like the crocodile only in that he is an animal. His jaws are not meant to destroy, but rather, to rescue, another representation of Bug's own idealistic vision of the revolution's outcome.

A Royalist Ideology

This image of d'Auverney being caught between two mouths not only signifies d'Auverney's unwillingness to accept the present, but also the differing ideologies of the two slave leaders. Habibrah, in his need for vengeance, follows the approach of Biassou to destroy all of the white people, planters and non-planters alike. Bug-Jargal on the other hand would like to lead a revolution but offer the possibility of compromise between the ex-slaves and the white community that does not involve terminating the lives of all of the white people, a point he makes clear in his disagreement with Biassou: "Faut-il […] que le seul vestige de notre passage

soit toujours une trace de sang ou une trace de feu?" (154). Through these rebel leaders, Hugo presents two extreme revolutionary ideologies: Bug-Jargal's naïvely idealistic one and Biassou's and Habibrah's frighteningly violent one. D'Auverney, although a citizen of a republican France, represents the dreamer who longs nostalgically for a past that will never be a viable option. Hugo shows the fallacies in these three possibilities, a criticism of the violence of Biassou and Habibrah, as well as the tragedy of d'Auverney's yearning to return to his old life. Although Hugo is critical of the revolutionaries, as evidenced by his depictions of the French republicans and two of the rebel leaders, his characterization of Bug-Jargal and presentation of his vision for freedom and equality suggest a sympathy towards the unique combination of his royal status and his desire to free and protect his people through a revolution. As Kathryn Grossmann argues, "[Bug-Jargal] successfully integrates the old and the new generations, Léopold's classical restraint and Biassou's romantic wilderness, within an original but coherent order."[37] Through a contrast between the principal characters and this African king/slave hero who embodies the idealized elements of the revolutionary and the royalist, Hugo at once criticizes the overzealous revolutionary leader and despotic monarch who both vie for their own power and glory at the expense of the very people that they as leaders are obligated to defend.

Thus, although Hugo never overtly states that a royalist regime is superior and more just than an administration run by the people, his characterization of the republicans and nobles in this story reveal clear sympathies towards a monarchy, albeit clearly a reformed one. In an analysis of the political ambiguity of *Bug-Jargal*, Pierre LaForgue points out Hugo's criticism of royalists *and* revolutionaries, citing the rebels as being "trop royalistes." However, he also notes

[37] Kathryn Grossmann, *The Early Novels of Victor Hugo : Towards a Poetics of Harmony*. Geneva: Librairie Droz, S.A. 1986. 104.

the carnavalesque quality of the characters who dream of being royalty only for their personal glory.[38] Considering the parallels between Hugo's characterizations of Biassou and d'Auverney's uncle, this is arguably also a critique of the slave-owner mentality and the rise of false kings. Both characters have constructed living quarters that imitate those of a king: the planter with a palatial house and a jester that give the home "un éclat en quelque sorte seigneurial," and the rebel leader with a cave meant to resemble a throne room (30). Both expect complete submission from their respective slaves and soldiers and respond with violence to those who challenge them. This characterization of Biassou and the planter suggests that a revolution led by despots will lead only to more violence and further enslavement, a viewpoint that condemns both the institution of slavery and the post-revolutionary possibility of an authoritarian regime. In both cases, they are effective in their roles, but their despotism makes them objectionable leaders, especially in comparison to Bug-Jargal.

While Biassou clings to various aspects of old regimes and religions, as evidenced by his many flags, pieces of clothing and medals, and the combination of African religions and Catholicism, Bug-Jargal advocates for a much simpler approach and represents the idealism of revolution as a way to address social problems in the great hope of creating something better without resorting to violence.[39] He wears only one red feather and carries only an axe as a weapon. His use of the Grande Rivière, the rocks and boulders, and the advantageous military position in the cliffs demonstrates his use of the natural world, rather than the weapons and ranks

[38] Pierre LaForgue. LaForgue, Pierre. "'Bug-Jargal' ou la difficulté d'écrire en "style blanc." *Romantisme*. 20.69 (1990) : 32.

[39] See Victor Brombert for more details regarding Hugo's recognition of the monstrosity of revolution as well as the desire to transcend it. Victor Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*. Boston: Harvard University Press. 1986, 9. Print.

of the French, as a means of furthering his cause. As Pierre LaForgue points out, “Ce n’est pas un roi de carnaval […] C’est une royauté parfaite, pure, sans mélange” (33). In addition to these differences from Biassou, Bug-Jargal’s cave is also a sanctuary, rather than a place of judgment and execution, the primary purpose of the caves of Biassou and Habibrah. Thus while most of the rebel leaders want to eradicate and replace the white planter class, Bug-Jargal’s disagreement with Biassou as well as his loyalty to d’Auverney suggest more of a compromise towards building a new society together without slavery. The paradisiacal qualities of the refuges that Bug-Jargal offers as well as his capacity to instill a sense of moderation and justice in his judgments suggest that only a person of noble lineage can truly lead a people to a new order.

The opposing philosophies of Biassou and Bug-Jargal limit the meaning of the opening battle cry for the slaves to devastate the earth so that it will swallow the whites. Biassou makes this cry in his motivational speech to his army, but Bug-Jargal, despite his dedication to the revolution and the respect he inspires in his army, never once utters this phrase or anything similar. The opening of the earth, while evoking images of death and burials, also indicates the chaos and lack of control that accompanies natural catastrophes. Biassou succeeds in his execution of the planters who have wronged him following the trial in his cave, a figurative “swallowing” of the white planter class. But Habibrah, in his attempt to push d’Auverney into the abyss in his cave, falls to his death, the implication being that the revolution and the opening of the earth are indiscriminate in whom they destroy. Revolutionaries cannot rely on nature or the sociopolitical movement itself to propel them into a new and just social order. Without a way to navigate the revolution, without a way to navigate the natural world and proactively lead society towards a new regime, the revolutionaries risk being swallowed up in the very movement

for which they are fighting.

This unfortunately includes even the rebel leaders who wish for a less violent path to a new social order. Even Bug-Jargal, the quintessential hero, cannot predict and navigate the complex enormity of this revolution. Although he successfully preserves the lives of those important to him, he cannot predict or control the actions of everyone around him. Bug-Jargal's death is the result of d'Auverney's inability to understand the interactions of the French army and the rebel slaves and his inability to return to his camp in time to save his friend's life. The rebel leader is unable to save his soldiers and d'Auverney without being engulfed by the revolution itself. While he has expertly negotiated with his enemy and the other rebel leaders and while he has managed to escape death and imprisonment multiple times through his strength and knowledge of the island's geography, at the end of the novel, he cannot rescue everyone and still manage to survive. A master of the natural world, Bug-Jargal cannot always predict how his peers will react; the actions of d'Auverney, Biassou, and Habibrah are beyond his control. He regards them in an idealistic light, as if they were able to see and understand nature and revolution as well as he does, it never occurring to him that he is unique in his heroic mentality.

Rask may pull d'Auverney from the abyss and into Bug's idyllic vision of a new order, but the Frenchman has already lost too much time in his own illusions to have any kind of impact on his present circumstances. He arrives too late at his own camp to prevent Bug from being executed, and without the clear direction of any authority figure, d'Auverney once again falls into his state of nostalgia for the past and goes on living as if his present is an illusion. He is consequently unable to rescue Marie from the fire that destroys the fort at the Cap. Once any possible future with her is destroyed, d'Auverney no longer sees the point of even trying to

remain alive, causing him to isolate himself further, a decision apparent even in his final days. He risks his life in every battle as if he had a death wish, associates little with his troop, and garners little respect from the other soldiers despite his being a captain. Like Bug, he too is eventually swallowed up, although in his case, he falls victim to both the French and Haitian Revolutions.

The camp tent in which he is recounting his story is the final cave-like structure of the novel and one in which he is finally one of the players rather than an observer. Although he is a captain in the army that is defending the planters and although the tent is part of that social structure, d'Auverney no longer belongs in that world. He does not realize that the men listening to his story are not sympathetic to his past, nor do they find his story particularly interesting. He leaves the tent periodically, splitting his story into scenes or acts and lending it a dramatic, theatrical character. Between each act, the men speculate on the veracity of his account and mock the emotional reactions of both d'Auverney and Thadée. For them, the story d'Auverney recounts is little more than that: a story that they even complain is not as engaging as they would have hoped. Just as d'Auverney viewed all of the events in Biassou's cave as "spectacles" and "dramas," his men reject his account as unrealistic, in this way invalidating his experiences as exaggerated or even fictional ways of defending a royalist viewpoint.

His soldiers' judgment of him and his story also parallels the trial that takes place in Biassou's cave. Whereas Biassou opposes two white slave-owners to a planter of color, d'Auverney's soldiers seek any indications that their captain harbors royalist sympathies against the French republic. Thus this seemingly informal story-telling becomes an informal trial before a critical yet jovial jury, one comparable to Biassou whose critical judgments of his prisoners are

punctuated with his hyena-like laughter. The extent of their disloyalty towards their captain is revealed in the epilogue when soldiers from the metropole arrive in Saint-Domingue to arrest d'Auverney for treason and presumably for execution after receiving notice that he was recounting stories that indicated royalist sympathies.

The similarities between the tent and Biassou's cave suggest a critique not only of the republican French army, but also of the French republic in general. Just as d'Auverney views all that occurs in Biassou's cave as a farce, Hugo also presents all that occurs as a consequence of d'Auverney's story as farcical. He is accused of telling anti-revolutionary stories, defending royalism as well as religion, of freeing slaves, and of using the word *monsieur* rather than *citoyen* (200). Because of these charges, the administration has judged that he has been conspiring to overthrow the republic and he has been sentenced to death. The arrest becomes irrelevant because d'Auverney has been killed on the battlefield, having sacrificed himself to guarantee a victory for the French army. Just as Biassou's cave was a confusing mish-mash of royalist and republican flags and mottos, d'Auverney's character has taken on a similar quality. The republic has flagged him as a traitorous royalist, and the French army's general has labeled him a hero. "[N]ous envoyons tous deux, chacun de son côté, une liste à la Convention. Vous le dénoncez comme le nom d'un traître, moi comme celui d'un héros; vous le vouez à l'ignominie, moi à la gloire; vous faites dresser un échafaud, moi un trophée" (201). The dissidence between the two sides reveals the lack of a clear agenda in the first republic as well as a destructive paranoia, Hugo's underlying critique of both the French and Haitian Revolutions.

The squabbling factions among the revolutionaries make it impossible to implement a clear plan for a new governing regime, causing more needless battles, loss of life, and ultimately

the chaos of the uncivilized, or natural, world. Through his natural imagery and the nightmarish depiction of the Haitian Revolution, Hugo shows the folly of relying on the natural world as a guide for building a new social order. In true royalist fashion, he suggests through his character of Bug-Jargal that a noble leader is necessary to create order, to build it for his people, and serve as their guide and protector. The obvious problem with this suggestion lies in the difficulty, if not impossibility, of finding a leader as idealistically just and noble as Hugo's slave hero.

Thus, Hugo's criticism of revolution is similar to Bernardin's in that he criticizes the noble class and advocates for their reform, with Bug-Jargal as an example of the perfect noble leader. He is also critical of the efforts of the French republicans, as evidenced by his ridiculous depictions of their bureaucratic idealism. His work differs from Bernardin's, however, in that rather than lauding the merits of passive observation, he illustrates the dangers and tragedy of them. D'Auverney's passivity and perpetual disbelief that a revolution is even occurring suggests an unyielding faith that somehow, his life will return to its former state of luxurious comfort. His inactivity, emphasized by the merits of Bug's own active role, only cause him to lose everything; furthermore, no ideal state ever emerges from the revolution. Hugo's novel suggests that while there is no way to prevent the uprising of the oppressed, the aristocracy needs to take the role of the active and compassionate reformer, ready to sacrifice themselves to lead the masses towards a more just society.

CHAPTER THREE

Navigating Disaster:

Nature's Sociopolitical Role in Alexandre Dumas' *Georges*

In the novel *Georges*, Alexandre Dumas tells the story of a wealthy biracial planter who responds to racial discrimination by freeing his slaves and leading a revolution against the white planters in the colony of Ile de France / Mauritius. Multiple elements of his novel contrast strikingly enough with Bernardin's *Paul et Virginie* and Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* that *Georges* might be read as a critical response to both novels in which he questions their representations of the metropole, the colonies, people of color, and man's capacity to control the natural world. Unlike Bernardin's France of corruption and decadence or Hugo's chaotic republic led by fanatic *citoyens*, Dumas' metropole is a sophisticated cultural center that offers opportunity for social advancement. Dumas' colony is neither the nightmarish inferno of *Bug-Jargal* nor the rustic paradise of *Paul et Virginie*. Rather, Ile de France is a location in development, with coarse and slightly savage Creoles who must look to the metropole as a civilized model and guide.

Dumas' novel is the first in this literary corpus that does not present the natural world as superior to the civilized one. No innocent and virtuous Paul or Virginie exists in this story; the only white characters are the powerful governor and the cruel, wealthy Malmédie planters. The noble savage also becomes subordinate to the European. While Hugo suggested that some degree of control over nature was possible, he limited this control to his romanticized slave character Bug-Jargal, a version of the noble savage. [40] Continental Frenchmen were represented by the

[40] For references pointing to the character of the "noble savage," see footnote (2) on page 2 of the Introduction. See Léon-François Hoffmann for a discussion on how this notion of the noble savage which had long been reserved for the indigenous people of the Americas was finally extended to the enslaved African in eighteenth-century literature:

bumbling dreamer D'Auverney. By contrast, Dumas shows the educated European to be vastly superior to the noble savage. In these ways, he completely redefines the roles of the metropole and the colony, as well as the traits of the characters who live in each respective location.

Throughout *Georges*, Dumas emphasizes the importance of dominating the natural world and explores the social implications of this control. He challenges the idea that social hierarchies are fixed. Man should not accept his unjust station in life as part of a natural order; he should direct and control it. Suffering is needless, and ambition is necessary to correct social injustices. At the same time, his depiction of the metropole controlling nature by guiding an undeveloped and unsophisticated Ile de France suggests a justification of imperialism. While Dumas still projects onto the colonies his vision for challenging unfair social hierarchies, he also imposes onto the metropole his fantasy of an ideal society.

As a man of color in nineteenth-century France, Alexandre Dumas himself faced racial prejudice from his peers, despite his literary success. Léon-François Hoffmann cites in his Introduction to *Georges*, the racist comments made by Dumas' critics and peers as well as an incident in which a Madame de Liniers mistakes him for a rebel soldier intent on leading a second slave revolution (15). Dumas reacted to such racism with humor, and in *Georges*, he makes no mention of the existence of racial prejudice in the French metropole. Racial discrimination is reserved for the plantation colonies alone. According to Dumas' personal experiences, *Georges*' version of the metropole did not really exist, and unlike what eighteenth-century exotic literature would suggest, the colonies certainly offered no escape for him. Thus, as a man of color, he was left with no true escape from France's racism, but simply had to accept

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Le Nègre Romantique ; personnage littéraire et obsession collective. Paris : Payot, 1973 : Introduction, 22-23; Chapter 2, 48-98.

the reality of racial discrimination and tolerate the prejudiced remarks. While it is impossible to know whether Dumas wrote *Georges* in reaction to his personal experiences, the novel does present the fantasies of a nearly utopic continental French society and an impossibly talented hero with the admirable audacity to revolt against racial discrimination. In an attempt to reshape the colony into his vision of a society in which he enjoys the same rights and privileges of the white planter, Georges Munier organizes a slave rebellion that ultimately fails. And yet, at the end the story, he gets the girl, and he and his family sail off into the proverbial sunset, a fairy tale finale following a surprising and unlikely personal victory against the white planters.

The implausibility of Georges' escape has caused some scholars to question whether they should interpret Dumas' novel as a defense of people of color or as a criticism of Georges' ambition. The open seas might be truly wild spaces of freedom and autonomy or a vast prison that Georges and his family can never leave. As Georges, his new wife, his brother, and his father sail away from the island "qui avait failli leur être si fatale," it becomes clear that they are indeed facing significant losses. As Molly Krueger Enz remarks, once Georges escapes the island, the only thing he has accomplished is exiling himself, his new bride, and his family from their homeland.[41] They no longer have their fortune, property, or home country to which they can return, but instead are isolated on a ship, the only location where they are free to live as they wish**.** As if this were not a difficult enough fate to endure, Jean-Michel Racault points out that Georges states in the last sentence of the novel that he would prefer to die like the colony's white governor Lord Williams-Murrey than be at sea with a woman who, in view of an interrupted

[41] Molly Krueger Enz, "The Mulatto as Island and the Island as Mulatto in Alexandre Dumas's Georges." *French Review: Journal of the American Association of Teachers of French*. 80.2 (2006): 391.

wedding ceremony, is technically not even his wife.[42] These obstacles certainly make for a bitterly ironic ending to an adventure story that largely focuses on the hero's success in overcoming a series of challenges based on racial prejudice. Perhaps one is not supposed to question the conclusion, much in the same way one closes a fairy tale without questioning the reality of the protagonists' capacity to live happily ever after. This interpretation nevertheless leaves the reader with the potentially dark conclusion that Georges and his family have battled social injustice only to doom themselves to a harshly nomadic and isolated life; Georges' ambition was nothing more than an arrogant mistake that leads to nothing but more suffering. However, considering Dumas' depiction of the Munier family's interactions with nature, their implicit rejection of Providence, and their demonstrated ability to carve out a place for themselves, this novel's final chapter can be read more optimistically than what Enz and Racault propose.

In this chapter, I argue that the representation of the Munier brothers' interaction with nature implies a capacity for self-determination rather than a dependence on Providence or on noble heritage, a depiction that corresponds to French revolutionaries' shifting understanding of individualism and nature during and following the French Revolution. By taking control of their surroundings, the heroic characters reject the idea that their personalities and capabilities have already been immutably determined by their racial heritage, birthplace, or Providence. They accordingly give up the identity that is linked to their homeland, and in this sense, they can indeed be regarded as homeless. A more optimistic way of viewing them, however, is to consider that as individuals who have emancipated themselves from their home country and its oppressive

[42] Jean-Michel Racault, "Mimétisme et métissage: sur *Georges* d'Alexandre Dumas." *Métissages Littérature-Histoire*. Université de la Réunion. Saint-Denis, Ile de la Réunion : L'Harmattan. 1992. 149.

social hierarchies, they can finally define themselves according to their own desires and beliefs rather than have their identities imposed on them.

Dumas shows how the experiences of Georges and Jacques Munier outside of Mauritius' stifling social hierarchy allow them to gain knowledge and develop skills that allow them to dominate the natural world. While Georges completes a formal education in continental France, Jacques enjoys the freedom of a more practical formation on a French ship sailing the open seas. The result is nevertheless similar in that both brothers learn to negotiate treacherous natural phenomena; and by proving their worth through these natural perils, they are both able to challenge social hierarchies both in and outside of the colony. By examining the links between sociopolitical power, education, and nature, and by comparing the two brothers to both creole and European characters, I show that despite Dumas' advocacy for colonialism, this novel can be read as the triumph of the wealthy biracial Munier family over the colony's social oppression.

Dumas weaves his hero Georges' adventures into a complex narrative linking together racial conflicts, class struggle, colonialism, and the natural world, concepts which can all be categorized under the broader scope of environmental determinism. While this notion did not gain widespread popularity until the middle of the nineteenth century, the characters' relationships with nature nevertheless allude to the idea that the environment plays a significant role in determining their personality and emotional responses, and by consequence, their social status. In the context of nineteenth-century revolutionary turbulence and its ties to nature, Dumas illustrates the dark side of the attitudes accompanying control over the natural world. Dominating the natural world is indicative of the highest level of civilization, an ability that Dumas attributes to European civilization alone. While his characters of non-European roots demonstrate a

capacity to adapt to their surroundings as necessary, they are never able to control them in the same way as their colonizers. Furthermore, Dumas characterizes the Creoles as never having fully transcended the animalistic traits determined by living in a tropical environment.[43]

Throughout *Georges*, Dumas' conceptualization of "nature" connotes a lack of discipline and control; this includes people who were born outside of European civilization or even on the margins of it. Those living in the colonies or those who are of non-European culture and heritage are still represented as "more natural" than those born and raised on the European continent. However, while past authors such as Bernardin and Hugo have characterized this "natural state" as positive, Dumas shows it to be weak and ineffective. These natural beings cannot compete with the European who will always be able to direct his surroundings more easily and therefore control his life as well as the lives of those around him. Even Creoles of European heritage are depicted as being weaker than the characters who have benefited from a more profound and extensive European influence. Within the imperialistic overtones of his work, Dumas suggests that through a continued influence of European culture and knowledge, these more "natural" characters can learn to control themselves and their surroundings and then use this ability to rise in social status and challenge the social order.

Dominating Spaces

The description of the island at the beginning of *Georges* reveals Dumas' opposition to Providence as well as the hierarchy between the metropole and the colony. While he regularly alludes to the possibility of an intervening god, he consistently follows these references with his

[43] See David Arnold for more details involving environmental determinism and the tropics. "Inventing Tropicality." *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture, and European Expansion*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996. 141-168.

characters' control of their own circumstances. Dumas' description of Ile de France's geographical features initially evokes the idea of a higher being watching over its inhabitants and determining what behavior is just and unjust, a depiction recollective of the belief in Providence and the linking of God's will with nature. "Voyez enfin le Pouce […] le pic le plus majestueux de l'île, et qui semble lever un doigt au ciel pour montrer au maître et à ses esclaves qu'il y a au-dessus de nous un tribunal qui fera justice à tous deux" (Dumas 31). Although Dumas suggests a judgment and punishment in the afterlife, in the rest of the novel, he shows this threat to be irrelevant in the lives of both the planters and the slaves. The planters do not free their slaves out of fear that they will eventually face eternal damnation, and the slaves do not accept their status in the hope of enjoying the delights of a paradisiacal afterlife. The slaves never make reference to God, and only when the planters are under the impression that God is ensuring their safety do they attribute their well-being to Providence. Although this depiction suggests that God ultimately supports the planters' lifestyle, Dumas also shows that the characters of lower social status can challenge the ruling classes with a certain degree of success, thus demonstrating that man does not have to be the victim of natural or divine forces.

To emphasize man's agency in the material world, Dumas counters the existence of a heavenly eye with the gaze of both the metropole and the colony of Ile de France in this same first chapter. France's cities of Marseille and Brest and Ile de France's Mount Brébant are characterized as sentinels that are in place to guard over the ocean and contribute to man's security against nature and enemies. "Venez à Brest, cette soeur guerrière de la commerçante Marseille, sentinelle armée qui veille sur l'Océan" (28). "Parmi toutes ces montagnes, voyez encore le morne Brabant, sentinelle géante placée sur la pointe septentrionale de l'île pour la

défendre contre les surprises de l'ennemi, et briser les fureurs de l'Océan" (31). While the *Pouce* might point to the heavens, the inhabitants of the colony use another peak for their security against nature and other men, in this way demonstrating their influence on their own lives. Furthermore, the French cities in themselves, as a shelter against nature's forces, are suggestive of man's ability to control and manipulate the natural world for his personal advantage and survival.

Both continental France and Ile de France demonstrate a capacity to detect and avert social attacks and natural disasters, in this way replacing God to some degree. The characters can use natural, geographical features as watch towers in the same way they can use fully established cities, and each serves the purpose of protecting man and allowing him to ensure his domination of his country or his colonies. However, even as Dumas grants man a significant role in determining his own destiny, he also creates a hierarchy between the metropole and the colony that suggests that the metropole enjoys a greater capacity to control nature, thereby giving people from continental France an advantage over their creole counterparts. By choosing a city as the metropole's sentinel and a rural peak as the colony's, Dumas emphasizes their differing stages of development. The French metropole assumes the role of the patriarchal figure while the colony becomes a submissive entity, the "fille de France" requiring the metropole's protection: "Aussi les Anglais, ces éternels jalouseurs de la France, avaient-ils depuis longtemps les yeux fixés sur sa fille chérie […]" (36). A developing microcosm of the metropole that requires guidance, Ile de France's representation does not change even when the colony falls under British rule.

Within the colony itself, the plantation hierarchy separating white planters, planters of color, and slaves also dictates the degree of control over the natural world; and the classes are

separated spatially as well as socially. As expected, the slaves live in their own quarters, a village-like community of shacks distinct from the big house and the rest of the plantation. This order extends to all people of color, including the free and wealthy Munier family who itself owns hundreds of slaves. Molly Krueger Enz' apt observation of the Munier family as an island isolated from the rest of planter society attests to the palpability of this physical separation, one that also dictates in part the hierarchical control of nature.[44] Slaves and free people of color alike are not allowed to enjoy the same types of social interactions as the white community, a seemingly irrelevant fact in regard to their interactions in nature. However, whereas earlier Romantic novels still show the slave as being able to manipulate nature more easily than the white planters, Dumas shows the reverse to be true. Because the slaves and even free people of color face continued oppression from the white community, they do not have the opportunities or space to develop their strengths.

In Dumas' depiction of the colony, the savage wilderness is hardly present. It has largely been tamed by the white community which has reappropriated these once savage spaces into places of leisure. The white planters dominate the forests which can no longer safely harbor fugitive slaves or hide communities of maroons; they have become their playgrounds for hunting game and slaves alike, a change that becomes apparent when the slave Nazim, who also goes by the nickname *le Cerf*, is subdued when trying to escape. These rural areas lack the threats they once posed to the white community; they feel safe enough that even the plantation belles are comfortable leaving behind the hustle and bustle of the plantation to enjoy the quiet escape that

[44] Molly Krueger Enz, 'White Negroes, Nothing More': The Ambiguous Role of the 'Mulatto' in Alexandre Dumas' *Georges*." *The Black Musketeer: Reevaluating Alexandre Dumas within the Francophone World.*. Ed. Eric Martone. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 91-106.

these less developed spaces offer. The island's isolated natural spaces, already within the grip of the white planters' control, can no longer hide or shelter the marginalized characters who seek refuge from the plantation society's unjust laws and conventions.

Race and Creoles

This change in the depiction of the colonies also holds implications for the characterization of the Creoles. They are not the naïve and innocent characters who, in their proximity to nature's wilderness, have been sheltered from a corrupt metropole. Dumas replaces these innocuous traits with coarseness and barbarism, and both white and black Creoles share the characterization of being both uncultured and part of an undeveloped society. When Dumas introduces a group of slaves, he refers to them as a "race d'hommes simples et primitifs," a characterization that corresponds to stereotypical nineteenth-century depictions. However, he also draws parallels between both white people and people of color that suggest that their geographical location and the limitations of colonial culture have prevented them both from reaching a Eurocentric standard of civilization (130).

Dumas focuses specifically on the white planter Monsieur de Malmédie and his family, the rivals of the Munier family. Malmédie, although economically successful, lacks sophistication and culture, a trait that Dumas illustrates in his introduction of this character. He is the leading officer of the colony's volunteer army that is preparing for battle against a British attack, and although his social status assures him of this position, he is clearly uncomfortable in the role. Unaccustomed to wearing a uniform, he has buttoned it completely, or as Dumas describes it, "primitivement," contributing to his lack of composure as he fidgets with the jacket. More importantly, he struggles to maintain the discipline of his troop, fails to keep them in line,

and makes poor strategic decisions, these failures also pointing to a lack of cultivation. Dumas re-introduces him later in the novel, at which point he again focuses on his coarseness, his "traits vulgaires, [et une] voix éclatante" (91).

Dumas does not limit this lack of sophistication to Georges' enemies, as evidenced by Monsieur de Malmédie's niece Sara. Although she is a beautiful and wealthy young white woman, she also epitomizes all of the stereotypical traits of a Creole. Raised in Mauritius, she proclaims herself a "wild child" who enjoys playing in the forest and near the river; in the slave community, she has even earned the nickname "La Rose de la Rivière Noire." Dumas connotes this simultaneously savage and civilized personality in his comparison of her to Diana, the elusive virginal goddess of the moon and the hunt, who although divine, exhibits an element of fierce savagery herself as she resists the advances of any man and any promise of domestic life. Although Sarah has received an education from her English governess Henriette, Dumas emphasizes that nothing Sara has learned has changed her individuality or her "nature primitive" (165).

Dumas is not so progressive as to suggest through these parallels that white people and people of color share the same innate abilities. Dumas' representation of his characters in *Georges* suggests that while everyone might be born with raw talent, the capacity to cultivate these talents and skills is directly dependent on both one's geographical origins and one's current environment, a belief that was commonly used to unfavorably characterize individuals born in tropical regions or with familial heritage from any non-European location.[45] Dumas' presentation of his creole hero and his secondary creole characters implies that the exotic environment of the

[45] Kevin Hutchings, *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures in the British Atlantic World, 1770-1850*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009, 44.

colonies and even of the rest of continental Africa have influenced their inhabitants in such a way that they have to work harder to train (or tame) their natural temperaments. Through his portraits of Malmédie and Sara, Dumas suggests that this environmental influence is true for both white people and people of color born in these tropical areas; all Creoles are slightly savage because of their environment.

That said, this common stereotypical trait hardly unites the Creoles. While the desire to preserve one's socioeconomic status is arguably at the root of racial discrimination, the metropole's characterization of all Creoles as "savage" may also motivate the white upper classes to take extreme measures to distinguish themselves clearly from the lower ones, or more precisely, from individuals who have any African heritage. Likewise, the free people of color, particularly the ones with both African and European ancestral origins, have an interest in distinguishing themselves from the enslaved people of color, creating a stringent social order that resists any restructuring. To maintain the colony's social hierarchy, the white planters not only have laws that ensure their social status, they also refuse to acknowledge any kind of challenge that the free people of color might pose to them. Furthermore, because of their social status, they have the authority to subvert acts that might indicate the superiority of a person of color, making it even more difficult, if not impossible for the lower classes to climb the social ladder. This is true even when the white people are clearly inferior to their subordinates.

Dumas illustrates this phenomenon through two of the colony's wealthiest planters: the biracial Pierre Munier and the white Monsieur de Malmédie. Although Munier is wealthier and physically stronger than Malmédie, he consistently surrenders to the prejudicial treatment of the white planter in deference to the colony's social norms. Regarding this injustice, Dumas

compares the natural traits of each character : “Cela était incroyable, étrange, misérable, n’est-ce pas de voir une nature d’homme si riche, si vigoureuse, si caractérisée, céder sans résistance à cette autre nature si vulgaire, si plate, si mesquine, si commune et si pauvre?”(73). Munier does not dare question Malmédie’s will. Facing a large community of powerful white planters, he does not have the confidence or courage to defend himself despite his physical strength and intelligence.

Although Pierre Munier is clearly superior to Malmédie, Dumas demonstrates the futility of trying to prove one’s merit within the confines of this society. During an invasion of British troops, Munier is denied a place in Monsieur de Malmédie’s army because of his skin color. His black soldiers’ eventual victory against an invasion of British troops earns him no recognition as a skillful leader among the white planter class. Malmédie dismisses his accomplishment and takes Munier’s stolen British flag under the claim that Munier needs to submit to his commanding officer. “Je le veux, je l’ordonne; obéissez à votre officier” (72). He conveniently forgets that he refused to allow Munier into his army, thereby nullifying his military authority over his rival. Because the white planters can change laws and contradict themselves in any way that assures them of their continued power, any challenge within their social domain, under their laws and conventions, will go unacknowledged.

The hierarchicalization of the metropole and the colonies as well as the problem of racial discrimination make it difficult if not impossible for Munier change his social status. As long as he wishes to remain a part of this oppressive plantation society, he cannot truly challenge the social order and has little to gain from refusing to accept his inferior social rank. Because Dumas consistently implies the dominance of the French metropole, he also perpetuates the dominance

of white Europeans and those of white European heritage. Social practices and customs are defined by the white planter class and ultimately by the metropole, and Dumas redefines the natural world as most accessible to the groups most influenced by this European civilization. It is no longer closed to them as an exotically foreign realm that is more easily navigated and dominated by those who have been raised in less urban settings. On the contrary, nature is more yielding to the European than it is to characters of other cultures or even to Creoles of European heritage.

While the implications of this Eurocentric viewpoint are negative for both slaves and others of less privileged classes, Dumas does not concern himself with these classes as much as he focuses on the struggle of the free people of color; it remains unclear in his work whether or not his black characters might benefit from a European education if they were not enslaved and if they had the opportunity. Dumas shows the discrimination against people of color to be unfair, but he also pragmatically assesses that Pierre Munier would be accepted by the white planter class only if he found a way to deny and disguise his identity. In order for the white planters to see him as their equal, he would have to be white. In order for them to consider him their superior, he would have to be both white and metropolitan. Throughout the rest of his novel, Dumas explores how his biracial Creole characters can become “white” and “French.”

The ability to control and dominate nature, both of the self and of the external environment, reflects the extent to which one is civilized, a notion that contrasts with earlier works in which Creoles, free and enslaved alike, tend to hold an advantage over the metropolitan character in their ability to live in undeveloped areas. In Dumas’ work, there is no such thing as another type of civilization that is different but still valued as much if not more than the

European one. The advantages of the noble savage or even of the naïve Creole simply do not exist; in fact, the noble savage himself does not exist. All of the Creoles, regardless of race and regardless of class, are shown to be ignorant, primitive, and barbaric. According to Dumas, the only way in which it is possible to overcome this state of primitiveness is through a continued intellectual and physical cultivation in Europe or from Europeans.

Dumas illustrates the metropole's influence primarily through his title character Georges, the highly intelligent but physically weak son of Pierre Munier, and through Georges' older brother Jacques, who is less intellectual but physically stronger. While Georges bristles at the prejudice his family faces, his father accepts their subordinate role in order to maintain peace and encourages his sons to do the same. Following a skirmish with Henri de Malmédie, the son of the white planter rival Monsieur de Malmédie, Georges and Jacques are sent to France primarily as a measure of protection from the consequences of challenging white, upper class society, but also to receive a metropolitan education, or possibly, to change their identities. While Jacques forgoes this scholastic opportunity in favor of the complete freedom of a life on the open seas under a French captain, Georges recognizes this period of time in the metropole as an opportunity to reinvent himself. Without the restrictions of the plantation hierarchies, both brothers gain the freedom to develop their strengths and realize the dreams that colonial life denied them. Although their experiences differ greatly, they each benefit from the metropole's more pronounced influence.

Forging New Identities Outside the Colony

Jacques, preferring practical experience over a classroom education, leaves continental France after only a year to pursue his dream of living a life at sea, an experience that Dumas

describes as “une rude école” (217). Viewing both Mauritius and the French metropole as prisons, he abandons his schooling and finds solace aboard the *Calypso* in the midst of the perilous wilderness of the open seas, spaces that because of their vastness and countless hidden dangers, have resisted colonization, development, and European law.[46] The open waters thus replace the colonies in their former role, in the sense that they are virgin territories that lack concrete, established sociopolitical structures. As with eighteenth-century representations of the colonies’ wilderness, the natural spaces of the open seas hold a significant role as locations that offer freedom from stifling social conventions. Far from being isolated pastoral utopia, however, they serve as arenas of life-threatening challenges, veritable battlefields where the social hierarchies are perpetually in a state of potential reorganization, and where the education of European civilized society offers a clear advantage over the empirical knowledge possessed by characters who have been raised in the natural world. Because of the dangers of living in this space devoid of the comforts of civilization, the characters must rely on their skills and knowledge rather than on Providence or social status in order to survive. Aware of the hardships posed by life at sea, Dumas observes that twenty-six days out of thirty, the *Calypso* engages in battle with other ships. The other days are spent battling storms (218).

The oceans thus remain a wild frontier and also a space that encourages struggle rather than offering a respite from it. Characters who escape to bodies of water and waterways must confront this uncivilized territory where they no longer necessarily have a defined social foundation, or at least not the same one they knew on land. Each ship’s social order and

[46] See Christopher Miller for France’s use of L’Exclusif, a trade agreement that was meant to ensure exclusivity between the metropole and its colonies: *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 24.

undertakings depend almost entirely on the judgment of the captain. Because he has a vested interest in maintaining a content and able crew, the social ranks are based on personal merit. Unfettered by his social status as a man of color, Jacques evokes initial grumbling from the rest of the crew only when they believe that the Captain Bertrand is unfairly favoring him as a newcomer. He learns quickly from the French captain and the rest of the crew all that he needs to know to be an effective member of the ship and prove his worth. Once his shipmates recognize him as both courageous and competent, he climbs quickly through the ranks of the ship's social order, a class system based entirely on personal merit.

Although the *Calypso* is presented as an extension of the metropole from which Jacques learns all of his seafaring skills, Dumas also shows how such knowledge can be used to impose one's own desires on less capable individuals, including some in continental France. Captain Bertrand is a strong Bonapartist who has never accepted the fall of the emperor or the Restoration, he secretly brings an exiled Napoleon back to France on his ship, despite the fact that this marks him as a traitor to the Bourbon family. Only by being captain of a ship is he able to smuggle the former emperor from Elba island to mainland France where Napoleon reinstates himself as ruler for one hundred days. The ocean thus opens the possibilities for subversive activity, even if it is against the metropole itself. While the inclusion of such activity in this novel may seem to contradict the idea that it is the metropole's influence that provides characters with a unique advantage over the natural world, it corresponds to the idea that those who are able to dominate the natural world will be more successful than those who are not. The Bourbon family, as part of the Old Regime, conforms to the notion that one's place in society depends on one's heritage; their reinstatement as the ruling entity during the Restoration perpetuates their

inherited power and their aristocratic exclusivity. Napoleon's brief return to power, accomplished through a marine voyage, parallels Georges' challenge to the plantocracy and reiterates Dumas' consistent theme that man can use daring acts in the natural world to challenge the established social order.

Such acts of defiance are limited, however, to those who have reaped the benefits of a French education. While the open waters are a natural battleground where social hierarchies are defined through daring feats and struggles against enemies, Dumas excludes slaves from these possibilities. Just as the Creoles of the colony are depicted as inferior to Europeans, the people who are purely African without any European influence, are depicted as inferior to the Creoles. Enslaved people of color are shown to be incapable of rising up against their oppressors not because they are black, but rather because they have not had the advantages of a metropolitan education or experiences.

This qualification can also explain Jacques' belief that people of color "étaient faits pour être vendus et achetés" and his seemingly contradictory refusal to hunt and enslave anyone, a decision that suggests that suggests that being "faits pour être vendus et achetés" is not synonymous with being *nés* for the same purpose (233). Rather, the enslaved Africans' environment and their sociopolitical situation have shaped them and made them an easy target for such an institution. This is supported by Dumas' supposition that their widespread enslavement stems from an uncontrollable addiction to alcohol which leads them to war and to selling their enemies and their children to slave traders (227). His depiction, while stereotypical, is consistent with his idea that one's power results from one's ability to control nature and to control himself. According to Dumas, non-European cultures have not learned to do this and thus

easily become the victims of the slave traders. While Jacques remains a part of the very system that oppresses him and his own family, Dumas characterizes him as exceptionally humane towards his slaves while he is at sea. His ship becomes its own small state that reproduces the social order found in the colonies, with Jacques at the very top of it, responsible for his crew members and his slaves as if he were a white planter, thus attesting to his more fluid identity at sea.

Being a slave trader distances Jacques from his African heritage. Because he does not have to identify himself as a man of color and because no one else imposes any prejudices against him, either because they do not care or because they are ignorant of his racial heritage, he is completely free to do as he pleases. His occupation and anonymity on the sea raise him to the social ranking of a wealthy white man when he is on land. White women fall in love with him, and their fathers often offer him their daughters in marriage. Handsome and wealthy, he could easily settle in one of the countries or colonies along his trade route. The ambiguity surrounding his peers' knowledge of his race suggests that he faces no prejudice because everyone believes him to be white. However, although this possibility suggests that race is still important even in metropolitan society, it also demonstrates the arbitrarity and stupidity of racial prejudice. After all, Jacques' abilities are equal if not not superior to all of the white people he encounters. Nevertheless, he resists returning to the world of stringent social orders and oppressive rules and prefers the freedom permitted by his life without borders and familial constraints. "[Ce] que Jacques aimait avant toutes choses, c'était sa liberté" (232).

The ocean is the only space that affords Jacques the freedom that he so desires as well as the liberty to define himself and his life as he would like, a depiction that also underlines his lack

of a homeland as well as its constraints. The *Calypso* becomes everything for him: his home, his homeland, and even figuratively, his wife, the name referring to the mythological nymph Calypso, who attempted to prevent Odysseus from leaving her island to continue his adventures at sea. In *Georges*, the *Calypso* does just the opposite, keeping Jacques from ever settling on land and in this way replacing a plot of land isolated from society. Jacques' care for the ship is even described in the kinds of terms reserved for a lovers' relationship, and he has decided that she is the only lover for him: "Aussi avait-il décidé qu'il n'aurait pas d'autre femme que *la Calypso*" (232). Furthermore, together, they go from port to port, changing the identity of the ship and the identity of Jacques depending on what cargo they are trading. When it is tea, for example, the *Calypso* becomes *la Belle-Jenny* and Jacques assumes the identity of a trader from Brittany (234). Other times, the *Calypso* even changes its sex and becomes *le Sphynx*, for example, while Jacques pretends to be a gentlemanly French officer. Thus, wherever he goes, at least outside of Europe where his disguises would be ineffective, he can assume whatever identity he pleases, from a rough old sea dog to a refined aristocrat (235). Although a life at sea might not seem ideal, it offers opportunities for multiple identities for the competent seafarer to choose at his whim, a significant change from the stifling role of a free man of color in Ile de France.

The ocean, even with its many perils, is the new wild frontier and the only place in which true freedom can exist. Like Bernardin's Paul and Virginie, Jacques creates his own microsociety defined by his personal values. Unlike the innocent children, he always remains in perfect control of his own life, using the laws and social customs of other societies to his advantage, manipulating them into believing the image he wants to convey, and making a considerable fortune through the slave trade. His paradisiacal microsociety, although isolated and completely

suited to his desires, is still strongly connected to France's colonial values and their economy; after all, Jacques has learned all of his maritime and trade skills from a French captain. However, in this vast wilderness that resists the constraints of laws and civilization, he can carve out his own destiny.

While Dumas' uses Jacques' experience to illustrate the perilous yet utopic life on the margins of civilization, he places his hero Georges first in the center of European culture and then in the pit of his old colonial life. The two brothers thus serve as mutual points of contrast that nevertheless point to parallels between life in the metropole and life at sea and oppose them to life in a plantation colony. Through the commonalities in the brothers' experiences, Dumas implies that the metropole has evolved from the strict monarchical hierarchy that shares similarities with the plantation colony's social order towards the type of meritocracy that one would still find in a dangerous natural setting such as the open seas. Although he depicts the natural world as eternally threatening, he still idealizes it as a space that offers the opportunity for a meritocratic, and thus just, social order. The metropole, rather than being the corrupt and unjust counterpart to the natural world, has managed to transcend it to offer both the comforts of civilized life as well as the same meritocratic opportunities. This places the colony in the position of the inferior society that is still evolving towards this more socially just state.

Georges' experience in the metropole is a singular period that cannot be duplicated in Mauritius. Dumas' presentation of his character's time there suggests that the social order in the metropole is a reflection of skill and intelligence rather than one of birthright, a representation that while reflecting the Enlightenment's philosophy of equality between men, was hardly accurate in nineteenth-century metropolitan society. Dumas himself enjoyed entry into high

society, but nevertheless faced racial discrimination.[47] Notably, he never writes that Georges openly reveals his racial status while he is living in continental France. The fact that Georges "tames" his naturally curly hair by straightening it and that his skin is "pale" suggests that his metropolitan peers assume he is white. It is perhaps rather hopeful to assume that his racial status is of little relevance to them; and on a more sinister level, Dumas could be suggesting that Georges is not only taming his *créolité* through his education, but also, and more specifically, his "blackness."[48] The tests he imposes upon himself in order to rein in his natural character flaws and fears that have resulted from his early upbringing in a tropical environment suggest that he does not entirely believe himself to be equal to the white Europeans because of his heritage (112). Frantz Fanon describes how important education is as a way of proving that one is "civilized," a term that was seen as antonymous with "black." If one has the culture and education of Europe, one is no longer "black" but simply "very brown," a distinction that Dumas makes in describing Georges as being "tan." "Le nègre, c'est le sauvage, tandis que l'étudiant est un évolué."[49]

As with Jacques and his life as a slave trader, Georges' experience in Europe could be read as a way of denying his African origins, a cultural whitewashing. While the significance of racial discrimination remains ambiguous, Dumas emphasizes that for the first time in his life, Georges enjoys the privileges that in Mauritius, were open only to the white community. Thus,

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[47] Léon-François Hoffmann. Introduction. *Georges.* 1974. By Alexandre Dumas, Paris: Gallimard, 2003. 11-16.

[48] Molly Krueger Enz, "'White Negroes, Nothing More': The Ambiguous Role of the 'Mulatto' in Alexandre Dumas' *Georges*." *The Black Musketeer: Reevaluating Alexandre Dumas within the Francophone World.*. Ed. Eric Martone. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 97.

[49] Fanon, Frantz. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1952. 56.

the metropole becomes this utopic setting that offers an escape, a refuge from the "barbaric" and oppressive colonies. It is fundamentally a place of learning and experience, a place where Georges has the freedom to fight to reach the top of the social order, and where he can shape his identity such that it corresponds to his desires.

Georges' educational experiences transform him from a weak and impetuous child to a strong and calculating adult who is capable of conquering the natural world. He has a traditional well-rounded education in which he learns several foreign languages, the arts, and science. He travels extensively and serves in the French army where he earns the coveted Legion of Honor medal. However, his most significant education is the one he imposes upon himself as an extension of this "taming" of his personal appearance. Although he has no difficulty in developing his mental faculties, he is physically weak. To overcome this weakness, he commits himself to extensive strength-training exercises, and rather than sleeping in the comfort of his warm bed, sleeps on the floor on a bear skin. This demonstrates his rejection of the comforts provided for him as well as his will to conquer the natural world even as he is in the midst of civilized society. Georges' strength-building, like the rest of his education, takes place in a highly controlled environment that he determines himself rather than leaving it to chance in the less developed colony where social constraints prevent him from fully defining and controlling his surroundings.

Through a series of challenges, he conquers what he considers his greatest weaknesses: lust, greed, and cowardice. While Dumas addresses some of the same vices that Bernardin cites in *Paul et Virginie,* he views them as natural characteristics that need to be "civilized" rather than characteristics brought out by a corruptive metropolitan lifestyle. Unlike Bernardin, Dumas

does not thus advocate turning to spirituality or nature in order to find the strength to resist these character flaws. Only through experiences and education in the metropole can one master himself, and Georges executes these tests in a logical and scientific manner. In his challenges against lust and greed, he sets time limits on his exposure to these vices. He gives himself one hour to gamble for three nights, and once that time is up, he stops and leaves, whether or not he has won or lost. Similarly, after meeting a beautiful Parisian courtisan, he forces himself to spend two full hours with her during which he resists all of her efforts to seduce him. Once the time period has passed, he leaves. His final test of courage resembles a scientific experiment in which he determines whether a skilled marksman maintains his accuracy when he has to fire upon a man, namely Georges, rather than upon an inanimate target. At the same time, he is gauging his own courage to remain calm in the face of possible death.

Having already gained the respect of his peers, Georges views this process as way to determine whether or not he has accomplished this level of mastery over his natural self, a task that would be more difficult if not impossible to perform in his homeland due primarily to racial discrimination. He views these last endeavors, highly controlled instances of his domination of his personal flaws, as the final factors determining the level of civilization he has attained as well as his capacity to disprove the racial prejudice of the white planter class. Georges' practices are overall an appeal to nature to return to him the strength that has thus far been closed to him during his first years in the colonies. Sheltered by his father and denied entry into the colony's elite society of white planters, Georges never has the opportunity in the colonies to develop his strengths or even fully measure himself against the upper class.

When he can at last start to reclaim and develop his skills that correspond to his natural

mental and physical capacities, his body and mind are unaccustomed to the physical and mental stress. "Un instant, la nature surprise hésita, ne sachant pas si elle devait rompre ou triompher […]" (108). Here, Dumas contrasts Georges' character and physical form that the plantation society has defined with the true nature that Georges, in his freedom in the metropole, is attempting to redefine and develop for himself. "La nature fut la plus puissante; la faiblesse physique, vaincue devant l'énergie de la volonté, disparut comme un serviteur infidèle chassé par un maître inflexible" (108). Georges' weakness is considered the *unnatural* result of an unjust hierarchy as well as his inability to draw upon and control his own natural strengths. His ambition and strength become synonymous with nature itself, a contradiction to Bernardin's notion of unnatural ambition. Unlike Pierre Munier who hides his talents and submits to those of a higher social status, Georges develops his strengths, with no intention of ever concealing them from anyone and without the suppression of them by the white planter class. In these first steps towards his goal, Georges takes advantage of these opportunities to gain the respect of his peers in the metropole, a feat he believes will be possible to reproduce in Ile de France. As he prepares for his return to the colony, Dumas once again points to the differences between the metropole and the colonies in the narrator's remark that Georges' "lutte avec la civilisation était finie, sa lutte avec la barbarie allait commencer" (121).

The Return to Mauritius

Georges' return voyage marks the beginning of this trial as he becomes acquainted with the English nobleman and new Mauritian governor Lord Williams-Murrey. They are the final moments in Georges' experience abroad in which the influence of the white planters is of no consequence. Because Lord Murrey does not know Georges' family or origins, the two men can

assess each other's skills objectively without racial prejudice. His friendship with the governor also provides him a point of comparison against which he can measure the progress he has made during his time abroad. Their new friendship is initially enjoyable as they recognize each other's merits and as Georges notices that they match each other physically and intellectually. Lord Murrey remarks during their voyage, "[J]'espère aussi que, pour l'un comme pour l'autre, tout homme supérieur est un parent que nous reconnaissons pour être de notre famille, partout où nous le rencontrons" (85). Georges' delight and encouragement turn abruptly to disappointment and self-doubt when he is "obligé de se reconnaître à lui-même une infériorité sur celui dont jusque-là il s'était cru l'égal" (82). When the ship's captain falls ill, Lord Murrey is able to take command and maneuver the vessel safely to the island. Georges, who has theretofore gauged the two as equals, is vexed to find that Lord Murrey holds this superior skill, one that is notably an indication of the Englishman's ability to navigate the natural world. Georges is comforted only when he discovers that Lord Murrey is ten years his senior and has more skill only because he is older. This hole in Georges' education could also be filled by his brother Jacques' experiences. As on Jacques' ship, during this voyage Dumas presents the ocean as a relatively neutral zone in which Georges' race is irrelevant and in which he is judged on personal merit. The new governor will discover that in the colonies, this objectivity is simply not possible, and that only on the open seas can social hierarchies be more fluid. Although Dumas once again suggests that the ability to dominate the natural world is linked to European culture and its colonies, he also demonstrates that when all else is equal, including education and financial status, race is of no consequence.

When Georges first arrives on the island, the Creoles no longer recognize him as the son

of Pierre Munier and assume from his mannerisms, clothing, and Legion of Honor medal, that he is a French aristocrat visiting the island. “[La] foule assemblée décidait, avec sa sagacité ordinaire, que cet étranger était quelque jeune seigneur à la haute aristocratie de France ou d’Angleterre” (90). Even his own father does not recognize him. He has, in essence, become European, and arguably, white. This in itself is a triumph for Georges because he proves his worth to the Creoles without their knowledge of his race clouding their judgment, an experience similar to Jacques’ own regular disguises. However, the real challenges present themselves when these same peers discover his true identity, at which point the hero is once again ostracized and viewed as inferior despite his objective superiority. Although one might expect that Dumas will draw an extensive direct comparison between Georges and his rival Henri de Malmédie to demonstrate Georges’ superior abilities, he refrains from doing this in favor or placing Georges in competition with the enslaved African prince Laïza.

The possible reasons for the this are two-fold. The proof of the Muniers’ superiority to the Malmédies was already demonstrated at the beginning of the novel during the battle against the British and Georges’ subsequent skirmish. Rather than again showing his hero to be superior to Henri, Dumas has to show that Georges does not conform to the slave status that the white planters believe to be the only status acceptable for a person of color. Furthermore, because of social constraints as well as an obligation to avoid the same kind of dismissal Pierre Munier faced years beforehand during the battle against the British, Georges cannot directly challenge the Malmédies or even place himself in direct competition with them. By pitting a wealthy and free biracial man against an enslaved one, Dumas emphasizes the significance of Georges’ experience in the metropole and distinguishes him from even the most noble and most intelligent

people of color. At the same time, he shows through this relationship, that despite Georges' wealth and free status since birth, the white planters will always view him as comparable to the enslaved Laïza.

The only way for either man to prove that they are "worthy" of the acknowledgement of the white community is by winning the affection of the plantation belle Sara. Both Georges and Laïza are in love with her. Winning her heart will force the white planters to recognize them as worthy; and even if both men of color are acknowledged as enemies, the mere acknowledgement still signifies that they are worth the attention of the white community. Fanon describes this phenomenon as a way to be recognized as white instead of black: "En m'aimant, elle me prouve que je suis digne d'un amour blanc. On m'aime comme un Blanc" (51).

The influence of Georges' experiences in France and the rest of Europe are crucial to his pursuit for recognition. While Georges' appearance, charm, and courage alone could attest to Sara's attraction to him, Dumas further emphasizes the extent of the metropole's influence in the counterexample of Laïza. A slave known as the "lion," Laïza is strongly linked to the natural world as well as his former African community. A natural leader, he easily commands the respect of the other slaves on the Malmédie plantation. Intelligent, strong, and possessing the will to sacrifice himself for the benefit of others, he embodies all of the qualities of the romantic, noble slave hero (Hoffmann, *Nègre romantique* 60). Nevertheless, Dumas repeatedly makes it clear that these qualities, while certain to evoke the respect of slaves and the admiration and gratitude of Sara, are ultimately insufficient in Laïza's struggle against the planter class. The character of the noble slave may be an indispensable hero in earlier plantation novels, but Dumas challenges the virtues of this stereotypical depiction by focusing on Laïza's failures that result

from his lack of knowledge and experience.

Dumas establishes this right from the beginning of Laïza's story when he is helping his brother Nazim escape the island in a canoe they have built to return to continental Africa. Using the darkness of the night to their advantage, they ready the canoe and then cover Nazim's body in coconut oil so that he can easily slip away from any man who tries to capture him. Their knowledge, in its limitations, fails them. They have never accounted for the possibility of the planters subduing Nazim from afar with rifles rather than by hand. Because their experiences have been limited to struggles that do not involve firearms and because their adversaries of the past have not had such a great social and financial advantage, they cannot easily anticipate all of the possible obstacles that an escape from this plantation society will present to them. Their status as slaves prevents them from having the same kind of education that Georges enjoyed, and their inherited status of African royalty or nobility of character does not compensate for this lacking experience. Furthermore, compared to Georges, they are absolutely incapable of gaining any more freedom than what the plantation society has already accorded them without his help. Georges' capacity to help them proves advantageous as it provides him with opportunities to demonstrate his worth to the white planter class and chip away at the social hierarchies at the same time.

Nature as a Weapon

A shark attack provides the two men with their first opportunity to prove their courage and strength to Sara. Having been raised in Mauritius, she is completely at ease in nature and forgets to heed any underlying dangers. While she is enjoying a swim in the bay, she does not notice that a shark has targeted her as its prey until it is too late for her to escape without help

from Georges and Laïza, who perform a heroic rescue that pushes the limits of believability. Laïza dives into the bay and manages to reach the shark and wrestle it away from Sarah, while Georges, who is observing from ashore, subdues the shark with a rifle. Although both men have contributed to her rescue, Dumas characterizes their roles differently. Laïza's role in Sara's rescue from the shark supports the idea that his nobility is inadequate when he is interacting with the planter class. Seeing the woman that he loves in a life-threatening situation, he can use only his body and a knife to try to save her. His rescue attempt clearly requires more courage than Georges' safe distance from the shark, but Dumas makes it clear that had Sara's life depended on Laïza alone, she would surely have perished. The noble slave simply cannot swim fast enough. Georges is the one who succeeds in wounding the shark with his rifle so that Sara can escape. Although Laïza wrestles with the creature while she swims away, allowing her more time to reach the shore, it is likely that Georges' efforts alone would have sufficed to save the plantation belle. Laïza may be depicted as a courageous man who risks his life, but Georges, whose rescue from land requires more talent than courage, is characterized as an "ange libérateur" (174). This depiction raises him to a celestial status that corresponds to Sara's own comparability to a goddess. Even she, as a "wild child" cannot survive without Georges' intervention. This episode also directly conflicts with the belief in Providence and suggests that man is fully capable of fighting for his own life or the lives of others without any intervention from a supreme being.

Both Sara and Georges adopt almost divine qualities themselves as they refuse to conform to the norms of colonial society. This becomes a point of irony that Dumas revisits several times in his novel and that alludes to his initial presentation of the roles of God and man in the first chapter of the novel. Although he ties together nature, sociopolitical upheaval, and

God in ways that seem as if they correspond to a belief in Providence, his deviation from the providential depictions of nature and the colonies suggest a critical irony over a sincere faith. The white planter characters in the novel are the ones who tend to attribute to Providence the seemingly miraculous survival of principal characters who find themselves facing nature's life-threatening forces, even when it is clearly the talents and courage of the characters themselves that have ensured their survival. Dumas conveys his critique of the belief in Providence in the Malmédie's dinner conversation that evening. As Henri and Monsieur de Malmédie marvel that Sara was able to survive such an attack, Dumas ironically has them attribute her rescue to Providence rather than to her true heroes Georges and Laïza. "[I]l ne fut question ni du nègre inconnu ni du chasseur étranger ; tout l'honneur du miracle fut rapporté à la Providence, qui voulait conserver à Monsieur de Malmédie et à Henri une nièce et une fiancée si tendrement chèrie" (177).

Attributing Sara's rescue to Providence thus serves as a way to refuse the rightful recognition of their heroism, a refusal that belies the white planters' fear of the potential of both men. Any acknowledgement would suggest that the Malmédie family was indebted to a free man of color and a slave. It also shows that they assume that God ensures their safety and their happiness in part because he approves of their lifestyles. They have been granted their position as slave owners rather than as slaves or even free people of color precisely because God has chosen this path for them. Despite the Malmédies' lack of acknowledgement, Georges' rescue does indebt them to him, confronting them with the honorable obligation to acknowledge his worth. Refusing to allow them to dismiss his influence on their lives, Georges uses the incident to buy the freedom of Monsieur de Malmédie's slaves Laïza and his brother Nazim, thus changing their

status from slaves to free men of color. This act contributes to a disruption in the plantation hierarchy, a challenge to the belief in God's approval and a challenge to the belief in Providence. Georges' liberation of the two enslaved brothers forces the Malmédies to accept that even as a free man of color, Georges is still a free man and a wealthy planter with the authority to impose this change. Georges' liberation of Laïza also pulls the former slave closer to his higher social status. Although Laïza is not wealthy, he becomes a free man of color, technically the same status as Georges, at least in the eyes of the white planters. Thus even as Georges undermines the Malmédies, he also draws into question his own prejudices against enslaved people of color and breaks down the social barrier between himself and Laïza.

Georges attacks the plantation hierarchy a second time when he breaks through racial barriers to ask for Sara's hand in marriage. Sara's approval of Georges will automatically translate into a change in social status, even if her family and the white community refuse to accept her decision. A white woman choosing a man of color for her husband means that she views him as equal, if not superior, to all of his white peers. Her acceptance of Georges' proposal marks a significant victory for him even if her family and the white planter community do not approve of her decision. In this case, because Sara is already betrothed to her cousin Henri, she also becomes the symbol of proof of Georges' superiority over his childhood rival as well as a validation of self as a white person.

As in the case of the shark, this type of interaction cannot occur under normal, tranquil circumstances. Georges must once again prove himself to gain recognition and acceptance. On the night that he has planned to meet Sara, a violent hurricane strikes the island, a phenomenon that convinces the other inhabitants to remain safely sheltered in their homes. Defiantly refusing

to allow himself be deterred by the storm, Georges uses the hurricane to his advantage to convince Sara not only of his love for her, but also to demonstrate his courage and the lengths to which he will go to win her love. Again in reference to the traditional belief in Providence, Dumas describes Georges' actions as a struggle against the colony, God, and nature. His allusions to mythological and fictional characters who defied God for their personal gain, paints Georges as a diabolical hero.

The chapter containing the episode of the hurricane is entitled "Pandora's Box," a reference to the mythological release of evil and disease upon the world and a pivotal moment in this novel. Dumas is clearly referring to the hurricane and its destruction as similar to the evils that Pandora released upon the world by opening the box. This would suggest that Georges is similar to Pandora; while he is certainly not responsible for the hurricane itself, his coinciding challenge to the white planter community could potentially disrupt the social order in such a way as to lead to the loss of their luxurious lifestyles, a fall from paradise. Georges revels in the chaos he has unleashed, never having any intention of trying to contain it and never dreaming of cowering before it. Unlike his mythological counterpart, Dumas' hero does not see hope as man's only possible defense against these evils; that idea is too close to Providence, too similar to waiting for the fickle will of God to determine one's destiny. He does not cower in the relative security of his home, waiting for the hurricane to end and hoping that his life is spared and the damage to his property is not too great. Instead, he calmly places himself in the middle of the chaos of the storm with the intention of carrying out his plans.

At the beginning of his trek, Dumas compares him to Faust riding his steed to the peak of Mount Brocken where he will participate in the witches' sabbath, a moment at which the devil

takes control of nature away from God and directs it himself. The comparison is apt in that Faust was a scholar who, disappointed by the limitations of his scholarly pursuits, makes a deal with the devil to know everything about the material world and rediscover pleasure through this knowledge. Similarly, Georges uses all that he has learned in the metropole to challenge the island's social hierarchies. The destruction of his physical surroundings resembles the witches' sabbath, the uprooted sugar cane and manioc carried away by the wind similar to flying broomsticks. The rolling waves of the turbulent sea also illustrates the indominatable violence of the storm and the absence of God: "[La mer] venait avec un bruit terrible battre les côtes, comme si la main de Dieu n'eût pas été là pour la contenir" (252).

Georges is the only one in complete control of himself and his environment. Once he begins his trek through the storm, he views himself as defying both nature and God's will rather than submitting to them. "[A] chaque éclair, il souriait; lui qui avait jusqu'alors essayé de toutes les luttes humaines, on eût dit qu'il lui tardait, comme à don Juan, de lutter avec Dieu" (251). As he rides to the Malmédie plantation, he treads across fallen roof tiles and navigates his way easily around falling trees, signifying not only his will, but also his disregard for the structures of this colonial society, both social and physical. As Georges struggles against natural forces, Dumas emphasizes his identity as someone who can dominate the natural world.

Sara, already impressed by his education and allure, is overwhelmed by his will to brave a dangerous storm just to see her; she can do nothing other than accept a marriage proposal from this heroic man, despite his inferior class status and her family's discrimination against him. While Dumas characterizes her acceptance as the influence of a divine will, such a characterization is ironic at the end of a paragraph that is little more than a list of Georges'

courageous feats :

> L'homme qui, au milieu de pareils dangers, quand les plus braves tremblaient dans leurs maisons, venait à elle, traversant les forêts déracinées, les torrents grossis, les précipices béants, et tout cela pour lui dire: "Je vous aime, Sara! m'aimez-vous?" (254)

Georges returns in triumph to his plantation, the social order of the colony broken in this promise of a union with Sara. The hurricane and the hero's ability to navigate his way through it together contribute to the fracturing of the barrier between white people and people of color and demonstrate the advantages of being able to dominate nature, rather than simply accepting it.

Georges views his own brave act as evidence that he is more powerful than God and nature, a perspective that contrasts with Bernardin's notions of Providence and with the revolutionaries' impression that natural phenomena that impeded their enemies were evidence that their cause was justified and supported by a higher power. Georges demonstrates his own strength and will as comparable to God's. "Dieu a voulu tout anéantir par un ouragan, et il n'a pu ; moi, j'ai voulu faire disparaître dans une tempête hommes, lois, préjugés, et plus puissant que Dieu, moi, j'ai réussi" (318). At the same time, he recognizes the important role of the hurricane in his efforts, and views himself as the one controlling and directing the storm's destruction against the colony's injustices. Dumas' conceptualization of the influence of nature and God in social affairs grants man an autonomy and capacity to define their lives according to their desires and ambitions.

The Death of the Noble Savage

Although Georges is the one who wins the hand of Sara, this victory is a secret to the white community; thus Dumas continues to compare him to Laïza to show that the planters still

views him in the same way they view the ex-slave. Georges may have convinced Sara of his merit, but the rest of the white community still opposes him. The differences between Laïza and Georges are significant at the beginning of the novel, but become less and less so as the story progresses and class lines are blurred. Laïza sees their similarities from the beginning, and even tells Georges that they are like brothers, explaining that as a North African and a prince, he was never meant to bear the shackles of slavery (293). Once he gains his free status through Georges, there is little that separates the two men apart from Georges' experiences in Europe. Both characters are free men of color who are facing the prejudice of white plantation society. Georges enjoys the wealth that comes from being the son of a successful planter, while Laïza commands the respect of a large community of slaves. Despite Georges' initial scorn at the former slave's comparison of the two of them, he gradually beings to trust him as if he were indeed his brother. Each man relinquishes his social position in order to lead a slave revolt not only for the freedom of the slaves, but to force the white planters to acknowledge Georges' merit. Laïza allows Georges to replace him as candidate for the leader of the revolution. In return, Georges frees all of his slaves and provides them with both money and firearms, an act that depletes his wealth. When their rebellion begins, Georges' cultivation in France and Sara's love are the only characteristics separating him from Laïza regarding their social status. While these may seem insignificant, they mean the difference between victory and defeat.

The rebellion that the two men plan together is Georges' first direct attack on plantation society. He does not rely on any violent natural phenomena as a means of proving his worth, and his rebellion fails in perhaps an unexpected turn of events considering he is the hero of this novel. However, Dumas warns of this likely outcome in his earlier depiction of Pierre Munier's

victory against the British. Without any life-threatening dangers to force the characters to rely on their skills rather than their social status, Georges and Laïza cannot fight the advantages of law and social conventions that the white planters enjoy. Georges' secret engagement to Sara has not raised him to the status of a white planter despite the encouragement her love has given him. Furthermore, by freeing his slaves and giving up most of his wealth, he has placed himself in direct opposition not only to the white community but also to the planter community, including other free men of color. In his attempt to lead a slave revolt, he defines himself as a slave leader rather than as a planter and is thus fighting against an even greater community than before.

It is possible to explain away Georges' failed rebellion through rationalizations of "vraisemblance" and the importance of maintaining a certain level of historical reality in addition to the lacking opportunity provided by nature. However, a more probable explanation lies in Georges' very limited role in its execution. Throughout the novel, the degree of control that Georges maintains during his bid for equality determines the extent of his success. His rebellion is ultimately unsuccessful because he is largely absent as a leader. Imprisoned the night before his attack on the colony, he is unable to lead his army of freed slaves, largely because of Lord Murrey's own ability to anticipate Georges' actions. Without the hero's presence and guidance, his rebel soldiers are lost, demonstrating the indispensability of Georges' influence. Distracted by large barrels of rum placed strategically in the streets, the rebel slaves, unable to have mastered themselves, find it impossible to remain focused on their goal for freedom and equality, a point that Dumas contrasts with Georges' own experience. "[T]oute cette haute étude de son propre cœur, de sa propre force et de sa propre valeur était inutile ; toute cette supériorité de caractère donnée par Dieu, d'éducation acquise sur les hommes, tout cela venait de se briser

devant les instincts d'une race qui aimait mieux l'eau-de-vie que la liberté" (343). Dumas opposes the two groups, not just as holding different status in class or race but precisely in the difference in mastery of themselves. He presents the freed slaves' love of alcohol as a "natural" trait, an *instinct* that they have never learned to dominate through civilization. Laïza, whose background is similar to the rebel army, cannot command such a large group alone. Although Georges is later freed from his prison, he is wounded shortly thereafter and falls unconscious, once again leaving his second-in-command Laïza to lead the few remaining soldiers.

The rebellion disintegrates into what resembles a hunt for two fugitive slaves, the chapter comprising this episode entitled "La chasse aux nègres." The forest, often depicted in other plantation novels as a place of escape for fugitive slaves, provides little to no cover for Laïza and Georges but instead seems to hinder their flight even more than it does the pursuit of the planters.[50] Once the planter class can no longer ignore Georges' challenge, a true struggle ensues, but because Georges is unconscious, the planters direct their wrath towards Laïza. Laïza's experience as a leader among the slaves serves him well during the preparation for the rebellion, but he is no match for the planters, even in the forest. The planters, in the habit of hunting deer, are accustomed to moving swiftly through the woods while tracking a target. With rifles, a number of slaves, and hounds at their disposal, they hold a clear advantage over Laïza. Furthermore, Laïza is burdened by the unconscious Georges who needs to be carried through the forest while armed white planters and hounds take pursuit. During the time that Laïza is carrying Georges and attempting to navigate the dense forest at the same time, it is easy to forget that Georges is even present.

[50] See for example, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* ; Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*; Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's *Sarah*; Charles Testut's *Le Vieux Salomon*.

Georges' absence as well as the similarities between him and Laïza suggest that the planters view them as the same person. Their injuries to Laïza arguably represent their desires to do the same to Georges. Although Laïza chooses to take his own life rather than allow himself to be killed by the white community, he does not die unscathed by his pursuers. Bullets have pierced both his heart and his thigh, parts of the body that have traditionally been highly symbolic in literary works. The piercing of his heart could signify the destruction of his ambition for freedom and his forbidden passion for Sara. Because the thigh has traditionally been used as a euphemism for male genitalia, its injury likely signifies the end of this family line and a symbolic destruction of the passing of African heritage to a second generation.

Furthermore, this could also be read as the death of Georges' own blackness. Only after the death of this ex-slave, does the white planter class finally acknowledge Georges as a threat and place him on trial for treason rather than immediately executing him. Despite the roles of his father, the slaves, and Laïza in this subversive act, Georges accepts full responsibility for the rebellion, not only to protect those involved, but also for his own honor and glory. Although he has not been victorious in his endeavor, he has finally demonstrated to his oppressors that he is their equal and that he and any other oppressed classes are capable of threatening the social order. He is unsurprisingly found guilty and sentenced to be executed.

Interpreting the Conclusion

This brings us back to the problem of interpreting the novel's conclusion. Dumas cannot make the rebellion successful, but he can certainly save his hero from death while at the same time emphasizing that the white planters view Georges as a worthy enemy. With the help of Sara, his brother Jacques, and his father Pierre, Georges escapes just before his execution and

sails away with his family on his brother's ship. At this point, the rebellion, the planned execution, and Georges' hasty marriage with Sara have all challenged the white planters enough that they cannot simply allow him to leave. By capturing Georges and executing him, they will bring Sara back to her white family, prevent the propagation of more children of color, and also discourage others who might try to organize an insurrection against the planters. When the governor Lord Williams Murrey takes chase in his warship *The Leicester*, he is showing his complete acceptance of Georges as a worthy adversary, an act that in itself is a triumph for Georges. In accordance with Dumas' depiction of the ocean and dangerous nature throughout the rest of the novel, during the struggle that ensues in this wild space, Georges and his family can once again use their capacity to control the natural world to accomplish unrealistic heroic feats. Together, they manage to destroy *The Leicester* and sail away in what would seem to be an apparent triumph.

I return to the original question of this chapter regarding the interpretation of the novel's unrealistic ending. Enz implies that it would have been more reasonable for Georges to find a way to "[coexist] in harmony with the 'Autre.'"("Mulatto" 392). She concludes her article with the observation that Georges has effectively isolated himself from the rest of the world for the rest of his life; "toute terre nous est ennemi" (426). Because of his own hatred for white people and their sense of superiority, he will never have a sense of belonging and will never be able to identify with any particular community of people. It is more probable that Dumas is directing his criticism towards the racial discrimination that is necessary to maintain the plantation society's social order. Georges effectively exiles himself and his family from their homeland, but Dumas' advocacy for struggle against nature and society suggests that his challenge against the white

planters is still his best possible recourse and casts a more optimistic light on his escape.

While Enz's assessment of the Munier family's social and financial situation, as well as his "unwillingness" to accept his unequal yet certainly comfortable status as a free and wealthy man of color, the fault does not lie with Georges himself. After all, while his search for an identity may be an illusion, it would not be any less illusory for him to spend the rest of his life in Europe where, for all of its opportunities, is not his homeland and does not allow him the satisfaction of proving to the planters that his race has nothing to do with his merit. His other option is to accept the oppressively prejudiced white society by tolerating their discrimination. While Mauritius would have felt geographically like his home, he would still never have had a sense of belonging there no matter his capacity for tolerance, and would have faced social ostracism at best. The plantation society does not accept his identity of himself, and although European society finds him of superior intellect and charm, it remains largely ignorant of his background. If Georges finds himself in this inbetween state that Chris Bongie defines in *Islands and Exiles*, it is because no matter where he is in society, he cannot completely reveal his identity without facing racial prejudice.[51] Enz makes the pragmatic suggestion that Georges should not have made a violent effort to change the opinion of the white planters so that he could maintain the wealth and privilege he had as a biracial planter. This suggestion effectively means that because Georges' attempt to change the perspective of plantation society will ultimately be futile, he should not even try to demonstrate his equality. Rather, he should just bow his head, be grateful for what he has, and tolerate the discrimination much in the same way his father did.

Considering the way Dumas presents his hero, the metropole, and nature, he is

[51] Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: the Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. 24.

advocating for the struggle, even if it results in a less than ideal life. Above all, Georges wants the opportunity to prove himself. His entire challenge is not necessarily about winning, but simply about being allowed to show all of his worth and being able to reap the rewards of such merit. Once he has been captured and is facing execution, he is calm because he has at least made the effort to realize his ambitions. He gambled his life in the hope of gaining acknowledgement and achieved what he desired: a beautiful white woman's love and the planters' acceptance of his challenge. His escape is an unexpected bonus. In addition to this, Dumas' presentation of Georges' relationship with nature suggest that his failure would be inconsistent with the rest of the novel. His lack of consciousness during the chase in the forest leaves the reader without a true confrontation between Georges and the planters. This battle comes after Georges' escape. In the natural wilderness of the open seas, this final scene upholds Dumas' suggestions that challenges to the plantation's social order can occur only in conjunction with dangerous natural phenomena and that the metropolitan influence plays a significant role in determining one's capacity to succeed.

Although Georges' new life on the open seas can be read as a condemnation to permanent exile from all lands, the depiction of the ocean in the rest of the novel suggest otherwise. "Toute terre nous est ennemi" is not an observation that everything has suddenly changed around the world because of Georges' rebellion. Rather, all land is Georges' enemy only in places where he can be identified, which is not a significant change from his life before the rebellion. Furthermore, Dumas has already established that Jacques' skill on the ocean as well as his ability to disguise himself and his ship prevent the family from being doomed to a life of complete and permanent exile. They can still make the less idealistic choice and live on the

margins of a society whose laws they do not fully accept. Herein lies Dumas' true critique of society not just in the colonies, but in all lands, perhaps including the metropole. The Muniers have not freely chosen to live this way, but rather, have been forced out of their homeland because of their refusal both to conform to unjust social conventions and to define themselves based on their color alone. In choosing a life at sea, they are refuting the geographical determination of their identities; rather than being European, African, or Creole, they become "Anyman." Accordingly, they are the ones who determine their new path.

While Dumas advocates for French imperialism in his depiction of metropolitan culture as superior to a primitive and mixed culture of the colony, he also shows that stringent hierarchies based on little more than tradition or inheritance will inevitably fall. In the natural world, differences in power and strength are not static, but rather in constant conflict and movement as they shift towards a stable equilibrium. Even the metropole, despite its representation of stability in this novel, faces some sociopolitical turbulence when the country is restored to the Bourbons and then returned briefly to Napoleon. A controlled movement in rank based on merit, as found in Dumas' representation of France's imperial military, appeases those in the lower ranks because they find a meritocratic society to be more fair than one based on birthright. Thus, while he does not overtly advocate for the abolition of slavery, he does imply that a more flexible social order will largely prevent violent slave revolts.

By defining the metropole's culture as being the only one that has significant merit or that can offer knowledge on controlling the natural world, Dumas creates the illusion that the metropole is an invincible state in comparison to its colonies and even to other uncolonized locations. That is to say, in Dumas' representation of the metropole, neither the Creoles nor the

peoples of uncolonized lands will ever be able to triumph against the French metropole, or the rest of imperialist Europe, because of their supposedly inferior stage of civilization, unless they can adopt Eurocentric culture to use to their own advantage. In this way, Dumas' work is not only a critique of discrimination against people of color, but also an accolade to French imperialism. Considering his critique of racial discrimination and his suggestion that strict social orders will eventually fall precisely because of their inflexibility and discriminatory practices, he perhaps unwittingly suggests that the French metropole, in its overconfidence and pride, has overlooked the value of other non-Eurocentric cultures. By imposing itself on these civilizations, it is categorizing them in ways that are not unlike the class separations faced by people of color. Perhaps unwittingly, Dumas implies that just as the white planters enjoyed the advantages of being at the top of the social order by denying the merit of those below them, the metropole will also eventually face sociopolitical uprisings as the oppressed make a bid for freedom and equality.

CHAPTER 4

Through the Superstitious Eye:

Science and Fatalism in Alfred Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*

Alfred Mercier's novel *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* is the only American plantation novel in this study and is the only one written by an author who grew up on a plantation. As the son of a planter, Mercier focuses almost entirely on the relationship between the plantation family members, their employees, and their slaves, the problem of slavery, and the impending American Civil War. As described in the introduction of this dissertation, the plantation is an isolated and self-sufficient community that seems almost utopic. The plantation master Monsieur Saint-Ybars is described in the stereotypical terms of "firm but just," and Mercier includes the archetypes of the Mammy and the happy slave in this work. At the same time, these same characters do not correspond entirely to their archetypes, and Mercier also delves into the injustices of slavery while still expressing some regret about the fall of the plantation family. With his presentation of the more complicated, nuanced, and imperfect relationships of the plantation inhabitants, his novel can hardly be condemned by scholars as simplistic, predictable, or even sentimental.

As a Creole, Mercier adds another layer of criticism to his work that ties it to the French metropole. He cannot resist a derisory remark about ignorant French authors such as Chateaubriand who wrote about Louisiana without ever having visited it; and he observes that the depictions of this former French colony are hardly accurate. He makes it a point at the beginning of his novel to show that New Orleans is a bustling and developed city rather than simply a small crop of homes. The inhabitants are just as intelligent and as cultured as any Parisian, a clear objection to the metropolitan depiction of them as coarse and savage. In addition

to this, the principal character Antony Pélasge is a Parisian who comes to Lousiana after the 1848 Revolution to teach the planter's son Démon, but also to see how a true republic is run. Mercier shows the relationship between France and its former colony to be one of mutual exchange and respect rather than a metropolitan/colonial hierarchy.

Considering this, it may be difficult at first to see what his work has in common with the French plantation novels in this corpus, apart from a similar setting and the French language. I have argued in the other chapters that the French authors associate their control over nature with sociopolitical power and control over the colonies. Although Mercier illustrates the strong ties between Louisiana and its former metropole, he does not show one as being more powerful than the other or as trying to exert its power over the other. Rather, he presents two relatively equal although admittedly different societies that are grappling with the same questions regarding a changing social order and its ties to nature, the persistent belief in Providence and fatalism, and the possible solutions to dealing with these existential questions.

Like many plantation novels of the American South, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* examines the role of nature in the social order, as a part of questioning whether or not slavery is *natural*. Mercier suggests that it is not. He characterizes the belief in fatalism and Providence, and by extension the belief in the natural right to rule over a people, as a superstition that proves harmful for slaves and planters alike because it ultimately stifles the agency of both. He advocates for extensive education with an emphasis in science as a way of overcoming superstitious beliefs and as a way of learning to view the world more objectively. While his work shares some obvious traits with Dumas' *Georges*, Mercier does not go so far as to imply that one can fully dominate and control nature, especially for sociopolitical gain.

In this chapter, I show how Mercier condemns the notion of being controlled by the natural world and by a divine plan as superstitious. At the same time, he presents genetic heritage and the natural and social environment as molding his characters' personal disposition so strongly that it is difficult for them to struggle against their natural inclinations, including their superstitious beliefs. Thus, although he condemns superstition, he also presents the idea of a fatalism based on scientific principles. Throughout his work, he suggests that education and even a change in environment can help ease this struggle, but unlike Dumas, and to a some extent, Bernardin, he shows that scholarly pursuits and relocation are insufficient in finding meaning in one's life. He proposes that existential meaning in life is found in the effort to change and build societies based on one's personal ideals and beliefs, even if this attempt ultimately proves futile. He applies this perspective not only to the plantation society, but also to civilization around the world, and shows that only when one decides to abandon this fight does he start to deteriorate.

Although Mercier focuses on the Saint-Ybars family in this novel, he alludes to a more widespread problem of superstition that played a role in the sociopolitical changes in nineteenth-century France. He begins his novel with the rise of Napoleon III and with the curious statement that superstition has played a key role in the establishment of the Second Empire. Richard Lehan explains that the fall of religion and the monarchy in France during the French Revolution had left the people with a void that they wanted to fill with the idea that they were a nation chosen to dominate others, a desire that persisted from the early part of the century through the time of the Second Empire. Lehan's work corresponds to Mary Ashburn Miller's evidence that the French believed that they were a chosen people before the rise of Napoleon I.[52] This same idea also

[52] Richard Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in the Age of Transition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. 181.

influenced the American South as the plantation masters viewed themselves as Southern gentlemen who believed that it was their destiny to "civilize" the rest of North America. Populating the land from coast to coast, they believed they were destined to push out the Native American populations and impose their culture on those who remained.[53] Mercier severely criticizes the characters who believe in a divinely ordained superiority to justify their own social status (203). He does not depict Louisianan plantation life or European colonialism as part of an amalgam of divine and natural forces that will eventually culminate in an ideal world.[54]

Instead, he depicts the scientific viewpoint of the world as an objective one that allows man to adapt more easily to environmental and social changes because of his capacity to see structure where there seems to be none. Rather than looking beyond the material world in search of the justification for inequalities or inalterable fates, Mercier focuses on the concrete reality of the present and its effects on civilization's sociopolitical future. Nature plays an integral role in this reality as the characters suffer from viewing their world as a fatalistic or succeed in ordering their environment and using scientific observations to guide their relationships with others and foresee looming sociopolitical conflicts. There is no otherworldly universal plan, no manifest destiny, no influence of the dead on the living, and no predictions of events to come. Mercier

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[53] Ritchie Watson Jr., *Normans and Saxons: Southern Race Mythology and the Intellectual History of the American Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. 25.

[54] Susan J. Tracy, *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. 9-11. See for more context on the prevailing class attitudes in the antebellum South. "[The antebellum historical romance] not only salutes the triumph of the United States in the American Revolution and glorifies the Southern role in that victory, but argues for a postwar society in which the "naturally superior" leaders of the heroic victory--the members of the planter class--will govern. […] While the aristocracy was decisively overthrown in France, persistent colonial ruling elites continued to hold power in the United States. They justified their dominance by appealing to the pre-industrial concepts of society. Even though the North would shed this social vision in a generation, the Southern planter class continued to appeal to the vision of a stable and harmonious society, based on government by traditional elites."

refutes these ideas multiple times in his work, consistently showing that the belief in destiny is harmful precisely in its deprivation of the characters' autonomy and personal responsibility for their actions. Science and reason offer the key to navigating the complexities of the world be they social or natural. Mercier's appreciation for a scientific perspective admittedly raises its own problems as his characters, while not subject to divine fatalism, are seemingly trapped by their biological heritage in what could be regarded as destiny based on science.[55] Despite this, Mercier seeks emotional stability for his characters through structure that only science can provide and suggests that this rational viewpoint is the only way for man to progress towards a just and egalitarian society.

With these two principal perspectives in mind, one can read *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* as a social experiment of what happens to those who rely significantly on superstition to guide them in defining their social status and in finding their purpose in life. Mercier opposes superstitious characters to ones who rely on science and concrete observation to give meaning and structure to their existence. He presents each significant event in the novel through these two philosophies, providing multiple examples of the harmful influence of superstition and its often irresistible draw, as well as the more stabilizing influence of rational thought and the scholarly diligence it requires.

In the first part of this novel, Mercier presents a portrait of each one of his principal characters. From the details and anecdotes he supplies for each one, the reader can determine

[55] Louise Henson, "'Half believing, half-incredulous': Elizabeth Gaskell, Superstition and the Victorian Mind." *Nineteenth Century Contexts.* 24.3 (2002): 251-269. See for a discussion of the blurred lines between science and superstition during the Victorian era as well as scientists' fascination with the physiological and psychological reasons for superstitious belief, and especially for mass epidemia of superstition. It would be interesting to explore to what extent, if any, Dr. Alfred Mercier studied the time period's medical texts on this subject.

whether the character is superstitious or more scientific in nature. Most of the characters fall into the former category and believe strongly in the notion that some people are born to lead while others are born to follow; their superstition causes them to be ever fearful of the loss of their social status. The scientific characters, by contrast, remain dubious of this idea. One actively fights for the rights of the working class in the 1848 Revolution while the other gives up his role as a planter to pursue a life of scientific study. By associating social equality with rational thought and opposing it to the perpetuation of social hierarchies linked with superstition, Mercier criticizes the social order of the antebellum South as a system based on fantasy.

Scientific and Superstitious Characters

He tells his story primarily through the rational viewpoint of Antony Pélasge, a professor from France who moves to Louisiana to avoid the impending establishment of France's Second Empire. Pélasge has "une nature essentiellement philosophique, une âme reposée et forte" (25). In no way a religious man, Pélasge does not subscribe to the idea that God is leading man towards the best of all possible worlds through catastrophic natural phenomena; rather, he has faith that man will develop his mind through continued study, and that through scholarly enlightenment, one can be free of the shackles of the plantation hierarchy. "La raison était sa religion; la science était son culte; il avait pour dévise: *Savoir c'est être libre*" (26). Although he fights to reorganize France's unjust class system, he more often plays the role of the rather passive observer who relies on knowledge to find environmental structure in a time period characterized by sociopolitical turbulence. His objective observations provide him with a way to see his role in his environment, both natural and social. In Louisiana, where he travels to work as a professor on the Saint-Ybars family's large sugar plantation, this viewpoint proves to be

exceedingly rare; it is shared only by Vieumaite, the old planter who has relinquished his role in favor of scholarly pursuits.

Vieumaite is very much like Pélasge in his appreciation for knowledge and for objective, scientific thought. Although he still enjoys the wealth and status that his former role as planter afforded him, he is no longer directly involved in the running of the plantation or in asserting his status over others. He prefers to dedicate his time to understanding his social and physical surroundings, perhaps overly so, as he is slightly bent over from perusing books. In the same way that Pélasge believes that society will continually improve through learning, Vieumaite demonstrates the benefits of using logic to one's social advantages. Just as education will lead to a sense of freedom and consequently, a more just society, Mercier illustrates how science and logic can replace superstition and can be used to anticipate social and natural upheaval, if not avoid them altogether. Not one to believe in fortune-telling or clairvoyance, Vieumaite can nevertheless predict future events by analyzing history and current conflicts and logically deducing where they will lead, a reasoning that allows him to foresee the Civil War. "Il étudiait attentivement les faits contemporains, pour en déduire les conséquences dans leur succession logique" (165).

In keeping with his adherence to logical thought, he has completely mastered his emotions, blocking out any sentimentality that might cloud his judgment until he is able to assess a situation or a person's character. His compartmentalized emotions and logic manifest themselves in his face as a friendly "sunny side" and a mistrustful, discerning "dark side." In complete command of his sentiments and his reason, he is able to resist the draw of superstitious thought. "Tous les Saint-Ybars avaient manifesté, plus ou moins, un penchant à la superstition:

Vieumaite seul avait fait exception à cette règle" (207). He recognizes that he has not successfully passed down this rational perspective to his children who do not share the same kind of restraint and who tend to demonstrate varying degrees of superstitious belief. When he is on his deathbed, he prefers to talk to Pélasge rather than to his own son about what the future holds for the plantation. He tells the Frenchman that his family is too emotional to understand and accept that a civil war is coming and that slavery and the plantation will end, leaving them without the social structure on which they depend to organize their lives.

Indeed, for the rest of the family, the plantation hierarchy is central to the smooth functioning of this agricultural business; and Mercier links superstition directly to social structures in the parallels he draws between aristocratic traits and his most superstitious characters. In the antebellum American South, it was common for the Southern planters to believe that they occupied their position of wealth and social status because it was their destiny.[56] Likewise, they tended to view themselves as both chivalrous and aristocratic, characteristics that are apparent in the most superstitious of the characters. Monsieur Saint-Ybars, the plantation patriarch, conducts himself like a king; and Pélasge even refers to him as such. "A-t-il l'air fier celui-là!... le grand roi Assuérus, dans toute sa gloire, ne marchait pas plus superbement" (14). As if he were royalty, he expects the utmost respect from his family and the immediate obedience of his slaves. Family and slaves alike describe him as "sévère mais juste," the stereotypical description of the "good planter" whose subordinates are content to follow his orders. This attitude is not limited to Monsieur Saint-Ybars. His biracial grandson Le Duc has been nicknamed as such because of his haughtiness and sense of self-importance. "[D]e ce qu'il

[56] Susan J. Tracy, *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. 11.

portait le nom du célèbre courtisan, il se croyait aussi important que lui" (75). Although a house slave, he enjoys privileges that are denied the other slaves. In addition to his own room, library, and rifle, he even has his own slave, Windsor, who serves as his valet. His desire to distinguish himself from the other slaves, coupled with a belief that as a Saint-Ybars, he has the right to own slaves, prevents him from any kind of comraderie or empathy towards the other slaves. Rather, he spends much of his time trying to find ways to benefit from the social order and undermine it just enough when necessary to realize his ambitions.

Although Mercier presents Monsieur Saint-Ybars and Le Duc as the most superstitious characters, they are not the focal point of his social experiment, nor are Pélasge and Vieumaite. Rather, Mercier explores the effects of the fall of the antebellum American South through his final principal character, Edmond, nicknamed "Démon", the son of Monsieur Saint-Ybars. Démon assumes the role of the pivotal character through whom Mercier presents both superstitious and scientific points of view while using the other characters as points of comparison. As Pélasge's student, he is aware of the tranquillity and structure that scholarly pursuits can offer. As a member of the Saint-Ybars family, he must constantly struggle against the fatalistic beliefs that his family has instilled in him and that often cause him to fall into a state of depression. Once the plantation hierarchy begins to crumble, Démon finds himself unable to reconcile his desire for social equality and his increasingly insignificant social status.

To gauge the different characters' reactions to changes in their environment, Mercier starts with a detailed description of the Saint-Ybars plantation which he establishes as the setting to which they are accustomed. In keeping with the aristocratic airs of the planter family, Monsieur Saint-Ybars' plantation is depicted as an enclosed monarchical community, largely

independent from the republican United States, and highly structured.[57] Beyond the usual stables and tack room that one would perhaps expect in a large agricultural setting, the property has its own hospital, shoemaker, carpenter, vegetable garden, and ballroom for the slaves. A sugar refinery, sawmill, cooperage, and foundry are also located on site. Split into different areas of housing for the planter family, the house slaves, and the field slaves, the plantation's social hierarchy is reflected in its physical organization. The slave quarters house four hundred field slaves, and the cabins resemble a small village rather than a part of the plantation. The house slaves have their own separate quarters near the planter's house, a large residence with Spanish-inspired architecture. Overlooking a courtyard filled with exotic plants, the big house seems very much like a castle surrounded by its self-sufficient village and loyal subjects.

It is a seemingly idyllic community that has nevertheless been established through slavery and a belief system based on religious ideology. The social order's dependence on religious faith (or superstition) helps maintain the plantation's class lines while at the same time rendering this structure precarious. This belief in destiny, a conviction that Mercier describes as nothing more than an illusion that rulers, or in this case, planters, use to justify their domination over others, also prevents them from assuming full responsibility for their actions and from having any sense of autonomy. Because they feel as if they cannot fully control their lives, they paradoxically cling to the only hierarchy they know, a fragile social structure that divine forces have supposedly granted them. The fall of this social order would mean not only the loss of their social status and highly structured environment, but also the annihilation of their entire

[57] Gloria Nobles Robertson. *The Diaries of Alfred Mercier, 1879-1893*. Thesis. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1947. See for a description of the planter Creoles of New Orleans as having wealth equalled only by the royal courts. New Orleans itself was better developed than the rest of the United States' western frontier. 7.

philosophy of life, leaving them with only a void.

Mercier presents the fall of the Saint-Ybars family as a slow decline rather than as a sudden catastrophe produced by the American Civil War alone. Instead, Mercier removes or alters aspects of the plantation's environment and social structure and then explores the reactions of his characters to these changes. He divides the setting of his novel in what could be regarded as a series of concentric circles. The innermost and smallest circle is found under the great oak tree that occupies an isolated and bordered off space on the Saint-Ybars property. The second one comprises the rest of the plantation, and the third one is the world outside of the plantation. By introducing elements of chaos into the plantation society starting with the innermost circle, he uses these spaces to examine the reactions of his superstitious and scientific characters. Those who base their existence on the concept of manifest destiny fail to adapt to any cracks in the social structure, leading to further disorder as they unwittingly undermine the social hierarchy on which they depend.

The Great Oak

The space under the great oak, in its profound differences from the rest of the plantation, provides the first example of the effects of the environment on Mercier's characters. In the middle of the fields lies an area shaded by an enormous oak tree and bordered off by the Saint-Ybars' ancestors who wished to preserve the space out of respect for its Native American inhabitants and their cultural and social differences. Their social order deviates from the one found on the rest of the plantation in its relative lack of stratification. The women are still subordinate to the men, but the tribe does not have the same separation and appropriation of space according to class that is seen on the plantation. The men and women all live together and

even share the same spoon to eat out of the same pot of stew. Furthermore, no slavery exists among them, and they are regarded as a possible refuge for fugitive slaves who seek shelter and community. A fugitive slave lives with them, and later in the novel, they allow the Saint-Ybars' slave Titia to live with them. Although in its relative simplicity this space recalls the utopic locations of earlier works such as *Paul et Virginie*, the somber atmosphere and the grim state of the tribe suggest that this area is not a paradisiacal escape from European civilization. This group of Native Americans is clearly in a state of decline. Fewer than twenty of them remain, and of this small number, there is only one child. A cemetery, the deterioration of the great oak itself, and the Spanish moss hanging off the branches like "des voiles funéraires" all contribute to the moroseness of this area. This decline could be attributed to the unstoppable influx of European settlers and slaves, an introduction of change from the world outside of this circle. While Mercier alludes to the mutual introduction of change into these spaces, he still characterizes the space under the great oak as being relatively disorganized. Accordingly, the characters who rely heavily on the structure of the plantation hierarchy feel uncomfortable in this location.

In an expression of his unease with this area, Monsieur Saint-Ybars says that "cette immobilité et silence ressemblent trop au néant," a void (73). His word choice is significant because this land, inhabited by this group of people that is declining but that still exists, is obviously not a void. This depiction raises the question of why the planter would find the quiet stagnancy of the space so disturbing as to see it as empty. In his philosophical work on "place," Edward Casey asserts that unfamiliar or unknown places can be unsettling because in their unfamiliarity, they undermine one's personal identity (6). In the context of this novel, a probable explanation is that this community does not offer a pronounced enough social structure to offset

the relative sense of nothingness that defines this area. Monsieur Saint-Ybars has no authority there, no right to use this space for anything other than a cemetery, and no real understanding of the people living there. This area is foreign. For him, the lack of a widely stratified social hierarchy, Eurocentric social roles, and a socioeconomic appropriation of space translates into a lack of meaning, as well as the unspoken, frightening possibility that he and his family will also eventually face this same sort of decline.[58] The more sinister suggestion and possible fear are that a lack of strict social hierarchies *will lead* to social decline. Thus, the planter becomes more susceptible to his superstitious beliefs that most easily lend this foreign space some meaning.

Monsieur Saint-Ybars' limited authority in this space becomes evident when he meets Nogolka, his daughter's governess, under the great oak late one night. Nogolka has purposely chosen this as a meeting space in the hope that this somber environment where Monsieur Saint-Ybars' ancestors are buried will prevent him from flying into a rage when she refuses his amorous advances. This location, in its separation from the rest of the plantation, emphasizes the difference in the power dynamic between the two characters. As an employee on the plantation, Nogolka is obligated to remain respectful towards Monsieur Saint-Ybars, and insofar as her job is concerned, to do as he wishes. In this space, however, she is not meeting the planter as an employee, but rather as an unwilling love interest. As such, she does not have to acquiesce to his desires. Furthermore, because Saint-Ybars is invested in seducing her and trying to please her to do so, her social status is automatically raised in his eyes, bringing her closer to his own position and making him more vulnerable. Thus, under the great oak, the plantation's class lines and roles

[58] Robertson. This also echoes Mercier's own fears about being annihilated by the influx of Anglophones into Louisiana and the slow annihilation of the French language. "The more the Creoles realized the possibility of their absorption by the new society, the more tenaciously they clung to the customs and traditions which identified them. Their defensive position resulted in their assuming an attitude of exclusiveness." 17.

become blurred.

Monsieur Saint-Ybars, in the habit of always being obeyed, struggles with this lack of definition as well as his vulnerability as a pleading lover. He is no longer the powerful plantation patriarch, but rather, simply a man facing a woman's refusal, a concept he can hardly understand. In an attempt to assure himself of his own position, he even tries to seduce her in terms of the plantation's social order. "Si vous acceptez mes offres, vous aurez une position assurée" (92). When she once again refuses, he sees his entire world as crumbling beneath him; his belief in destiny conflicts with the reality before him, and with each repeated refusal, he experiences a downward spiral away from reserved rationality. Although superstitious, he does not initially accept this lack of power as a sign of the will of God or of his ancestors, but rather as a cruel sabotage of his life. Madame Saint-Ybars has caused him to miss his destiny; his true fate was to be with Nogolka. "Elle a faussé ma destinée; elle est la malédiction de ma vie" (92). When he realizes that Nogolka will not accept this argument as valid, he claims that his very life is in danger. "[V]otre présence est aussi nécessaire à ma vie que l'air que je respire" (93). Nogolka responds that she will take legal action, if necessary, to liberate herself from him, drawing into this circle an authority that could limit Saint-Ybars' power. In response to this clear threat, Saint-Ybars clings more stubbornly to his status as patriarch, and like a beast, physically tries to force Nogolka to love him. Only when she calls upon his ancestors for help, does he react. "Ô morts, morts sacrés, venez donc à mon secours!"(94). Unlike the law, divine forces hold more sway over the planter; and when an owl screeches in response to Nogolka's plea, Saint-Ybars believes it be a sign that his ancestors are expressing their anger towards his actions. Reminded that his social status depends on the favor of supernatural authority, he comes to his senses and, at least

momentarily, abandons his pursuit.

This incident illustrates the strange paradoxical nature of the link between superstition and social status. Because Monsieur Saint-Ybars is superstitious, he believes he has been granted the right to dominate others. In believing this, however, he makes himself a pawn to otherworldly forces, thus removing any personal autonomy and leaving him unprotected against the whims of fate. The only way for him to know that he is still in control is to gauge the degree of subordination of those around him. If he is treated with the utmost respect and all of his subordinates submit to his will, then he can assume that divine forces are treating him favorably. Moreover, he is absolved of any guilt or wrongdoing regarding the enslavement of others because it is God's will. Any falter in his subordinates' obedience, however, indicates that fate is steering him onto the inescapable road towards his personal destruction, a path that he will nevertheless try to resist taking. In both cases, he is depending on other people and vague supernatural forces to define his role in life, making it questionable as to whether or not he can ever define himself independently of others and independently of his status as planter.

Mercier responds that not only is it possible, it is also necessary to do so to find an inner tranquillity. Both Pélasge and Vieumaite are capable of classifying and categorizing the material world without an intervening divine element. The reaction of these two characters to the space under the great oak is the first indication that their perspective is significantly different from nearly all of the other characters in the novel. Vieumaite, rather feeling uncomfortable, finds this tranquil space representative of a natural end to his life; and he has requested to be buried there next to his ancestors. Pélasge's reaction is similar but more complex. The Frenchman experiences a wave of melancholy as he regards the dying Native American society and realizes

that at some point, the plantation society will also fall. However, even through his sadness, he still appreciates the unique quiet of the grove, remarking, “Quel calme! on se croirait transporté au-delà des limites du monde, dans un lieu où le mouvement et le bruit n’existe pas” (73). His observation bears striking similarities to that of Monsieur Saint-Ybars. Both characters talk of the quiet and the lack of movement and both refer to their impressions that this space seems otherworldly. But while Monsieur Saint-Ybars describes it negatively with the word “néant,” Pélasge chooses the more objective “au-delà des limites du monde.” In this way, he admits that the space seems representative of the unknown, but rather than feeling fearful of it, he accepts his lack of understanding, much in the same way that Vieumaite accepts this as a natural end of life.

That said, for Pélasge, this area does not represent an end, but rather, a point in which he sees the vastness of time and space. He first visits this space at night during a tour of the plantation with Démon. When they arrive at the great oak, Pélasge is immediately aware of the difference between this location and the rest of the plantation, but he still manages to find meaning and structure in it. He points out the constellations to Démon, showing him star formations where, to the untrained eye, there would seem to be none. As he regards the cemetery with the young boy, this representation of death and all of its unknowns, he brings meaning to it by talking about the value of archeological digs and the knowledge that comes with learning about human history and past civilizations. Unlike Saint-Ybars, Pélasge does not regard the space as “nothingness,” but rather as an opportunity to show the possible scientific ordering of a vast world beyond the plantation and beyond that moment in time.

Order Based on Science

This is important because it serves as the basis of the education that Pélasge imparts on

his young protégé and shows him the possibility of finding order outside of the plantation hierarchy. This lesson is meant to ease Démon's inner turbulence by teaching him to see stability in his surroundings rather than rely on the uncertain durability of the social order. Like his father, Démon is still susceptible to the superstition of most of the Saint-Ybars family; but like his grandfather, he also solemnly accepts the finality of the material world and wishes to be buried under the great oak. He expresses as much to Pélasge who thus understands that his student has the potential for calm, rational thought, as evidenced by his acceptance of this natural part of life. However, it will always be competing with his sense of fatalism; after all, at the tender age of twelve, he is already contemplating the end of his life.

The logical shortcomings of the younger Saint-Ybars generations do not mean that they are doomed to suffering through life as a slave to their emotions. The principal reason that Pélasge has a position at the Saint-Ybars plantation is to tame Démon's inner turmoil through a proper education. He is also replacing Démon's old teacher Monsieur Héhé who made it a point to indicate that it was impossible to teach the young boy because of his constant emotional agitation. Démon's twin sister Chant d'Oisel explains that her brother "apprend très bien quand il est avec moi, quand il est tranquille; mais il est d'un caractère si turbulent! c'est terrible" (27). Full of energy and without the same degree of inner tranquillity as his grandfather, he finds it difficult to spend his days cloistered away in the house with books and lessons. In their abstraction, lessons seem completely removed from his life and his surroundings. He finds it more beneficial to spend his days outside where he gains a sense of stability by imposing his will on his environment.

Mercier suggests this need for control when Démon meets Pélasge for the first time. His

lack of restraint over himself is evident. He returns to the house in a state of excitement, but also dirty and disheveled, his trousers and jacket each torn in multiple places and covered in dust and sweat. In addition to this, and more significantly, he has caught two quail and put them in a cage, a thinly veiled metaphor for slavery. While this capture and Démon's excitement certainly indicate a natural curiosity about his environment, it is important to note that he is not content to observe the birds in their natural environment; he wants to determine every aspect of their lives, including their behavior. When the male throws itself against the cage in a desire to escape, Démon strikes it while telling it to be still. His lack of understanding of these two creatures translates into an inability to empathize with them, suggesting that empathy comes with education. Once Mamrie explains to him why his two birds are unhappy, he frees them, an example of the optimistic view that by learning more, one has a greater capacity for kindness.

In this introduction of Démon, Mercier shows both the character's unbridled energy and his curiosity about his surroundings. He needs only learn how to channel this energy to gain an affinity for learning. To do this, Pélasge structures Démon's time in such a way that he expends his extra energy through physical work and can then manage to direct his remaining energy towards his studies. Pélasge also relies on concrete and practical lessons that bear some kind of influence on the natural environment. Through the construction and cultivation of a small farm, the French professor teaches Démon lessons in geometry and arithmetic as well as the economic benefits of selling the resulting produce. Pélasge's lessons not only bring an inner sense of calm to Démon in the direction of his energy towards practical reasoning, but also bring more structure to Démon's environment in ways that do not relate to the rest of the plantation hierarchy.

Pélasge's choice to build a farm is significant because it transcends the classes reinforced by the machine-like structure of the plantation. Although a few slaves help Démon gather supplies at the beginning of his small endeavor, he is the one who is responsible for planning, for doing much of the physical labor, and for harvesting and selling the crops. He has always relied on the socioeconomic gain that his status as a planter's son has afforded him, but working his own farm and selling the fruits of his labor instill in him a sense of independence and autonomy that the plantation never could. Without needing to command anyone else, without needing to depend on the obedience of subordinates, Démon is able to transform his surroundings into something both ordered and beneficial, all the while learning concepts that will allow him to continue to do this.

In these lessons, Pélasge demonstrates that the potential problem of a less ordered society can seemingly be solved through the practical application of abstract principles. That is to say, rather than assuming the existence of a divine plan that determines the direction of one's life, one can learn to shape and manipulate one's own environment and eventually chart his own path. Doing this will help quell anxieties about future events and help one maintain a sense of autonomy which will discourage him from superstitious beliefs and a lack of responsibility for himself. This in turn will deter him from trying to control those around him in his quest for personal stability.

While Mercier seems to assert that one's emotional state and resulting superstitious beliefs are possible to control, his continued development of the Saint-Ybars men, including Démon, shows that this is not necessarily true. Pélasge tries to push Démon out of this dependency by showing him how to see structure and stability outside of the plantation's social

order, perhaps a variation on the theme of escaping civilization. Through Pélasge, Démon discovers how to find structure in tranquil setting of the space under the great oak; likewise, his routine farmwork allows him to manipulate and order his environment in beneficial ways without depending on slavery. Both experiences transcend the plantation hierarchy in such a way as to suggest that Mercier has momentarily removed it from the boy's life. The effect has been a calming of his inner agitation, as long as his surroundings are relatively tranquil and he has the time and Pélasge's guidance to see order in his environment. This raises the question of what would occur should either nature or civilization fall into a momentary state of chaos.

Mercier's emotionally turbulent characters look towards two possible sources of inner stability: the plantation's class system based on superstition or the natural and social environment based on scientific observation. Although Pélasge has tried to teach Démon the basics of scientific objectivity, he cannot keep him in an ideal world separated from the reality of a world fraught with natural and social conflict. If the violence of the natural world destroys any sense of stability that Démon has derived from it, he can turn only to the plantation for security. If that structure falls as well, then he is left with the original conundrum of finding new meaning and structure in what seems to be a void. Violent natural phenomena can be distressing enough to provoke the powerful emotional response that the Saint-Ybars men find so difficult to master. When they consequently overstep the boundaries of their social role in an attempt to maintain control over their surroundings, they unwittingly undermine the very structure they want to uphold.

The Hurricane and Superstition

Mercier introduces a hurricane into the plantation as a new chaotic element that once

again illustrates the difference between his superstitious and scientific characters. Although Démon has gained some objective ways of viewing the world, in his constant exposure to the plantation and his family, he still struggles with his fatalistic beliefs. The hurricane serves as a test for this turbulent character who does not always succeed in being rational. Both Démon and Pélasge are contrasted with Monsieur Saint-Ybars who, still bruised from his failure to seduce Nogolka, is especially prone to superstitious interpretations of natural phenomena and sees this impending disaster as a bad omen. "Saint-Ybars écoutait la voix sinistre de la tempête; il lui semblait, par moments, qu'elle articulait des menaces et des prophéties de malheur" (113). The characters' reaction to the storm and to each other illustrate the negative effects of superstition on the plantation hierarchy.

Nervous about the approaching hurricane and feeling that he has no control over his employees or his family, Monsieur Saint-Ybars is exceedingly aware of every mistake they make and interprets each one as a sign of insubordination. When his wife serves the meal clumsily due to her own anxiety over the weather, Monsieur Saint-Ybars insults her repeatedly, his cruel words not only an attempt to shame her into complete submission with no regard to the storm, but also a release of his anger over his own apparent lack of domination. Even as he tries to maintain control of his family, his belief that his feelings and actions are ultimately being controlled by external forces causes him to fall into a state of absolute fury that deprives him of nearly all semblance of humanity. As his rage mounts, he assumes the characteristics of a violent and uncontrollable storm, which emphasizes the effects of external forces on the Saint-Ybars men.[59] "[Monsieur Saint-Ybars] ressemblait à l'ouragan qui maintenant avançait rapidement"

[59] Tim Fulford, "Slavery and Superstition in the supernatural poems." *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*. Ed. Lucy Newlyn. Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press, 2002. 49

(105). The planter's rage causes a cascading effect on the emotions of the other characters, resulting in the crumbling of the social hierarchy.

Le Duc, who shares the planter's turbulent nature, also assumes storm-like characteristics that reflect his desire to undermine the social order. Delighted by the conflict unfolding before him, but also fearful of drawing the planter's wrath, he vacillates between fulfilling his duties as a house slave and sitting back to watch this family drama. He carries on with his appointed tasks, but completes them quickly, whisking away dishes and then reappearing "comme un éclair," his quick disappearances and reappearances illustrating his feeling of obligation to obey and his underlying desire to revolt. While his reaction does not directly contribute to the family's turmoil, it also does nothing to alleviate it.

Both Démon and Pélasge, by contrast, challenge Monsieur Saint-Ybars, exacerbating his feeling of powerlessness and contributing to his loss of rationality which evolves from storm-like characteristics to animalistic ones. His laughter and his speech become "sauvage" and "chevrotant" and resemble "plus de la bête féroce que de l'homme" (106). Once he strikes Démon, he turns on him "comme le tigre sur la proie qui croit lui échapper" (108). As he becomes more beast-like, he ironically continues to see those around him as his subordinates; all of the other characters are like animals while he is godlike. When Pélasge tries to prevent Saint-Ybars from striking Démon, the planter uses an expression most often reserved for dogs to tell him to get out of the way. He commands Démon to fall to his knees to beg forgiveness, and Démon refuses to obey under the reservation that such an act is for God alone. When Démon continues to refuse, he whips him, a punishment reserved for slaves.

Thus, Monsieur Saint-Ybars instigates a shift in the status of all of the characters,

disrupting the social order to assure himself of his own power. Although he believes he is creating more distance between himself and his subordinates, he is ultimately causing them to lose respect for him; they cannot possibly be obligated to obey someone who behaves so irrationally and with such excessive demands. In his rage, he unwittingly closes the social gap between himself, his employees, his family, and his slaves. This becomes most evident when Mamrie, a maternal figure to Démon, throws a hatchet towards the planter, narrowly missing him but nevertheless jolting him back to reason. In response, Monsieur Saint-Ybars cannot even bring himself to punish her for this daring act of insubordination.

Monsieur Saint-Ybars' actions ultimately lead to the irreparable loss of his status as plantation patriarch. Because Démon has suffered such an egregious punishment from his father, one that has always been reserved for slaves, the plantation's social order has become momentarily meaningless. In this way, it serves a test through which one can gauge the effects of Pélasge's education on Démon's ability to remain calm and rational without the stability of this social structure. Unfortunately, Démon does not entirely succeed. Without the security offered to him by his status and privileges as a planter's son, his ability to remain calm and rational is also compromised and he suffers a momentary loss of reason brought on by despair and humiliation. He sees no other choice but to leave the plantation, even if it means trying to cross the Mississippi River on a small raft in the middle of hurricane.

Démon's attempt to escape illustrates the inner struggle he experiences between reason and blind emotion. While his ill-timed attempt to leave certainly demonstrates a loss of reason, he also does not passively place his destiny in the hands of God in the way that a superstitious person would. He takes an active role in his survival, managing to maneuver his raft on the

raging river. As Monsieur Saint-Ybars attempts to rescue him, Démon continues his effort to cross the river and never assumes that divine forces will eventually determine his fate. Although he stubbornly refuses to return to the safety of the plantation, he maintains his wits enough to make the difficult decision to abandon his raft and grasp the roots of a giant sycamore tree to prevent grievous injuries to himself. Mercier characterizes Démon's decisions as a conscious effort to remain within the boundaries of reason despite his irrational desire to escape: "Démon ne perdit pas sa présence d'esprit" (119). Largely because of his ability to assess his situation rationally, he is able to survive these circumstances.

To rescue Démon, Monsieur Saint-Ybars cannot rely on the plantation's social structure that his actions and the storm have destroyed. In the eye of the hurricane, he is faced with a space very similar to the void under the great oak. When Monsieur Saint-Ybars arrives at the banks of the river and beholds his son struggling to survive, he orders four slaves to take a canoe onto the river to rescue him. Although the slaves are obligated to obey their master, they view this situation as extraordinary, decide that they cannot be asked to do something so life-threatening, and instead flee. The planter can rely only on himself and his half-brother Salvatore to help him save his son's life. Once Monsieur Saint-Ybars' canoe approaches Démon, he begs his son to come back but to no avail. He finally supplicates him on his knees to swim to their canoe. "Demon, je te le demande à genoux" (119). The stance is not only the one that he demanded of Démon at the house, but it is also the stereotypical stance of a slave begging for mercy or for freedom. Thus Monsieur Saint-Ybars, in an attempt to amend the injuries he has inflicted on Démon in his rage, must reduce himself to an almost slave-like status, a complete reversal of the plantation hierarchy and an act that symbolically relegates him to the same slave status to which

he has designated his son. Démon forgives his father, but he never fully recovers from this incident.

Although the hurricane causes minimal damage to the plantation, the mere threat of physical destruction causes the plantation's fragile hierarchy to totter as Monsieur Saint-Ybars oversteps his authority in an ironic attempt to maintain it. Even Pélasge's carefully laid foundation of Démon's education does not prevent his young student from falling apart as his social hierarchy starts to collapse. Although he manages to hold on to just enough of his reason to survive the hurricane, rationality does not provide enough security for him to feel as if he could do without the plantation's structure. In this sense, Pélasge's education has not been entirely successful, leading him to seek another way to calm Démon's turbulent nature. The boy's positive response to Pélasge's lessons before the storm and before his corporal punishment suggest that a change of environment will perhaps help Démon maintain his sense of calm rationality. Furthermore, time away from Louisiana will prevent him from being reminded of his precarious social status. Pélasge suggests that Démon go to France. "Tout ici rappelle à cette jeune âme la blessure qui lui a été faite ; plus Démon grandirait parmi nous, plus cette blessure s'élargirait" (137). Thus, in reaction to this tumultuous incident, Mercier seems to suggest, perhaps rather obviously, that it is easier to be emotionally stable in environments which themselves are more socially and environmentally stable. Following Démon's conflict with his father, he is sent to France precisely because his surroundings in Louisiana serve as a constant reminder of how poorly he has been treated.

At first, this may not seem like an obvious choice. After all, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Pélasge leaves Europe because of the rise of Napoleon III and the

establishment of the Second Empire. Just as Mercier qualifies the actions of the Saint-Ybars men as “superstitious” so does he describe the attitude of Napoleon III who believes that he is part of a family “chosen” by divine forces to lead France. “[I]l s’obstinera, au mépris du sens commun, à se fier à ce que, dans sa famille, on a l’habitude d’appeler la bonne étoile des Napoléons” (11). However, even Paris under Napoleon III is free of slavery and offers a different kind of social structure than the one to which Démon is accustomed.

Life Outside the Plantation

At first, he suffers from the same depression he felt in Louisiana, but as he grows used to his new environment, he begins to recover. “Heureusement, Démon avait fini par sentir l’influence bienfaisante du milieu dans lequel il était placé” (146). As a wealthy American in Paris, he is sheltered from the poor conditions of the working class and can more easily consecrate his time to his studies. He has the privilege of living with a book publisher, takes classes, and often finds himself in the company of professors. His entire existence in France revolves around the acquisition of knowledge and the study of philosophy; moreover, excursions to the countryside and outings to the theater contribute to his sense of well-being.

Perhaps most significantly, Démon is sheltered from the American Civil War, this last element of chaos that Mercier introduces into to the Saint-Ybars family. Unlike the hurricane, this war affects the entirety of the American South; if the storm caused the Saint-Ybars plantation hierarchy to tremble, a direct, massive attack leads to its immediate collapse. Although an aristocratic figure on the plantation, Monsieur Saint-Ybars is still a citizen of the United States; and when he refuses out of principle to pledge his allegiance to the Union, he is arrested and imprisoned in Fort Lafayette where he dies. Little by little, the plantation is dismantled. The

big house is reappropriated as barracks for the Union soldiers; the rest of the property is pillaged every night until nothing remains. Even the crops and vegetation are destroyed by the newly free roaming livestock. Démon's family scrapes together what little money they can in order to fund his stay in Paris without revealing their own hardships. Démon, in his protective academic bubble with rare letters from Pélasge or Mamrie, has little idea of the extent of the war's destruction, and the family prefers that it remain that way. When he writes to Pélasge of his desire to return to Louisiana, he is aware of this protective stance that his professor has taken and tells him, "Ne me traitez plus d'esprit chimérique." In response, Pélasge reminds him of how much he has changed for the better during his time abroad; he has no need to go to war out of a sense of honor like his brothers are doing. "Mais l'éducation que vous avez reçue en France vous a donné d'autres idées, d'autres sentiments que ceux de vos frères" (171).

However this way of protecting Démon cannot last forever, and Mercier does not pretend that France is not vulnerable to its own conflicts. Démon is able to leave Europe before the start of the Franco-Prussian War, thus avoiding the sociopolitical turbulence that eventually strikes the country once more. Thus, even if Démon had decided not to return to his native Louisiana, he would have had to confront sociopolitical conflicts based on conquest and preservation of the social order. Just as the Native Americans on the plantation could not be sheltered from the changes occurring around them, Démon cannot avoid the changing circumstances closing in on him, either in France or the American South. His return marks a final test of the effects of his education in France and of the influence of his environment. When he arrives, he finds himself facing the void that his father always feared.

Without the institution of slavery, its social order, and the resulting socioeconomic

benefits, the family has faltered and is in an undeniable state of decline. Even as they have attempted to make the best of their situation, it is largely Pélasge and Mamrie who have carried them into a modest state of financial stability. Facing financial hardship and poor health, and forever under the yoke of their fatalistic predisposition, they easily slip into the belief that their family's suffering has been predetermined by divine forces.

When Démon finally returns to Louisiana, he must confront the profound changes that the Saint-Ybars have undergone. The plantation is gone, his father and Chant-d'Oisel have both passed away, he has lost numerous siblings in the war, Mamrie is blind, and his mother no longer possesses all of her mental faculties. This he must face after having finished his education in Paris, an experience that has itself led to his personal growth and learning. Despite Démon's scholarly progress, he is still susceptible to the fatalistic beliefs of the Saint-Ybars family and finds it difficult to be in his native country and see the damage that the war has wrought on the city and on the old Saint-Ybars plantation. While rationally, he is content to see the abolition of slavery, a certain nostalgia for the happiness of his past and the prosperity of his family makes accepting this new situation much more difficult. The loss of Madame Saint-Ybars the morning after his return pushes him towards the turbulently melancholy nature from which he suffered as a child; and his desire to leave suggests that he recognizes the positive effects of a more stable environment.

Pélasge notices the change in his old student immediately. "L'attitude de Démon donnait du souci à Pélasge. Tous les Saint-Ybars avaient manifesté, plus ou moins, un penchant à la superstition [. . .] Il soupçonna que son jeune ami se croyait sous le coup d'une fatalité inexorable [. . .] Dans le secret de sa pensée, [Démon] ne douta plus qu'il ne fut né pour le

malheur" (208). Pélasge's student cannot seem to escape his superstitious tendencies no matter what he does. His scholarly pursuits, while offering him some relief, serve more of an escape from his life than they do as a means of finding a sense of stability. His environments, in their inevitable fluctuations and natural and social turmoil, also do not offer any stability; it would be impractical for Démon or anyone else to flee a certain location every time any kind of disaster presented itself.

Mercier briefly explores the possibility that an amorous relationship could offer some kind of anchor for Démon. Blanchette is briefly the only point of refuge for Démon. Unfortunately, like Démon, her happiness is entrenched in the measures the Saint-Ybars family has taken to shelter her from any harm. Even when she is a child, Chant d'Oisel keeps her out of the summer heat because she recognizes that Blanchette is too delicate for Louisiana's climate. Similarly, her family heritage is also kept a secret. When the townspeople discover that Blanchette's mother was the enslaved woman Titia, Démon takes great care to keep Blanchette from understanding the full meaning behind the cruel remarks they make towards her. The insults and prejudice nevertheless take a toll on him. Just as Démon cannot not forever remain sheltered by his life in France, Blanchette cannot remain insulated from the racial prejudice of (post)Civil War era society. When she discovers the truth of her racial heritage, she decides to distance herself from Démon so that he will not be made to suffer socially through a relationship with her, a way of trying to shelter him from emotional suffering, a magnanimous act that will prove futile.

To emphasize the futility in these attempts to shelter Blanchette and Démon from the ills of this society, Mercier compares them to the similar attempt to shelter the Native American tribe

from the growing encroachment of the white settlers. Blanchette laments the cruelty of her community and longs for a past society, namely a Native American tribe, in which such prejudice does not exist. “Je regrette que ma mère ne m’ait pas laissée dans les bois où je suis née; je serais moins malheureuse parmi les sauvages, qu’au sein de cette société civilisée qui me traite avec tant de barbarie. Enfin, c’est la destinée; il faut bien s’incliner devant elle.” Mercier uses this situation and nostalgia to make the point that such a society does not exist and has never existed in the past. Furthermore, it is not possible to hide oneself away from human civilization. While Mercier expresses regret that the Native American tribe is dwindling in number at the beginning of the novel, he never even suggests that they are superior to Louisiana’s plantation society of European heritage. Although Mercier has shown that racial prejudice does not seem to be a problem for the Native American tribes, he also does not want to pretend that their lives are more worthwhile, even if they are free of the constraints of the hierarchical plantation society or of the prejudices of a postbellum South. If anything, he is critical of their marginalization which, through the words of Pélasge, he suggests is self-imposed. By following Blanchette’s regretful statement about the Native Americans with one that conveys a belief in destiny, Mercier characterizes both statements as fallacious.

In a moment of fierce clarity, Démon responds to Blanchette’s lament. “Le destin n’a rien à faire ici; le bourreau qui nous sépare est le fils de l’orgueil et de l’ignorance. [. . .] [Le préjugé] n’existe pas dans la nature, il n’a pas de nom dans l’ordre éternel des choses, il n’en a un que dans le langage des hommes [. . .] Ecoute ces paroles qui éclatèrent dès l’aurore de la civilization, comme si elles étaient le cri naturel des sociétés naissantes. [. . .] Elles ont été redites de siècle en siècle” (239). Although Mercier states that prejudice is not natural, he also

does not believe that there was ever a golden age of man in which no prejudice existed and in which there was never any corruption; it has always existed. Mercier does not advocate for returning to "uncivilized" life out of hope of finding a paradisiacal existence far from the barbarism of civilization, as if it were even possible. Rather, he suggests that man can only move forward, learn more and understand more to diminish and eventually eliminate prejudice.

It is not sufficient for the North to have abolished slavery by law alone; the racial prejudice that was born out of this institution persists and continues to evoke suffering among both white people and people of color. The environment that Démon left behind after his departure for France has changed, his plantation social status no longer has meaning, but the egregious inequalities persist. "Vous constaterez que l'esprit de caste est plus prononcé qu'il ne l'était du temps de l'esclavage" (202).

Blanchette's remark catalyzes in him a battle between his despair and his anger. As despair triumphs, Démon finally loses his rational side, refuting his argument to Blanchette by echoing her own belief that earlier societies were more innocent: "[. . .] et à mon tour, après tant d'autres malheureux, je les répète pour mon propre compte" (239). Thus the fears that Pélasge expressed following Démon's dispute with his father finally come to pass even after Démon has spent years away from his home. In the face of this new social structure still under the yoke of racial prejudice, Démon sees no place for himself. As he contemplates taking his own life, he watches a small cloud that diminishes in size until it finally disappears; in this cloud, this airy and amorphous mass, he sees himself. There is no meaning in this thin and fragile form, slowly dissipating until it exists no longer. Démon's life and destiny is similar to this, meaningless, lacking in any kind of supportive structure, and fragile enough to disintegrate into nonexistence.

In the same way that his father feared “le néant” or *the void*, Démon welcomes it as an end to his turbulent emotional suffering.

Démon’s suicide catalyzes a chain reaction in the Saint-Ybars family. Blanchette takes her own life in response to Démon’s death, and Démon’s cousin falls into a state of madness upon hearing of the couple’s suicides. Mamrie ends Le Duc’s life when she discovers that he is the one responsible for revealing Blanchette’s secret to the rest of the family and the community. Thus Démon’s profound education and study abroad has apparently failed to shelter him from the superstition and prejudice that pervades the South. This would suggest that he is in fact a slave to his biology, to this turbulent disposition that he inherited from his father and that prevents him from ever viewing the world from a completely scientific viewpoint. It would seem that if divine fate does not exist, then Mercier shows biological heritage to be a scientific version of it. Mercier, however, does offer one final suggestion for overcoming the difficulties and obstacles that life inevitably presents.

An Alternative to Scholarly Pursuits

Throughout the novel, Pélasge has always been a counterexample to Démon, the ideal to which the boy has aspired. It is perhaps surprising that the Frenchman has been able to remain stoic following the loss of his wife, his former student and friend, as well as the rest of the Saint-Ybars family. When Chant d’Oisel dies, he goes through a series of questions similar to the ones that Bernardin’s Paul asks upon the death of his beloved Virginie. Unlike Paul and the hermit of Bernardin’s work, Pélasge does not seek answers in the divine.

> [T]out meurt, tout disparait, c’est la loi [. . .] Mais qui me dira [. . .] pourquoi cette charmante enfante [. . .] est morte à la fleur de l’âge, au seuil même du Bonheur? Qui me

> prouvera que cela est juste, que cela est bon? […] L'homme a rêvé la divine pour expliquer sa misérable destinée, et son triste rêve n'explique rien. (185)

Instead of trying to understand the meaning behind these deaths, he simply accepts them, albeit with difficulty, as a law of nature. Like Démon attempts to do, Pélasge seeks peace in his studies. "Depuis la mort de Chant-d'Oisel, Pélasge s'attachait avantage à l'étude; il cherchait et trouvait, dans le culte de la science, le silence du coeur et la sérénité de l'esprit" (243). Once Démon and Blanchette have passed, Pélasge spends all of his time with his books and at the Great Oak tree.

But even Pélasge is not emotionally impervious to this series of terrible tragedies, and his studies begin to resemble a means of avoiding the pain of a solitary life. Just as Démon and Blanchette feel a regret that they are unable to live in their imagined life of simplicity and acceptance before the rise civilization, Pélasge also begins to live in the past, unable to move forward with his life and finding that it no longer holds meaning without any of his loved ones present. Mercier shows this nostalgia to be harmful in the same way that a belief in destiny is, in the fact that it is a denial of the present reality. When lightning strikes the Great Oak and destroys it along with the gravesites of the Saint-Ybars family, it breaks the last ties that Pélasge had with his dear friends. He finds himself without any purpose; even his studies no longer appeal to him.

However, this does not mean that all is lost. For Mercier, falling into a state of depression does not have to end in death even if this is what has happened to the Saint-Ybars family. The way out is to give new meaning to one's life. Because Pélasge's studies no longer provide this sense of purpose or order, he needs to find something new. Nogolka's husband the Count Dziliwieff of Russia calls this kind of despair "la mort," but with great optimism, he believes that

it is possible to come back to life from this state. “Mort en Amérique, s’écria-t-il, pour renaître en Europe” (263). Thus, although the falling of the Great Oak and the destruction of the cemetery cause Pélasge’s depression, they also force him out of the his nostalgia for the happiness of his past and into new possibilities for the future. When Nogolka finds him, she says, “Vous avez donné votre âme au passé; l’avenir vous réclame” (266).

Thus, Mercier realizes that although education and knowledge can provide ways of seeing order in an otherwise chaotic world, even they can, and most likely will, fail in the face of horrific events. In that case, it is more helpful and more hopeful to try to change the world itself rather than simply observe its injustices and feel helpless against them. Even if Pélasge’s efforts to bring republicanism to Russia fail, he can find meaning in this concrete purpose in his life and at the same time fight against the same types of unjust social orders that played such a significant role in the death of the Saint-Ybars family. Rather than simply try to find meaning in life through a vague conception of a divine power and a paradisiacal afterlife, Mercier advocates for trying to improve life on the concrete reality of life in the present. This suggests that Démon needed to continue his struggle and be content with it, rather than despairing in the lack of an easy, comfortable life with Blanchette.

Mercier thus concludes his novel with a philosophy very close to that of Voltaire.Mercier’s philosophy on how to accept the evils of the world advocates for changing it for the better. It is not enough to exist; one has to make life meaningful in order to be alive. He depicts Pélasge’s rebirth as an evolution towards something greater, as a movement beyond education and knowledge and as action to make the world as it *should* be according to one’s ideals. In a way, he tries to realize through his characters what the naïve and idealistic Paul

wished he could do to win Virginie's heart. Rather than looking towards a vague destiny, superstition, the divine, and uncontrollable forces, Mercier suggests happiness will be found, not in isolating oneself from the parts of the world that are displeasing, but rather, in throwing oneself into the fray to shape one's environment.

CONCLUSION

The examination of the four novels in this dissertation centers on this problem of control over both the natural and civilized worlds. While each of these works depicts natural and social turbulence and the impact of both on the colonies' social orders, the authors' perspectives vary significantly. Bernardin encourages the passive acceptance of both natural and social upheaval. By contrast Hugo, Dumas, and Mercier all advocate for social struggle but disagree on the source of their characters' ability to dominate nature, attributing it to biological heritage, an extensive education encouraging rational thought, or a combination thereof. Although these authors' offer differing representations of the intersection between natural and social upheaval, several common threads relating to this principal theme run through their novels and merit further analysis.

The conflict between science and superstition, or rational and religious thought, are significant in the writers' approaches to violent natural phenomena and social inequalities. The distinction between these lines of thought at this time period, however, is not as defined as one might suppose. Bernardin's novel seems to have a strong religious foundation with the encouragement to believe in Providence and a universal plan. However, as a botanist, Bernardin was also invested in scientific study of the physical world, a characteristic that he illustrates in his detailed descriptions of the vegetation of Ile de France. His negative views on formal education and his blurring of the lines between science and religious belief in *Paul et Virginie* as well as *Etudes de la Nature* and *Voyage à l'Ile de France* could offer a more nuanced insight on his definition of man's role in face of the dark side of nature.

Alfred Mercier demonstrates a similar problem in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars.* While he

encourages scientific thought over superstitious beliefs, he veils these same superstitious beliefs behind the authority of science. Even as he criticizes the Saint-Ybars family's belief in destiny, he suggests that personality traits are inherited and largely immutable; if his characters are not constrained to a path predetermined by divine or supernatural forces, they still find themselves subject to a biological destiny. At a time period during which "science" was also used to justify racial prejudice, it would also be interesting to examine the extent to which Mercier overlaps scientific study with social classification.

Alexandre Dumas touches upon the conflict between rational and religious thought in his advocacy for a formal education and his condemnation of the belief in Providence. However, like Mercier, he falls into the problem of biological and environmental determinism and the extent to which one's capabilities can be developed. Again, this "scientific" determinism carries with it implications of the justification of social inequalities, both racial and colonial.

A second thread woven through these novels concerns the blurring of the distinction between the human and the animalistic. In *Bug-Jargal* and *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, principal characters take on animalistic traits regardless of race and class lines. In the character of Bug-Jargal, this animality indicates a strong connection with the natural world and the ability to dominate it. The description of the rebel hero in animalistic terms, although stereotypical for this time period, also connote a power and understanding of nature to which the white characters are not privy. In Monsieur Saint-Ybars, by contrast, any animalistic traits are associated with a loss of humanity and a loss of power. Further study of this phenomenon in plantation literature might shed some light on whether this is indicative of prejudicial racial depictions or if there is a more complex understanding of man's identity in the natural and civilized worlds.

The organization and use of space plays a prominent role in all of these novels. It is most obvious in *Bug-Jargal*, in which Hugo opposes the organized space of the plantation with the unorganized space of the cave. The mouths of caves and the doors in cave-like structures provide openings through which a dangerous nature can invade and destroy the highly structured plantation society. Mercier presents a similar portrait of the Saint-Ybars plantation as an organized space, a microsociety, being invaded by violent natural phenomena and social upheaval. In these respects, both *Bug-Jargal* and *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* echo elements of *Paul et Virginie*. Bernardin describes in detail Paul's careful structuring and naming of the gardens in the families' microsociety as well as the invasive hurricane and the European values that eventually destroy them. Finally Dumas presents civilization in the role of the invader that will tame and bring order to the untouched natural spaces of the colonies. Colonists have reappropriated the exotic forests as leisure areas for hunting and the peaks as sentinels guarding against enemies; the only untameable space is the ocean. A deeper analysis of the specific organization of these spaces may reveal to what extent the writers show how man's constructions and ordering influence the damage caused by natural upheaval.

While these four novels share these themes and variations of them, they admittedly draw a very broad picture of literary trends from the late eighteenth century through the late nineteenth century. In addition to the deeper analysis of the threads mentioned in this conclusion, an expansion of the literary corpus to other novels representing plantation life might allow for a more nuanced understanding of the role of man in face of natural and social disasters. Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's *Sarah*, Charles Testut's *Le Vieux Salomon*, George Sand's *Indiana*, and Merimée's *Tamango*, all published before 1850, and all concerning the subjects of slavery, class

struggle, and the natural world, would offer a more complete picture of French authors' view of nature, revolution, and Providence.

To conclude broadly on the novels of this corpus, metropolitan authors continue to impose their projections of the metropole's sociopolitical issues onto these locations and their people; the colonies and even the former colonies remain points of comparison that authors first use to criticize European practices and customs but eventually use to assure themselves and their readers of the metropole's own cultural and scientific progress. Even as the theme of dominating the natural world runs parallel to the themes of human equality and the fall of class systems, it is tied to a European education and the patriarchal perspective that the colonies need to be molded and guided. The rise of scientific study pushed all of these authors away from superstitious explanations of nature's disasters, but it also allowed them to touch upon the dangers of falsely rationalizing nature, from the notion of a "natural" revolution to the "scientific" justification of racism and imperialism.

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