

Chateaubriand and the Mourning of (New) France

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“From the perspective of Paris, it was unclear that France had been permanently chased from North America in 1763. Only in retrospect does the year emerge as a defining moment, and even then it can appear as one of those turning points at which history failed to turn” (Furstenberg 657). This perspective was still shared by François-René de Chateaubriand in 1801, when he published the book that made his literary career soar: *Atala*. In the preface of this novella set in the virgin territories of the New World, Chateaubriand implies that he has not entirely given up hope that the French empire in America could be reborn: “[. . .] si, par un dessein de la plus haute politique, le gouvernement français songeait un jour à redemander le Canada à l’Angleterre, ma description de la Nouvelle France prendrait un nouvel intérêt” (“Préface d’*Atala* 22). At the turn of the eighteenth-century, creating a *new* “New France” was indeed *dans l’air du temps*: as part of the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso (1800), Louisiana had just been returned to France by Spain and Napoleon was considering the recreation of the French empire in North America in case of a victorious conclusion to the Saint-Domingue Expedition (1801–1803). For a brief period of time, it seemed possible to cancel the historical significance of the Treaty of Paris by building a new French power in North America. Nevertheless, this window of opportunity was rapidly shut by the defeat of the French expedition in Saint-Domingue. Concerned that a slave revolt could also happen in Louisiana, convinced that it would be expensive and ultimately impossible to protect such a vast territory against British and American ambitions, Napoleon decided to sell it: Louisiana was transferred from Spain to France in 1803, only to be transferred from France to the United States the same year. Thus Napoleon crushed forever the hopes of those who, like Chateaubriand,

dreamed of seeing once again the French flag flying over the land across the Atlantic.

Years later, in 1827, Chateaubriand was completing a new book about North America. Thanks to the intervention of two friends who went to England on his behalf, he had been able to recuperate the manuscripts he wrote during his exile in London between 1793 and 1800. He had been forced to abandon these when he returned to France after the Revolution and had been unable to retrieve them since that time because of the war between his country and England. Among these voluminous manuscripts were two unfinished works: *Les Natchez* and the first version of a travel narrative based on his 1791 journey to the New World. Entitled *Voyage en Amérique*, this travel narrative is a complex textual construction where the voice of the young Chateaubriand cohabits with the corrections and additions made by the author in the late 1820s. These 1827 amendments reflect the dramatic geopolitical changes that had occurred since the original journey and ponder the irretrievable loss of the French colonial empire across the Atlantic: “Nous sommes exclus du nouvel univers, où le genre humain recommence” (*Voyage en Amérique* 371) declares Chateaubriand gloomily. Haunted by the ghost of France’s defunct empire, Chateaubriand never ceases to reflect on the causes of its disappearance and to imagine what it might have been, what riches and glory it could have brought France had the country managed to preserve its dominion.

In this article, I analyse in *Voyage en Amérique* the overwhelming presence of a nostalgia for the time “France possessed a vast empire in North America [covering] all the lands from Labrador to Florida and from the shores of the Atlantic to the most remote lakes in Upper Canada” (Chateaubriand *Atala* 33; our translation). Chateaubriand used many of his 1827 additions to the London manuscript to analyse the reasons why New France had disappeared in the late eighteenth-century and why it could not be recreated afterwards. Nevertheless, Chateaubriand’s intentions go far beyond a mere elegiac representation of these lost territories: his goal also consists in describing the loss of New France as an allegory of the future of his homeland. Looking at Chateaubriand’s representation of New France in *Voyage en Amérique*, I demonstrate how it serves both as a site for conceiving the alternate fate the French colonial empire in North America could have had and as a medium for imagining the destiny of France itself as the end of the Restoration was drawing close.

The Logic of the Past Conditional

In the summer of 1791, Chateaubriand left the American cities he mentions in *Voyage en Amérique* quickly, without much more than a passing mention. Immersing himself instead in the natural environment allowed him to cultivate a feeling of closeness with an ancestral past that so fascinated him. His experience in the pristine forests of the New World brought on fits of enthusiasm that bordered on delirium—fits he recounts with a touch of humor (*Voyage en Amérique* 167). Yet, as he traveled along the Iroquois Trail on his way to Niagara Falls, the young Chateaubriand encountered an invisible border protected by Native Americans under the command of the British army: “Je fus obligé d’envoyer le Hollandais au fort Niagara, chercher une permission du commandant pour entrer sur les terres de la domination britannique; cela me serrait un peu le cœur, car je songeais que la France avait jadis commandé dans ces contrées” (*Voyage en Amérique* 167). The sudden appearance of this administrative constraint in the middle of the woods reminded the young traveler of the loss of the French colonial empire in North America and the signing of the Treaty of Paris. In 1827, when Chateaubriand discovers in the London manuscript the voice of a younger self coming from beyond the grave, the memory of New France is perhaps even more painful than it was in 1791. Indeed, Chateaubriand knows that his homeland no longer has the possibility to reclaim his lost American empire, at a time when it was already well advanced in the process of creating a new one in North Africa.¹ Nevertheless, Chateaubriand tries to understand not only why New France was lost, but what could have happened if his country had managed to save it:

En traçant ce tableau d’un monde sauvage, en parlant sans cesse du Canada et de la Louisiane, en regardant sur les vieilles cartes l’étendue des anciennes colonies françaises dans l’Amérique, j’étais poursuivi d’une idée pénible ; je me demandais comment le gouvernement de mon pays avait pu laisser périr ces colonies qui seraient aujourd’hui pour nous une source inépuisable de prospérité. (*Voyage en Amérique* 370)

Once he has broached the subject, Chateaubriand invites the reader to imagine the immensity of a territory that covered “more than two thirds of North America” (*Voyage en Amérique* 371; our translation). He then asks a series of questions that invite the reader to speculate on an alternate future: “Que serait-il arrivé, si de telles colonies eussent été encore entre

nos mains au moment de l'émancipation des États-Unis? Cette émancipation aurait-elle eu lieu? Notre présence sur le sol américain l'aurait-elle hâtée ou retardée?" (*Voyage en Amérique* 371). Chateaubriand wonders what sort of impact New France would have had on the Revolutionary War had it remained in French hands and treats the history of French-American relations as a source of inspiration for "uchronic" scenarios.²

"Uchronia" is a literary construction based on the past conditional: "What would have happened if . . . ?" It singles out a critical moment when things could have turned out differently, then constructs an alternative history that gradually becomes an entire parallel world. In *Napoléon et la conquête du monde, 1812–1832* (1836), Louis Geoffroy-Château imagines what would have been the consequences for world History if Napoleon had left Moscow before the Winter of 1812 and decided to take Saint Petersburg: uchronia entails the identification of a moment of rupture and analyzes the exponential effects of a single deviation from History as we know it.³ The moment of historical rupture chosen by Chateaubriand for his own uchronic musings is the Treaty of Paris, which Napoleon failed to correct when he sold Louisiana to the United States. The use of uchronia by both Geoffroy-Château and Chateaubriand can be explained by their need to understand the succession of historical upheavals that took place since the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, their imaginary constructions provide a kind of compensation for the territorial losses and political changes that occurred at an unbridled pace.

In *The Spectacular Past*, Maurice Samuels describes the way the men and women of the first part of the nineteenth century used historical spectacles (plays, wax museums, dioramas, panoramas, etc.) to come to terms with the role history had played in the recent changes to their identities: "Through the consumption of popular and visually realistic forms of history, bourgeois spectators were able to envision the process of historical change that had created their new subject positions" (270). The drive to create uchronic representations can be considered another form of this need for retrospective analysis. However, uchronic works betray a greater sense of revolt against the course of history than do traditional historical representations since they contemplate the past in an effort to understand better not how it influenced the present, but how things could—and should—have turned out differently to create a better future reality. Chateaubriand continues his uchronic portrayal of the French colonial empire by trying to imagine the future that New France would have known had it

remained French after the Treaty of Paris: would it have eventually become an independent nation?

This very question was asked in 1803, during the deliberations on the fate of Louisiana. In 1829, Marquis François Barbé-Marbois published a work that aimed more than twenty six years after the fact to assuage the feelings of regret still conjured up by the sale of this colony⁴. In it he relates one of the arguments put forth by the partisans of the sale:

Si, devenue colonie française, [la Louisiane] prend des accroissements et de l'importance, il y aura dans sa prospérité même un germe d'indépendance qui ne tardera pas à se développer. Plus elle fleurira, moins nous aurons de chances de la conserver. Rien n'est plus incertain que le sort à venir des colonies des Européens en Amérique. (Barbé-Marbois 289)

Chateaubriand also imagines the possibility of independence for French colonies in North America. However, unlike Barbé-Marbois, who sees the prospect as an excellent reason to dispose of the territory because it will eventually elude France's grasp anyway, Chateaubriand believes that independence would have been favorable to France had it happened: "La Nouvelle France elle-même serait-elle devenue libre? Pourquoi non? Quel malheur y aurait-il pour la mère patrie à voir fleurir un immense empire sorti de son sein, un empire qui répandrait la gloire de notre nom et de notre langue dans un autre hémisphère?" (*Voyage en Amérique* 371). Here, Chateaubriand perpetuates the traditional perversion of the maternal metaphor, so frequently used in order to describe the relations between Metropolitan France and its colonies: far from imitating the mother who feeds her child, the "métropole" received its strength from the resources taken by force from the colonies.⁵ Indeed, Chateaubriand insists on several material advantages the emancipated French colonies would have represented for his homeland: in particular, France would have benefitted from the large commercial market it could have exploited across the Atlantic (*Voyage en Amérique* 371). Nevertheless, if Chateaubriand disagrees with Barbé-Marbois while basing his argument on the same premise as him, it is primarily due to the greater importance he places on immaterial values: "glory" and "language."

Chateaubriand proves to be quite defensive when it comes to France's glory, particularly when assessing the role played by his compatriots in the colonization of North America. He aims to disabuse those who tend to minimize the importance of the French contribution: "L'orgueil national

des Américains les porte à s'attribuer le mérite de la plupart des découvertes à l'occident des États-Unis; mais il ne faut pas oublier que les Français du Canada et de la Louisiane, arrivant par le nord et par le midi, avaient parcouru ces régions longtemps avant les Américains [. . .]" (*Voyage en Amérique* 210). Glory—a concept “inherited” from the Old Regime by Napoleon who used it as the essential tenet of a “politics of fusion” merging revolutionary and egalitarian principles with aristocratic and traditional values⁶—was also central to Chateaubriand's political thinking for nationalistic purposes. Indeed, very much like Napoleon who saw war as the true means of obtaining glory and the edification of a vast empire as the measure of a nation's greatness, Chateaubriand was in favor of seeking abroad the prestige of military conquests: after the Louisiana Purchase, he expressed his desire to see France building another colonial empire around the Mediterranean.⁷ In this respect, Chateaubriand subordinated the national interests of foreign countries to those of his homeland and placed the rights of his compatriots before the human rights of its colonial subjects. In all his writings about the French empire, France's glory is Chateaubriand's predominant criterion.⁸

Chateaubriand is also concerned with the future of the national idiom, a future that could have been much brighter if France had kept its possessions in North America. The issue of the vulnerability of languages comes up as early as the *Preface* (*Voyage en Amérique* 113) and is omnipresent throughout *Voyage en Amérique*. Indeed, Chateaubriand devotes an entire chapter to those spoken by the native tribes (*Voyage en Amérique* 283–90), and even goes so far as to affirm that the Amerindians have lost everything but their languages (*Voyage en Amérique* 369). Nevertheless, certain idioms have disappeared, like “Old Natchez,” which “was just a gentler dialect of Chickasaw” (*Voyage en Amérique* 283; our translation). A similar fate awaits the other Amerindian languages, which could be lost as easily as a book: “On a aussi le manuscrit d'un dictionnaire iroquois et anglais; malheureusement le premier volume, depuis la lettre A jusqu'à la lettre L, a été perdu” (*Voyage en Amérique* 290). In his general meditation on the mortality of languages,⁹ French is no exception. When Chateaubriand argues that, overall, the independence of New France would have been desirable for France itself, it is because the resulting French-speaking world would have been much more formidable than the one that really exists in his time. The hidden logic behind Chateaubriand's case for New France might be called the “logic of the past conditional:” his meditations on France's lost Ameri-

can empire include reflections on a future that could have been if history had turned out differently.

In the same way that we all tend to imagine what someone *would have wanted*, what they *would have said*, or even what *would have had to happen* to prevent their death, Chateaubriand gives a representation of New France which simultaneously admits that it is over and done with, while envisioning the events that could have prevented it from receding into the past. Additionally, this logic implies what *is not* at present, thus expressing the dissatisfaction of an author with the reality he is witnessing. In short, this type of representation recreates a past that underscores the vulnerability of the present by reminding the reader that things could have turned out quite differently. The fate of the French language in North America plays a crucial role in Chateaubriand's reflection on New France because, for him, the standing and influence of his language are inextricably tied to French foreign policy.

The Politics of the French Language

Despite the fact that France ruled over an empire spanning two continents at the time—though its African colonies were still mostly fledglings—Chateaubriand is saddened by the status of French in the world:

Les langues anglaise et espagnole servent en Afrique, en Asie, dans les îles de la Mer du Sud, sur le continent des deux Amériques, à l'interprétation de la pensée de plusieurs millions d'hommes; et nous, déshérités des conquêtes de notre courage et de notre génie, à peine entendons-nous parler dans quelques bourgades de la Louisiane et du Canada, sous une domination étrangère, la langue de Racine, de Colbert et de Louis XIV: elle n'y reste que comme un témoin des revers de nôtre fortune et des fautes de notre politique. (*Mémoires d'outre-tombe* 498)

At first glance, Chateaubriand seems to be exclusively preoccupied with a linguistic problem: he deplores the progressive disappearance of French, particularly in comparison with Spanish and English, which, thanks to more effective colonial policies, are spoken in a much vaster territory and by many more people than French in 1827. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that it is the role that French could have played in a successful colonial policy that interests Chateaubriand, much more than the fate of the language for its own sake alone. The short list given at the

end of the excerpt cited above is proof of this stance. “Langue de Racine” is an idiomatic expression familiar to all French speakers: it alludes to an author who employed the French language with such brio that he metaphorically made it his own. However, the phrases “langue de Colbert” and “langue de Louis XIV” have different connotations since they are directly relating language and empire.

Indeed, while Colbert did make his mark on the history of France, it is not because he authored works that embody the quintessence of the French language. He is remembered as the Controller-General of Finances and as the Secretary of State of the Navy, and as the founder of celebrated trading companies—the French East India Company (1664), the French West India Company (1664), and the Levant Company (1670)—that underpinned the power of his king. Colbert is also responsible for the first draft of the *Code Noir* (put into effect two years after his death, in 1685) and for the French institutionalization of slavery and the slave trade.¹⁰ In terms of colonization, he contributed to the development of French Canada by providing it with a “[. . .] demographic and economic foundation” (Havard and Vidal 101). The expression “langue de Colbert” thus serves as a synonym for “the language of the man who contributed to France’s glory by building its colonial empire.”

Similarly, by using the expression “langue de Louis XIV” Chateaubriand references an idealized conception of the seventeenth century as the dual apotheosis of France and its national idiom.¹¹ This conception can be found in the work of many seventeenth-century authors, particularly in that of Father Bouhours. France’s military strength and the spread of French go hand in hand according to him, who attributes the preemptive learning of French in other European countries to the Sun King’s victories: “[. . .] le peuple même, tout peuple qu’il est, est en cela du goût des honnêtes gens: il apprend notre langue presque aussi tôt que la sienne, comme par un instinct secret qui l’avertit malgré lui, qu’il doit un jour obéir au roi de France comme à son légitime maître” (Bouhours 104). Under Chateaubriand’s pen, the expression, “langue de Louis XIV,” thus alludes to a time when French was both an instrument for France’s cultural domination and the consequence of the Sun King’s military prominence. However, Chateaubriand’s use of it betrays a pessimistic irony.

Chateaubriand rediscovered the manuscript of his travel narrative at a time when the “language of Louis XIV” was spoken in a country that shared very little with the one Bouhours praised. While the monarchy glorified by the Jesuit had “[. . .] not changed since its establishment” (Bou-

hours 163; our translation), the one Chateaubriand lived under when he prepared *Voyage en Amérique* for publication had been interrupted during the Revolution and the Empire, then restored. Furthermore, while Bouhours's monarchy had sown its "*fleur de lys*" (Bouhours 163)¹² throughout the world, Chateaubriand's had seen the vast empire built in North America by Louis XIV and Colbert wither and fade. Although Chateaubriand believes, like Bouhours before him, that France and its language will share the same fate, he does not conclude, as the Jesuit priest did, by affirming the incorruptibility of the latter based upon the supposed inalterability of the former. On the contrary, Chateaubriand evokes the link between the two in order to underscore the probable future decay, or even disappearance, of French, while he reflects on the decline of the French colonial empire. Chateaubriand's representation of New France thus performs a mirror function: it reflects the situation in France by using the portrayal of its colonial empire to discuss indirectly France's institutions and political system. By pondering on the ruins of New France, Chateaubriand does more than offer an elegy expressed through the "logic of the past conditional" presented earlier. That sort of work would have had no effect on the present since the French colonial empire in America was no more by the time *Voyage en Amérique* was published. Through his portrayal of the fate of New France, Chateaubriand hopes to warn his compatriots of the future that awaits them. The representation of France's lost American empire in his work thus never aims solely to preserve a bygone era by embalming its memory in a book: the commemoration also serves as a warning. Chateaubriand goes on to reinforce further the mirror function played by New France as a reflection of his homeland by establishing a homologous relationship between the Amerindians and the French.

"Nativizing" the Frenchman

Chateaubriand believed that a historical law determines the progressive decline of all societies. "Toute société, pense-t-il, y compris les sociétés indiennes d'Amérique, est bâtie sur les ruines d'une humanité antérieure, qui possédait ses règles et son développement propre, souvent remarquablement complet" explains Claude Reichler (157). For proof of the decline of the New World tribes, Chateaubriand cites the decrease in their population and a general state of corruption, which he blames on the negative European influence: "Ainsi la civilisation, en entrant, par le commerce, chez les tribus américaines, au lieu de développer leur intelligence, les a

abruties” (*Voyage en Amérique* 367). But the Amerindians are not the only ones to experience social decay: several times throughout *Voyage en Amérique*, Chateaubriand parallels the fate of the French empire in America and that of the native tribes. “Ainsi donc, la France a disparu de l’Amérique septentrionale, comme ces tribus indiennes avec lesquelles elle sympathisait, et dont j’ai aperçu quelques débris” (*Voyage en Amérique* 372), he deplors.

The “sympathy” between Amerindians and the French colonizers is a commonplace of French colonial discourse regarding North America. While Chateaubriand presents it as the result of a particular affinity between the native tribes and the national temperament of his compatriots (“Le caractère brillant de la valeur française, notre désintéressement, notre gaîté, notre esprit aventureux, sympathisaient avec le génie des Indiens” [*Voyage en Amérique* 363]) it was in fact a consequence of the vulnerability of early settlements in the New World, which pushed the French to build relationships with Native Americans in order to survive. As Christopher L. Miller points out:

Francis Parkman famously claimed, “Spanish civilization crushed the Indian; English civilization scorned and neglected him; French civilization embraced and cherished him.” If true, this was largely due to the delicate balance of power between the French and the Indians, which was not utterly one-sided; the French could not and did not enslave huge numbers of Indians. [. . .] French settlements in the early years were small, male, seasonal, and incomplete, requiring reliance on and intermingling with native peoples. The colonial encounter in New France nativized the French perhaps as much as it Frenchified the Indians. (109)

However, the parallel drawn by Chateaubriand between the fate of the French empire in America and that of the native tribes has a broader sense as well: it foreshadows the future decline of France itself, as if a historical chain linked the Amerindians to New France and New France to its mother country. In this respect, Chateaubriand inverts the traditional meaning of the “sympathy” between Amerindians and French people. While the thesis of their so-called affinity was used to justify the integration of like-minded people within the French empire, Chateaubriand employs it as a form of warning towards his compatriots who are likely to share the same future as these people who used to call the king of France “our father.” Thus, Chateaubriand highlights the existence of a historical inevitability that has

already affected Amerindian tribes and will soon affect France itself, which could become, someday, the subject of a book where a young traveler would describe the ruins of the Louvre, the fallen towers of Notre Dame, and meditate on the progressive decay of French civilization, while murmuring French words deprived of their meaning. In this respect, the progressive demise of Amerindian tribes is much more than a historical example to which France's situation can be compared: it is an allegory of France's own decline after the First Empire.

Published three years before the end of the Restoration, *Voyage en Amérique* indeed harbors an underlying meditation on the history of France during the first half of the nineteenth century, with a particular focus on its ability to survive the rift caused by the Revolution: "En filigrane, c'est bien un état présent de la France de 1826 qu'il nous faut lire, un état présent qui pourrait constituer un palier vers une dégénérescence définitive" explains Henri Rossi ("Introduction" 62). Chateaubriand played an important role in that history: after serving as French ambassador to Berlin (January–July 1821), French ambassador to London (April–September 1822), French representative to the Congress of Verona (October 14–December 13, 1822), and Minister of Foreign Affairs (1822–1824), he was relieved of his duties on June 6, 1824 by Prime Minister Joseph de Villèle.¹³ The resentment he felt for him pushed Chateaubriand to oppose the government more and more vehemently, particularly in the *Journal des débats*. After his departure from the government, he began working on the publication of his *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Ladvocat, 1826–1831, 28 vol.), including *Voyage en Amérique*. Chateaubriand thus revised the London manuscript at a moment when his doubts about the future of the Restoration were at their peak, as proved by the "General Preface" he published only one year before *Voyage en Amérique*:

L'Europe, pressée entre un nouveau monde tout républicain et un ancien empire tout militaire, lequel a tressailli subitement au milieu du repos des armes, cette Europe a plus que jamais besoin de comprendre sa position pour se sauver. Qu'aux fautes politiques intérieures on mêle les fautes politiques extérieures, et la *décomposition* s'achèvera plus vite : le coup de canon dont on refuse quelquefois d'appuyer une cause juste, tôt ou tard on est obligé de le tirer dans une cause déplorable. (General Preface [1826], *Œuvres complètes* iv; emphasis added)

The term "decomposition" is characteristic of the political school of thought that likens societies to people—gradually edging their way towards

the abyss. Chateaubriand's faith in the future of the French monarchy continued to diminish over the next several years: Claude Lefort notes that after 1830, the author of *Atala* is one of a handful of writers who realize that the monarchy is just as incapable of resurrecting its pre-Revolutionary glory as it is of building a sustainable future (Lefort 197). If Chateaubriand never wavered in his support of the Bourbons, he knew that the time would soon come when he would need to mourn the Restoration the same way he mourned New France. In *Les Natchez* (1726), Chateaubriand saw in the distant horizon "[. . .] European civilization's descent into a decadence that the Revolution was destined to consummate" (213; our translation) explains Marc Fumaroli. The horizon is no brighter in *Voyage en Amérique*, where the eulogy of New France serves to foreshadow a similar fate for Chateaubriand's homeland.

This implicit parallel between France and its former American colonies appears in particular in one of the 1827 additions to the London manuscript, a chapter entitled "The current state of the North American savages" where Chateaubriand evokes the name chosen by the Iroquois:

Poussés par les populations européennes vers le nord-ouest de l'Amérique septentrionale, les populations sauvages viennent, par une singulière destinée, expirer au rivage même sur lequel elles débarquent dans des siècles inconnus, pour prendre possession de l'Amérique. Dans la langue iroquoise, les Indiens se donnaient le nom d'*hommes de toujours*, ONGOUE-ONOUÉ: ces *hommes de toujours* ont passé, et l'étranger ne laissera bientôt aux héritiers légitimes de tout un monde que la terre de leur tombeau. (*Voyage en Amérique* 359).

The west coast of North America is both the starting point and the resting place for the Amerindians; the birthplace of a civilization and the site where it takes its last breath. In much the same way, in a few centuries—maybe less—the same fate awaits the Europeans who crossed the Atlantic: civilizations that affirm their own immortality perish one after the other. Admittedly, the decline of Amerindians had an external cause—the White settler's conquest—that does not have an equivalent in the Restoration's progressive decay. Nevertheless, Chateaubriand warns us in the *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* that the destruction of great civilizations may have a variety of origins: "Athènes et Sparte ne sont point tombées par les mêmes raisons qui ont amené la ruine de Rome" (187). Following Montesquieu who analyzed the roots of Rome's decadence,¹⁴ Chateaubriand reflects on

Greece's progressive decline and explains it by internal causes, in particular its lack of political ambition after Sparta's victory over Athens and the corruption of its mores: "Lacédémone triomphante trouva à son tour, comme Athènes, la première cause de sa ruine dans ses propres institutions" (*Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* 189). Similarly, France's decline during the Restoration has also internal causes, in particular the development of what Chateaubriand calls in 1818 "la morale des intérêts" ("Polémique [Paris, 5 décembre 1818]" 191). Its main characteristic is to be short-sighted: "[. . .] l'intérêt, variable et divers, ne peut être que la base mouvante d'un édifice de quelques jours" ("Polémique [Paris, 5 décembre 1818]" 195). On the contrary, "la morale du devoir" is the most stable foundation a political regime may be built upon since it encourages people to see beyond their personal interests and to devote themselves to the greater good of their country. According to Chateaubriand, the victory of "la morale des intérêts" over "la morale du devoir" is a regrettable novelty of the Restoration since the French Revolution—despite its many atrocities—saw countless examples of generous sacrifices ("ces temps affreux sont ceux des grands dévouements" [(“Polémique [Paris, 5 décembre 1818]” 192)]) whereas the First Empire—despite its many flaws—partially redeemed itself by inspiring a thirst for glory and keeping alive the aristocratic tradition of honor ("Buonaparte séduisait par un prestige de gloire ; et tout ce qui est grand porte en soi un principe de législation" [(“Polémique [Paris, 5 décembre 1818]” 194)]). On the contrary, the rapid spread of la "morale des intérêts" during the first years of the Restoration is responsible of an accelerated moral corruption that will precipitate its political failure: "[. . .] cette morale des intérêts, dont on veut faire la base de notre gouvernement, a plus corrompu le peuple dans l'espace de trois années, que la Révolution entière dans un quart de siècle" ("Polémique [Paris, 5 décembre 1818]" 191). The decadence of a civilization may have a plurality of causes—whether internal or external—but the process itself has only one direction, it can be slowed down but never halted or reversed: all civilizations degenerate and their last vestige—the national idiom—is always in danger of becoming instinct. Thus, American Indians and French people are united by their shared past and their common destiny: in *Voyage en Amérique*, they all chant the requiem of their inevitable demise.

Chateaubriand's pessimistic reflections on the destiny of Amerindians in the end deconstruct the chronological inferences produced by the expression "New World." The idiom is based on the assumption that America came after Europe, since it was "discovered" by Europeans; this

younger continent is also considered to be less civilized, an argument supported by the vast forests found from coast to coast. For Chateaubriand, however, the predominance of nature does not mean that America is less civilized than Europe; instead it suggests that time had accomplished its destructive mission here long before Europe came into its sights, leaving the forests to occupy the land where men had lived. He draws this conclusion as he contemplates Amerindian ruins on an island whose inhabitants have disappeared. The name of the people who used to live there, the time when it occupied this island is shrouded in mystery: “[. . .] il vivait peut-être lorsque le monde, qui le cachait dans son sein, était encore ignoré des trois autres parties de la terre. Le silence de ce peuple est peut-être contemporain du bruit que faisaient de grandes nations européennes tombées à leur tour dans le silence et qui n’ont laissé elles-mêmes que des débris (*Voyage en Amérique* 221). In this excerpt, Europe becomes the “New World” in relation to America, which was inhabited by a people who had already been forgotten by the time certain “great European nations” made their entrance on the historical stage. As he reverses the traditional chronological relationship between Europe and America, Chateaubriand also establishes an underlying continuity between the peoples of the two continents. The Amerindians’ silence foreshadows that of the European nations, which, once they had made their mark, disappeared in turn from memory: in *Voyage en Amérique*, America’s past foretells France’s future.

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Notes

1. Chateaubriand was a staunch supporter of French expansion in North Africa: he considered the conquest of Algiers to be one of the three most outstanding achievements of the Restoration (see *Mémoires d’outre tombe*, edited by Jean-Claude Berchet, Paris: Le livre de poche, liv. XXXVII, chap. 14, t. 4, p. 310) and saw in this colonial endeavor a compensation for the failure of French ambitions in North America.

2. The term “uchronia” was first used in 1857 par Charles Renouvier (1815–1903) when he began his novel *Uchronie (l’utopie dans l’histoire): esquisse historique apocryphe du développement de la civilisation européenne tel qu’il n’a pas été, tel qu’il aurait pu être*. The first edition of this text was published in 1876 in Paris by the *Bureau de la critique philosophique*. In *Uchronie*, Charles Renouvier creates an alternative history starting with the reign of Marcus Aurelius by imagining what would have happened if Christianity had not spread throughout Europe.

3. In the alternate world imagined by Geoffroy-Château, Napoleon’s strategy allows him to avoid the disastrous retreat to Europe and, in the long run, to unify all the

people of the world under a universal French empire. On *Napoléon et la conquête du monde, 1812–1832* (1836), see by Catherine Gallagher, “What Would Napoleon Do? Historical, Fictional and Counterfactual Characters”, *New Literary History*, vol. 42, n 2, 2011, pp. 315–36.

4. Minister of the Treasury, Marquis François Barbé-Marbois (1745–1837) was charged with negotiating the sale of Louisiana to the United States. He published his *History of Louisiana* for reasons he explains in a “Preliminary Note”: “Le traité par lequel la Louisiane fut cédée aux États-Unis, il y a vingt-six ans, a depuis peu donné lieu à des regrets qui m’ont paru mériter d’autant plus d’attention qu’ils sont de bonne foi. J’ai cru que l’histoire de cette négociation dissiperait quelques erreurs et pourrait éclaircir les doutes qui se sont élevés.” *Histoire de la Louisiane et de la cession de cette colonie aux États-Unis de l’Amérique septentrionale ; précédée d’un discours sur la constitution et le gouvernement des États-Unis*. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1829), p. 2.

5. On Chateaubriand and French ideologies of conquest and colonization, see Pratima Prasad, *Colonialism, Race, and the French Romantic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 72–98.

6. On Napoleon and the concept of glory, see Robert Morrissey, *The Economy of Glory. From Ancien Régime France to the Fall of Napoleon*, translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago : Chicago University Press, 2013).

7. On this question, see Note 1.

8. In an 1816 speech to the Chamber of Peers, Chateaubriand advocated in favor of a new “crusade” to end the slave trade of Christians in the Mediterranean: “N’est-ce pas aux Français, nés pour la gloire et les entreprises généreuses, d’accomplir enfin l’œuvre commencée par leurs aïeux ? [. . .] il est temps que les peuples civilisés s’affranchissent des honteux tributs qu’ils paient à une poignée de Barbares.” *Œuvres complètes de M. le Vicomte de Chateaubriand*, t. 1, Paris, Pourrat Frères, 1836.

9. Chateaubriand also relates the mortality of the French language to the progressive disappearance of Amerindian idioms in *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (liv. VII, chap. 10, t. 1, p. 498). On this analogy, see by Denis Hollier, “Incognito”, in *Chateaubriand inconnu*, special issue of *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, n247, 2007, pp. 25–43.

10. On the history of slavery and its representations in French-language literature, see Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. (Durham: Duke UP, 2008).

11. On this question, see Béatrice Guion, “Langue et nation: l’invention du ‘siècle de Louis le Grand,’” *Revue Française d’Histoire des Idées Politiques* 36 (2012), pp. 347–63.

12. “[. . .] je ne sais quelle inspiration me dit que les Lis qui viennent du Ciel, bien loin de se flétrir dans le Champ où ils sont plantez, fleuriront un jour par toute la terre.”

13. Chateaubriand refused to support Villèle, the head of the government, in Parliament because he was involved in a controversial annuities conversion scheme. Irritated by this lack of political solidarity, Villèle convinced Louis XVIII to dismiss Chateaubriand.

14. Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* [1734], edited by Catherine Volpilhac-Augier (Paris: Gallimard, “Folio Classiques”, 2008).

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