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A retrospective Ulysses' syndrome: French *émigré* recollections of the British host

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*Between 1789 and 1815, thousands of French counter-revolutionaries chose exile rather than abide by the new political systems brought on by the Revolution, and later by Napoléon. A large number came to the British Isles. Contemporary documents demonstrate the French exiled community cohabited peacefully alongside a rather welcoming British society. Yet, self-narratives written after the Bourbon Restoration of 1815 described a different situation, in which French and British communities often clashed over behavioural and political distinctions. These discourses appeared to have further diverged from the event as time went by. This article does not mean to assess how traumatised the French *émigré* populations had been when driven to exile, but how the initial trauma, i.e the forced and lengthy separation from their motherland, was modified in later narratives and scholarship first to be utilised in the creation of national memories, and later in the formation of transnational ones. Focusing on the French memorial side of this transnational phenomenon, it aims to understand the political, social, and editorial agendas driving such modifications.*

In Bourbon Restoration France and throughout the nineteenth century, the publishing industry was thriving with individual memories of revolutionary and imperial events (Petiteau 5-20). Amongst the authors, several had been *émigrés* – the population displaced voluntarily and involuntarily as a result of the transformation of the French political sphere after 1789. In the past twenty-years, French historians and literary critics alike have again proceeded to publish and re-edit these *émigré* self-narratives, yet seemingly displacing the focus from a nation-centric perspective to an international or even transnational one. Emigration writing is based on the experience defined by a forced relocation that was at once geographical, social, economical, intellectual, and ethical in the case of French *émigré* writers (Jacob and Rossi 9). Despite being commonly accepted by scholars in the field of emigration to describe the experience of forced relocation, the word trauma is not used in contemporary documents and in narratives by returned *émigrés*. Often considered as anachronic, trauma is a relatively new analytical concept in the history of the French Revolution (Steinberg 177-179); yet, in practice, “each change constitutes a trauma” and henceforth participates to “transform the mores, habits, values and dreams of a population” (Perrot 306). This article does not aim to assess whether or to what extent the *émigrés* had been traumatised; it aims however to assess how the circumstances correlative to this particular trauma, understood as a forcible change brought to a normalised situation by external forces, can be read and comprehended differently depending on the observer’s viewpoint. Comparing French early nineteenth century and recent editions of self-narratives, this article aims to demonstrate that understandings of the circumstances around the trauma of forced relocation took on different

meanings depending on whether emigration was experienced, recollected, published, hidden away or dug up out of some unhistorical zones by literary critics and historians.

Due to the scale of the project, the analysis in this article will be limited to four core circumstances surrounding the relocation of the *émigrés* to Great Britain, as shown in documents contemporaneous to emigration and described in later self-narratives. The four circumstances are drawn from Spanish psychiatrist Dr. Achotegui's four "stressors", defined in his early 2000s description of Ulysses' syndrome. After some twenty years of research on the subject of migrant and refugees' mental states, he described the existence of a "chronicle and multiple stress" amongst the migrant population, differing from the classical acculturative stress (Payan 173). The latter is linked to the necessity of learning a new language, adapting to a new culture and nostalgia for the home country. Ulysses' syndrome arises from four environmental factors, also known as stressors. The first stressor is the fear related to the host state's legislation on foreigners. The arrival of the French exiles in Great Britain coincided with the British acquisition of a repressive police and legislation on foreigners, the Aliens Act voted in January 1793. The second stressor is related to extreme poverty in immigration and the daily fight for survival. On their arrival, most exiles were impoverished and dependent on an extremely unequal and exclusive system of relief. The third stressor is loneliness and the distance from one's family. In the French exile's case, the term family was both real and symbolic. The home country – the fatherland – was thought of as a familial model in counter-revolutionary philosophy. The fourth and last factor relates to the constant impression of failure: for the *émigrés*, the failure here was obviously martial and political in nature.

Used as an unambiguous and under-contextualised primary source in historical practices, *émigré* self-narratives were often exploited to prove the impossibility for the emigrants to reject their national culture and oppose them to the mores of their host countries. When noble and ecclesiastic memoir writers insulted their British ex-hosts, calling them insular, impolite or ugly and when these same writers portrayed themselves as the innocent victims of violent British mobs, historians interpreted it as the sign that French exiles and the host country had had something of a tumultuous relationship. At best, this patriotic position was related to the centenary "love-hate" bond between the two countries (Tombs and Tombs). Yet, in the late 1990s, historian of the French emigration to Germany, Karine Rance, asked whether self-narratives written and published years after the experience of displacement should be trusted (2001). Following Paul Ricoeur's work on memory and history, she recommended that historians not only engage with the events described in the text, but also the writing and publishing contexts of self-narratives. Like Ulysses, the French exiles had been obsessed with their homeland throughout and beyond emigration: France retrospectively became a mythical and utopian location. By contrast, the host country was related to an inner suffering and the separation from home. How can we differentiate the experienced trauma from the recollected and reconstructed one? In theory, any recollection of the past has become illusionary and anachronistic, and the author amnesic (Ricoeur). In the case of emigration, the amnesia was furthermore increased by refuge and uprooting. Hence, the recollected trauma differs from the experienced trauma, and this is because of individual and collective reasons. This article proposes a new reading of emigrant-British interactions, based on the concomitance of three individual and collective "moments" in self-

narratives (Rance, 1998). The first moment coincides with the experience of the stressor; the second one to the narration of the stressor as part of a writing context. The third moment corresponds to the publication and re-edition of self-narratives, and the influence of their context on the meaning of the stressor.

The affirmed purpose of each self-narrative read for this study was the factual and accurate relation of the past experience of a forced relocation outside the French national frontiers. Passages on the *émigré* community in Britain were however missing fundamental moments regarding *émigré*-British interactions. For example, in January 1793, the British Parliament voted the *Aliens act*. As Britain was preparing to enter the coalition against French revolutionary armies, this act dealt primarily with the surveillance and management of foreign populations arrived in Britain after January 1792. The fear of the host society's legislation (the first stressor in the Ulysses' syndrome) played a fundamental role in alienating and marginalising the French population; it had a daily impact on the exiles' lives and dictated their social and political behaviours as shown in manuscript documents kept in the London Metropolitan archives and at Winchester's Hampshire Record Office. Between 1793 and 1815, the French in Britain had to carry passports and report any of their journeys to local authorities. They could be sent outside the Kingdom without any form of trial or isolated in jail. Landlords spied on their exiled tenants to report their movements to a larger spying agency, the *Alien Office*. As a result, many felt alienated to the extent that some were the victims of psychotic episodes like the chevalier de Blin who imagined that his daughters had died of hunger, while a few marginalised *émigrés* committed violent suicide, as reported in London's 1790s and 1800s press.

Yet, the British administrative treatment of the French is almost absent from self-narratives; the *Aliens act* and its daily impact on the exiles is merely mentioned in self-narratives. Very few memoir writers actually name the act (Bouillé, 3:103). A few make references to it, mainly when narrating the moment the author crossed the Channel. And even then, the event is proposed as an anecdote – generally reminiscing that the memoir writer had been granted an exceptional treatment. Gauthier de Brécy, for example, was welcomed in England with the gifts of sugar, tea and champagne when the customs officer realised he had fought alongside him against the revolutionary armies in Toulon (Gauthier de Brécy 278). Mentioning the *Alien Office* but not the *Aliens Act*, Madame de la Tour du Pin reported that the rude custom officers she dealt with changed their “tone and manner” when she claimed kinship with the British aristocracy (La Tour du Pin 306). A third author, the General d'Andigné, had to wait for days at the customs before receiving the authorisation to proceed into British territories (Andigné 101). He accused the local populations of exploiting the customary borders with the help of customs officers, but spared the British government from any blame.

The relative silence of the emigrants concerning the *Aliens Act* could be interpreted as a sign of complacency with and even approval of British Prime Minister William Pitt's policies. Indeed, the *Aliens Act* was double-edged: painful to the impoverished refugee, it also facilitated the dismissal of revolutionary spies from British territories. Yet, it was only once praised in this manner in self-narratives. On the contrary, most political decisions made by Pitt and his government were scorned by returned *émigrés*. A second explanation for their silence could be humiliation. One of the largest difficulties when creating the corpus of self-narratives necessary for this study was to make it

consistent with the latest results on the heterogeneous sociology of emigration. Although present in emigration in Britain, less-privileged classes did not leave many written recollections of their exile. Yet, this apparent failure proved an important stumbling block in the construction of this article. The memoir writers had probably lost more than the average emigrant in fleeing France and they were inclined to obey a certain code of honour (Reddy). As stated in the introduction, these individuals' relocation had been geographical, social, intellectual and ethical as well as financial and hierarchical. Self-narratives could hence be a way to cope with the loss of a social status – they described the fall from an established position in the home country to the one of an outsider, of an alien in the host country. In Britain, *émigrés* had been reminded on a regular basis that they were outsiders, foreigners – and that for as long as twenty-two years for those who remained in England between the passing of the law in 1793 and the Restoration of the monarchy in France in 1814-15. In Restoration France, the authors of self-narratives would again enjoy certain privileges and be recognised as the elites of their country for the aristocratic ones or the elites of their town for the provincial noble and clerical writers. If we look further into the examples of the Marquise de la Tour du Pin and the General d'Andigné, both descendants from the French aristocracy, the humiliation was worsened by the fact that those who disrespected them were British provincial commoners. Just like Ulysses in the islands of Cyclopes, these French memoir writers had become “nobodies” in foreign lands.

Self-narratives do not function as factual relations of the trauma of relocation when writing the history of emigrant-British relations. Their role as comprehensive stories of one's exile must be similarly questioned. Indeed, the chronological distance between the trauma and the writing moment “prompt[s] renewed, more strenuously self-conscious reflection” (Appleby 21-22). The author of self-narratives is the same one who experienced the trauma of exile. He is IDEM, the invariable same; and yet, he is simultaneously different, or IPSE, the variable same (Rance 2006; Ricoeur). Everything that happened between the trauma and the writing process contributed to the redefinition of this same trauma. Since their return to France, the *émigrés*' personal situations as well as the structures influencing their behaviours and thoughts had been the subject of radical changes. It is through these new individual situations and collective structures that they reinterpreted their relationships with those who had been their friends, benefactors and allies while in exile in Britain.

This is particularly obvious with narrations related to the fight for survival in the host country (the second stressor in the Ulysses' syndrome). For a few months after September 1792, thousands of French *émigrés* were pushed towards the British shores by the radicalisation of the French Revolution and the European wars. The majority of them had lost everything during their flight, and were reduced to indigence. As a response, the British civil society created some relief committees, known as Wilmot and Thomas, in charge of helping the French lay and clerical poor; the British government later maintained them. Kept in the record office at Winchester, a majority of *émigré* letters addressed to the administrations and individuals in charge of the reliefs praised the British charitable efforts. Yet, the *émigré* schilling – the name given to the average allowance received by an adult emigrant per day – generated a shift amongst returned *émigrés*.

Once again, most memoir writers chose to ignore the topic. However, one writer, Joseph-Alexis Walsh, explained that in the 1830s many returned *émigrés* publicly accused Great Britain of having

had a political interest in being hospitable to the then despaired exiles (50). He affirmed that returned writers had invented a collective lie when affirming they had refused the British relief. His affirmation was in direct opposition with the arguments and rhetoric used in two other self-narratives. An ex-army officer, Bouillé, denounced the relief as a “British governmental plot against the French nation” (2:104). Georgette Ducrest pitied those exiles who had been forced “to beg the enemy of their fatherland to survive” (37). This author was probably less than five years old during her stay in London – as she affirmed earlier having no reminiscence prior her fifth birthday, she could not have possibly remembered the relief or the experience of shame related to receiving charities. She nonetheless continued her argument: “George III repaid James II’s debts, in the name of the Nation and Royalty” (37-8). In other words, the asylum and relief offered to the French exiles was simply a reimbursement due, or counter-gift, for the asylum given by the French monarchy to the Catholic Jacobites after 1688.

These two examples demonstrate how authors of self-narratives transformed the counter-revolutionary alliance of the French *émigrés* and the British crown against the French revolutionary State into a national opposition. Admitting to have been the recipient of charitable efforts would probably damage the counter-revolutionary rhetoric of aristocratic dominance. Admitting to having received help from Great Britain, France’s main financial, military, and imperial competitor in the nineteenth century, would furthermore be an acknowledgment of their subordination to their post-revolution challenger. Ducrest had been close to the Napoleonic elites before rallying the Bourbons; Bouillé was a hardcore royalist, or *légitimiste*. At the time of the redaction of their self-narratives, both right-wing ideologies had developed a nationalist propaganda based on a strong Anglophobia (Darriulat 226; 228). Hence, this discourse on charity cannot be trusted as the reminiscing process was inevitably biased by the context of its genesis: returned *émigrés* attempted to assert their moral and political integrity in *Mémoires* and *Souvenirs*. The reconstructed vision of antagonistic relations between the migrants and their host country allowed them to better project their patriotic adherence to France as a fatherland and a royalist Nation. As an intertextual collective corpus, *émigré* self-narratives served a teleological purpose. *Emigré* self-narratives were positional writings, in favour of a certain idea of the grandeur of France, and by correlation, against all challenging powers and ideologies. Correlatively, it aimed to hide the transnational nature of the European counter-revolutionary fight.

If the context of the genesis modifies the reminiscing process, could we also consider that the context in which the text were edited and published also participated in renewing collective memories of the trauma of emigration? Regarding the stressors in Ulysses’s syndrome, would the *émigré* feeling of failure be erased or emphasised by later memories? Would later editors forgive the betrayal towards the fatherland expressed by many authors in the 1820s and 1830s? The anthropologist and specialist of social productions of nationalist memory in traumatic situations, Liisa Malkki, insists that “rather than be silent or apologetic about the editing process, a theoretically principled ethnography must be self-conscious and explicit about the motives and justifications for its editing strategies” (57). In the absence of original manuscripts, and with one exception, this study resorted to printed copies of self-narratives. Most of them had been at first solely intended for the author’s families. Publishing a

private manuscript first participated in modifying its status. Furthermore, publishers and editors often felt, and still feel, authorised to modify arbitrarily the original manuscript. Sometimes, the first published edition had been modified in the absence of a manuscript: hence, the 1825 first edition of Madame de Genlis's self-narrative by publisher Ladvocat had been modified in content and in length at least three times: by her niece in 1855, by a historian in 1857 and more recently, in 2004, by a specialist of eighteenth century literature citing the need to facilitate the modern reader's experience of the text. In some cases, the first edition outdated by more than sixty years the death of the memoir writer: the *Souvenirs du Comte de Contades* were published for the first time by his royalist grandson in 1885. While the French new Republic was reinventing the historical profession by imposing a positivist and critical reading of primary sources, this epistemological revolution scarcely touched royalist scholarship. The edition of Contades's narration of his counter-revolutionary involvement in Quiberon, symbol for the religious involvement of the *émigré* armies against atheist France, completely belonged to a royalist and Catholic fight against the French Third Republic, the programme of which was based on the rejection of monarchy and a strong anti-Catholicism. In this, the British participation to Quiberon became secondary to a presentist memorial discourse on the French political model.

Furthermore, the re-edition of some self-narratives gave way to contradictory projects: in the 1940s, emigration became altogether an object of pride and shame. Around 1941, the memory of emigration was associated with the spirit of resistance against Nazi Germany. In programmatic prefaces by French editors in London, the association was made even more obvious that *émigré* communities and *la France libre* had both taken London as a shelter (Rance, 2006). The departure from "the fatherland" stopped being a failure or a betrayal, and was metamorphosed into an act of righteous defiance against what was perceived as equally totalitarian regimes. This metamorphosis of the memory of exile is furthermore interesting in that the British memory on emigration simultaneously took a similar turn. In 1941, Leslie Howard directed and starred in a British propagandist movie called *Pimpernel Smith*. In this, he transfigured the emigrant fleeing revolutionary France into the innocent victim of the Nazi state. In lieu of saving noblemen and women from the Guillotine, Horatio Smith, a British archaeologist, rescued innocent anti-Nazi democrats from concentration camps. This new *France libre*-British resistant memory created and reinforced in popular culture the refugee-status of the French *émigré*: from a political being, he became a despairing individual, a "traumatised object of intervention" described in the simplified terms of helplessness and loss (Gatrell 8). On the other hand, the memory of emigration has also been fully associated with the collaborationist memory of World War II. The only unpublished memoir in this study is nowadays kept in the French national archives, and its consultation ruled by several restrictions imposed on the French State by its previous owners. Part of the *Fonds Jarnac-Lasteyrie*, the memoir was a gift from René de Chambrun, godson to the Maréchal Pétain and son-in-law to Laval who both actively participated in the collaboration with Nazi Germany. In this case, the failure of emigration became double: the original betrayal towards the French nation, the 1789 departure, was combined with the history of a second and ultimate betrayal.

In the past twenty-years, historians and literary critics alike have again proceeded to publish and re-edit *émigré* self-narratives, displacing the focus from a nation-centric perspective to an international or even transnational one. In this new memory of emigration, failure and loneliness give way to transnational exchanges and allow for a focus on transnational sociability and cultural transfers. Cultural exchange and transnational experiences slowly start to replace in scholarly discourse the focus on political and cultural trauma. Could we go as far as affirming that this interest for transnational exchanges in emigration is part of a common effort by scholars and the publishing industry to create a common European cultural and historical identity (Delanty)? Most of the memoir writers who have been republished recently were women: *Le Temps retrouvé*, a collection by the *Mercure de France*, published Madame de Boigne, Madame de la Tour du Pin, Madame de Genlis or Georgette Ducrest. The twice exiled Madame de Stael, who affirmed in 1814 that she “had become European”, was the subject of several re-editions and biographies in the 2000s (quot. in Gooden 1). Still concerned with politics, these women often proposed a less extreme view of the relation with Great Britain. As civilians, they had a different experience of their hosts than many of the previously published military *émigrés*. In the same time that these self-narratives are being reprinted, several international collaborations by specialists of the *émigré* question participate in renewing the angles and sources used to study emigration and the relation to host countries. Researchers are now focusing on transnational exchanges, cultural transfers and the existence of a Third Space, where the host culture would neither be duplicated nor rejected, but rather influential in the creation of a long-lasting *émigré* identity (Bhabha).

While self-narratives often present exile as a communitarian political process and a wasteland in terms of cultural exchange, the confrontation between both contemporary sources and the writing and publishing contexts brings to light the development of diverse collective memories on the phenomenon. Applied to self-narratives on emigration in Britain, Karine Rance’s theoretical principles allow us to bring to light the transnational interactions and interrelations between emigrant and British cultures despite identity differences being retrospectively conspicuously underlined and displayed. Retrospective constructed memories on emigration should not be judged as true or false: it is in the difference between sources from several origins that the historian will be able to write a history of the creation and development of a collective identity on the long term trespassing the boundaries of national histories. It is only by retracing the genealogy of the legends and historiographic transformations around emigration and the counter-revolution in the past two centuries that the historian will be able to seize the importance of the long lasting European counter-revolutionary ideologies.

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