



51. *L'Abside de Notre-Dame*, etching with engraving & drypoint; 1854

Evidence for the dating of the *Abside de Notre-Dame de Paris*<sup>1</sup> is confused since the 4th state carries the date 'mdcccliv' and the 7th '1853'. In any case a clear date *ante quem* is provided by the *Bibliographie de la France* which reported its publication on 7 October 1854,<sup>2</sup> while the drawing of the same subject (Yale University Art Gallery), which is dated to the late 1840s, demonstrates that Meryon's interest in the subject was of several years' standing. The print picks up the same unusually elongated format already used for the *Pont-au-Change*, from a similar low viewpoint, but neither the figures in the left foreground, nor the cart, horses and boats in the centre, nor the birds in the upper left and around the cathedral itself, invite a pessimistic reading. Instead, this image could stand simply as a hymn in praise of one of the great monuments of France's medieval past.

A comparison with a description taken from one of the great figures of Romantic literature, François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), may, however, suggest a more personal and introspective reading.

When evening came, taking up again the road to my dwelling, I lingered on the bridges to watch the sun setting. The star, enflaming the mist and smoke of the city, seemed to oscillate slowly in a golden fluid, like the pendulum of the clock of the centuries. Then I drew homeward with the night, across a labyrinth of lonely streets. Looking at the lights which shone in the homes of men, I carried myself in thought into the midst of the scenes of grief and of joy which they illuminated, and I thought that beneath so many inhabited roofs, I had no friend. In the midst of my reflections, the hour was struck in measured strokes in the tower of the gothic cathedral: it was repeated in all tones and near and far from church to church. Alas! each hour in society opens a tomb, and causes tears to flow.<sup>3</sup>

1 S 45 (*The Apse of Notre-Dame de Paris*).

2 Exhibited at the 1855 Exposition Universelle as no. 4733.

3 Chateaubriand's *René* was first published in 1802 as part of *Le Génie du Christianisme*: quotation translated from Phyllis Crump, ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1951, p. 93.

and anticipated asking 15 francs for the proposed series of ten plates on Bourges.<sup>1</sup> Even when sales were made, this was indeed a precarious life as the following anecdote indicates.

A pathetic story [...] was related [...] by Monsieur Beillet, a patriarchal old man, who, after having worked at the same printing-press for forty-eight years, has recently retired on a competency of six francs a day: "Méryon came stealing into my atelier, looking even more nervous and wild than usual, and bringing with him two sheets of paper and the plate of his Abside de Notre Dame. 'Monsieur Beillet,' said he, 'I want you to print me two proofs of this plate,' and added, timidly, 'I cannot pay you till I sell them—don't refuse me!' " "How much did you charge him for the printing?" "Oh, dix sous les deux." (Ten cents, that Méryon could not pay for two proofs of his loveliest plate!) An exclamation of pity on his hearer's part was mistakenly appropriated by the practical old printer, for he added: "Mais oui, Monsieur,—I never got my money."<sup>2</sup>