

“Revolution” or “Deplorable School”?:

Chateaubriand’s Analysis of French and British Romanticism in the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*

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“En moi commençait, avec l’école dite romantique, une révolution dans la littérature française.” (*Mémoires d’outre-tombe* 390)

François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) stands in the mid-waters of two merging streams in French letters: Neo-classic and Romantic. Born in and of these cross-currents, his work carries the wild strands of the Romanticism to be, yet drags its anchor in the sands of Neo-classicism. Jean-Claude Berchet has remarked that “la position intermédiaire qu’il occupe à égale distance des rives du temps ne doit pas être comprise comme un équilibre maîtrisé entre des tensions contradictoires, mais comme la figure même d’un passage dans le présent.”¹ To capture (t)his passage in time Chateaubriand began writing the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (MOT), his autobiographical masterpiece, as early as 1811.² 1798 stands out very clearly in the *Mémoires* as a landmark and a tidemark. The land was England at the time of his exile, the tide, a swift passage, both literal and metaphorical, “du roman à l’état romantique.” Reconstructing the year 1798 in 1822 while an ambassador in London, Chateaubriand thematized, and thereby unified, its heterogeneous events: a personal tragedy; Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign; and, marking a pause yet metaphorically prolonging the narrative of his exile in England, the situation of British literature and the emergence of the Romantic poets. The phrase describing the passage from “the novel to the Romantic state” in the *Mémoires* refers directly to the evolution of British literature as narrated by Chateaubriand. “From the novel to the Romantic state” turns out to be also a description of the turn taken by

Chateaubriand's own work and by Napoleon's career in 1798. Thus, a genealogy of Romanticism eventually emerges out of the biographical, political, historical and literary reconstruction of the year 1798 in the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*.

On 31 May 1798, Chateaubriand's mother died. Exiled in England since May 1793, he received the news in a letter from his elder sister, Julie. It was made more painful by his sister's implying that the impiety of his *Essai sur les Révolutions* published a year before precipitated their mother's death.³ His immediate reaction was a dramatic recanting of his past religious skepticism and a revocation of the *Essai* as "l'instrument de [s]on crime." Chateaubriand recalls this moment as one of conversion: "J'ai pleuré et j'ai cru" — a conversion which gave birth to the idea of writing the *Génie du Christianisme*, a celebration of the poetry and harmony of Christian religion, as, partly, an act of expiation toward his mother.

1798 records the deliberate severing of his very first work from the rest of his future production. Yet the burial of his skepticism happened too quickly for the author to resolve the doubts and cure the pains that his first work had exposed.⁴ These doubts and pains resurface in his subsequent writings and remain in a perpetual tension with his professed Christian faith. For instance, the stories of *Atala* and *René*, conceived to illustrate the *Génie du Christianisme*, exemplify a state of being marked by loss, uncertainty, loneliness and melancholy: the switching of genres, from a political and historical essay to fiction, dramatized the disquietude of "l'état romantique."

Shortly after this sudden switch in genres, Napoleon indirectly crossed Chateaubriand's path. While walking along the Thames River, Chateaubriand was heckled by English boat rowers, following the news of the British victory over the French in the Battle of the Nile (MOT 423). At this stage of the *Mémoires* (Book 12) the incident is briefly reported as adding insult to the injury of his exile. However, at the end of the volume (Book 19), the author returns to this battle, inserted in his account of Napoleon's life and career, but telescopes the event in a very revealing way. With telegraphic phrasing, he sails through an account of the French defeat in the Bay of Aboukir: "Il [Napoléon] entre au Caire; sa flotte saute en l'air à Aboukir; l'armée d'Orient est séparée de l'Europe" (MOT 712).⁵ The name of the victors is secondary: what matters to Chateaubriand is not the rivalry between France and England but the destiny of a young general, his exact contemporary in age, who has so far brilliantly succeeded. Instead of just reading the battle of Aboukir as a defeat, Chateaubriand sees it as the ominous "separation" of an ambitious military leader from the government which granted him authority, and therefore as a door opening onto a possible abuse of power. For Chateaubriand something more important than the Battle of the Nile, or Napoleon's defeat, or even the birth of the new

science of Egyptology occurred in Egypt in 1798: it is then that the twenty-eight-year-old general turned dictator.

In the *Mémoires*, the writing of this history focuses intensely, not on facts, but on the psychology of Napoleon's political — and cultural — genius. Sitting down on Cheops' tomb inside a pyramid and later ordering the massacre of thousands of prisoners at Jaffa, to cite two moments described by Chateaubriand in great detail, Napoleon, by claiming to be God's envoy, forfeited his genius to his dictatorial character.

In spite of his condemnation of the bloodshed and his foreseeing the beginnings of dictatorship, Chateaubriand cannot help but read the whole Egyptian adventure as an "épisode romanesque." Oddly uncritical, the phrase reflects the dominant aspects of the expedition: the oriental battleground, the Pharaonic dimension of the country under siege and, moreover, Napoleon's extraordinary capacity to mastermind a military campaign while leading a team of scientists and artists, and shipping back art and artifacts that would set off a new style and fashion. This uniqueness in character fascinates Chateaubriand because it is paired with a personality common to a whole generation. Taking stock of the books read by Napoleon, Chateaubriand writes,

Dans la bibliothèque qu'il emporta se trouvaient *Ossian*, *Werther*, *la Nouvelle Héloïse*, et *le Vieux Testament*: indication du chaos de la tête de Napoléon. Il mêlait les idées positives et les sentiments romanesques, les systèmes et les chimères, les études sérieuses et les emportements de l'imagination, la sagesse et la folie.⁶ (MOT 711)

The passage, built around sets of oppositions, leaves the reader with the image of chaos and madness, implying that the fictions read by Napoleon were not what one should have expected in a man of war in charge of thousands of soldiers. Yet the reading list of this portable library (the Scottish bard *Ossian*, Goethe, Rousseau and the Bible) was common to an entire generation, including Chateaubriand, making Napoleon no longer unique but emblematic.

The vivid summary of the year 1798 allows the reader to see the transformation of a young, successful general boasting impressive military deeds such as the sweeping victory over Italy, into a divided Romantic genius.⁷ Moreover, the probing into the singularity of Napoleon's genius reveals its conformity with the post-revolutionary literary *Weltgeist*, making even more difficult Chateaubriand's quest to define the uniqueness of the genius — Napoleon's, but also the genius of the great masters, and ultimately his own genius.

The time of Chateaubriand's political activism in reaction to Napoleon's had not yet come: in 1798, he was unknown, poor and in exile. Suspending

the chronological narrative of his life at the threshold of fame (after the publication of *Atala* in 1801, he, like Byron, woke up famous), Chateaubriand inserts, in the first part of the *Mémoires*, a whole book entitled "Incidences" devoted to English literature. What is the function of this break in the economy of the *Mémoires*? I would argue that it should literally count as an episode in Chateaubriand's career. Chateaubriand knew English from an early age and read English literature extensively both before and during his stay in England.⁸ One finds critical analysis of major British authors in the *Essai*, in the *Génie*, in a series of articles he wrote for the *Mercure de France* and in his long but sketchy *Essai sur la littérature anglaise* written to preface his translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, published in 1836. The section in the *Mémoires* is an abridged and modified version of his longer essay on English literature. Chateaubriand's two-fold purpose is to unveil to his readers the major influence of British literature upon his sensibility and his own work but at the same time his goal is to leave this tribute *behind*, the better to set apart his achievements to come. There is a permanent tension between an open acknowledgment, a deep admiration of all major British authors, and a critical determination to outline the autonomy of his own work. The same tension is at play between the title "Incidences," suggesting the incidental importance of the literature under question, and the careful enfolding of this book within the *Mémoires*, the evidence of its being part of the whole and not an external outgrowth.

One can divide this section into three parts dealing with three major authors, Shakespeare, Walter Scott and Byron, who introduce three major themes and concerns, all revolving around the issue of Time and History.

The pages on Shakespeare do not offer a concise analysis of his work or style; rather they are a "cantiqne d'admiration" (MOT 409), a panegyric to the "maître suprême." Chateaubriand's praise is enthusiastic but deliberately general, for Shakespeare embodies first and foremost *a concept*, the concept of the "génie-mère":

Shakespeare est au nombre des cinq ou six écrivains qui ont suffi au besoin et à l'aliment de la pensée; ces génies-mères semblent avoir enfanté et allaité tous les autres. Homère a fécondé l'antiquité: Eschyle, Sophocle, Euripide, Aristophane, Horace, Virgile, sont ses fils. Dante a engendré l'Italie moderne, depuis Pétrarque jusqu'au Tasse. Rabelais a créé les lettres françaises; Montaigne, La Fontaine, Molière, viennent de sa descendance. L'Angleterre est toute Shakespeare, et, jusque dans ces derniers temps, il a prêté sa langue à Byron, son dialogue à Walter-Scott.⁹ (MOT 408)

Few and towering, "génies-mères" like Homer, Dante, Rabelais and Shakespeare engender generations of authors, conjuring up the image of a

genealogical tree that would begin with a singular self, simultaneously male and female, father and mother, and therefore so fecund as to deliver a progeny of geniuses throughout the centuries. The concept is intriguing because by looking forward, and focusing on the descendants and legacy of the genius, it contrasts with definitions conceiving the genius as radically breaking away from past forms and past individuals. In fact, both visions are compatible. A quasi-miraculous spontaneous generation is implied in Chateaubriand's idea of the "génies-mères" since the mystery of their own birth is not explored. Paradoxically (or perhaps not so) "leur immensité, leur variété, leur fécondité, leur originalité, les font reconnaître tout d'abord pour lois, exemplaires, moules" (MOT 409).¹⁰ Chateaubriand compares them with the "quatre ou cinq races d'hommes sorties d'une seule souche, dont les autres ne sont que des rameaux" (MOT 409).¹¹

Chateaubriand's concern with legacy will not come as a surprise to readers of the *Mémoires*, where the obsessive question of posterity lies everywhere beneath the depiction of his own life and work. In other words, the personal haunting question "Will I, too, be a génie-mère?" urges an exploration into the meaning of literary heritage and offers an implicit answer. Revolutionaries in their own right, the "génies-mères" are defined by the school they leave behind. By the end of his life, Chateaubriand was aware of his numerous followers, thus implicitly counting himself among the selected few. This conviction, however, is challenged by Byron's presence on the same stage, as we will see.

Chateaubriand moves on to the novels of past and modern times and expresses mixed feelings about the new "school" started by Walter Scott. On the positive side, his greatest merit is to be accessible to all. On the negative side, "[il] refoula les Anglais jusqu'au moyen âge: tout ce qu'on écrivit, fabriqua, bâtit, fut gothique: livres, meubles, maisons, églises, châteaux" (MOT 411).¹² Chateaubriand is not criticizing the Middle Ages, for which he, too, had a personal liking, but the phenomenon of *fashion*: the unfortunate and much dreaded counterpoint to the fame of the genius. When the unique becomes collective and reproduced *ad infinitum*, it is bound to eventually fall out of fashion and be displaced by a new trend.¹³

The most serious criticism against Walter Scott is to have created what Chateaubriand calls a "false genre": "Il a perverti le roman et l'histoire; le romancier s'est mis à faire des romans historiques, et l'historien des histoires romanesques" (MOT 411).¹⁴ By inserting history into the novel, Scott introduced truth into fiction and fiction into truth — a dangerous perversion. A footnote to the long chapters on Napoleon, some five hundred pages later, examines Walter Scott as the author *cum* historian of the *Life of Napoleon*: "Il est ébloui par les succès fabuleux qu'il décrit, et comme écrasé par le merveilleux de la gloire . . . En rencontrant une vie si prodigieuse, le

romancier a été vaincu par la vérité" (MOT 729-30).¹⁵ His *Life of Napoleon* is "exact" but too apologetic, too tame, too careful: "il capitule partout . . . Il n'ose tenir tête à son héros, ni le regarder en face" (MOT 730).¹⁶ The complex issue of the competition, so to speak, between truth and fiction, the historian and the novelist, is raised by Chateaubriand not so much against the genre of the historical novel nor against the *Life of Napoleon*, but against the confusion created by an author who did *both*. The issue is at the core of Chateaubriand's own writing, in particular his prose epics *Les Natchez* about a disappearing Indian tribe, and *Les Martyrs* about the persecution of the first Christians. The *Mémoires* themselves, like any autobiographical writing, have a complicated relationship to truth. Furthermore, they are the site of an ambitious project: not to reveal the personal history of his inner self like Rousseau, but to expose his own fate as History in the making.

Moving into his next chapter on British poetry, Chateaubriand uses a parallel to formulate his transition: "En même temps que le roman passait à l'état romantique, la poésie subissait une transformation semblable" (MOT 412).¹⁷ Chateaubriand notes that this evolution was partly a reaction against the French school. At a time when there was no discussion of the Romantic canon, it is interesting to see the two authors whom Chateaubriand places in his pantheon of Romanticism, namely James Beattie, author of *The Minstrel; or the Progress of Genius*, and Lord Byron. The poets of the Lake School are dismissed fairly rapidly as having produced such an intimate genre of composition as to be understood only by men of the same soil (that is, English men and women). However, there is no question in Chateaubriand's mind that James Beattie was their precursor and, as such, the real ground-breaker: it was he "qui avait annoncé l'ère nouvelle de la lyre. . . [II] a parcouru la série entière des rêveries et des idées mélancoliques, dont cent autres poètes se sont crus les *discoverers* [in English and in italics in the text]" (MOT 413).¹⁸ Chateaubriand admires the beauty of Beattie's image in *The Minstrel*, with the caveat that this beauty was not matched by the execution, particularly in the second song.

Enter Lord Byron, the poet whose verses, Chateaubriand writes, strikingly imitate in several instances *The Minstrel*. The remainder of the chapter, nonetheless, makes clear that Byron succeeded where Beattie had failed; Lord Byron stands as the greatest poet since Milton. Eager to leave in the *Mémoires* a portrait of Byron as complete as possible, Chateaubriand twice lengthens these pages, originally written in 1822, with additions in 1834 and 1840.¹⁹ Written while Byron was still alive, the section is built around comparisons between the two writers' lives: similar aristocratic origins; a similar childhood spent by the sea; a similar first love for Ossian and the Bible; similar travel among Greek ruins and in the Orient; similar depictions of Rome, etc. Chateaubriand further discloses that he dreamt René

under the same old tree, in the same cemetery in Harrow where Byron, several years later, dreamt Childe Harold. These heavy-handed parallels are not to be read as coincidences but as an attempt to unite the fate of two famous contemporaries who never actually met. With a tip of the hat in the direction of future comparative literary criticism, Chateaubriand, who rarely uses the future tense, predicts, "Il y aura peut-être quelque intérêt à remarquer dans l'avenir la rencontre des deux chefs de la nouvelle école française et anglaise, ayant un même fonds d'idées, des destinées, sinon des moeurs, à peu près pareilles" (MOT 416).²⁰ The affinities between their imaginations and their fates, politely, albeit heavily, underlined by Chateaubriand, give way to open resentment and a sense of rivalry in a burst of indignation against the poet who dared not mention even once, publicly or in writing, the name of his fellow spirit from across the Channel:

S'il était vrai que René entrât pour quelque chose dans le fond du personnage unique mis en scène sous des noms divers dans *Childe-Harold*, *Conrad*, *Lara*, *Manfred*, le *Giaour*; si, par hasard, lord Byron m'avait fait vivre de sa vie, il aurait donc eu la faiblesse de ne jamais me nommer? J'étais donc un de ces pères qu'on renie quand on est arrivé au pouvoir? Lord Byron peut-il m'avoir complètement ignoré, lui qui cite presque tous les auteurs français ses contemporains? N'a-t-il jamais entendu parler de moi, quand les journaux anglais, comme les journaux français, ont retenti vingt ans auprès de lui de la controverse sur mes ouvrages, lorsque le *New-Times* a fait un parallèle de l'auteur du *Génie du christianisme* et de l'auteur de *Childe Harold*?

Point d'intelligence, si favorisée qu'elle soit, qui n'ait ses susceptibilités, ses défiances: on veut garder le sceptre, on craint de le partager, on s'irrite des comparaisons.²¹ (MOT 417-18)

This quite disingenuous indignation is born of concern for his posterity.²² Of Chateaubriand and Byron, whom will posterity elect as the "génie-mère"?

Swinging one more time the pendulum of praise, Chateaubriand heralds Byron as an "enfant de son siècle" who expressed, like himself and like Goethe, its passions and sorrows. This inferiority complex, so to speak, is not in the content or spirit of each writer's work but in their medium of expression: poetry for Byron, prose for Chateaubriand. "Que peut à la muse de la *Dee*, portant une lyre et des ailes, ma muse pédestre et sans luth?" (MOT 417).²³ The rivalry between the two "brothers" was deeply grounded in the enemy sisters of prose and poetry — still very much at odds in France at the turn of the century. Chateaubriand regretted all his life not having been endowed with the talent of writing verses.

The *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* thus distributes the laurels of Romanticism: for Romanticism in politics, Napoleon; for Romanticism in prose, Chateaubriand; for Romanticism in poetry, Byron. I wish to conclude, however, in canceling, after all, this distribution of prizes. Indeed, it is not so much the paternity of Romanticism(s), singular or plural, which is questioned by Chateaubriand's treatment of Byron and Napoleon, as the very significance of the movement itself: "Lord Byron a ouvert une déplorable école: je présume qu'il a été aussi désolé des Childe-Harold auxquels il a donné naissance, que je le suis des René qui rêvent autour de moi" (MOT 418).²⁴ René, Childe Harold, and one should add Werther, were born as specific individual characters. They were not born as types but became so. Because he lived long enough to know he had started a new school himself, Chateaubriand's mixed feelings of pride and disgust lead him to simultaneously appropriate and negate the constructs of Romanticism. The repetition of the unique and the generalization of the particular engendered a new "ism" — as in Romanticism — but it left the creator on the verge of negating his creature: Chateaubriand writes elsewhere in the *Mémoires* that he would no longer write *René* today.

The revolutionary aspect of the "génie-mère"'s writing is left unexplored and remains shrouded in mystery, like Chateaubriand's own conversion after his mother's death. The uncertainty of the legacy of any literary revolution greatly preoccupied Chateaubriand. This profound literary concern can be read as a projection of the mixed legacy that followed the French Revolution. The Revolution can be said to have engendered the "deplorable school" of the Terror. Similarly, soon afterwards, Napoleon's Consulate engendered a dictatorial Empire, another "deplorable school" to many. The potential distortion through extremism of an original groundbreaking gesture haunts Chateaubriand's conscience. It accounts for his pessimistic, cautious and mixed analysis of both French and English Romanticism. A witness to the rise and fall of Byron and of its controversial by-product, Byronism, Chateaubriand feared the same fate: the disappearance of the original writer, of the writer at the origin, and ultimately the loss of the origin.

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Notes

1. "The intermediary position he occupies at equal distance from the banks of time should not be understood as a controlled balance between con-

- tradictory tensions, but as the very figure of a *passage* in the present" (Berchet 12). All translations from the French are mine.
2. Chateaubriand wrote the *Mémoires* in parallel to his works of fiction and his political career, and arranged for their posthumous publication.
 3. The letter, transcribed by Chateaubriand, includes a terrible reproach against his writing: "Si tu savais combien de pleurs tes erreurs ont fait répandre à notre respectable mère, combien elles paraissent déplorables à tout ce qui pense et fait profession non seulement de piété, mais de raison; si tu le savais, peut-être cela contribuerait-il à t'ouvrir les yeux et à te faire renoncer à écrire" (MOT 397, my italics). (If you knew how much our respectable mother has cried over your mistakes, how deplorable they seem to all who think and profess not only piety but reason; if only you knew, perhaps it would help open your eyes and make you renounce writing.) Chateaubriand attributes his sister's hatred of literature to the fact that it was precisely "une des tentations de sa vie" (MOT 397).
 4. "L'Essai n'était pas un livre impie, mais un livre de doute et de douleur" (MOT 398). (The *Essay* was not an impious book, but a book of doubt and sorrow.)
 5. "He gets into Cairo; his fleet blows up in the air at Aboukir; the army of the Orient is separated from Europe."
 6. "In the library he brought with him were *Ossian*, *Werther*, the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, and the *Old Testament*: an indication of the chaos in Napoleon's head. He would mix positive ideas and feelings drawn from novels, systems and chimeras, serious studies and flings of imagination, wisdom and madness."
 7. Primarily a man of action, Napoleon engendered what one may call a political Romanticism with which Chateaubriand, as well as Byron, and later Victor Hugo, would always seek to measure themselves by becoming active political figures.
 8. For a chronology of Chateaubriand's relationship to English language and literature, see Meta Helena Miller.
 9. "Shakespeare is among the five or six writers who are sufficient to the need and food of thought; these mother-geniuses seem to have given birth to and breast-fed all the others. Homer fecundated antiquity; Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Horace, Virgil are his

- sons. Dante engendered modern Italy, from Petrarch to Tasso; Rabelais created French letters; Montaigne, La Fontaine, Molière, are among his descendants. England is all Shakespeare, and up to our very own times, he has lent his language to Byron and his dialogue to Walter Scott."
10. "Their greatness, their variety, their fecundity, their originality, allow them to be recognized as laws, exemplars, molds."
 11. The "four or five races of men that came out of a single stock, of which the others are but branches."
 12. "[He] drove the English back to the Middle Ages: everything that was written, made and built was gothic: books, furniture, houses, churches, castles."
 13. "Mais les lairds de la Grande-Charte sont aujourd'hui des *fashionables* de Bond-Street, race frivole qui campe dans les manoirs antiques, en attendant l'arrivée des générations nouvelles qui s'apprêtent à les en chasser" (*MOT* 411-12). (But the lairds of Great Britain are Bond Street's fashionables of today, a frivolous race who camps in antique manors, waiting for the arrival of the new generations who are about to chase them out.)
 14. "He has perverted the novel and history; the novelist started to write historical novels and the historian novel-like histories."
 15. "He is blinded by the fabulous successes he is describing, and as if crushed by the marvelousness of glory. . . . In coming across such a prodigious life, the novelist was vanquished by truth."
 16. "He capitulates everywhere. . . . He does not dare to challenge his hero or look him in the eyes."
 17. "At the same time as the novel moved on to the Romantic state, poetry followed a similar transformation."
 18. "[W]ho announced the new era of the lyre. . . . [He] has gone through the entire range of reveries and melancholy ideas, of which a hundred other poets believed themselves to be the *discoverers*."
 19. He also asks his readers to read what concerns Byron in the part of his *Mémoires* recounting his own stay in Venice.
 20. "There will be perhaps some interest in noticing in the future the meeting of the two heads of the new French and English school, having an identical store of ideas, and destinies, if not morals, almost alike."

21. "If it was true that *René* took part in the stock of the unique character put on stage under different names in *Childe Harold*, *Conrad*, *Lara*, *Manfred*, the *Giaour*; if, by chance, Lord Byron had made me live in his life, he would have had the weakness never to name me? I was one of these fathers that one recants once in power? Could Lord Byron have completely ignored me, he who cites almost all the French authors who are his contemporaries? Has he never heard of me, when English as well as French newspapers resounded around him for twenty years with the controversy over my books, when the *New Times* drew a parallel between the author of the *Génie du Christianisme* and the author of *Childe Harold*?
There is no intelligence, however gifted, that does not have its susceptibilities, its distrusts: one wants to keep the scepter, one fears to share it, one is irritated by comparisons."
22. "Paternity," would say Vladimir Troubetzkoy, whose article, "Chateaubriand et Byron ou le père refusé," analyzes the confrontation between the two authors in psychoanalytical terms. While adhering to Troubetzkoy's interpretation, I chose to emphasize another side of the contested paternity through the issue of posterity.
23. "What compared to the muse of the *Dee*, carrying a lyre and wings, can my pedestrian and lute-less muse do?"
24. "Lord Byron opened a deplorable school: I presume he was as distraught over the Childe Harolds to whom he gave birth, as I am over the René's who dream all around me."

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