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Luke Bouvier

Death and the Scene of Inception: Autobiographical Impropriety and the Birth of Romanticism in Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*

Chateaubriand is certainly no stranger to death. One need only look to his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* for confirmation, for the experience of death pervades this entire work, serving as a point of reference that orients virtually every aspect of his autobiographical project. Even a cursory reading reveals this overwhelming preoccupation: in brute empirical terms, one reader informs us that death is mentioned or described on fully one-third of the pages of the *Mémoires*.[1] For Chateaubriand, death serves as the main organizing principle of his narrative, a *structuring* figure that emerges, appropriately enough, through a series of architectural metaphors. "Ces *Mémoires* seront un temple de la mort élevé à la clarté de mes souvenirs" (122-23), he affirms, near the beginning of his monumental autobiographical work, "édifice que je bâtis avec des ossements et des ruines" (344).[2] More specifically, death manifestly configures the narration of Chateaubriand's *Mémoires*. The very title of the work testifies to the desire to construct a voice from "beyond the grave," to make of one's life story a testament of sorts, a project that is literally realized in the deferral of publication until after Chateaubriand's death in 1848: "On m'a pressé de faire paraître de mon vivant quelques morceaux de ces *Mémoires*, je préfère parler du fond de mon cercueil; ma narration sera alors accompagnée de ces voix qui ont quelque chose de sacré, parce qu'elles sortent du sépulcre" (118).

This very prevalence of death, however, can make it easy to lose sight of its potential complexity. Indeed, Chateaubriand reminds us of

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his ambition to speak from the depths of his tomb so frequently that his apparent familiarity with death can be deceptively obvious. What we are to make of this gesture, though, is certainly anything but clear. What does it mean to speak of "death," or of "Chateaubriand's death" in this way, or for that matter of "Chateaubriand's life"? To take one obvious possibility, many readers have been quick to seize on the religious overtones of the *Mémoires*, making of Chateaubriand's desire to speak from beyond the grave the sign of an aspiration toward literary resurrection and posthumous glory.[3] The *Mémoires* in this sense would assure his immortality through a kind of aesthetic salvation—the supposed very example of the Romantic belief in redemption through Art. This argument surely has some merit, but Chateaubriand at a number of moments also seems to allude to a different ambition. Having sold the publishing rights to the *Mémoires* years earlier in order to avoid destitution, Chateaubriand suggests in the "Avant-Propos" that if he still could have his way he would prefer that his wife suppress the publication of his work after his death, "ce que je désirerais plus que jamais aujourd'hui" (116). A moment later he proposes two additional possibilities for his text that he would also consider acceptable: "Enfin, si j'étais encore maître de ces *Mémoires*, ou je les garderais en manuscrit ou j'en retarderais l'apparition de cinquante années" (117). Even if one allows some latitude for false modesty or a desire to avoid potentially painful or embarrassing revelations, what seems to be at stake here is not so much a hope for resurrection as a desire for oblivion. On first reading, at least, Chateaubriand seems to want his "voice from beyond the grave" to remain unheard, perhaps to exist in secret or to emerge only at a moment when it will have lost its potential audience, that is, at a moment when it will no longer have any relevance and might even appear incomprehensible—hardly a prescription for literary immortality.

Is the "voice from beyond the grave," then, as many readers imagine, simply a Romantic conceit in that Chateaubriand would imagine himself on the far side of the tomb in order to survey the totality of his life? In this case, the gesture would serve to create a position of dominance from which to recount his story, a kind of triumphant perch from which Chateaubriand would exercise a sure, all-knowing judgment on his life and peers.[4] This commanding rhetorical site would ultimately guarantee the coherence of the autobiographical subject, placing the entire text firmly under the sign of the supposed end product

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of autobiography, a mastery of self-knowledge—which here would take on a transcendent, "sacred" character. But is the border between life and death in Chateaubriand's text really as discernible and secure, as intelligible as this reading would suggest? Numerous passages in the *Mémoires* seem to blur or obscure precisely the legibility of this distinction, as for example, when Chateaubriand remarks how death has come to insinuate itself, through the writing of his autobiography, into the very substance of his life: "Personne ne se crée comme moi une société réelle en évoquant des ombres; c'est au point que la vie de mes souvenirs absorbe le sentiment de ma vie réelle. . . . on dirait que nul ne peut devenir mon compagnon s'il n'a passé à travers la tombe, ce qui me porte à croire que je suis un mort" (2: 587). Even more troublesome is Chateaubriand's prominently situated pronouncement at the end of the "Avant-Propos" suggesting that death can ultimately provide no help in making sense of life: "La mort ne révèle point les secrets de la vie" (120). In effect, such a judgment seems to cast doubt in advance on the entire autobiographical project, that is, on the very possibility that a voice from beyond the grave could eventually arrive at any self-knowledge.

How are we to interpret the many such enigmatic and paradoxical formulations by which Chateaubriand seems to breach the integrity of his project to write "l'histoire de ma vie" (122), both as a narrative of his *life*, and as a totalizing, neatly contained account of that life? If death is the primary structuring principle of the *Mémoires*, it is also at the same time a profoundly *destructuring* figure. In effect, the autobiographical narrative, positively conceived here as a grand, monumental architectural project ("temple de la mort," "édifice," etc.),[5] appears to be radically undermined by this vertiginous instability of the limit between life and death. In particular, death seems to have compromised the very founding principle of Chateaubriand's narrative, as it presides in an almost obsessive way over the multiple scenes of inception to which the *Mémoires* repeatedly return, as if to an original or unsolvable enigma. How are we to account for this apparent incongruity of the proximity of death with respect to the question of origins or beginnings, especially as concerns the foundation or establishment of the autobiographical narrative? Does this proximity of death to the "inaugural gesture" have a wider resonance in Chateaubriand's work, inasmuch as Chateaubriand very deliberately considers himself to be the founder of French Romanticism ("En moi commençait, avec l'école dite romantique, une révolution

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dans la littérature française," 594), and as we tend to think of Chateaubriand's work, along with Rousseau's, as being a "starting point" of sorts for modern autobiography?

From the very beginning of the *Mémoires*, these questions loom large for any understanding of Chateaubriand's work, as it becomes quickly apparent that death is no simple *terminus ad quem* or final endpoint of life, the farthest possible limit of the autobiographical narrative. Rather, death appears paradoxically as a certain *terminus a quo*, a problematic point of departure or earliest limiting point, an original impetus to any movement of beginning. Chateaubriand's birth, for example, is at least three times marked by the specter of death and exile:

> J'étais presque mort quand je vins au jour. (135)

> En sortant du sein de ma mère, je subis mon premier exil; on me relégua à Plancouët, joli village situé entre Dinan, Saint-Malo et Lamballe. (136)

> A peine étais-je né, que j'ouïs parler de mourir: le soir, un homme allait avec une sonnette de rue en rue, avertissant les chrétiens de prier pour un de leurs frères décédé. Presque tous les ans, des vaisseaux se perdaient sous mes yeux et, lorsque je m'ébattais le long des grèves, la mer roulait à mes pieds les cadavres d'hommes étrangers, expirés loin de leur patrie. (153)

This configuration of beginnings, death, and the figure of exile is not simply an isolated event or an episodic encounter. Somewhat later, for example, the young Chateaubriand leaves his native Brittany "pour débuter dans la vie." His older brother has arranged for him to be introduced at the court of Louis XVI, an appearance designed to facilitate Chateaubriand's projected military career as a chevalier de Malte: "Mon frère m'annonçait que j'entrais dans la route de la fortune" (256-57). Chateaubriand, however, filled with dread at the thought of Paris and the court, places these auspicious beginnings under the sign of an impending death sentence: "Je partis en effet; je partis pour être présenté à la première cour de l'Europe, pour débuter dans la vie de la manière la plus brillante, et j'avais l'air d'un homme que l'on traîne aux galères, ou sur lequel on va prononcer une sentence de mort" (257).

What these passages begin to make clear is that there is a specific movement associated with death in the *Mémoires*. If death functions as a point of departure of sorts, what proceeds from this limit, as the

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figuration of exile and departure here suggests, is in general a motion of separation or distancing, a movement away, a disappearing or fading from view, a movement of loss or dying off, a creating of retrospective vision. The writing of the *Mémoires* itself is figured in precisely this way: "le navigateur, abandonnant pour jamais un rivage enchanté, écrit son journal à la vue de la terre qui s'éloigne, et qui va bientôt disparaître" (204). Death itself remains inscrutably detached from this movement and unapproachable; in effect, it figures as an *asymptotic* limit, a kind of infinite gap or abyss, or perhaps a cataclysmic or unthinkable moment, from which this movement is set in motion. Death constitutes the imponderable or unfathomable point of the *Mémoires*—beyond the scope of representability, but also fixing the parameters of the autobiographical project. It is the abyssal concept around which Chateaubriand's autobiography turns compulsively without ever acceding to it, fixing it, or coinciding with it; rather, it remains condemned to existing within a certain indefinable proximity to it. In this regard, Chateaubriand's reflections on the occasion of a childhood illness prove to be an early telling moment, one among many: "Toute notre vie se passe à errer autour de notre tombe; nos diverses maladies sont des souffles qui nous approchent plus ou moins du port" (188). This observation leads directly to another "first" for the young Chateaubriand, the first corpse he ever sees, horribly distorted by the final convulsions of death—a sight that evokes for him the idea of a fundamental misrecognition of death: "La mort est belle, elle est notre amie, néanmoins, nous ne la reconnaissons pas, parce qu'elle se présente à nous masquée et que son masque nous épouvante" (188).

Thus, death comes to play a paradoxically dual role here with respect to the autobiographical project. As the examples above suggest, it appears to be the inescapable precondition for any gesture of beginning, whether it be the compulsively revisited origins of the recounted life or, as will become increasingly evident, the beginning of the autobiographical text itself. As such, death would then figure as the founding moment of autobiography, as autobiography only emerges here through a consideration of death as inherent to its very project, and not as a life defined *against* death, implicitly or not. However, even as death conditions the emergence of autobiography, it also proves to be its undoing; this founding figure of Chateaubriand's narrative is also precisely what vitiates any possibility that this narrative might function

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smoothly. As the imponderable, primordial enigma of the *Mémoires*, death maintains a radical inaccessibility that shatters the integrity of the autobiographical subject and alienates it from itself; it undoes the notion of self-identical auto-creation that must subtend any notion of autobiography, showing it uncannily to be untenable, or ultimately perhaps an indispensable fiction. As Chateaubriand's incessant and restless return to the unrepresentable scene of inception reveals, this paradoxical double movement of death inhabits and haunts his entire project, keeping it off-balance and disoriented, forever seeking to gain an impossible footing. In this regard, the *Mémoires* are indeed a problematic reflection of their epigraph from Job, "Sicut nubes ... quasi naves ... velut umbra" ("As a cloud ... as the swift ships ... as a shadow").[6] These three verse fragments, read in their biblical context, all figure life not as a coherent, well-founded construction of self, but rather as the movement associated above with the configuration of death and origins: life as inexorably fleeting, slipping away, irrecoverable, as well as fragmentary and conspicuously lacking in wholeness or closure—an open-ended movement of pure passage. And as we will later see, this epigraph also points to another significant motif in Chateaubriand's autobiographical conception: the inescapable relationship between life and figuration itself. Life here appears as if trapped in echoing comparisons, caught in the resonating remnants of figures in a dead language with no apparent ground or point of departure—a movement that will subsequently underlie the constitution of Chateaubriand's identity as a writer. Death thus conditions the emergence of the autobiographical subject and in the same movement alienates it from itself. Ultimately, the *Mémoires* use this paradox of death to figure the general impossibility of making a "clean start" to autobiography, that is, of founding the autobiographical subject on the entry into a first-person, self-identical relationship—a necessity of autobiographical integrity that could only be a fiction. Autobiography in general can only maintain its appearance of integrity by incorporating such a fiction into itself to dissimulate its gaps and fissures; the necessary exclusion of such an impropriety will paradoxically only lead to radical lack, fragmentation, and the failure of self-knowledge. As we will see, these paradoxes of autobiography are precisely the defining preoccupations of Chateaubriand's autobiographical practice, the points to which the *Mémoires* repeatedly return in order to reflect on their own constitutive enigmas.

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This reading is obviously quite far from the critical commonplace of the *Mémoires* as a self-aggrandizing monument to Chateaubriand's massive ego, an idea that subtends so many of the "triumphal" interpretations of this text.[7] Despite Chateaubriand's hope that the "voice from beyond the grave" will function as a guarantee of wholeness and coherence through its transcendent or "sacred" nature, what we actually read in the text is much less reassuring in this regard. What Chateaubriand calls "le malheur de naître" (181), that is, the birth into exile ("En sortant du sein de ma mère, je subis mon premier exil") or into a proximate relationship with death ("J'étais *presque* mort quand je vins au jour," "*j'ouïs parler* de mourir," etc.), is marked not so much as an entry into life, but rather as a kind of "putting to death," albeit one that is at the same time also strangely deferred. As the scene of Chateaubriand's introduction at court might suggest, this paradoxical movement might be thought of as a form of death sentence, although one that can perhaps best be rendered by the French *arrêt de mort*, which can mean both a "death sentence" as well as a "provisional reprieve" or "stay of execution." The moment of inception in Chateaubriand's text would be uncannily summed up by these two meanings at once, staking out his narrative as the space of a deferral of death, stretching out between these two fantasmatic, unrepresentable limits: the death sentence and death itself. Passing between these two inaccessible endpoints, the autobiographical subject thus labors under impending doom, an image that predominates in the *Mémoires*, as for example when Chateaubriand reflects on his sister's recent death: "Mais, voyageur lassé, je me suis assis au bord du chemin: fatigué ou non, il faudra bien que je me relève, que j'arrive où ma sœur est arrivée" (246). In this regard, Chateaubriand insists on the coextensivity of his life and text, fantasizing that the period of the writing of the *Mémoires* corresponds with his remaining years, the two figured by the passage of sand through an hourglass: "À mesure que ces *Mémoires* se remplissent de mes années écoulées, ils me représentent le globe inférieur d'un sablier constatant ce qu'il y a de poussière tombée de ma vie: quand tout le sable sera passé, je ne retournerais pas mon horloge de verre, Dieu m'en eût-il donné la puissance" (270). In the same way, as the *Mémoires* near completion, Chateaubriand invokes the imminent end of his "jours de grâce" and proclaims that it is indeed time for him to die: "Comme il m'est impossible de prévoir le moment de ma fin, comme à mon âge les jours accordés à l'homme ne sont que des jours

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de grâce ou plutôt de rigueur, je vais m'expliquer. Le 4 septembre prochain, j'aurai atteint ma soixante-dix-huitième année: il est bien temps que je quitte un monde qui me quitte et que je ne regrette pas" (115). However, perhaps not surprisingly, these reflections are promoted to the very *first* lines of text in the *Mémoires*, as the beginning of the "Avant-propos"—written near the end, but also complicating the question of origins precisely along the lines suggested above, in that the imminence of Chateaubriand's death now presides over the text's opening gesture. At a first level, then, one can say that Chateaubriand's text does indeed produce a "voice from beyond the grave," not as a guarantee of autobiographical propriety, however, but in the sense that the narrative voice here is always only situated after the realization of its own mortality.

Indeed, there is a substantial philosophical tradition that predicates the emergence of a sense of self precisely on this very realization of one's own mortality. In his recent work on the question of death,[8] Jacques Derrida traces this tradition back to Platonic theory and the idea of the *melete thanatou* elaborated in the *Phaedo*, that is, a certain concern or care taken with death, an anxious solicitude or attentive anticipation of death. This concept not only conditions the practice of philosophy as an exercise in learning to die or preparing the soul for death, but also establishes a new self-reflexive individuality and a sense of interiority of the self:

> For one never reinforces enough the fact that it is not the *psyche* that is there in the first place and that comes thereafter to be concerned about its death, to keep watch over it, to be the very vigil of its death. No, the soul only distinguishes itself, separates itself, and assembles within itself in the experience of this *melete tou thanatou*. It is nothing other than this concern for dying as a relation to self and an assembling of self. (GD 14)

In the sense that the soul or the self only constitutes itself in this concern or anticipation of dying, this movement resembles what Derrida calls "a provisional mourning, a vigil [*veille*] as wake [*veillée*]" (GD 15). Elaborating on this concept through the work of Patocka, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, Derrida situates the idea of the "irreplaceable singularity" of the self precisely in this apprehension of one's own death, "irreplaceable" in that nobody can undergo the experience of death in "my" place, or the place of the individual, but ultimately in the wider sense that "existence excludes every possible substitution" (GD 41).

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Moreover, as Derrida makes clear, this double movement of the apprehension of death and the emergence of the irreplaceable singularity of the self is also inherently an assumption of responsibility, in the sense that "my own death becomes this irreplaceability that I must assume if I wish to have access to what is absolutely mine" (GD 43-44). In a formulation that has particular resonance for our reading of the scene of inception in Chateaubriand's *Mémoires*, Derrida thus proposes that the sense of responsibility is "in all cases defined as a mode of 'giving oneself death'" (GD 43)— where one possible double meaning of "se donner la mort" invokes both the idea of giving oneself a "gift of death" as part of the "gathering" of the self in its irreplaceable singularity, but at the same time also that of "putting oneself to death," that is, committing suicide, or in a larger sense, entering into one's own mortality.

Thus, what Derrida calls the "sameness of the self," that is, "the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to itself" only emerges through "the idea of mortality as irreplaceability" (GD 45). Yet even as one is "called" to responsibility from within oneself, the source of this call—and of the "gift of death"—remains paradoxically inaccessible, making of the "identity of the oneself" an "irreducibly different singularity" (GD 45). It is in this context that Derrida situates Levinas's notion that the identity or sameness of the self is always ultimately derived from the other, "coming to itself as responsible and mortal from the position of my responsibility before the other, for the other's death and in the face of it" (GD 46). Likewise, Derrida insists in his analysis of Heidegger that the "self-relation" that is "constituted in its ipseity in terms of an originary mourning" "welcomes or supposes the other within its being-itself as different from itself"; and in the same way, "the relation to the other . . . will never be distinguishable from a bereaved apprehension" (AP 61).

This "nonaccess to death as such" (AP 76), as Derrida calls it, holds obvious significance for the reading of Chateaubriand's autobiographical subject proposed above, for that subject only emerges through the unfathomable enigma of the death sentence. In effect, as Derrida makes clear, silence and secrecy are inherent to this inaccessibility, and to the configuration of responsibility, originary mourning and irreplaceability as a whole. Insofar as responsibility emerges with respect to uniqueness or absolute singularity, it must resist all substitution and repetition, all

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visibility or manifestation in the order of universal generality; indeed, this configuration is secrecy or inaccessibility itself, inasmuch as it must remain aloof from "the very order and essence of manifestation," or "the essence in general to the extent that it is inseparable from presence and from manifestation" (GD 66). Ultimately, a possible name for this unassignability of death in its inaccessibility would be "God," the absolute, singular other—who must remain transcendent, hidden, secret—to whom this structure of absolute responsibility responds: "God is in me, he is the absolute 'me' or 'self,' he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard's sense, subjectivity" (GD 109). Following Kierkegaard's logic, however, Derrida shows that responsibility also demands that one answer for oneself, that one give an accounting "with respect to the general and before the generality," that one justify or explain one's decisions in public. Responsibility thus ultimately demands that one enter the medium of language, but this exigency is also precisely what threatens responsibility and reveals it to be an aporetic entity; for as soon as one enters into language—and thus into substitution, signs and representation—one violates the very basis of responsibility in secrecy and singularity. Since "the first effect or first destination of language . . . involves depriving me of, or delivering me from, my singularity," to speak or respond to the generality is "to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept" [GD 60, 61]. Responsibility, to respect its own logic, must remain "inconceivable, indeed unthinkable," leaving us with the paradox that "one always risks not managing to accede to the concept of responsibility in the process of *forming* it" (GD 61). This aporia is indeed pertinent to our reading of Chateaubriand, for Derrida is staking out here the problematic basis of autobiography: responsibility is inherent to the emergence of the sense of self, but at the same time "it declines the autobiography that is always auto-justification, *égodicée*" (GD 62). It is this aporia that ultimately subtends the paradoxical inscription of death outlined earlier and, as we will see, leads Chateaubriand's text to turn toward the enigmatic moment of the entry into *language and writing*, and finally to the fantasmatic concept of a "dead language" of absolute secrecy that predicates his textual production.

At the most general level, Chateaubriand works through this aporetic configuration in his *Mémoires* in terms of what we could call a continually self-negating affirmation of self. The work of memory here

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produces a spectacle of the self that is at once emerging and dying off, or more precisely only coming into view as an object of perception insofar as it is disappearing or irremediably slipping away. Chateaubriand's text incessantly reproduces this contradictory movement; in effect, the process of memory or recollection does not lead here to a recovery of self, but rather to a continual revisitation of the moment of loss, the point of "degeneration" where the self is posited as perpetually fleeting, declining, dying away. It is in this context that we can situate the work of the echo, which serves as the structuring figure for this movement of memory in the *Mémoires*.[9] "Mes souvenirs se font écho," writes Chateaubriand (187); in effect, the various scenes and events in Chateaubriand's narrative are not simply to be taken at face value, but rather as subordinate to an internal logic of temporal decomposition or decay, as points of reference for orienting the inscription of death in the *Mémoires*. In particular, various moments of departure or decline invariably recall for Chateaubriand other moments of loss: "C'est en disant adieu aux bois d'Aulnay que je vais rappeler l'adieu que je dis autrefois aux bois de Combourg: tous mes jours sont des adieux" (221); "Maintes fois, en voyant le soleil se coucher dans les forêts de l'Amérique, je me suis rappelé les bois de Combourg" (186-87). This latter example is particularly pertinent, since it occurs to Chateaubriand not while he is traveling in America, as it might first appear when read in isolation, but rather while he is still in Brittany; the woods of Combourg are thus in a sense an *anticipatory* echo of the American forests, which themselves hark back to Combourg, however, in a movement that defines an infinite echoing loop. In a more explicit manner, Chateaubriand creates a similar double resonance when he stops at a nearly abandoned monastery sometime in the years before the Revolution: "Mon cœur saignait à la vue de ces forêts ébréchées et de ce monastère déshabité. Le sac général des maisons religieuses m'a rappelé depuis le dépouillement de l'abbaye qui en fut pour moi le pronostic" (180). Once again, the "original" event is transformed into an anticipatory echo, or "pronostic," of a subsequent event that itself "recalls" the prior event—a resonating circle that in effect displaces the point of origin to a position of unresolvable indeterminacy.

Even more telling for our purposes are the numerous scenes where the autobiographical subject restlessly traces and retraces his steps, repeatedly returning to scenes of his past in order to "observe" the

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disappearance of self, as when the young Chateaubriand momentarily returns to the scene of his birth in Saint-Malo:

Du reste, rien de mon passé à Saint-Malo: dans le port je cherchais en vain les navires aux cordes desquels je me jouais; ils étaient partis ou dépecés; dans la ville, l'hôtel où j'étais né avait été transformé en auberge. Je touchais presque à mon berceau et déjà tout un monde s'était écoulé. Étranger aux lieux de mon enfance, en me rencontrant on demandait qui j'étais. . . . (233)

Of course, the original scene of birth in Saint-Malo, as we have seen above, is hardly itself a moment of recovered plenitude or presence, but rather one of exile and alienation, just as here Chateaubriand has become "étranger aux lieux de mon enfance." Following the logic of the previous echoing moments, the "first" scene is in a sense already designated as an "echo" of the future scene of its disappearance or demise, which in turn doubles back to echo the earlier passage through Saint-Malo. This same echoing disappearance of self is also noted, for example, when Chateaubriand passes through Cambrai for the second time: "En traversant Cambrai avec le roi, après les Cent-Jours, je cherchai la maison que j'avais habitée et le café que je fréquentais: je ne les pus retrouver; tout avait disparu, hommes et monuments" (251); or again when passing for the second time through Dieppe: "Dieppe est vide de moi-même: c'était un autre *moi*, un *moi* de mes premiers jours finis, qui jadis habita ces lieux, et ce *moi* a succombé, car nos jours meurent avant nous" (2: 18). These last passages make clear that what is at stake here is a failure of self-recognition; the autobiographical narrator presents us with the memory of the failure of memory, with the recollection of the disorienting experience of the self confronting the impossibility of recovering its past, revealing nothing so much as the self as missing or absent. Ultimately, these infinite echoing loops bear witness to the inaccessibility of the scene of inception, to the impossibility of a first inscription in the textual creation of the self. Insofar as the echo is pure "secondarity," reflected sound that dies away as it passes, it vibrates here around a gap or abyss, that of the unrepresentable moment of loss in the emergence of the self. For Chateaubriand, finally, virtually *every* moment of life contains such a "dark lining" that echoes this barred moment of "degeneration": "La population générale du globe est évaluée de onze à douze cents millions; il meurt un homme par *seconde*: ainsi, à chaque *minute* de notre existence, de nos sourires, de

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nos joies, soixante hommes expirent, soixante familles gémissent et pleurent. La vie est une peste permanente" (436).

In this movement of continual revisitation of the moment of loss, it is the fantasmatic moment of the entry into writing that comes to hold a privileged status. As Derrida's account suggests, the unavoidable entry into language—more specifically into autobiography—could only be experienced as betrayal or violation, even as it is this very movement that constitutes the violated entities of responsibility, secrecy, and the irreplaceable singularity of the self in the "giving of death." In the *Mémoires* this entry into language is "debased" into the scene of Chateaubriand's entry into writing, into printing and publishing, into a career in writing—ultimately into his identity and reputation as "Chateaubriand the writer."[10] Indeed, the entire first part of the *Mémoires* could be read as a reflection on the enigma of the "fall into writing," which is at the same time a breach of filial responsibility before the father. Early on in the *Mémoires*, on the occasion of his father's death, Chateaubriand speculates that his father would have disapproved of his career as a writer: "Une renommée littéraire aurait blessé sa gentilhommerie; il n'aurait vu dans les aptitudes de son fils qu'une dégénération" (254-55). The final paragraph of the first part echoes this comment and orients the movement of decline and "degeneration" that defines the emergence of Chateaubriand as a writer; returning to France from exile in the spring of 1800, Chateaubriand sees opening before him his new career ("s'ouvre devant moi *la carrière de l'écrivain*"), which is at once an entry into "le carrefour souillé et bruyant du monde" and "un dernier adieu à la maison paternelle" (647).

A crucial moment for Chateaubriand in this "coming to writing" is the publishing of his first work, *Essai sur les révolutions* in 1797, an event that created for him a certain renown, the point where he imagines that he emerged from obscurity and made a name for himself as a writer, that is, where he established the identity that is the focus of attention in the *Mémoires*. Unsurprisingly, this point of departure proves to be a moment of loss and regret, "le premier pas qui me fourvoya du chemin de la paix," the point where Chateaubriand as metaphorical traveler through life "a commencé de s'égarer" (585). "Je commençai à écrire obscurément" (550), writes Chateaubriand of his literary beginnings as a penniless nobleman living in exile in London. Just as this figurative "invisibility" of Chateaubriand's beginnings as a writer echoes the

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general inaccessibility of the scene of inception in the *Mémoires*, his writing career is born precisely through the realization of its imminent demise: as Chateaubriand almost immediately falls gravely ill while writing, his doctor advises him that he has no more than a few years to live, perhaps only a few months: "'Ne comptez pas sur une longue carrière': tel fut le résumé de ses consultations" (551). And in another echo of the general structure of the gesture of beginning in the *Mémoires*, Chateaubriand here returns to the figure of the *arrêt de mort* to describe his writing practice: "C'est sous le coup d'un arrêt de mort, entre la sentence et l'exécution, que j'ai composé cet ouvrage" (551). However, even as Chateaubriand's writing career is born into the same gaping improprieties that mark the autobiographical identity in the *Mémoires* as a whole, he ultimately suggests here that there is something about these improprieties that is paradoxically proper to the activity of writing. For as he makes clear, it is precisely this very structure of death that is responsible for the "calm lucidity" of his first published work, and ultimately for his implied success as a writer:

> La certitude acquise ainsi de ma fin prochaine, en augmentant le deuil naturel de mon imagination, me donna un incroyable repos d'esprit. Cette disposition intérieure explique . . . cet autre passage de l'*Essai* même: "Attaqué d'une maladie qui me laisse peu d'espoir, je vois les objets d'un œil tranquille; l'air calme de la tombe se fait sentir au voyageur qui n'en est plus qu'à quelques journées." (551)

It is the very proximity to the tomb here that "makes itself felt" in Chateaubriand's writing and conditions his extraordinary perspicacity. In a strange inverse relationship, the imminence of the decline of the self seems to predicate precisely the rise of the successful writer. A similar movement is suggested in another telling passage when, upon his return from America, Chateaubriand hears talk of the literary success of Madame Roland: "J'entendais beaucoup parler de madame Roland, que je ne vis point; ses *Mémoires* prouvent qu'elle possédait une force d'esprit extraordinaire" (497). Inasmuch as Madame Roland ("La femme qui, au pied de la guillotine, demandait une plume et de l'encre afin d'écrire les derniers moments de son voyage," 497) was writing under a sentence of death and would be subsequently executed, her condition as a writer closely mirrors Chateaubriand's own conception of his writing practice. His proximity to this "invisible" specter of death—evoked once again by the phrase "entendre parler," here in the

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indeterminacy of the *imparfait*, to suggest that Chateaubriand is hearing only untraceable, second-hand "echoes" of her renown—makes of Madame Roland's memoirs an obscure echo of the origins of Chateaubriand's own autobiographical practice and of his future success as a writer.

Perhaps the most significant episode in Chateaubriand's emergence as a writer in the *Mémoires* is his well-known and much-commented trip to America in the early 1790s.[11] In his youth, Chateaubriand nourished hopes of a brilliant career as an explorer, hoping to attach to his name "une de ces renommées paisibles au-dessus de la gloire" (334). As he recounts the event in his *Mémoires*, Chateaubriand at first appears to follow in the long tradition of Enlightenment voyages of exploration in proposing for himself a trip that will at once increase the cartographic knowledge of the North American continent and serve as a gesture of appropriation of that continent, both in his own name and in the name of France. He decides to join in the great historical search for the Northwest Passage, planning for himself a monumental trip that will take him across the continent to the Pacific Ocean, then up north to Alaska, circling around to follow the unexplored coastline of the Arctic Ocean, which he hopes will then lead him to the opening of Hudson Bay and finally back down to the United States through Labrador and Canada. In effect, this voyage would delimit an enormous territory, nearly all of North America, and mark it as French; "agrandir ma terre natale" is one of Chateaubriand's stated goals, as well as providing France with a Pacific colony, taking over the lucrative trade in furs and pelts from the English, and putting France in possession of the shortest trade route to the Indies, to the detriment once again of the English (385). Perhaps most important, though, his voyage is designed to mark the triumph of the French language in North America: "En cas de succès, j'aurais eu l'honneur d'imposer des noms français à des régions inconnues" (385). If Chateaubriand had been successful in fulfilling these goals, as he makes clear, he would have ultimately avoided a career as a writer. In other words, the "fall into writing" is conceived here as a direct result of Chateaubriand's subsequent failure as an explorer: "Que devait-il m'arriver si j'atteignais le but de mon voyage? . . . Il est probable que je n'aurais jamais eu le malheur d'écrire" (334); "Un mauvais génie m'arracha le bâton et l'épée, et me mit la plume à la main" (451).

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Almost as soon as he arrives in North America, however, Chateaubriand realizes that his grand ambitions—both personal and national—are destined for failure. The British explorer Mackenzie, as Chateaubriand quickly discovers, has already beaten him to the northern coast of the continent, having traced to the Arctic Ocean the river in Canada that today bears his name: "Aux États-Unis, en 1791, on commençait à s'entretenir de la course de Mackenzie: parti le 3 juin 1789 du fort Chipewan, sur le lac des Montagnes, il descendit à la mer du pôle par le fleuve auquel il a donné son nom" (384). This last observation, that Mackenzie succeeded in baptizing the "Mackenzie River" with his own name, makes clear that when Chateaubriand speaks of the "honor of imposing French names on unknown regions" he is thinking first and foremost of the name "Chateaubriand." The English name here comes to undermine the possibility of a first or original inscription of the name and identity "Chateaubriand," which at the same time takes on a wider significance as a failure of the French language itself. Once again, anonymous hearsay has somehow managed to slip in and displace Chateaubriand's original moment ("on commençait à s'entretenir . . ."), barring the scene of inception and setting in motion the decline of both Chateaubriand and the French language, both of which are repeatedly marked on this trip by death and disintegration. Chateaubriand himself seems to give free rein here to a sort of pronounced death drive, when, for instance, he nearly drowns while going for a swim just before his ship reaches North America ("On me hissa sur le pont à demi-mort: si je m'étais noyé, le bon débarras pour moi et pour les autres!" [367-68]); later, he can barely restrain himself from jumping into the Niagara River and letting himself be carried over the falls: "Le guide me retenait toujours, car je me sentais pour ainsi dire entraîné par le fleuve, et j'avais une envie involontaire de m'y jeter" (408). On this same visit to the falls, his horse shortly afterward nearly throws him over the edge, and finally he narrowly misses death when he falls while scaling the cliffs, breaking his arm instead.

This proximity to death is most acute, however, with respect to the French language. Indeed, what Chateaubriand first comes to discover on his voyage of exploration is nothing so much as the spectacle of the demise of French and of the possibility of a French North America. For Chateaubriand, the failure of a first inscription of French names on "unknown regions" is an echo of the general British displacement

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throughout North America of colonies that had originally been French. The English name again comes to supplant the French origin when he enters British territory at Niagara, for instance, where he is obliged to obtain a permit from the local authorities: "Cela me serrait un peu le cœur, car il me souvenait que la France avait jadis commandé dans le Haut comme dans le Bas-Canada. Mon guide revint avec le permis: je le conserve encore; il est signé: *le capitaine Gordon*" (406). As when he retraces his steps through Saint-Malo, Dieppe, Cambrai, and elsewhere, only to discover the absence of self, Chateaubriand has come to North America to witness the disappearance of France and of the French language, a movement that closely echoes his own personal failure as an explorer. When he looks at his maps and charts, he no longer thinks about finding the Northwest Passage, but instead contemplates the irremediable decline of "Nouvelle France": "En parlant du Canada et de la Louisiane, en regardant sur les vieilles cartes l'étendue des anciennes colonies françaises en Amérique, 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" (423). This spectacle of decline is not simply a question of an erasure of the past, as Chateaubriand makes clear; in fact, it is an expulsion from a new origin, where humanity is starting over again and recreating itself for the future. "Nous sommes exclus du nouvel univers, où le genre humain recommence" (425), insists Chateaubriand, who leaves no doubt that he is speaking here most of all of an exclusion of language:

> Et nous, déshérités des conquêtes de notre courage et de notre génie, à peine entendons-nous parler dans quelque bourgade de la Louisiane et du Canada, sous une domination étrangère, la langue de Colbert et de Louis XIV: elle n'y reste que comme un témoin des revers de notre fortune et des fautes de notre politique. (425)

Chateaubriand's voyage here ultimately serves to constitute the French language as a resonating vestige of an inaccessible, lost origin. The language itself becomes something of a ruin, a decaying monument that speaks of a lost glory, but also of an original "disinheritance." For as Chateaubriand does not fail to remind us, the "failure" of his voyage of exploration in fact signals his birth as a writer, the fall into "le malheur d'écrire." And as the slippage from "je" to "nous" in the passage above suggests, this paradoxical movement of birth and decline will no longer simply govern Chateaubriand's vision of his own, individual writing

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practice, but will also come to preside over his sense of a new collective enterprise of language and national destiny, and more specifically the emergence of a new literary movement.

If the scientific basis of Chateaubriand's journey collapses in the realization of French national and linguistic decline, it is precisely this sense of French as a dying language—whether real or imagined—that makes it fit or appropriate for the birth of a new literary aesthetic.[12] In this sense, Chateaubriand's voyage seems to mark for him a definitive break with the goals and ideals of the Enlightenment, whose very failure conditions the emergence of Romanticism under the sign of the "new muse" that Chateaubriand discovers in the New World and brings back with him to France: ". . . je promis à la poésie ce qui serait perdu pour la science. En effet, si je ne rencontrai pas en Amérique ce que j'y cherchais, le monde polaire, j'y rencontrai une nouvelle muse" (385). Once again, the figure of the echo comes to give form to this moment of birth, for the muse emerges out of the dying sound of the falls at Niagara resonating through the night, "les sourds mugissements de la cataracte de Niagara, qui . . . se prolongeaient de désert en désert, et expiraient à travers les forêts solitaires" (405-06). It is out of this fleeting reverberation that the new muse will preside over a fantasmatic first inscription of Romanticism: "C'est dans ces nuits que m'apparut une muse inconnue; je recueillis quelques-uns de ses accents; je les marquai sur mon livre . . . comme un musicien vulgaire écrirait les notes que lui dicterait quelque grand maître des harmonies" (406). This translation or passage into writing, though, like the other entries into writing in the *Mémoires*, signals a moment of degeneration; the figure of musical dictation displaces the first moment of writing into a position of secondarity, as it effects a movement of debasement from the singularity of a master of harmonies to the coarseness or commonality of a "musicien vulgaire." As Chateaubriand pursues his revised travel agenda, this new aesthetic of writing continues to affirm itself at the expense of his dream of polar triumph and the personal, national, and linguistic glory that would have accompanied it. As he travels down the Ohio River valley, Chateaubriand has already forgotten about his original plans: "Du reste, j'étais si charmé de mes courses, que je ne pensais presque plus au pôle" (432). Finally, toward the end of his trip, Chateaubriand once again observes the rise of his new muse in relation to the ultimate failure of his scientific project: "Je n'avais recueilli

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aucune lumière sur le but principal de mon entreprise; mais j'étais escorté d'un monde de poésie" (448).

These entwined strands of the fall into writing, the impending demise of the French language, and the rise of a new literary aesthetic come together in one particularly extravagant passage, where Chateaubriand reflects on the destruction of Indian cultures and languages in North America. In an inevitable associative chain, his lament over the disappearance of Indian civilizations leads him back to Europe, to muse over the decline of Old Prussian, then Low Breton, Basque, Gaelic, Cornish, and ultimately, in a final rhapsodic flourish, "nos jargons modernes, débris du grec et du latin":

> Des peuplades de l'Orénoque n'existent plus; il n'est resté de leur dialecte qu'une douzaine de mots prononcés dans la cime des arbres par des perroquets redevenus libres, comme la grive d'Agrippine qui gazouillait des mots grecs sur les balustrades des palais de Rome. Tel sera tôt ou tard le sort de nos jargons modernes, débris du grec et du latin. Quelque corbeau envolé de la cage du dernier curé franco-gaulois, dira, du haut d'un clocher en ruine, à des peuples étrangers à nos successeurs: "Agréez ces derniers efforts d'une voix qui vous fut connue: vous mettrez fin à tous ces discours."
>
> Soyez donc Bossuet, pour qu'en dernier résultat votre chef-d'œuvre survive, dans la mémoire d'un oiseau, à votre langage et à votre souvenir chez les hommes! (422)

This ultimate reduction of dying languages to a ghostly echo in the memory of birds is perhaps one of Chateaubriand's strangest and most enigmatic figures. As in the echoing scenes that we examined above, the languages exist here not so much as echoes of their previous moments of greatness, but as dying echoes of each other. The French language, as one of "nos jargons modernes," is already marked as a ruin, "débris du grec et du latin"; but the Greek language itself is also cast as a ruin, existing only through Agrippina's thrush. In this sense, the final imagined movement of the French language as a funeral oration in the manner of Bossuet pronounced for itself by some escaped crow echoes not so much the glory of French or Greek, but the echoes produced by other dying languages in the memory of parakeets and thrushes. For as Chateaubriand makes clear, it is this very gesture of the dying echo of a language emanating from a bird that itself constitutes the moment of glory for that language; in effect, this passage offers a new aesthetic of what makes a literary classic, a "chef-d'œuvre." Nevertheless, it is a strange vision of success, for the classic work will have outlived the ability to decipher it, surviving the very language in which it is written.

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It is the bearer of unknown glory, the very manifestation of absolute secrecy but, as this formula suggests, such a work proves to resist conceptualization; for the moment it accedes to its ultimate status, it will have outlasted the very ability to distinguish it as a masterpiece or, in other words, it will no longer manifest anything since it will henceforth be strictly unknowable. In this sense, one could say that such a work represents the fantasmatic culmination of Chateaubriand's vision of Romanticism, the fulfillment of a new literary aesthetic in that the French language accedes to a new status of the literary through the specter of its own imminent demise. The literary *chef-d'œuvre* would thus be the means by which a language comes to speak from "beyond the grave" and to fulfill its destiny of greatness, although such a voice would ultimately be bound to absolute secrecy.

Inasmuch as Chateaubriand's conception of Romanticism is inextricably woven into his autobiographical practice, he is not thinking of just any *chef-d'œuvre* here, but of his own "voice from beyond the grave," the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*. It is perhaps here that we can rethink and resituate the desire that Chateaubriand expresses in the "Avant-Propos" to leave the *Mémoires* as an unknown monument—that is, to suppress its publication, leave it in manuscript form, or delay its appearance for 50 years. In the ambiguous address of the exhortation to be a strange, unknowable Bossuet, Chateaubriand is undoubtedly sketching the ultimate end-logic of his own textual identity. The final status of the *chef-d'œuvre*, in its aporetic unthinkability, in a sense constitutes the unrepresentable, asymptotic endpoint of the *Mémoires*, the logical complement of the inaccessible scene of inception. One final echo resonates between this impossible final moment and another exemplary scene of inception, a moment of "involuntary memory" that triggers the process of remembrance and through it the writing of the *Mémoires* at Montboissier:

> Je fus tiré de mes réflexions par le gazouillement d'une grive perchée sur la plus haute branche d'un bouleau. A l'instant, ce son magique fit reparaître à mes yeux le domaine paternel; j'oubliai les catastrophes dont je venais d'être le témoin, et, transporté subitement dans le passé, je revis ces campagnes où j'entendis si souvent siffler la grive. Quand je l'écoutais alors, j'étais triste de même qu'aujourd'hui; mais cette première tristesse était celle qui naît d'un désir vague de bonheur, lorsqu'on est sans expérience; la tristesse que j'éprouve actuellement vient de la connaissance des choses appréciées et jugées. Le chant de l'oiseau dans les bois de Combourg m'entretenait d'une félicité que je croyais atteindre; le même chant dans le parc de Montboissier me rappelait des

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jours perdus à la poursuite de cette félicité insaisissable. Je n'ai plus rien à apprendre; j'ai marché plus vite qu'un autre, et j'ai fait le tour de la vie. Les heures fuient et m'entraînent; je n'ai pas même la certitude de pouvoir achever ces *Mémoires*. (203-04)

This passage, which was much admired by Proust, nevertheless serves a function quite different from the recovery of his "moments bienheureux."[13] The echo between the thrushes of Montboissier and Combourg establishes once again a passage between two moments of loss, in this case two moments of "tristesse" born of the vain desire for an elusive happiness. The obscure origin of this movement of "involuntary memory" produces multiple resonances, however; the sound of a thrush perched on high in the gardens of Montboissier not only triggers the entry into the writing of the *Mémoires*, but also harbors "secret" resonances with the fantasmatic scene of their ultimate demise, the moment they attain the status of *chef-d'œuvre* in absolute secrecy, as a distant echo of Agrippina's thrush. Ultimately, to return once again to Derrida, this "master echo" (and indeed the infinite echoing structure in general of Chateaubriand's text) seems to put into play what Derrida calls an "essential and abyssal equivocality," a play of multiple inscription that "seems to contain the very possibility of a secret that hides and reveals itself at the same time within a single sentence and, more than that, within a single language" (GD 87). In this sense, Chateaubriand's echoes bounce indefinitely between the two poles of secrecy that define the limits of his autobiography; more than that, though, they make of his *Mémoires* a meditation on the secret life of signs: signs that assume an existence of their own, that lead a double life, that escape the bounds of an illusory original context and oscillate over multiple scenes of inscription, that survive all possibility of their utterance and ultimately become free to mean nothing—tokens of the very irrecoverability of full meaning.

If Chateaubriand's autobiography is to attain the status of *chef-d'œuvre*, ultimately it will come at the expense of any possibility of autobiographical propriety or closure. As the final phrase of the passage above suggests, the inaccessible scenes that mark Chateaubriand's textual limits raise the specter of autobiographical incompleteness: "je n'ai pas même la certitude de pouvoir achever ces *Mémoires*." A final, gaping impropriety looms ahead for Chateaubriand, who realizes that he will never really be able to have the last word: "Presque toutes les personnes dont j'ai parlé dans ces *Mémoires*, ont disparu; c'est un

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registre obituaire que je tiens. Encore quelques années, et moi, condamné à cataloguer les morts, je ne laisserai personne pour inscrire mon nom au livre des absents" (601). Chateaubriand certainly is confronting here once again the impossibility of coinciding with the moment of death, in this case the general impossibility of recounting one's own death, as well as the necessity (and uncertainty) of relying on some other to pronounce what should properly be his own final word, indeed, his own name. However, in a wider sense, he will also need the recognition that only some future reader could provide, some other who will recognize his identity in his text and appose the name "Chateaubriand" to his work. As Derrida makes clear in his work on Nietzsche's autobiography, it is always "the ear of the other that signs," in the sense that it is ultimately the perception of the other that only subsequently authorizes and validates the autobiographical signature, indeed "says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography."[14] Now Chateaubriand knows that nothing is less certain for him than the possibility of such a final, validating counter-signature; "nous ignorons, que je crois, la demeure de la postérité, nous mettons mal son adresse" (585), he writes of the vanity of authors who think that their work will find an echo with future generations. To respect its own logic, Chateaubriand's textual identity must never arrive at such a destination, for it is his very incomprehensibility that will assure his (unknown) greatness. In this regard, it is the mystery of "style"—the intangible, quintessential element of his writing that somehow bears with it the propriety of Chateaubriand's identity—that will ultimately guarantee his future oblivion and glory. "Dépasserai-je ma tombe?" he asks, "y aura-t-il un public pour m'entendre? Ne serai-je pas un homme d'autrefois, inintelligible aux générations nouvelles? Mes idées, mes sentiments, mon style même ne seront-ils pas à la dédaigneuse postérité choses ennuyeuses et vieillies?" (573). For Chateaubriand, the beauty of style is not like the beauty of thought or sentiment; it belongs to a particular time and place and does not travel well: "Le style n'est pas, comme la pensée, cosmopolite: il a une terre natale, un ciel, un soleil à lui" (622). Like the dying sun over the forests of America or the woods of Combourg, it is clear that the sun of Chateaubriand's style is perpetually setting, never to rise over a new day. His fate will be that of the medieval Prussian poet who sings of the past glories of his country in the Old Prussian language that no one any longer understands: "personne ne le

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comprit, et on lui donna, pour récompense, cent noix vides" (421-22). Like an empty nut, the name "Chateaubriand" will become a dead letter, an empty signifier that no longer raises an echo or resonates in human memory.

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[1] Linda Cypres, "Une définition de la mort dans les *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*," in *Chateaubriand Today*, ed. Richard Switzer (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1970) 133.

[2] François de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, 2 vols. to date, ed. Jean-Claude Berchet (Paris: Classiques Garnier-Bordas, 1989-). All page references to the *Mémoires*, hereafter given in the text, will refer to the first volume of this edition unless otherwise noted. When complete, this edition will supersede all previous editions; until then, see also the edition prepared by Maurice Levaillant and Georges Moulinier, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1946-48).

[3] See, for example, Jean-Claude Berchet's introduction to a collection of papers from a recent conference on Chateaubriand, "Avant-Propos," *Chateaubriand—Le Tremblement du temps*, ed. Jean-Claude Berchet (Toulouse: PU de Mirail, 1994) 14-15: "Le seul moyen, pour le réel—nature ou histoire, de ne pas sombrer dans la *mutabilité* insignifiante du temps, est de se réincarner dans un univers de signes. C'est ainsi que la médiation chrétienne amène le mémorialiste à redécouvrir les traces de mythes très anciens: . . . un rite immémorial de mise au tombeau provisoire qui consiste à présenter au Dieu de la Révélation un monde en attente de résurrection: il faut désormais *traverser le miroir* (y être allé, en être revenu) pour voir juste. . . . C'est placer la démarche autobiographique sous le signe du tombeau vide, c'est-à-dire de la victoire sur la mort. Il ne sera, dès lors, pas difficile . . . de se confondre avec un texte mémorial que la substance périssable a déserté pour rayonner dans une écriture libre de toute attache, de toute pesanteur." See also the preface to Berchet's new critical edition of the *Mémoires*, especially the final section, "Mort, où est ta victoire?" (lxiii-lxvii).

[4] See, for example, Michel Dassonville, "Chateaubriand et le temps retrouvé," *Studi de Letterature Francese* 5.154 (1979): 189: "Car lui-même, [Chateaubriand] se considérait comme mort: il écrivait *d'outre-tombe* et de ce belvédère il dominait présent, passé et futur. Il avait triomphé du Temps."

[5] Note, in passing, how Chateaubriand uses the architectural metaphor specifically as an attempt to guarantee the integrity and unity of his narrative, based on his conception of himself as "l'architecte, toujours le même," possessor of an unchanging vision: "Il m'est arrivé ce qui arrive à tout entrepreneur qui travaille sur une grande échelle: j'ai, en premier lieu, élevé les pavillons des extrémités, puis, déplaçant et replaçant çà et là mes échafauds, j'ai monté la pierre et le ciment des constructions intermédiaires; on employait plusieurs siècles à l'achèvement des cathédrales gothiques. Si le ciel m'accorde de vivre, le monument sera fini par mes diverses années; l'architecte, toujours le même, aura seulement changé d'âge" (2: 18).

[6] King James Version, Job XXX, 15: "Terrors are turned upon me: they pursue my soul as the wind: and my welfare passeth away as a cloud." IX, 25-26: "Now my days are swifter than a post: they flee away, they see no good. They are passed away as the swift ships: as the eagle that hasteth to the prey." XIV, 1-2: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not."

[7] One recent notable exception is Michael Sheringham's perceptive study, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1993), in which he, too, argues against the notion of a coherent, transcendent subjectivity in the *Mémoires*. Sheringham stresses instead the

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importance of discontinuity and fragmentation in the *Mémoires*, produced by an associative network of juxtapositions structured through echoing effects over multiple temporal planes (106-117, 293-94). See also Jean-Marie Roulin's recent study, *Chateaubriand: l'exil et la gloire* (Paris: Champion, 1994), which takes up similar arguments in a psychoanalytic frame.

[8] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995); *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993). Page references hereafter given in the text, preceded by GD or AP.

[9] As a first approach to the question of the echo in Chateaubriand, see Peter Lund's overview of recent work, *François-René de Chateaubriand, Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, Études Littéraires (Paris: PUF, 1986), especially 45-62. See also Sheringham 106-17.

[10] On this inscription of writing as a debased or declining form of language, see for example Chateaubriand's imaginary "echoing" scene of a return trip to America, where once again everything he had previously seen would have disappeared or decayed so as to become completely unrecognizable: "Si je revoyais aujourd'hui les États-Unis, je ne les reconnaîtrais plus" (452). As a telling symptom of this general decline, Chateaubriand proposes the debasement of Indian languages, which is revealed for him precisely in the implication that the Cherokees have begun to *write*, that is to print and publish in their language, indeed to practice journalism: "J'ai reçu dernièrement une brochure imprimée chez les *Chérokis*, laquelle m'est adressée dans l'intérêt de ces sauvages, comme *au défenseur de la liberté de la presse*" (452).

[11] See Denis Hollier's perceptive study "French Customs, Literary Borders" *October* 49 (Summer 1989): 40-52.

[12] See Denis Hollier's pertinent comments concerning Chateaubriand's review in the *Mercure de France* (July, 1801) of Mackenzie's published account of his North American explorations. Chateaubriand accuses him, among other things, of having erased or corrupted in his travel narrative the pre-existing French names for wildlife and geographical features in Canada. As Hollier suggests, however, Chateaubriand probably read Mackenzie's text in translation and never went back to check the original in English, which in fact *maintains* the use of French names. Since for Hollier, Chateaubriand's "feeling of exclusion" is "the prerequisite for his literary inspiration, a need at the core of his romantic sensibility," he suspects that "he so intensely wanted these markers of (French) presence to be erased that he did not even check if they really were" (Hollier 45).

[13] See Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 4, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1989) 498: "N'est-ce pas à une sensation du genre de celle de la madeleine qu'est suspendue la plus belle partie des *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* . . . ."

[14] Jacques Derrida, "Roundtable on Autobiography," in *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1985) 51.

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