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Poncelet (and Pole and Polar)

2.1 Poncelet reminisces

Listen to his words:

Following the example of a celebrated contemporary novelist, whose statue stands at the entrance to the room where our academicians hold their private meetings to glorify, without doubt, a political and religious system from the day before yesterday and which is still fashionable today, I could have entitled this work, which is purely mathematical, *Memoirs from beyond the tomb*. It is, in fact, the fruit of the meditations of a young lieutenant of the engineers, left for dead on the fatal battlefield of Krasnoy, not far from Smolensk, and for a long time strewn with the bodies of the French army. There, in that terrible retreat from Moscow, seven thousand Frenchmen, exhausted by hunger, cold and fatigue, under the orders of the unfortunate Marshal Ney, came, deprived of all artillery, on the 18th of November 1812, the an-
iversary of the Russian Saint Michael, to fight a furious, bloody and final combat with twenty-five thousand soldiers, fresh and equipped with forty cannons of Field-Marshal Prince Miliradowitch, who himself would soon become the victim of a military conspiracy hatched in the bosom of the modern capital of the Muscovite Tsars. But the adoption of such an ostentatious title, however justifiable it might seem, would seem with good reason to be a ridiculous plagiarism, an overweening imitation with perhaps a permitted licence, of the avowed leader of the romantic novel in our France, at a time of moral perturbation as much political as literary. A similar title, besides, would suggest of this modest book neither the serious and reserved habits of the author, still less the character, the aptitudes, the tastes which presume a sincere love of the truths of geometry, whose profound culture calls for a spirit disengaged from all foreign passion and, one might say, of any earthly interest.

Now, such is precisely, and in some way inevitably, the moral and mathematical position of the author of this work in the distant prisons of Russia. Much later, when he appeared to neglect the study of this geometry in favour of teaching the mechanical and industrial sciences, he had in reality no other purpose but to make it useful to the working class and the youth of our schools; he wished to inspire them with a love of the eternal truths of science, a hatred of the intrigue and the sophisticated subtleties of a greedy charlatanism, which signals an epoch where, among the conquests of the modern spirit, one deplores with sorrow the aberrations, the passion for money which dishonours our character, our customs, and even our national literature. Finally, if in the honourable steps of Vauban and Belidor, of Bézout, of Borda and Coulomb, of Daniel Bernoulli, of Euler and so many other illustrious benefactors of humanity, he has attempted to make useful to the class of artists or engineers, in writing for the general public in such a way as to avoid the reproaches too often and rightly addressed to the members of the profession.

The novelist referred to is François-Auguste-René, Vicompte de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), one of France’s first Romantic authors. Chateaubriand had initially refused to side with the Royalists in the French Revolution, but eventually did so (after the flight of Louis XVI in June 1791) and was wounded in action. He left for England in May 1793, where he wrote his *Essais sur les révolutions* (*Essays on revolutions*, 1797) [34]. In 1800 he returned to Paris, and in 1802 to the traditional Christianity he had once disclaimed. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [63] comments that “His apologetic treatise extolling Christianity, *Le génie du christianisme* (*The genius of Christianity*, 1802) [35], won favour