

LIFE AFTER DEATH: LIBERAL USES OF THE NAPOLEONIC PAST IN 1821

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In his *Memoirs from beyond the Grave*, Chateaubriand perceptively observed that Napoleon posed a greater danger dead than he had while still alive: "The world belongs to Bonaparte. What the destroyer could not manage to conquer, his fame has succeeded in usurping. Living, he lost a world; dead, he possesses it."¹ Those who hoped that Napoleon's death would sap Bonapartism of its vitality and finally assure the security of the Bourbon regime were sadly disappointed.² On the contrary, members of the Liberal Opposition could henceforth exploit memories of the Napoleonic past for political purposes without any real danger of precipitating another imperial restoration, for l'Aiglon was as yet a boy of ten and a virtual prisoner at the court of his maternal grandfather, while Louis-Napoleon could not present himself as a serious candidate for imperial pretender while Napoleon's son still lived. His death eased the conscience of those liberals and republicans who collaborated with Bonapartists in the many abortive conspiracies of the early Restoration period, facilitating further cooperation among the three groups in opposition to the Bourbon regime.³ In fact, the ephemeral literature published in the second half of 1821 suggests that Napoleon was even more useful to the liberals now that he was deceased; no longer an active participant in the creation of the Napoleonic myth, he became more

easily adapted to their particular political needs. The Napoleonic past proved especially useful to liberals on two issues – the Greek struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire and the pressing need for an opposition *revanche* in the wake of the royalist reaction of 1820.

The mythic account of Napoleon as a liberator of oppressed peoples was a cornerstone of the narrative woven by the Emperor himself in the memoirs penned in exile on St. Helena. Appropriating for himself the role of prophet of liberty, Napoleon reversed his previous ambivalence towards his revolutionary heritage and enthusiastically posed as heir to the principles of 1789, who resorted to despotic measures only in order to prevent France from falling into the abyss of anarchy and civil war. The Napoleonic Wars were refashioned into an act of self-defense against reactionary impulses rather than unbridled imperial ambition; Napoleon's ultimate design, in this version of the myth, was a federated Europe composed of free and independent states governed according to liberal principles. Yet even before the *Memorial of Saint-Helena* appeared in print for the first time in 1823, a similar narrative of Napoleonic history was developing in French political discourse, first surfacing during the Hundred Days and crystallizing in the months following his death in 1821. For many, the return of the Bourbons and the triumph of the old order cast Napoleon in a new light; his despotic excesses seemed to pale in comparison with what was seen as the revival of pre-revolutionary feudalism, while the Restoration's passivity in foreign affairs gave the

¹ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre tombe* (Paris, 1849-1850), XXIV:8

² J. Lucas-Dubreton, "Le monde apprend sa mort," *Miroir de l'histoire* (1959), 79.

³ R.S. Alexander, *Bonapartism and Revolutionary Tradition in France: The Fédérés of 1815* (Cambridge, 1991), 18.

French cause to re-evaluate and appreciate the Empire's militant attitudes. In his captivity he became a martyr at the hands of the Holy Alliance, and Napoleon's aggressive and belligerent foreign policy, from Italy to Spain to Poland, was re-translated as a crusade against old regime tyranny. In short, the Holy Alliance having become the bogeyman of French liberals, Napoleon's numerous campaigns against the crowned heads of Europe gave him impeccable credentials as a symbol of nationalist revolutionary fervor.

This image of Napoleon gained fresh impetus in the 1820s and early 30s, as liberal movements and nationalist aspirations reared their heads throughout Europe and provoked a swift response from the great powers, particularly the eastern autocrats. The Troppau Protocol of 1820 left no doubt as to the reactionary character of the Holy Alliance; drawn up by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, it pledged collective action to intervene by armed force in the internal affairs of any state in which revolution threatened the peace of Europe, by which was meant, of course, their own monarchical interests. Liberal and nationalist movements in places like Naples and Spain appealed to the sympathies of the French political left, for whom France's revolutionary heritage made her the natural standard-bearer of any struggle against tyranny. To some observers in 1821, Napoleon's death signaled the moment for France to once again assume the revolutionary mantle against the Holy Alliance. The crowned heads of Europe might profit from this lesson, suggested one anonymous writer; "Let the oppressors of peoples tremble in considering the fall of the great Napoleon, he who was always a friend and father to his own people, and never their master!" The members of the Holy Alliance had long held both Napoleon and the people of Europe in bondage, but "death freed the Emperor from his chains, and our grief will free us from ours!"⁴

The year 1821 also witnessed the opening salvos in the Greek War of Independence. In

⁴ [Amédée Vibaille], *Il n'est pas mort!!! Par un citoyen, ami de la patrie* (Paris, 1821), 5.

February of that year, Alexander Ypsilantis, head of the Danubian principalities, coordinated the first revolts against Ottoman rule, precipitating a major uprising in the Morea. News of the insurrection and subsequent Ottoman retaliation rocked the congress of European powers at Laibach and accentuated the growing rift within the Alliance over the Troppau Protocol, which had been issued without the signatures of either Great Britain or France. But more pressing concerns such as the resolution of Neapolitan affairs and escalating conflict in Spain diverted foreign policy away from the Eastern Question for the time being, and France did not formally engage in Greek affairs until 1827. Nonetheless, philhellenism remained conspicuous in French political discourse, transcending to some degree the usual partisan divisions. Greek antiquity exerted a strong grip on the French imagination, prompting gratitude for the foundations of a culture long steeped in classical traditions. Moreover, Christian sensibilities were outraged that Europe's cradle of civilization was held in bondage by the Ottomans, and the struggle was easily cast as a holy war that deserved the support of all Christendom against the heretical Turks. But as a nationalist revolution against despotic foreign rule, the Greek war was especially calculated to win sympathy among liberals. They constituted a majority in the nominally apolitical Philhellenic Committee, formed in 1824, whose philanthropic activities eventually ceded importance to the political objectives of advocating revolutionary tactics among the Greeks and a more aggressive foreign policy for France. Its membership boasted some of the most recognizable names of the day, including Chateaubriand, Constant, the duc de Broglie, the banker Lafitte, and even Napoleon's faithful amanuensis, Emmanuel de Las Cases. For the liberals, eviscerated in the elections of 1824, the committee provided a vital outlet for public organization as well as potent means of opposition against the Villèle ministry.⁵

⁵ R.S. Alexander views the Philhellenic Committee and other such organizations as evidence that the Liberals increasingly relied on legal rather than conspiratorial or insurrectionary methods of political opposition after 1824. *Re-Writing the French Revolutionary Tradition* (Cambridge, 2003), 208. See also

Philhellenism also proved the extraordinary plasticity of the Napoleonic myth, and some liberals were quick to harness his name to this *cause célèbre*. At first glance, the association appears highly unlikely, having little basis in historical events. Although Napoleon's seizure of the Ionian Islands from Venice in 1797 fostered hopes that the French Republic might do for Greece what she had done for Belgium and Italy, these hopes were largely extinguished after the Egyptian expedition ended in failure, becoming even more remote as the Napoleonic saga assumed its increasingly imperialistic character. Nonetheless, liberal political writers found ample justification in the mythic narrative of Napoleonic history that celebrated the late Emperor as the son of revolution and a champion of nationalist revolt against the reactionary forces of the old regime.

This paradoxical relationship between the imperial conqueror and Greek independence articulated itself in a curious and anonymous piece titled *Napoleon's Ghost, or, Ypsilantis' Dream*. The link between the Emperor and Ypsilantis is especially ironic considering the latter's service in the Russian cavalry, where he fought against Napoleon's armies in the campaigns of 1812 and 1813. Nonetheless, the author imagined Ypsilantis to be full of admiration for his former foe; "the image of Napoleon accompanied him everywhere, whether he was asleep or in the midst of combat." Somewhere beyond the grave, omniscient in death, Napoleon responded with great sympathy for "the unfortunate descendants of Miltiades and Pericles," suffering under the terrible yoke of Ottoman despotism. Thus, a providential dream transported Ypsilantis to the island of St. Helena, where Napoleon, keenly aware that the Greek cause required the services of an able general, rose from his tomb to address his potential protégé. "If only your ghost could appear at the head of our columns and inspire terror in the Osmanli ranks! At the very least, guide me along the difficult path

Marie-Pascale Macia-Widemann, "Le Comité Philhellénique et la politique intérieure française (1824-1829)," *Revue de la Société d'histoire de la Restauration et de la monarchie constitutionnelle* 5 (1991), 27-41.

of war, and save Greece," begged Ypsilantis. Napoleon cautioned the prince against relying on foreign intervention. None of the great powers really desired the revolution's success; on the contrary, "the commercial interests" of France and England were wholly antithetical to the establishment of an independent Greece. Rather, Ypsilantis need only kindle the spirit of independence among the people of the Peloponnesian peninsula. In a more distinctly Napoleonic strain of thought, the shade cautioned Ypsilantis against modeling the new Greek government on those of the ancient republics, advising him instead to establish an "absolute empire." Finally, in a comment well-calculated to strike a chord with French citizens who still bristled with resentment over the treaties of 1814-15 and the nation's much-deteriorated diplomatic clout, Napoleon observed, "Unfortunate are the peoples who require the mediation of foreigners!"⁶

Ypsilantis' Dream was one of several writings that manifested a distinct vogue for a dialogue with the dead. This device proved useful to members of the Liberal Opposition, who could mold the imagined, and hence more pliant, figure of Napoleon into a mouthpiece for their own political views. For the journalist Pierre Barthélemy, the late Emperor was an especially effective weapon against Richelieu's center-right ministry. In one particularly inventive piece, Barthélemy set the scene at midnight; the council busied itself with "obtaining oppressive legislation, keeping up taxes, preparing snares, fixing the price of certain consciences, bribing vile persons; in a word, marking their zeal by great useless acts and grand phrases. By such devotion they produce nothing, and by such noble disinterestedness the ministers' fortunes increase." Suddenly, the ghost of Napoleon appeared among them, not in the feeble state of a man on his deathbed, but as he was at the height of his glory and power. Through the voice of this ghostly figure, Barthélemy vilified the ministers one by one with scathing attacks on both their actions and character, accusing them of

⁶ *L'apparition de Napoléon, ou le songe d'Ypsilanti* (Paris, 1821), 4-7.

hypocritical posturing as devoted servants of the public good. He reserved his especial contempt for Richelieu, whose long exile and service to the court at St. Petersburg rendered him a stranger in his own native land, in the journalist's opinion, unfit to occupy the high office with which he had been favored. He charged the council with a long list of crimes designed, he suggested, to perpetuate France's state of debasement vis-à-vis the rest of Europe. Above all, the council was guilty of squandering the advances that Napoleon had initiated in commerce and agriculture; "the navy is destroyed, the army lacking in discipline and patriotism, public administration abandoned to a generation of men for whom it has become their inheritance, the courts subordinated to the government, and the spirit of factionalism has taken the place of love of country and of national glory."⁷

Published in August 1821, Barthélemy's piece was less about the death of Napoleon than it was about the current crisis of the Liberal Opposition. The assassination of the duc de Berry in February 1820 by a Bonapartist fanatic had sparked widespread fears of a vast continental liberal conspiracy and precipitated a period of royalist reaction. Decazes, the king's favorite but long suspected of liberal inclinations by the ultraroyalists, was sacrificed and a new ministry formed under Richelieu, who swiftly proposed a number of legislative measures intended to insulate the royal family from further attacks on its authority. The opposition press was effectively muzzled by stringent press censorship. The left also suffered heavy electoral losses following the much reviled Law of Double Vote in the fall of

1820, and they were to lose even more seats in the partial elections of October 1821. Stripped of any real parliamentary power, liberals increasingly turned towards conspiracy and sedition as a means of achieving their goals.

Napoleon's death was thus something of a happy accident for the Barthélemy and other liberals, allowing them to tap into the great public demand for all things Napoleonic while fashioning his memory to meet their own needs for a highly publicized discourse of opposition against the government. In the remainder of Barthélemy's phantasmagoria, the shade of Napoleon went on to recite certain articles of liberal faith in the form of advice to the council on how to repair the wrongs they have done to France. Using historical examples that surely would have made the real Napoleon chuckle, he counseled the ministers to emulate not the conquering Romans but the industrious Tyrians, for commerce was the surest route to a beneficent glory. In a maxim more liberal than Napoleonic, he reminded the



Marshal Soult

ministers that it is great to govern a France that is both free and educated, but humiliating to reign over a "nation of Helots." Barthélemy concluded the piece in his own voice by demanding a reorganization of the cabinet, with new ministers "devoted to the interests of the *patrie*," men like Marshal Soult and comte Daru (both of whom, not coincidentally, had been well trusted by Napoleon). In a not-so-subtle dig at Richelieu, Barthélemy demanded that the portfolio of foreign affairs go to "a man who, having never been obliged to foreigners, could act independently in his ministry." Such an appointment, he hoped, would ensure a more militant foreign policy and

⁷ Pierre Barthélemy, *L'ombre de Napoléon au conseil des ministres* (Paris, 1821), 4-10.

bring about an alliance with Russia aimed towards securing Greek independence.⁸

The year 1821 assumed apocalyptic proportions in the mind of Barthélemy's fellow opposition journalist and jack of all literary trades, Alexandre Barginet. For Barginet, Napoleon's death was only one of a series of disastrous portents for a grim future, part and parcel of a grand assault on the liberty of peoples, Christian virtue, and even the whole of European civilization. He went so far as to accuse the great powers of assassinating both Napoleon and Queen Caroline of England, also deceased in 1821. The recent turns of the diplomatic

tables were clearly very much on Barginet's mind; it was at the very least highly suspicious, he implied, that Great Britain, which up until now had staunchly opposed the Troppau Protocol of

allied intervention against "revolutionaries and enemies of peace," should suddenly cease to actively oppose the "ambitious designs" of the tsar. Soon, he warned, France being too weak and Great Britain too cowardly to resist, Alexander will establish himself upon the throne at Constantinople and subordinate the whole of Europe to his will. Barginet, coy in his reasoning, suggested that Napoleon, who even in exile exerted his influence on the concert of Europe, was sacrificed to the political interests of the Holy Alliance. "Thus liberty descends into the grave



A snuffbox commemorating Louis XVIII granting the Constitutional Charter

along with her oppressor," both "victims of tyrants."⁹

Liberal writers also voiced themselves loudly in the demands to reclaim Napoleon's mortal remains from St. Helena and lay them to rest at a suitable burial place on French soil. Predicating their demands for the repatriation of Napoleon's ashes on the idea of *reconnaissance*, in the sense of recognition of, and gratitude for, services rendered to France, they availed themselves of the increasingly formulaic and mythic narrative of Napoleonic history with its litany of patriotic good works. Perhaps the most curious feature of this

discourse was the tendency to couch these demands as personal appeals to the king, flattering his sense of honor and charity. At first glance, this

confidence in Louis XVIII's magnanimity appears naïve at best. The Restoration government went to great lengths in its attempts to erase the usurper's presence from the national consciousness. Although Napoleon's death put an end to fears that he would escape and return to terrorize the crowned heads of Europe yet again, the government had little reason to relax its vigilance, as Bonapartist hopes were kept alive in the person of Napoleon II. Furthermore, given France's precarious diplomatic position, the government had little reason to antagonize England with importunate demands for Napoleon's body. But considered within the context of the Restoration's

⁹ Alexandre Barginet, *Apocalypse de 1821, ou songe d'un homme éveillé* (Paris, 1821); *De la Reine d'Angleterre et de Napoléon Bonaparte, tous deux morts d'un cancer* (Paris, 1821), 3-9, 20-21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-17.

failure to “unite and forget,” the shrewdness of this tactic becomes clearer. Enshrined in Article 11 of the 1814 Constitutional Charter, which ordained a policy of “forgetfulness” by forbidding investigation into individuals’ political opinions held prior to the Restoration, this attempt to enforce collective amnesia represented a desire to forge national unity by burying the proverbial hatchet.¹⁰ It was doomed to fail, not least because of the resilience of collective memory. As Sheryl Kroen has argued, the highly public and ceremonial destruction of Revolutionary and Imperial symbols tended to encourage the process of remembering rather than forgetting.¹¹ Furthermore, the assassination of the duc de Berry and subsequent royalist reaction sounded a death knell for the “unite and forget” principle, rendering further cooperation between the king and the left untenable.

By appealing to Louis’ sense of justice and *reconnaissance*, these writers were in effect challenging him to make good on his promise to forget the bitter past for the sake of national reconciliation. Proponents of repatriation claimed that their motives transcended the pettiness of

¹⁰ David Skuy has called attention to the ambiguous meaning of *oubli* in this context. Rejecting the definition posited by Sheryl Kroen, who argues that *oubli* became “compulsory forgetting” under the Second Restoration, Skuy insists that between 1814 and 1821 it was emphatically a call for conciliation for the greater good of France, an effort to “forgive and forget.” David Skuy, *Assassination, Politics, and Miracles: France and the Royalist Reaction of 1820* (Montréal, 2003), 67; Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815-1830* (Berkeley CA, 2000), 41. Rather than taking these definitions to be mutually exclusive, I view the *union et oubli* policy as an attempt to achieve national reconciliation through selective forgetting.

¹¹ Kroen, 59-62.

party spirit and partisan divisions. In a polemical pamphlet directed at ultra-royalist and “counter-revolutionary” writers, Barginet blamed his opponents on the right for injecting “party spirit” into the debate. In an effort to cover up their own



A snuffbox with a bas-relief of King Louis XVIII

insidious machinations against the government, charged Barginet, the ultraroyalists had raised a false cry of alarm over the seditious nature of public mourning for Napoleon, attempting to turn the king against the nation. None of the “little books” occasioned by Napoleon’s death contained even the faintest whisper a threat against the Bourbon family, yet the ultras foresaw the end of the monarchy itself, “as if Napoleon’s coffin could open and let loose again the triumphant victor of Europe!” Was it not

possible, he asked, to mourn Napoleon without insulting “a lawfully-reigning king?” Was it an insult to the memory of Henri IV to honor the unhappy courage and glory of an exiled hero?¹²

No partisan observer, Barginet admitted that he often denounced Napoleon’s power, but that this did not preclude him from honoring his memory.¹³ He conceded that Napoleon was indeed guilty of despotic excesses, which had alienated “the friends of constitutional liberty.” But to those who accused him and other liberals of hypocrisy, having opposed Napoleon in life and mourned him in death, he insisted that it was important to distinguish between the two aspects of Napoleon’s character – “the conqueror and the Great Man.” To honor the latter was not the same thing as

¹² Barginet, *Sur Napoléon, ou réponse aux journaux contre-révolutionnaires qui s’intitulent: Quotidienne, Gazette de France, Journal des Débats, et Drapeau Blanc* (Paris, 1821), 6.

¹³ Barginet, *La nuit de Sainte-Hélène, héroïde sur le tombeau de Napoléon-le-Grand* (Paris, 1821), 9.

forgiving the former. For Barginet, Bonapartism was less a political doctrine and more of a willingness to recall “the great acts of a beneficent and glorious Revolution,” and thus reconcilable with liberalism.¹⁴

Nonpartisan claims notwithstanding, liberals were quick to make use of the repatriation project as a proxy in their opposition to the erosion of constitutional liberties that commenced shortly after the duc de Berry’s assassination in February 1820. The arguments of Barginet and others contained subtle warnings to the king that he could count on the support of the nation only so long as he reigned in accordance with the Charter. They implored Louis to make a show of good faith by uniting himself with the majority of the French people and concede to their desires to reclaim Napoleon’s body.¹⁵ Pierre Grand, a student and later a lawyer at the royal court, was even more explicit in linking the repatriation project to the liberal cause. In a pamphlet entitled, “The Cry of France,” Grand lamented the death of the Charter, “no more than a phantom, a vain simulacrum of illusory liberty!”¹⁶ Having satisfied the wishes of the French nation in 1814 with a constitutional guarantee of their political liberties, Louis XVIII caved into the hysteria of the Jesuits and the ultras, who held the liberals responsible for Berry’s assassination and seized the event as a pretext for violating the Charter.¹⁷ For Grand, the perpetual exile of Napoleon’s body was as much a symptom of liberty annihilated as arbitrary censorship and the suspension of habeas corpus; “today France demands in vain that the lifeless remains of this Great Man, over which even Caesar would have mourned, be deposited beneath the [Vendôme] Column.” In a nation where such a thing is possible, suggested Grand, “perhaps it is

¹⁴ Barginet, 7-15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 19; Giraud de la Clape, *Remerciements d’un ex-étudiant en droit, au Prince Eugène, sur la demande des cendres de Napoléon, aux membres de la Sainte-Alliance* (Paris: n.d.), 5.

¹⁶ Pierre Grand, *Le Cri de la France* (Paris: 1821), 1.

¹⁷ As Charles Nodier famously declared in the royalist journal, *Le Drapeau Blanc*, “I have seen the dagger that killed the duc de Berry,” he said, “It was a liberal idea.” Quoted in Emmanuel de Waresquiel and Benoît Yvert, *Histoire de la Restauration, 1814-1830: Naissance de la France moderne* (Paris: 1996), 290.

dangerous to even hope to obtain a new constitutional charter.”¹⁸ The campaign to repatriate Napoleon’s remains was thus insinuated into the wider context of parliamentary politics that pitted the Liberal Opposition against the ultra-royalists, becoming a yardstick for measuring Louis XVIII’s commitment to constitutional government.

The year 1821 has long been recognized as a particularly fertile moment in the creation of the Napoleonic myth. Public mourning over Napoleon’s death expressed itself in a spate of funeral odes, elegies, and panegyrics, contributing to an already substantial corps of mythic texts that celebrated his memory. Much of this literature can arguably be classified as short-lived nostalgia for the Napoleonic golden age, inspired by a perfectly natural and largely reflexive emotional impulse to mourn a national hero. But often overlooked is the small but vocal clique of liberal writers who appropriated the myth for their own ends, fashioning a narrative of Napoleonic history that cast him as a friend of oppressed peoples and champion of liberty against the tyranny of reactionary Europe. In the process, they made plain the utility of the past in the service of opposition politics, and assured Napoleon of a certain life after death.

¹⁸ Grand, 6.