France once possessed, in North America, a vast empire that stretched from Labrador to Florida, and from the shores of the Atlantic to the most remote lakes of Upper Canada.

—Chateaubriand, Atala

Prologue: Chateaubriand and the Metamorphosis of Fictions

Édouard de Mondésir, who crossed the Atlantic in the company of François-René de Chateaubriand, left an intriguing account of an episode that is less anecdotal than it may appear at first glance:

The chevalier, I would almost say the Don Quixote, who often liked to take risks, wanted to go swimming in the ocean. Although the sailors asked him if he had ever done that before, and when he answered in the negative tried to dissuade him from this dangerous caprice, they had to let him have his way. They had us all, priests and Levites, go below. The bather undressed completely, they passed straps and ropes beneath his armpits, and he was lowered thus into the water. Scarcely had his feet touched the surface than he fainted, and they hurried to pull him back up for fear that a shark might cut him in half.¹

Can we believe Mondésir’s tale when we know that he found the eccentric behavior of the young Chateaubriand intolerable?² The memorialist gives, in fact, a radically different account of this same scene. After diving gracefully from the
bowsprit of the ship, followed by other passengers, the bold swimmer found himself in great peril:

Sharks showed up in the waters around the ship, and shots were fired to scare them off. The swell was so large that it slowed my return to the boat and exhausted my strength. I had an abyss beneath me, and the sharks could bite off an arm or leg at any time. . . . I was able to grab the rope, but my bold companions were already hanging on it; so when they pulled us to the side of the ship, I was at the end of the rope, and the others all pressed down on me with all their weight. . . . They pulled me up onto the deck half dead; if I had drowned, what a good riddance it would have been for me and for the others!

While it is the simple idea of a shark that frightens the young man in Mondésir’s text, it is a whole shoal of sharks that almost devoured Chateaubriand, if we are to believe the latter. Which of these two versions is closest to the truth? In the study he devotes to Chateaubriand’s America, Bazin notes the striking similarity between the perilous swim of the young chevalier and the painting of John Singleton Copley titled *Watson and the Shark.*

During his exile in London between 1793 and 1800, Chateaubriand would have been able to see this canvas, which had been on display at the Royal Academy since 1778. In addition to this source of inspiration for the scene he describes, there is a possible literary influence. In the *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain* (1787), Crèvecœur relates a little story illustrating the bravery of the Americans. The “5th Anecdote” tells of the death of a sailor whose thigh was devoured by a shark before one of the comrades avenged him by diving into the water to gut the predator. The dramatic circumstances of the attack are emphasized by Crèvecœur: “The voracious monster, seeing his prey flee, cuts through the waves in a flash and arrives at the very moment when the body of the last swimmer, seized by his comrades, was already in the lifeboat: he bites off his thigh. A second sooner and this unfortunate fellow would have been saved.”

In Crèvecœur’s anecdote, the last swimmer makes it into the lifeboat at the very moment that the monster attacks him, a detail that emphasizes the horrible misfortune that befalls him. If we except the attack itself, Chateaubriand describes a similar situation in the *Voyage en Amérique*, then again in the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*. It is therefore entirely possible that, having read Crèvecœur’s tale shortly before his departure, he remembered it when he was swimming in the Atlantic and feared that he was risking a fate similar to that of the sailor. Years later, the memory of Copley’s painting and that of Crèvecœur’s tale may well have coalesced in his mind in such a way that he related, in the *Voyage* and in the *Mémoires*, not what actually happened but the recreated
memory of a scene that, by dint of being described no doubt many times, eventually became regarded as a true version of the events.

Beyond its apparently anecdotal and probably fictitious character, this text allowed Chateaubriand to introduce surreptitiously a central theme throughout his memoir writings: a meditation on alternative destinies. Chateaubriand imagines here the memory he would have left for posterity if a shark’s jaws had taken his life at the age of twenty-two, a memory that would have been perfectly nil, since he had not yet accomplished anything that would have preserved any trace of his existence in the memory of mankind. In the introduction to the *Voyage*, we find a similar meditation in the course of which Chateaubriand imagines the consequences that the discovery of the famous Northwest Passage would have had on the rest of his existence, going so far as to suppose that he could have settled in the place he had discovered and die forgotten by everyone (140). This meditation on the nullity of human life and the ultimate insignificance of any worldly glory that might perchance be showered on a person, since he is destined to disappear, is often taken up by Chateaubriand, for whom the *Voyage en Amérique* is a return to the origin of both his person and his apprenticeship as a writer, a return through memory that is accompanied by the dizziness provoked by this question: “[A]nd if my life had finished before beginning?”

Ultimately, this scene of swimming with real or fictitious sharks gives rise to two central questions, both in the criticism devoted to Chateaubriand’s American texts and in the present study. The considerable distance between the event related and the moment of writing prompts one to pose the question of the accuracy of the testimony of a writer who may be mixing incomplete memories with pictorial and literary reminiscences that affect the representation he is giving of events that occurred in his past. Moreover, this episode reveals that the goal of Chateaubriand in the *Mémoires* is not only to safeguard memories of himself and his time; they are also a gallery in which he exposes the possible portraits of the various individuals he could have become. Thus, the posthumous voice of the author regarding his existence immortalizes also what did not take place but what could have been; it takes on the task of representing destinies that nearly were his. This immortalizing voice of the memorialist is haunted by the dream of its own negation: it imagines at what moments the conditions might have been such that it would not have had the same events to relate, but it also imagines the events that could have prevented its very existence if, by chance, the author had died before having accomplished anything or if his path in the world had led him to an Arctic solitude reminiscent of that awaiting him in his grave.

Surprisingly, it is not retrospective anguish but rather regrets that Chateaubriand expresses in imagining these definitive impasses, as if writing had been more of a burden for him than a salutary activity. Is this just an artist’s
coquetry? There is that, of course, in this affectation of scorn for what one loves the most, but, more deeply, perhaps, the lassitude of someone who had the crushing responsibility of saving through writing the memory of his person and of all those he had seen die, one after the other, the tumultuous history of his epoch and his own life, the metamorphosing countries he had crossed and even all these beings distinct from himself that he had very nearly become. In the *Voyage* and in the American books of the *Mémoires*, this responsibility extends to an entire continent, since by virtue of the law illustrated by the first paradox of the New World—one can only write about America at the turn of the eighteenth century at a time when it has ceased to be what it was—the country visited in 1791 by Chateaubriand no longer exists except in his memory. In his mental geography, it is a nodal point to which his memories draw him constantly back, for it is the symbolic locus where his destiny could have been brought to a halt before beginning, the one where he could have taken directions so radically different that his existence and his person would have been changed forever. The rest of this prologue presents the circumstances of a journey whose remembrance allows Chateaubriand to carry out the archeology of his identity and of his literary vocation. He also describes the uncertainties that surround both his exact route and his motivation, for it is in the gap with reality that is written this representation of an imaginary journey in a bygone period of American history: what we call posthumous America.

**THE INVESTIGATION OF RENÉ DE MERSENNE AND ITS CRITICAL POSTERITY**

What degree of credibility may we lend Chateaubriand’s narrative of his journey in America? This question is among those that have caused the most ink to flow in the history of French literary criticism. A certain René de Mersenne posed it, in fact, while the author was still alive. In 1832, he discovered an article in the *American Quarterly Review* (December 1827, 460) whose author judged Chateaubriand’s descriptions chimerical and stated that it was impossible he had visited certain places that he had nonetheless described: a man capable of populating the banks of the Mississippi with parrots, monkeys, and pink flamingos could not seriously claim to have seen them with his own eyes. Resolved to determine who was telling the truth, the American journalist or Chateaubriand, Mersenne followed the supposed route of the latter to compare his writings to the spectacle the New World actually offered, initiating a critical tradition marked by suspicion and creating at the same time the method his successors were going to imitate: checking the veracity of Chateaubriand’s narrative by following him step by step. The conclusions of his inquiry were published in two letters in 1832 and 1835. They are adamant: Chateaubriand’s descriptions are pure “cock-and-bull stories.” Sainte-Beuve became aware of Mersenne’s writings, which prompted
him to write this apparently conciliatory commentary: “The criticisms that were made of the first pages of *Atala*, as regards the lack of faithfulness of the images, show us that Chateaubriand did not seek to produce a precise pictorial reality but rather, after a rapid general view, took the liberty of rearranging his *memories* and employed, following his fancy, the rich images emanating less from his memory than from his imagination.”

By pretending to sweep away suspicions, Sainte-Beuve was nonetheless mischievously propagating them. After the publication of his study in 1860, an undercurrent of suspicion persisted among critics: to quote Émile Faguet, Chateaubriand was suspected of “having described a bit more than he had seen.” In 1899, Joseph Bédier attempted to put the question to rest by means of three successive articles. He asserted that Chateaubriand did not visit all the places he describes, and that he borrowed copiously from the *Voyages* of Bartram to fill the gaps in his own experience. Numerous critics followed Bédier’s example, noting Chateaubriand’s borrowings from various authors—notably Charlevoix, Beltrami, and Bartram—and casting doubt on the authenticity of certain episodes of the journey related by “the Enchanter,” as Chateaubriand was sometimes called. The second half of Chateaubriand’s journey, the part that he claims led him toward the southwest of the United States, has for a long time taken the top prize for skepticism. If it appears indisputable that Chateaubriand, after debarking in Baltimore on July 10, 1791, did indeed go to New York, then to Boston, before going up the Hudson to Albany and then following the Iroquois Trail until Niagara Falls, it seems that the rest of his trip, in the Ohio Valley first, then to Pittsburgh and on into Louisiana, is solely a product of his imagination.

Nonetheless, this questioning of the reliability of Chateaubriand’s account belongs to an outmoded phase of criticism, replaced henceforth by another in which the specialists are in agreement regarding the general sincerity of the author. This is the case, notably, of Painter, who shows in his biography that Chateaubriand’s narrative is consonant with what we now know about the speed of transportation in America at the time of his stay. More recently, this debate has been taken up by Bassan, who reaches the same conclusions as Painter and Switzer in observing that the travels of Chateaubriand by stagecoach are in agreement with the schedules furnished by the newspapers of the period, whereas the speed of his trips on horseback and by boat is the same as that of his contemporaries on identical routes.

In the recent biography that he devoted to Chateaubriand, Berchet also tends to believe in the sincerity of the writer. In his opinion, Chateaubriand was telling the truth when he asserted that he traveled toward the southwest in following the course of the Ohio River. Conversely, the biographer doubts that Chateaubriand went down as far as the mouth of the Mississippi and tends to believe that he headed for the East Coast after reaching the confluence with
the Kentucky River. To support this hypotheses, Berchet quotes a page taken from Chateaubriand’s Mémoires in which the author recalls the conclusion of his travels in the American southwest: “I was so enchanted with my travels that I no longer thought about the North Pole: the poet had conquered the traveler; I wandered for the sake of wandering with no other goal than dreaming.” The end of Chateaubriand’s journey became a dreamy meandering whose erratic itinerary could not leave him with precise memories; he thus recreated the memories a posteriori, adding memorial vagabondage to geographical nomadism and dreams of an aging memoir writer to those of the traveler. By declaring that “the poet had conquered the traveler,” Chateaubriand reveals the tension that exist between two distinct goals and two possible identities, a tension that is present from the very conception of his travel plans.

THE AMERICAN MUSE AND THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Chateaubriand’s fascination with the New World was not a recent development. “He had dreamed long before of travelling to America, on All Soul’s Eve at Combourg in 1784, when the Capuchin missionaries told of their life among the Red Indians, and again in the spring of 1786, when he announced to his acquiescent father his intention to ‘go and clear forests in Canada,’” remarks Painter. The plan for a trip to the United States began to take shape beginning in 1790 when he sketched out the plot of Les Natchez. After describing the sojourn of the Amerindian Chactas in Paris, Chateaubriand wanted to relate his adventures in America but quickly discovered that he needed personal experience with this country: “I soon noticed that I was not familiar with the true colors, and that if I wanted to create a faithful image, it was necessary, following Homer’s example, to visit the people I wanted to portray.” His family’s consent was indispensable, and Chateaubriand, who could not obtain from them the necessary sums for his journey by revealing his hopes for literary glory, had to find a plan that was both practical and, if possible, grandiose: he declared that he would go to America in quest of the Northwest Passage.

This undertaking was fashionable: it is evoked, for example, in the last edition of the Lettres d’un cultivateur américain. In Chateaubriand’s mind, it would combine both geographical exploration and ethnographical research, since the young knight intended to make use of his frequenting of the Amerindians to later portray them in his novels, while at the same time contributing to a better knowledge of the topography of the North American continent. In addition, this quest for knowledge was to serve the geopolitical interests of France: “If I succeed,” Chateaubriand declared, “I will have had the honor of imposing French names on new regions, giving my country a colony on the Pacific Ocean, taking the rich fur trade away from a rival power, and preventing this rival from finding
a shorter way to India by giving this path to France itself." The discovery of the Northwest Passage thus also involved a symbolic, economic, and political gain for his country: it was urgent to undertake it.

However, the blessing and financial support that Chateaubriand received from the members of his family cannot be explained solely by their support of this ambitious project: they also saw it as a way for him to escape a political climate that was becoming exceedingly threatening. Chateaubriand remarks, “The chaos was growing: it was enough to have an aristocratic name to be exposed to persecution: the more conscientious and moderate your opinion was, the more suspect and denigrated it became. I decided to fold my tent: I left my brother and my sisters in Paris and headed for Brittany” (1:417–18; emphasis original). The curiosity to discover a new world was thus reinforced by the threats that were growing in the traveler’s motherland: there is a striking parallel between Chateaubriand and this other emigrant, Usbek, of whom the Lettres persanes inform us that he is going to France not only to discover this unfamiliar country but also to flee the country of his birth, and it is precisely Montesquieu that Chateaubriand remembers when, in Les Natchez, he defamiliarizes France for his reader through the gaze of Chactas the Amerindian.

During the preparation for his journey, Chateaubriand found an enthusiastic ally in the person of his grandfather-in-law, Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes. Magistrate, botanist, statesman, and “friend of Rousseau” (1:567), Malesherbes supported the publication of the Encyclopédie and defended Louis XVI during his trial. Keenly interested in geography, he had established a correspondence with Saint-John de Crèvecoeur when the latter was French Consul in New York. In 1783, he wrote him to “request a large quantity of tulip tree, wax tree and white cedar seeds.” In his Mémoires, Chateaubriand states that M. de Malesherbes “had gotten him all worked up about the trip” (1:417) and describes the study sessions that they devoted together to the preparation of an expedition that the old man lamented not having the strength to join.

As Painter observes, this expedition was doomed to fail before even beginning, and adventurers more experienced than Chateaubriand explained to him the extent of the difficulties he could not even begin to imagine. Sometime after his arrival on the East Coast of the United States, Chateaubriand visited a certain M. Swift, an American who described to him the numerous skills he would have to acquire before being ready even to begin his exploration. Chateaubriand claims that this warning in no way diverted him from his plans, but, nonetheless, his expedition project was pushed into the background in the rest of a text that resembles more a tale of wandering than a journey oriented toward a precise goal. After scarcely five months on American soil, Chateaubriand decided to return to France: he relates how this decision was prompted by
the discovery of a newspaper reporting the flight of the king to Varennes, and how the voice of honor immediately ordered him to fight in his service. The definitive abandonment of the plan to discover the Northwest Passage was a matter of much ambivalence for Chateaubriand: it was one of the nodal points in the destiny of the memorialist to which he returned in his reflections on the direction his existence took and in his dreams of alternative futures. As Hollier remarks, “Chateaubriand himself often presented his literary career as a consequence of this disappointment. At times, happy about the turn of events that resulted . . . , he was, at other times, longing for the peace of mind this missed opportunity had cost him.”

However, it is not only the archeology of his identity and of his literary vocation that his American works permit Chateaubriand to complete but also the exploration of an original period of America corresponding to the discovery of the New World by the first French travelers. The search for the origins of the writer and of America are superimposed in a work where remembrance fosters a journey toward oneself as well as toward a deceased continent of which writing permits a posthumous representation. On what memorial process does the latter depend?

**METAMORPHOSIS OF FICTIONS**

Four years before his death, Chateaubriand wrote a letter that includes the following reflection: “I’ve mixed many fictions with real things, and, unfortunately, in time the fictions take on a reality that transforms them.” This confession describes how fiction eventually comes to take on the cloak of reality when, repeated over and over again, it opposes imaginary representations to memories of actual events and eventually replaces them. This process is at the heart of the literary creation of posthumous America. Not only does Chateaubriand describe America several decades after traveling there—and the memories that he shares have had time to be transformed according to the aforementioned logic—but among the fictions mixed in with the “real things” was the dream of a journey that would have taken place not at the end of the eighteenth century but at the end of the Renaissance, a dream of meeting a state of nature that the Europeans had not yet degraded and an Amerindian population still unchanged. Here, truth is not opposed to falsehood, and the author does not knowingly deceive his reader, since fiction has become truth at the end of a process that precludes identifying it as the fiction it formerly was. Just like Crèvecœur and Lezay-Marnésia, Chateaubriand progressively reinvented America as he remembered it. The nostalgia for the sixteenth century that is expressed in the *Voyage en Amérique*, as in the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, in the explicit references in these works as well as in their formal and stylistic choices, proved to have a political dimension as
well, since through the evocation of this epoch it was the ultimate failure of the French colonial venture in America that Chateaubriand was lamenting and its pursuit in other places that he was advocating.

**Chateaubriand Cosmographer: Le Voyage en Amérique (1827)**

**EMERGENCE OF A VOICE FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE?**

*Genesis of the Voyage*

“For Chateaubriand, any narrative is ‘from Beyond the Grave’ and gives voice to the dead.” This idea borrowed from Reichler guides this section, devoted to the problems of enunciation in the *Voyage en Amérique*. “Problems” in the plural, because several voices organize this work, and it is necessary to follow the stages of its genesis in order to understand the reasons for their coexistence, as well as those that explain the emergence of a defunct voice that has come to speak of a vanished country and of a mankind in decline. In the absence of the phonograph, whose invention was going to fascinate Villiers de l’Isle-Adam in *L’Ève future* (1886), because for the first time in history a machine could conserve the living trace of a deceased being, the inimitable range of his voice, Chateaubriand stages the return of a persona who was the author and, nonetheless, is no longer that person. How does the appearance of a voice from beyond the grave lead to a commemorative representation of America whose function consists in safeguarding both the memory of what it has ceased to be and of a traveler in whom the author can scarcely be recognized? The genesis of the *Voyage en Amérique* spans three countries and nearly thirty-six years during which the text was produced, lost, and rewritten from memory. It proves to be comparable to the origin of the *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain*, which is likewise the result of a reconstitution after the theft of a first manuscript. Nonetheless, the creation of the *Voyage en Amérique* is still more complex, since the manuscript was lost a second time then invented in both senses of the term: both rewritten and recovered like one discovers a treasure. It is thus literally a posthumous America that we are going to discover, the literary representation of a country that was buried for three decades in a trunk before being exhumed. We will accompany the stages of its production by means of the information provided by the paratexts of the *Essai sur les Révolutions*, *Atala*, and the *Voyage en Amérique* itself, whose first edition dates from 1827 and is included in the plans for the *Œuvres complètes*, published between 1826 and 1831 by Ladvocat.

During his voyage across the Atlantic, Chateaubriand began the *Tableaux de la nature américaine* (*Paintings of American Nature*), *Atala*, and *Les Natchez*. In the *Mémoires*, he relates several tales about the manuscripts that accompanied him during the campaign of the émigrés: “I would sit down, with my rifle, in
the middle of the ruins; I would take from my haversack the manuscript of my *Voyage en Amérique*; I would place the separate pages around me on the grass; I would reread and correct the description of a forest, a passage of *Atala*, in the rubble of a Roman amphitheater, getting ready to conquer France” (1:588). Chateaubriand depicts himself at work, setting a creation scene in which two memories collide: those in the pages he was writing at that time and those concerning the circumstances of their composition. To the rubble of this Roman amphitheater, to the ruins that surrounded the author, is opposed the permanence of a work through which the writer himself will ascend to posterity. The manuscript of *Atala*, however, was to guarantee not only the posthumous existence of Chateaubriand but also his survival on earth, since it found itself between his body and a shell fragment during the siege of Thionville (1:608). Alas, the original version of Chateaubriand’s American works was lost: “The manuscript of these travels, of which you will find a few excerpts in the work I am offering here to the public, perished, with the rest of my fortune, in the Revolution,” bemoans Chateaubriand.36 What text is he designating, precisely, by the expression “the manuscript of these travels”? A note added in 1826 to the second edition of the *Essai sur les révolutions* offers a clue: “Yes, the *very first* manuscript of these travels, but not the manuscript of *Les Natchez*, written in London, in which a large part of the original manuscript is preserved.”37 If we follow Chateaubriand’s successive statements, it becomes apparent that the London manuscript of *Les Natchez* is composed of a considerable part of the original manuscript written in the United States, whereas that of the *Voyage en Amérique* disappeared during the Revolution before being rewritten in England at the time of his exile between 1793 and 1800. Chateaubriand manifests a deep regret over the loss of the original version of his American memories, as if it represented a quintessential state of the text that his later remembering could not equal:

People were kind enough to grant some praise to my manner of depicting nature; but if they had seen these various writings on my knees, among the savages themselves, in the forests and on the shores of the American lakes, I dare to presume that they would have perhaps found things even more worthy of the public. Of all that, all I have left are a few separate pages, among which the Night, that is included here. I was destined to lose in the Revolution my fortune, relatives, friends, and what one never recovers when it is lost, the fruits of the labors of one’s mind, the only thing that really belongs to us.38

To the nostalgia he felt for a period of his youth in a country whose intrinsic mutability was often stressed by him—“the United States is growing more
quickly than this manuscript”—may be added his nostalgia for the first version of a text that, by dint of having been lost and having the seal of radical authenticity, since it was produced in the heart of the territory he had come to discover in order to be immersed in its colors, is graced with incomparable qualities that cannot be matched by any other later attempt. Even so, the story of the writing of the *Voyage* is far from being finished at this point. The text that we read under this title is not the one that was composed in London during his exile, since Chateaubriand lost the fruits of his labor a second time.

*A Manuscript from Beyond the Grave*

In 1800, Chateaubriand decided to return to France. He could not bring with him the voluminous manuscript that he had written during his years of exile, for there were no less than 2,393 in-folio pages. Forced to choose from this textual mass, he took out *Atala* and *René* from *Les Natchez* before storing the rest of his manuscripts in a trunk that he put in the keeping of his London hosts (1:746). If *Atala* was designated by Chateaubriand as “his devoted daughter,” *Les Natchez* and the *Voyage en Amérique* resembled abandoned orphans, left in the English capital where they would languish with no news from their father for fifteen years. Chateaubriand took his negligence so far that he even forgot where his offspring were awaiting him.

In 1814, when he resumed his communication with England, the memorialist’s mind played a dirty trick on him, for he could no longer recall the name of the Englishwoman with whom he had left his texts: “Based on some vague, even contradictory, information” (1:746), some friends of Chateaubriand became clever sleuths for him. Through great perseverance, they managed to unearth his youthful works in the home of the children of the owner of an apartment Chateaubriand had formerly rented in London. From a trunk resembling a coffin arose the works written by Chateaubriand during his London exile when, between 1793 and 1800, he must have remembered the original manuscript that he had lost. The *Voyage* is thus a work produced by memory with successive interlocking versions in the heart of which subsisted a discourse contemporary with a defunct age. This work gives a commemorative representation of America whose function consists in reviving through language a period that no longer existed at the moment that it was described. In order to approach as close as possible this period, Chateaubriand included in the *Voyage* the oldest documents that he could recover.

*The Novice Author and the Aged Writer*

The temporal distance between the production and the rediscovery of these texts produced a doubling of Chateaubriand’s persona that he describes in regard to *Les Natchez* but which is just as true of the *Voyage en Amérique*. “What happened
to me has perhaps never happened to an author before, that is, to read after thirty years a manuscript that I had completely forgotten. I passed judgment on it as if it were the work of a stranger: the aged writer confirmed in his art, the man enlightened by criticism, the man with a calm mind and musty blood corrected the rough drafts of a novice author, abandoned to the whims of his imagination."

We will retain his terminology in the following pages in order to distinguish between Chateaubriand at the moment of the rediscovery of the manuscript in 1827 (the “aged writer”) and Chateaubriand during his exile in London (“the novice author”). After the rereading and revision of the manuscript, the final stage of the literary work undertaken by the aged writer consisted of staging the history of his own book. He chose to intermingle the voice of the novice author with his own, inscribing in the text the circumstances of its production in its final form: “This journey bears within itself its own commentary and its history,” he warned in the author’s notice at the beginning of the *Voyage en Amérique* (75). The *Voyage* contains numerous references to the “manuscript” found in London, the aged writer reminding us that he drew from it the essential matter of his narrative. Doing so, he organized the resurrection of words pronounced long ago by the novice author: “Now I let the manuscript speak: I give it to you as I found it, sometimes in the form of a *narrative*, sometimes in that of a *diary*, sometimes in *letters* or in simple *annotations*” (109; emphasis original). Chateaubriand behaves toward this voice as if he were a necromancer, capable of recalling the dead back into existence, beginning with this former “I” in which he no longer recognizes himself, because youth is really and truly over for him. It seems therefore that the *Voyage* is a space where a voice emerges to speak in the present of a defunct country. For the first time in this study, are we dealing with a commemorative representation that is not the result of an a posteriori reconstruction but an account, unaltered, of the traveler’s original vision of America? This voice would thus be contemporary with the age it describes, while at the same time reaching from beyond the grave the aged writer who no longer recognizes it as his own. To the contrary, while the commemorative image of America offered by Chateaubriand seems to preserve the original impression of the novice author, it is, in fact, the reconstructed memory of the aged writer that it offers the reader.

*Elaborations of the Past*

The enunciative split in the *Voyage en Amérique* is more complex than Chateaubriand suggests. Certain passages that the aged writer attributes to the novice author are not given “as is,” despite what he says, but are the result of a reworking at the time of the elaboration of the definitive version of the text. The example of the “Journal sans date” (“Undated Diary”) is, in this respect, revealing, for
this section of the *Voyage* is one of those in which the voice of the novice author seems to speak with a particular liveliness, as if it had achieved the miracle of anticipating the recording of sounds and images and was communicating to us a fragment of reality of the New World such as it was perceived in 1791.

The “Journal sans date” is presented by the aged writer as a document rediscovered in the London manuscript following the “Lacs du Canada” (192). This text presents itself as a kind of logbook written by Chateaubriand in 1791 and surmounts the second paradox of the New World described in the introduction. Indeed, the “Journal sans date” seems to have succeeded in its attempt to describe the United States in the present and not when it had ceased to be what the author describes. “Journal sans date”: paradoxical title, as Degout points out, for what is a “diary” that makes no mention of the “days” it is recounting and during which it was written? More precisely, Chateaubriand reduces the temporal unity of the diary by isolating segments that are shorter than days: the hours, during four days and three nights. Replacing days with hours as the unit of measurement is a means of bringing together as closely as possible two times that it is impossible to superimpose completely: that of the writing and that of the experience. This nearly perfect coexistence is illustrated in the following passage:

Midnight.

The fire is beginning to go out, the circle of light shrinking. I listen: a formidable calm weighs on these forests; it sounds like silence giving way to silence. I seek in vain to hear in this universal tomb any noise that reveals life . . .

Half-past midnight.

The repose continues, but the rotted tree breaks and falls. The forests moan; a thousand voices rise up. Soon the noises grow weak: they die in the quasi-imaginary distance: silence again invades the wilderness. (196–97)

The passage from silence to the nocturnal racket of the birds in the trees and back to silence takes place in thirty minutes. Combined with the brief period of time, the use of the present creates for the reader the illusion that Chateaubriand’s pen is recording the variations of the sonorous atmosphere of the American forests, as if writing had become a cassette deck capable not only of recording the sounds but, contrary to the *phonograph*, of playing them back at will. Was America finally being described in real time?

In an article published in 1998, Degout presents a second version of the “Journal sans date.” It is called the “copy” to distinguish it from the “Journal sans date” published in the *Voyage*. His study reveals that the copy is not a logbook kept by Chateaubriand in America but a volume of memories written after
his return to Europe. Likewise, the “Journal sans date” is not what it claims to be, that is, a fragment torn from time, a gem extracted from the New World and set in the composition of the *Voyage en Amérique*, a work by the novice author that he had written during pauses in the middle of the American forests, surrounded by Amerindian guides and by the presence of a whole world hidden in the trees: noises, birdsongs, muffled cracking. . . . As we meet it in the *Voyage*, the “Journal sans date” is the result of a later rewriting and enrichment of the copy. As Degout observes, “At no time are we in the presence of raw material, but rather of two very successful ‘reworkings.’”

An additional proof supports this hypothesis. When reading the “Journal sans date,” one notes numerous borrowings from the *Voyages* of Bartram. Bartram’s work was published for the first time in English in 1791 and translated into French in 1798: Chateaubriand’s borrowings from this text thus prove definitively that the “Journal sans date” is not the work of the young traveler in America but, in its final form, that of the aged writer. However, Chateaubriand strived to preserve the fiction of a manuscript rediscovered and faithfully transcribed, in particular when he stated, in a note in the “Journal sans date”: “I am leaving as is all these things produced by youth; please excuse them” (194). Precisely, these “things” were not produced by youth but were instead the work of the aged writer reconstituting and thus altering a posteriori the impressions he remembered from thirty-six years before. We recognize here the process of the “metamorphosis of fictions” described earlier: the memory presented to the reader as genuine is the result of an elaboration during which fiction is merged with truth and eventually takes its place.

Ultimately, the *Voyage en Amérique* is not a space from which emerges a voice from beyond the grave, miraculously returned from the dead after the wanderings of the manuscript. It is rather a stage play that only announces two characters but in which, in fact, three voices can be heard. The first two, we already know them, are those of the aged writer and of the novice author. The third is the one produced by Chateaubriand when he attempted to revive in the present a past experience, which, he asserted, was being offered to the reader in its original purity, whereas it is in fact being relived in the manner of a fleeting reminiscence and an irreparable loss. For Chateaubriand, time is simultaneously found and lost: his consciousness of time is a tragic consciousness that is not brightened by the hope of a victory of writing over death. Thus, the posthumous America created by Chateaubriand is a retrospective literary construction signed by a writer who was trying to describe the New World as he perceived it thirty-six years earlier but whose literary incarnation is imbued with the experience of loss and disappearance. The “Journal sans date” thus reveals a painful awareness of the passage of time, when it evokes those “generations of trees” that cover each other over and that the traveler steps over as so many
lifeless corpses (196). Breaking with the Rousseauian tradition in which the silence of nature is associated with the idea of tranquility, plenitude, and rest, Chateaubriand identifies the silence of the forests with the calm of the grave: “Let me rest a moment in this double solitude of death and nature: is there any other refuge where I would prefer to sleep forever?” (196). There is the suffering of bereavement at the heart of this recollection of a distant age. This diffuse suffering allows us to distinguish the commemorative writing of America in the works of Crèvecoeur, Lezay-Marnésia, and Chateaubriand. In the *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain*, the recalling of memories of a retrospectively idealized period invested the present by opposing a luminous vision to an unbearable present. The memory of the past was more radiant than the experience itself had been, and it was still more radiant than the period of its reemergence. Concerning the final Lezay-Marnésia, the one whose castles in America had definitively collapsed, a similar conclusion is warranted: for him too, when he was working in the solitude of Saint-Julien, immersed in the anguish of the Revolution, the posthumous representation of the New World provided a moral escape, a kind of erasure of time. If the Golden Age will never return, at least it is still possible to reinvent it. To the contrary, the commemorative representation of America in Chateaubriand’s works may be distinguished from that of his two compatriots by the spectral nature of the apparition that it invokes. The past arises from beyond the grave, but it does not announce the victory of writing over the time that has destroyed what it is trying to save: America is resuscitated, but not like Lazarus leaving his tomb—rather like a phantom that has preserved its ectoplasmic nature in coming back to life.

A WEB OF ANACHRONISMS

Reenactment
The posthumous representation of America in Chateaubriand’s *Voyage* is characterized by the adoption of an anachronistic aesthetic: that of the period that the text strives to resuscitate. Chateaubriand undertook a work of total recreation that safeguards the memory of the past by using his own language. If we tried to find an equivalent for it in the museographic domain, it would not be a collection in which the artifacts of the past are exposed behind glass or on mannequins. Chateaubriand’s work is comparable rather to the city of Williamsburg in Virginia, where flesh-and-blood individuals in period costumes stroll down streets that have been preserved in their original colonial state. English has a term that is lacking in French: “reenactment,” for which the term “reconstitution” is only an imperfect translation. If the works of Crèvecoeur and Lezay-Marnésia reconstitute the past by producing a discourse on it, those of Chateaubriand attempt to *bring it back to life*, to *stage it* in a form already outdated at the time
of the writing. In order to bring to light the formal uniqueness of the *Voyage en Amérique*, it is first necessary to place it in the context of its production.

*Travel Narratives and Tourist Guidebooks*

The form of the travel narratives in America was changing at the end of the eighteenth century. The young United States attracted numerous visitors, whether they were infatuated with the supposed grandeur of the American model, like Brissot or Chastellux, crossed the Atlantic to escape the French Revolution, like La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt and Volney, or taken refuge there after the loss of Saint-Domingue, like Moreau de Saint-Méry. The account of their journey was most often organized, as Rossi remarks, “either day by day or by chapters that follow the progress of the trip, with care taken to give as many temporal and spatial indications as possible.” These chronicles of personal experiences were accompanied by commentaries on broader questions (the political system, society, manners, religion, slavery, etc.) and lingered on themes that, from narrative to narrative, came to be regarded as obligatory exercises: numerous authors, for example, devoted a passage to the Quakers. In addition, the narrator provided ample information intended for the reader who might one day decide to follow in his footsteps: he indicated, notably, the distance between the cities to help him prepare for his stay.

During his journey in the northeastern United States, La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt informs the reader, for example, that in Lebanon, in the State of New York, it is possible to stop at the tavern of a certain M. Staw, where the boarders get together to drink mineral water. Although the primary purpose of his text is to describe the stages of his own trip, the author also offers practical information to his readers. This informative function turns many travel narratives into virtual tourist guidebooks, a form that is developing and becoming autonomous at the turn of the eighteenth century.

The notion of reproducibility constitutes nonetheless a means of distinguishing the travel narrative from the guidebook. A travel narrative is the tale of a journey that cannot be relived identically, either by the reader or by the author himself. Indeed, it is the adventure of an individual who has completed a trip at a precise moment in history. As such, his experience cannot be repeated by anyone: it is possible to walk in the footsteps of a traveler, but as years go by, the successor perceives as a sentimental pilgrimage what was originally lived as an intimate initiative experience. Reading only serves to revive the experience of the journey and to *bring to the present*, each time the account is read, the travels that it relates; but it is like a past relived in the mind, and not like an experience equivalent to that of the traveler, that the journey is reproduced.

On the contrary, the role of a guidebook is to describe an itinerary that the traveler can complete as it is described, which is illustrated by the regular
updating of the information that it provides so that it reflects as closely as possible a changing reality: the revision of the guidebook is critical to the repetition of the experience of its author. Of course, it was necessary for an individual to travel at a given time in the past in order to be able to describe the places mentioned in his guidebook; nonetheless, this past moment is destined to be integrated into someone else's future. All the reader has to do is go to the place indicated, and the past of the author of the guide will become his present: he will discover the places described by his predecessor, since they will not have had time to change significantly since the publication of his work.

Contrary to the majority of the travel narratives devoted to North America at the turn of the eighteenth century, Chateaubriand's *Voyage en Amérique* has no resemblance to a guidebook: that is one of its most important characteristics. The celebration of the uniqueness of the subject is exhibited in the recalling of an experience that is impossible to duplicate. Indeed, Chateaubriand's America is not an America that one can visit: it has been lost, it belongs to the past, and the only way to travel there is by memory and reading. Chateaubriand, therefore, does not bother with details on the means of transportation or the location of inns—that he finds moreover atrocious, often preferring to spend the night in the forest. These details have no sense, since they are already outdated at the time of the publication of the *Voyage* in 1827. Roads have been built, reducing the length of time necessary to travel from one place to another: “If I were to see the United States today, I would no longer recognize it: where I left forests, I would find planted fields, where I beat my way through bushes, I would travel on highways. The Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Ohio Rivers no longer flow by in solitary majesty; large ships with three masts ply them; more than two hundred steamships enliven the shores” (373).

The memorial cartography preserved by the author could not serve as a guide for the travelers of the 1830s; the form of America, alas, has changed more quickly than Chateaubriand's heart.

*Chateaubriand and Cosmography*

Chateaubriand's narrative stands out as an exception to the travel literature of the period for an additional reason. While he readily describes the *Génie du christianisme* as the first text of the “new literature,” Chateaubriand hardly appears as an innovator in the *Voyage*, whose singularity consists rather in the return of an anachronistic discourse: cosmography. “A collage of heterogeneous textual fragments between which ‘voids’ are going to remain,” as Lestringant defines it, 51 cosmography postulates the profound albeit hidden unity of the Creation, the harmony between divine, human, and natural things being the sign of the conformity of essences that it is incumbent upon the scholar to bring to light. The subjectivity of the cosmographer plays a key role in the production of this
discourse, since it serves to unify the diverse materials used in the work. If the Creation is a space of hidden correspondences, it is up to the cosmographer to emphasize the secret relations between the spaces he describes. For this purpose, he never limits himself to the description of what he has seen himself—a limit that defines the opposite method, that of the “topographers” that Michel de Montaigne wished for—since the description of the places crossed by the cosmographer is a pretext to enlarge the perspective: his discourse ultimately embraces territories that he only knows through the books of others. While basing the legitimacy of his discourse on the experience of his own travels, the cosmographer does not hesitate to resort to the compilation of ancient and modern sources. He combines ancient authorities and individual testimony, his own writing and that of his collaborators, motivated by a totalizing ambition that nonetheless entails the risk of the discourse crumbling into a series of digressive notations assumed by a polyphonic enunciation.

Although it was written well after cosmography had died out, Chateaubriand’s travel narrative revived this form of discourse at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The heterogeneousness of the subjects treated in the *Voyage* is a first trait it has in common with the cosmographers of the sixteenth century. Chateaubriand relates a series of personal experiences that took place during what he calls his “Itinéraire” (130): his crossing of the Atlantic, his meeting with Washington, his accident at Niagara Falls, and so forth. Furthermore, he devotes an entire chapter to the fauna and flora (“Histoire naturelle”), before producing a series of chapters whose ambition—typical of the cosmographic discourse—is to conduct an inventory of the particular facts known about America in order to produce an exhaustive knowledge of it. The markedly diverse character of his work is demonstrated likewise in the conclusion, in which Chateaubriand turns away from North America to bring his attention to bear on the Spanish colonies of the New World, whose history he compares to that of the former English colonies: after putting on the garb of a traveler and of a specialist in natural science, now he was adopting the discourse of a historian and a political thinker.

The fragmentation of the *Voyage* into diverse discourses is not the only characteristic of cosmographic literature that this work exhibits: the integration of borrowed erudition is another. Chateaubriand readily admits that he has drawn part of his information from his readings: “Immediately after the description of Louisiana, the manuscript gives a few excerpts of the travels of Bartram that I had translated rather carefully. Mixed in with these excerpts are my own rectifications, observations, reflections, additions, and my descriptions. . . . But in my work everything is so much more entangled that it is almost impossible to separate what is from me and what is from Bartram, nor even to recognize it” (218).
This confession is liable to be interpreted both as a proof of intellectual integrity (Chateaubriand recognizing what he owes to Bartram) and as a strategy intended to counter from the outset any accusations of plagiarism—that he had good reason to fear. Even if borrowing information from one’s predecessors is a common practice in travel literature, Chateaubriand did not confess the full extent of the debts he owed his precursors, as is proved, especially, by his tense relationship with Giacomo Costantino Beltrami (1779–1855). Chateaubriand made this Italian traveler and man of letters quite bitter by not acknowledging (as he was wont to do) the borrowing of a certain number of texts from the latter’s work titled *Découverte des sources du Mississippi et de la Rivière sanglante* (*Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and of the Bloody River*, 1828). A modern cosmographer, Chateaubriand compiled information taken from works of his traveling colleagues to fill the gaps in the London manuscript, numerous at the time of its providential recovery.

Chateaubriand’s borrowings often came from ancient sources. James Fenimore Cooper was one of the first to observe that Chateaubriand had consulted documents composed five decades earlier: “The book speaks plainly for itself, and if Mr. Chateaubriand has painted them [the Sioux] materially different from what I have he has been led into an error. . . . *He probably gained his information from the old French writers, half a century old, while I have consulted our own means of intelligence, and my own observation.*” Cooper opposes two types of representations of the Amerindian world: one taken from life—his—the other the result of a bookish compilation, the reliability of the sources being inversely proportional to their ancientness. The debate between Cooper and Chateaubriand evokes the terms of the one that, long ago, pitted Jean de Léry against André Thevet, the first presenting himself as the champion of “autopsy”—a method that guarantees the truth of a discourse by a direct confrontation between the author and object he is treating—and the second being considered a representative of cosmography, a method whose partisans did not hesitate to resort to the authority of ancient sources.

However, at the end of the “Itinéraire,” Chateaubriand announces his desire to update the information contained in his book: “The thirty-six years that have gone by since my journey have shed much light and changed many things in the Old and the New World; those years modified and corrected the judgments of the writer” (230). This passage suggests that the work of the “aged writer” consisted in updating the views of the “novice author” by completing its information by means of more recent works. It is true that Chateaubriand very often proves to be well informed: the chapter “État actuel des sauvages de l’Amérique septentrionale” (“Current State of the Savages of North America”), for instance, contains information on the population of the Amerindian tribes, the surface of the territory that they have been granted, and the relations that they maintained.
with the American authorities. Many of these facts were unknown in France at the time of the preparation of the *Voyage en Amérique*, and Chateaubriand very likely obtained them from his contacts among the French diplomats. Nonetheless, to complete the information he offers on various subjects that he treats after the “Itinerary” itself, Chateaubriand does not restrict himself to the most recent works he has at his disposal: he exhibits a curious interest in “totally different sources, older, foreign, seeming to show a certain disdain for the American writings of his contemporary countrymen,” as Rossi observes in his presentation of the book. The Enchanter disdains, for example, the *Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis d’Amérique* (*Chart of the Climate and Soil of the United States of America*, 1803) by Volney, but he borrows widely from William Bartram and Jonathan Carver, as well as from Le Page du Pratz and Charlevoix.

The analysis of these borrowings allows us to glimpse a whole network of intertextual connections: sometimes Chateaubriand takes information from authors who have themselves found it in the works of their own predecessors. Such is the case of this detail on beavers—“he uses this tail as a trowel and sled”—that he finds in Beltrami, who had discovered this fact in Lahontan (234, note 3). By the meshing of these interwoven intertextual references, Chateaubriand’s narrative includes knowledge that comes from the beginning of the seventeenth century—which is at the very least paradoxical for an author who is unambiguous about his wish to update the information presented in his text. For what reasons would he cultivate anachronism by drawing his information from texts that are not only old but sometimes even precede the tale of a journey he claims to be bringing up to date?

*“Geometrical Truths” and “Truths of the Imagination”*

The article devoted by Chateaubriand to the *Voyage* of Mackenzie helps us to attempt a response to this question. “When the first Frenchmen who set foot on the shores of *Canada* speak of lakes that resemble seas, of waterfalls that plunge down from the sky, of forests of unfathomable depth, the spirit is far more moved than when an English merchant, or a modern scholar, informs you that he has reached the Pacific Ocean and that Niagara Falls is only one hundred and forty-four feet high. What we gain in knowledge, we lose in feeling. The geometrical truths have killed certain truths of the imagination that are far more important to morality than one might think.”

Chateaubriand sets up here an opposition between two types of representations of America: that of the first travelers and that of modern scientists. The first did not have at their disposal precise scientific instruments. To help their readers imagine the New World, they resorted to analogy (“lakes that resemble seas”) and to hyperbole (“waterfalls that plunge down from the sky”; “forests of unfathomable depth”). Their descriptions produce what Chateaubriand calls a
“truth of the imagination.” By this expression, he designates information that conveys to us not what the object is in itself but the manner in which it strikes the imagination of the person who is contemplating it: in short, and to paraphrase Mallarmé, the first travelers chose to depict not “the thing” but “the effect that it produces,” which is another way of saying that they produced a poetic representation rather than a scientific discourse. The image that they gave of America provokes strong emotions in the reader, allowing him to travel at their sides in his mind, since “tired of the society in which we live, and of the sorrows that surround us, we like to lose ourselves in thought in faraway countries and among unknown peoples.” In the example of the first travelers, Chateaubriand finds a source of aesthetic inspiration, since they knew the secret of painting an enchanting picture of the New World.

For their part, the modern scientists produce an opposite type of representation of America, spreading what Chateaubriand refers to as “geometric truths.” They generate scientific knowledge for their readers, using units of measure that rigorously characterize the objects that they describe. Measuring, however, puts an end to reverie; it determines the nature but also the limit of an object: “Niagara Falls is only one hundred and forty-feet high,” we say, and suddenly an objective fact replaces the deep feeling that a subject experiences before what he considers less as a quantifiable physical phenomenon than as a grandiose phenomenon, a marvel that he thanks God or nature for creating. In addition, modern scientists are distinguished from the first travelers by their practice of naming: “the Pacific Ocean” is a labeled space, whereas the first travelers do not speak either of Lake Michigan, or of the forests of the Catskills, or of Niagara Falls but of “lakes,” “forests,” and “waterfalls,” bathing them in a poetic vagueness that is preserved by both their anonymity and the use of the plural. As in the magical stories in fairytale, these elements of the natural décor can be found on no map, and while they are indeed real since they have been seen by the traveler, they belong, for the reader, to the realm of the imaginary. The first travelers and the modern scientists are opposed, finally, by the time of their respective reigns: if the time of the first is now past, we have entered, Chateaubriand tells us, into a period that has inherited from the Enlightenment an encyclopedic ambition whose goal is to generate an exhaustive inventory of knowledge about the world and therefore to erase inexorably from the maps the very mention of the Terra Incognita that, in yesteryear, still gave rise to dreams and the desire for adventure.

Although Chateaubriand’s birthdate placed him in the age of the modern scientists, he judged severely the sacrifice of imagination in favor of the accumulation of objective knowledge that seemed to characterize his period. The readers of the nineteenth century, grown blasé through the proliferation of travel narratives, were only beguiled by descriptions of faraway countries under certain
conditions. As Chateaubriand asked, with a dose of melancholy: “In the past, when one had left his home like Ulysses, that person was an object of curiosity: today, other than a half-dozen individuals distinguished by their unusual personal merit, who can get anyone interested in the tale of his travels?” (137). To appeal to one’s readers, it is no longer enough to have traveled the world over: it is still necessary to have corrected a map or otherwise contributed to the exhaustiveness of geographic knowledge.

Well, Chateaubriand’s *Voyage* reveals nothing to the readers of the nineteenth century that they could not already have learned by reading the works of his precursors. On the one hand, Chateaubriand completed a journey that was, all in all, rather classical, the description of Niagara Falls appearing, for example, in a large number of previous accounts. On the other hand, his American adventure did not result in any discovery, since he had quickly given up any plans to discover the Northwest Passage in favor of wandering around the forests of the New World. Consequently, how does Chateaubriand intend to “get anyone interested in the tale of his travels” if he cannot take credit for the slightest find? He goes against the “modern scientists” and adopts the aesthetic of the travel narratives of the first French explorers of the New World. In his effort to write in the manner of his predecessors, the very imprecision of his itinerary plays a key role whose value has gone unrecognized by a whole critical tradition. For a long time now, the inaccuracies of Chateaubriand concerning his journey in North America have been interpreted as more or less clever attempts to dissimulate the modest distances that he had in fact traversed. The presupposition of these works criticizing Chateaubriand’s contradictions and geographical approximations consisted in the certainty that he wanted to pass himself off, for posterity, as a much more adventuresome traveler than he was in reality. But this accusation cannot be valid, considering the fact that Chateaubriand readily admitted that he belonged to the “crowd of obscure travelers who only saw what everyone else saw, who contributed nothing to the furthering of scientific progress, and who added nothing to the store of human knowledge” (137). In recognizing the scientific insignificance of his journey, its relative banality, Chateaubriand turned an apparent weakness into a poetic force that allowed him to embrace the charm of those old narratives, in which the spaces were blurred and the places unnamed, in which the traveler had no idea exactly where he was in the vastness of the New World. In the end, the imprecision of his itinerary was an aesthetic choice rather than a ruse employed to fantasize about his journey.

We recall that René de Mersenne compared the descriptions of *Atala* to their models in the New World. In concluding that Chateaubriand had lied, is he not revealing the lack of comprehension of a modern scientist in regard to the descriptions of a traveler at the turn of the eighteenth century who is trying to write like the “first Frenchmen” of the sixteenth century? The absence of certain
“geometrical truths” in the *Voyage*, denounced by a whole critical tradition, may be explained by Chateaubriand’s resolve to cultivate in their place those truths of the imagination that abound in the texts of his predecessors.71 Ultimately, the posthumous representation that Chateaubriand offers of his American journey has an analeptic function, recreating a past trip as if it had taken place in an even earlier period.72 Chateaubriand recreated his journey of 1791 by adopting the anachronistic approach of the former cosmographers and the literary techniques of the first French travelers in America in order to bring back the charm of a country whose power of fascination was progressively reduced as it was explored, and in order also to endow with an aesthetic interest a journey that, judged according to the standards of modern scientists, could have appeared insignificant. The America of Chateaubriand is an imaginary continent, combining the nostalgia for the period of his own trip with that for an earlier period whose disappearance he deplores.73

MOURNING FOR (NEW) FRANCE

*Vestiges of New France*

“Both the idealization and the criticism of America were to some extent a projection of French and English aspirations and anxieties and an attempt to account for—and come to terms with—Europe’s progressive loss of status and influence,” observe Craiutu and Isaac.74 Like the French and English authors referred to by these two scholars, Chateaubriand is preoccupied with the decline of his country, and it is vestiges of its former power in the New World that he discovers with regret as he crosses through the wilderness. In the *Voyage*, the posthumous representation of America has a specular function: through the recalling of the disappearance of New France and the decline of the Amerindian tribes, it reflects the loss of vitality of French civilization in the course of the last years of the Restoration.

Following the Iroquois Trail to Niagara Falls, the young Chateaubriand comes up against an invisible border that is defended by the Amerindians: “The savages of Niagara Falls, under the command of the English, were put in charge of guarding the border of Upper Canada on this side. They confronted us armed with bows and arrows and prevented us from passing. I had to send the Dutchman to Fort Niagara to ask permission from the commandant to enter the territory that was under British control; I did so with a heavy heart, because I remembered that France had once held dominion over this region” (180). Chateaubriand had hastened to leave the American cities of which he speaks in the *Voyage* just as he had visited them: as quickly as possible. Plunging into the woods allowed him to keep as close as possible to an ancestral past, the object of his fascination, and this blessed immersion in the forests of the New World
afforded him moments of enthusiasm bordering on delirium, one of which he relates, with a certain humor, in the *Voyage* (167). However, the encounter with this administrative constraint in the middle of the forest reminded him of a painful political defeat: that of the French colonial empire in North America. This chagrin at the idea that his country no longer dominated immense regions of the New World pervades the sumptuous beginning of *Atala*: “France once possessed, in North America, a vast empire that stretched from Labrador to Florida, and from the shores of the Atlantic to the most remote lakes of Upper Canada.”

With this “once,” whose tone and placement at the beginning of the sentence recall the “Once upon a time” that introduces fairytales, the narrator evokes the New France that, like the magical universe with which it is associated, henceforth belongs to a past so distant that it seems to be a figment of his imagination. Nonetheless, at the time of the publication of *Atala* in 1801, Chateaubriand had not entirely given up hope of seeing the French empire rise once again in America: “[I]f, by a strategy at the highest political level, the French government decided one day to ask England for the return of Canada, my description of New France would take on a new interest.” His viewpoint is typical of a segment of French public opinion for which the signing of the Treaty of Paris did not constitute a definitive abandonment of French ambitions on the other side of the Atlantic: “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 observes in this regard. Despite these hopes, Canada was never returned to France, and Bonaparte disappointed all those who, like Chateaubriand, would have liked to see a revival of the French adventure in the New World.

In 1827, when Chateaubriand published the *Voyage en Amérique*, he had nothing left to express, regarding this episode, other than “regrets” and the lack of “hope”: New France was indeed dead. He tried to put his grieving behind him, haunted by the disappearance of an empire whose causes remained at the center of his reflections, and to imagine what it could have become, what profit and glory it could have brought to France if she had been able to keep it. However, the goal of the posthumous representation of this empire is not just to celebrate its memory: it allows us to imagine what could have been its alternate destiny.

*The Logic of the Past Conditional*

In rereading the London manuscript, and in adding to it some reflections on the “Current State of the Savages of North America,” Chateaubriand is faced with the memory of New France and its past glory: “In tracing this tableau of a primitive world, in speaking constantly of Canada and of Louisiana, in studying
on old maps the vast area of the former French colonies in America, I was plagued by a painful idea; I wondered how the government of my country had managed to allow to perish these colonies that would be today an inexhaustible source of prosperity for us” (370). Once this problem was clearly stated, Chateaubriand invites his reader to imagine and traverse, as if he had a map beneath his eyes, the vastness of a territory equivalent to “more than two-thirds of North America” (371). He then asks a series of questions that amount to nothing less than speculations on an alternate future: “What would have happened if said colonies were still in our hands at the time of the liberation of the United States? Would this liberation have taken place? Would our presence on the American soil have facilitated or hindered it?” (371). Just like Lezay-Marnésia, Chateaubriand found in the history of the relations between France and the United States a source of inspiration for uchronic scenarios. 8🎂 Lezay-Marnésia indeed saw in America the last chance to build the reformed French society that could have been achieved in France itself if only the Revolution had not become so radical. Chateaubriand, in his turn, wonders what influence a New France that had remained in the hands of metropolitan France would have had on the progress of the American Revolution. For these two authors, the destinies of America and France could not be conceived separately. Their recourse to uchronia may be explained by the need to understand the successive historical upheavals that occurred at the end of the eighteenth century and to find in imaginary constructs a compensation for the territorial losses and political changes that followed on each other’s heels at such an unbridled rhythm.

In The Spectacular Past, Samuels describes the need of men and women at the beginning of the nineteenth century to grasp, through the consumption of historical spectacles (wax museums, panoramas, dioramas, etc.) and narratives on the past (novels, short stories, plays) the role played by recent history in the transformation of their identity: “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.” 82 The uchronic discourse may be conceived as another expression of this need to analyze retrospectively, given that it focuses on the identification of key moments in history that hung by a thread but resulted in incalculable consequences by the chain of events that they precipitated. More than classical historical representation, however, uchronic reflection constitutes a revolt against history as it came to be written; it is a meditation on the past, not to understand the manner in which it informs the present but to understand how it could or should have been written differently to bring about a reality considered to be preferable. Chateaubriand pursued this uchronic reflection when he sought to imagine the future that would have awaited New France if France had not ratified the Treaty of Paris in 1763: would it not have become, in the end, an independent state?
This question had been asked in 1803, in the course of deliberations on the fate of French Louisiana. In a work from 1829, with which he hoped to dispel the regrets still felt over the sale of this colony nearly thirty years after the fact, Barbé-Marbois recounts one of the arguments advanced by the partisans of this transaction: “If, having become a French colony, [Louisiana] grows and becomes important, there will be in its very prosperity a seed of independence that will soon grow. But the more it blossoms, the less chance there is that we could hold onto it.”

Chateaubriand too envisioned the possibility of independent French colonies in North America. However, contrary to Barbé-Marbois, for whom this eventuality was a good reason to get rid of a territory destined to escape sooner or later the control of metropolitan France, he considered it as an event that would still have been advantageous to his country: “Would New France itself become free? Why not? What problem would it be for the motherland to see the flowering of an immense empire sprung from its bosom, an empire that would spread the glory of our name and of our language in another hemisphere?”

Here, Chateaubriand was perpetuating the traditional perversion of the maternal metaphor, used so often to describe the relations between metropolitan France and its colonies: far from imitating the mother who nourishes her child, it was, on the contrary, France who was drawing new strength from the exploitation of the colonies. In fact, he insisted on the numerous material advantages that the liberated colonies could have offered to his country, which could have exploited the vast market that it would have retained in America (371). Nevertheless, if Chateaubriand is in disagreement with Barbé-Marbois, while basing his rationale on an identical postulate, that is, the inevitability of the independence of the French colonies in North America, it is because he grants a supreme importance to immaterial interests: those of “glory” and of “language.”

Chateaubriand is particularly defensive regarding the glory of France when it concerns the role played by his countrymen in the colonization of North America. He claims to disabuse those who would tend to minimize the participation of the French in this immense endeavor: “The national pride of the Americans leads them to attribute to themselves the merit of most of the discoveries in the western part of the United States, but one should not forget that the French of Canada and Louisiana, arriving from the north and the south, had traveled through these regions long before the Americans” (210). However, Chateaubriand recognizes with thinly concealed bitterness that this considerable accomplishment was far more the result of individual initiatives than of a national policy advocated by France (140); perhaps he was thinking of his own attempt to discover the Northwest Passage, for which he had received no official support. Glory—a concept inherited from the Old Regime by Napoleon, who turned it into one of the foundations of a “policy of fusion” uniting revolutionary and egalitarian principles with aristocratic and traditional values—proved to
be at the center of Chateaubriand’s political reflections as well, owing to their nationalist character. Like Napoleon, for whom war was the only way to earn glory, and for whom the extent of its empire was the measure of the grandeur of a nation, Chateaubriand was favorable to the pursuit of the prestige of military conquests in foreign countries: after the sale of Louisiana, he expressed his hope that France would build a new empire around the Mediterranean. In this respect, Chateaubriand subordinated the national interests of foreign countries to those of his homeland and placed the rights of his countrymen before those of their colonial subjects. Throughout his writings devoted to colonization, the glory of France is his primary criterion for any decisions.

The interests of the French language are likewise a constant preoccupation, haunted as he is by the specter of its impending disappearance. The question of the fragility of languages is omnipresent in the *Voyage*. Those spoken by the Amerindian tribes were of particular interest to Chateaubriand, who devoted an entire chapter to them (283–90). Although he declared that the indigenous peoples of North America have preserved nothing of their ancestral culture but their languages (369), even certain of these have eventually disappeared, as in the case of Natchez, that was only “a softer dialect of Chickasaw” (283). A similar destiny threatened the other Amerindian languages, that risked being lost like the mislaid volume referred to by Chateaubriand: “We also have the manuscript of an Iroquois-English dictionary; unfortunately, the first volume, from the letters A to L, has been lost” (290). In this general meditation on the mortality of languages, French is no exception: if Chateaubriand asserts that, everything considered, the independence of New France would have been an advantage for metropolitan France, it is because this enlarged Francophone world would have covered a much greater surface than it did in his time. Chateaubriand’s discourse on the French colonies of the New World stems from the same past conditional logic as Lezay-Marmésia’s earlier description of Saint-Pierre, given that the two men both imagine what French America could have become if other historical circumstances had prevailed. Thus, the posthumous representation of America, at the same time that it commemorates a bygone age, is accompanied by a meditation on a future that very nearly came to be. For just as we imagine what a person *would have wanted*, what she *would have said*, or, still better, what *should have happened* to avoid her premature demise, the author of a posthumous representation of America, when he notes the disappearance of a period of its history, likewise seeks to imagine the events that could have prevented it. The posthumous representation of America is similar to the image that Chateaubriand gives of himself in the *Voyage*: it is a portrait of both what was and what could have been in other circumstances, for this recreation of the past underscores the fragility of the present by recalling that it could have been written in a different manner.
Politics of the French Language

After citing several economic and strategic advantages that the preservation of New France could have brought to metropolitan France, Chateaubriand returned to the question of the French language. He was saddened by the place that it had been assigned in the world: “We are excluded from the new universe where the human race is being reborn. The English and Spanish languages are used in Africa, Asia, in the islands of the South Sea, and on the continent of the two Americas to interpret the thought of several million people, while we, dispossessed of the conquests of our courage and genius, scarcely hear the language of Racine, Colbert, and Louis XIV spoken in a few villages of Louisiana and Canada, which are under foreign domination; it only exists there as a witness of our reversals of fortune and our political errors” (290).

At first glance, Chateaubriand was only concerned with a linguistic problem. He deplored the weak international influence of French, especially when he compared the fate of his mother tongue with that of Spanish and English, languages that, by dint of being supported by more effective colonial policies, were practiced in 1827 in a far wider territory and by a much larger number of speakers. Nonetheless, it was not only the fate of the French language that concerned him but more exactly the role that it could have played in a successful colonial policy. The short enumeration at the end of the aforementioned excerpt illustrates this position. The “language of Racine” is a well-known expression referring to an author who used the French language so brilliantly that his idiom became a metaphor for it. Conversely, the locutions “language of Colbert” and “language of Louis XIV” are not expressions that can be used innocently as synonyms of “language of Molière.” Chateaubriand employs them to connect the French language explicitly to the creation of the colonial empire.

If Colbert has remained famous in the history of his country, it is not for signing works that expressed the quintessence of the French language. It is for contributing to the construction of the power of his master as Secretary of State of the King’s House and of the Navy, but also by creating commercial companies—the Compagnie française des Indes Orientales (1664), the Compagnie française des Indes Occidentales (1664), and the Compagnie du Levant (1670). Colbert was also the originator of the first version of the Code Noir (Black Code) (implemented two years after his death in 1685) and of the institutionalization of slavery and slave trade by France. In the colonial domain, moreover, he furthered the development of the colony in Canada by contributing to the constitution of its “demographic and economic base.” The expression “language of Colbert” may thus be read as a synonym for “language of the individual who worked for the glory of France through the construction of its colonial empire.”

Likewise, to use the expression “language of Louis XIV” allowed Chateaubriand to adopt a conception of the Great Century that saw it as the time of a
double apotheosis, that of both France and of its national language. This thesis was developed by numerous authors in the seventeenth century, and notably by Father Bouhours (1628–1702). The power of France and the spreading of French go together, if we are to believe this writer: “They already speak French in all the courts of Europe. All enlightened foreigners pride themselves on knowing French; even those who hate our nation the most love its language . . . ; the people themselves, even though they are only commoners, share in that respect the good taste of respectable people: they learn our language nearly as soon as their own, as if by a secret instinct that informs them, in spite of themselves, that they will one day have to obey the king of France as they would their legitimate master.” The expression “language of Louis XIV” as used by Chateaubriand refers therefore to a time when the diffusion of French was both a means of cultural domination by France in Europe and the result of the military prestige of the Sun King. However, the use of this term is imbued with a dark irony.

Chateaubriand published the *Voyage* at a time when the “language of Louis XIV” was spoken in a country that no longer had anything in common with the one that Father Bouhours was praising. While the monarchy he exalted “[had not] changed since its establishment,” the one that Chateaubriand had under his eyes at the time of the publication of the *Voyage* had been restored following the Revolution and the Empire. Moreover, far from sowing its “lilies” throughout the world, it had seen the vast empire built by Louis XIV and Colbert shrink progressively. If Chateaubriand was also convinced that there was a community of interests between France and its language, it did not lead him to believe, as did Father Bouhours, in the incorruptibility of the second on the basis of the supposed inalterability of the first: it was, on the contrary, because he recognized the probability of a degeneration of France when he meditated on the decline of French in the world. To reflect on the ruins of New France as Chateaubriand did was not only to adopt an elegiac posture and apply the “logic of the past conditional,” an action with no impact on the present, since the French colonial empire in America was already definitively eliminated when the *Voyage* was published. This meditation also allowed the author to hold out to the inhabitants of metropolitan France a mirror in which they could contemplate a possible future for their country. The posthumous representation of America thus never serves solely to preserve the memory of a past period in order to embalm it in a book; the commemoration also stands as a warning. This specular relationship between New France and metropolitan France was reinforced by Chateaubriand through the homology he established between his countrymen and the Amerindians.

*Portrait of the Frenchman as an Amerindian*

According to Chateaubriand, human civilizations are subjected to an ineluctable historical law that dictates their progressive degeneration and leads eventually to
their disappearance. “Every society, he believes, including the Indian societies of America, is built on the ruins of a preceding human civilization that possessed its own rules and development, often remarkably complete,” observes Reichler.\textsuperscript{96} Chateaubriand finds the proof of the decline of the Amerindian tribes in the shrinking of their population and in a general corruption for which he blames the pernicious influence of the Europeans: “Thus, their civilization, in penetrating by commercial means into the Amerindian tribes, instead of developing their intelligence resulted in their degradation” (367). However, this phenomenon of degradation does not concern solely Amerindian civilization, since, several times in the\textit{Voyage}, the fate of the French colonial empire in America and that of the Amerindian tribes are paired: “Thus, France disappeared from North America, like those Indian tribes with which they got on so well, and of which I observed a few remnants,” Chateaubriand laments (372).

The good relations between the Amerindians and the French is a commonplace of colonial discourse on North America. Presented by Chateaubriand as the result of an affinity between the temperament of the Amerindians and that of his countrymen (363), it was in reality a consequence of the fragility of the first settlements in the New World, the French forming with the natives alliances that were essential to their survival. After noting the inability of the French to reduce to slavery a very large number of Amerindians, Miller concludes, “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.”\textsuperscript{97}

This identification between the fate of the French empire in America and that of the Amerindian tribes has, however, a broader significance: it announces in its turn the decline of France, as if a historical chain linked the Amerindians to New France and New France to its metropolitan parent. In this respect, Chateaubriand reverses the meaning traditionally lent to the good relations between the Amerindians and the French. Whereas this so-called affinity between the two peoples was used to justify the integration of the Amerindians into the French empire, Chateaubriand turned it into a warning to his countrymen, concerned that they risked meeting a fate similar to that of those tribes whose members in times past called the king of France “our father.” Chateaubriand emphasized, therefore, the existence of an irresistible historical process that had already affected the Amerindian tribes and which, soon, would finish its work in France itself, so that this country could very well become, in the not too distant future, the theater of a narrative in which a young traveler would describe the ruins of the Louvre and the demolished towers of Notre-Dame and would meditate on the progressive decline of French civilization while murmuring French words whose meaning had been long forgotten. The progressive decadence of the Amerindian tribes was thus far
more than a simple example to which the situation of France could be compared: it was a reflection of the decline of France after the first empire.

Published three years before the end of the Restoration, the *Voyage en Amérique* proposed a veiled reflection on the history of France during the first half of the nineteenth century and, especially, on its ability to survive the break caused by the Revolution: “Between the lines, there is indeed an account of France’s present state in 1826 that we need to read, a state that could constitute a stage in a definitive degeneration,” observes Rossi. In this history, Chateaubriand played a prominent role: after having been the French Minister in Berlin, then ambassador to London (1821), the representative of France at the Congress of Vienna (1822), and Minister of Foreign Affairs, he was dismissed on June 6, 1824, by the president of the Council of Ministers, Joseph de Villèle. It was then that he undertook the publication of his *Œuvres complètes*, of which the *Voyage en Amérique* is a part. The recovery and rewriting of this text came therefore at a time when Chateaubriand was harboring particularly severe doubts about the future of the Restoration: “Caught between a new very republican world and an old very military empire, which suddenly shivered in the embrace of peace, Europe more than ever needs to understand its position in order to save itself. If we add exterior political errors to our internal political errors, the *decomposition* will occur more quickly: the cannon that we sometimes refuse to fire for a just cause, sooner or later we are forced to fire it for a deplorable one.”

“Decomposition”: the term is typical of political thought according to which societies are like men and head imperceptibly toward their disappearance. Chateaubriand’s faith in the future of the French monarchy weakened even more during the years following the publication of the *Voyage*. Lefort remarks that after 1830, the author of *Atala* was one of the rare writers of his time to become aware that the monarchy was just as incapable of coinciding with what it was before the Revolution as to continue on in the present. Already in *Les Nat-chez*, Chateaubriand’s distant horizon was “the fall of European civilization into a decadence that the Revolution was destined to consummate,” as Fumaroli remarks. The horizon is no less dark in the *Voyage*, where the example of the loss of New France serves as an omen for the mainland.

The use of the specular function in the *Voyage* is an additional point in common with the works of Crèvecoeur and Lezay-Marnésia, in which the description of America is always associated with a depiction of France, whether it is to set it up as a model, as Crèvecoeur does, or to present it as a refuge for the French fleeing the Revolution, as Lezay-Marnésia proposes. For France, America is a figure of otherness in which it is nonetheless possible to recognize itself, a double through which it can pass to return to itself. This double has, in fact, a fundamental point in common with France: it shares the same future. In the chapter titled “Present State of the Savages of North America,” Chateaubriand
recalls the name that the Iroquois had given themselves: “Driven by the European populations toward the northwest of North America, the savage peoples come to die, by a strange destiny, on the very shore on which they disembarked centuries ago to take possession of America. In the Iroquois language, the Indians called themselves men of forever, ongoue-onoue: these men of forever no longer exist, and the foreigners will soon leave only the soil of their tomb to the legitimate heirs of a whole world” (359).

The shore of North America is both a point of departure and of arrival, the place of birth of a civilization and the place it puts in its final appearance. Similarly, do the peoples of Europe who cross the Atlantic not have to fear, in several centuries or in a shorter period of time, the extinction that has struck their predecessors in North America? The earth is covered with civilizations that aspire to immortality and nonetheless perish one after the other. Of course, the decline of the Amerindian tribes had an exterior cause—the conquest of their territory by the colonists—whose equivalent is not to be found in the Restoration. Nevertheless, Chateaubriand observes in the *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811) that the destruction of great civilizations may have a variety of origins: “Athens and Sparta did not fall for the same reasons that led to the downfall of Rome.”

Following in the footsteps of Montesquieu, who had studied the roots of the decadence of Rome, Chateaubriand reflected on the progressive decline of Greece, which he explained by internal factors, in particular its moral corruption and lack of political ambition after the victory of Sparta over Athens: “In its turn, triumphant Lacedaemon, like Athens, found in its own institutions the first cause of its ruin.” Likewise, the decline of France during the Restoration also had causes inherent to its own social organization, in particular the development of what Chateaubriand calls, in a text from 1818, “the principle of self-interest.” Variable, diverse, this shortsighted principal “can only be the shifting base of an edifice of a few days,” whereas the one he opposes to it, “the principle of duty,” is the most stable foundation on which a political regime can be built, since it encourages individuals to devote themselves to the general good. In Chateaubriand’s opinion, the victory of “the principle of self-interest” over “the principle of duty” is a regrettable novelty introduced into French political life by the Restoration, since the French Revolution—despite the numerous atrocities that occurred during that period—saw many examples of noble sacrifices (“these horrible times are also the occasion for acts of great dedication”). Alternatively, the first Empire—which Chateaubriand disparaged mercilessly—partially redeemed itself by inspiring in the French an unquenchable thirst for glory and by keeping alive the aristocratic tradition of honor (“Buonaparte charmed people by the prestige of his glory; and everything that is great bears within itself the principle of a law”). On the contrary, the rapid proliferation of the “principle of self-interest” during the first years of the Restoration was responsible for
an increase in moral corruption that risked bringing it down: “[T]his principle of self-interest, upon which they want to base our government, corrupted the people more in the space of three years than the whole Revolution in a quarter century.” Whether it has internal or external causes, the decadence of societies is an inevitable historical phenomenon, and if it can no doubt be slowed down, Chateaubriand believes it impossible to stop or reverse it: all civilizations degenerate and their last vestige—the national language—will disappear in its turn. Amerindians, Americans, and Frenchmen of France and America form, in spite of their differences, a group united by a common destiny: in the *Voyage*, they all intone the common requiem of their ineluctable disappearance.

Ultimately, Chateaubriand’s discourse on America allows us to deconstruct the meanings suggested by the expression “New World.” This formula presupposes, in fact, that America is second in relation to Europe, since the latter “discovered” it: more recent, it is also less civilized, as bears witness the vastness of the forests that cover it. For Chateaubriand, the predominance of nature in America does not indicate a lesser degree of civilization in relation to Europe: it is, on the contrary, the sign that time has accomplished its destructive work for a longer length of time, permitting the forests to grow and cover the remnants of forgotten cultures. Such is the conclusion he is led to by the discovery of some Amerindian ruins on an island: “What people had lived on this island? Its name, race, the time of its existence, everything is unknown; it lived perhaps when this particular world that was hiding it in its bosom was still unknown to the three other quarters of the earth. The silence of this people is perhaps contemporary with the noise made by great European nations fallen silent in their turn, leaving nothing of themselves but ruins.”

By reversing the order of temporal precedence traditionally established between Europe and America, Chateaubriand nonetheless established an underlying continuity between the peoples of these two continents. The silence of the Amerindian tribes foreshadows that of the European nations who, after having been in the spotlight, will disappear in their turn from the memory of mankind: in the mirror of America may be read the future of France, and Chateaubriand will give a yet darker illustration of this specular relationship in the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*.

The *Reenchantment of America: The Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (1848)

**Aesthetics and Politics of Convergence: From America to the Orient**

**Farewells to Analogy**

In completing the books VI to VIII of the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand brought to the surface a new island in the archipelago of his American texts.
The *Voyage en Amérique* exhibited a curious survival of cosmography, a discourse combining heterogeneous textual fragments in order to show the harmony of divine creation based on correspondences hidden from the uninitiated.\(^1\) The American books of the *Mémoires*, for their part, throw off the vestiges of cosmographic thought by producing an original form of representation of the New World. Chateaubriand dismissed the analogical approach at the beginning of the relation of his journey to the United States, developing in its place an aesthetic of convergence of America and the Orient. How is the farewell to analogy effected in the *Mémoires*? And to what extent does the posthumous representation of America allow us to reflect on the future of the French colonial empire?

Analogy is an effective, albeit dangerous, means of evoking what has not yet been seen or thought. Dangerous, indeed, because the inherent risk of analogy consists in identifying the unknown to the known in order to ward off the distress provoked by the confrontation with otherness. Let us return a moment to the period of André Thevet that was referred to earlier, when European travelers brought back to their countries the first notion of plants and animals foreign to their countrymen. Thevet described the tapir to his French readers in the following terms: “Its fur is reddish like that of certain mules or cows over here; and that is why Christians over there [in Brazil] call such animals cows, since they only differ from cows in that they do not have horns; but, in fact, it seems to me that they resemble donkeys as much as cows.”\(^2\) This passage demonstrates the difficulty facing a traveler when he attempts to give his contemporaries an initial notion of an unfamiliar object. Among the devices at his disposal, analogy enables him to introduce an unknown object by comparing it to another with which the reader is already familiar. However, a new object is not only the counterpart of an object that is familiar to the reader, with the exception of a few obvious differences; a whole series of comparisons is required to describe it. The hybridization of the new object is the first consequence of the analogical method: the tapir is only conceivable in the form of a composite image, combining fragments of reality borrowed from a variety of sources. Moreover, a second consequence of analogy is to “reduce otherness to resemblance.”\(^3\) The series of comparisons required to familiarize the reader with the new object eventually blurs its specificity: its difference is progressively obliterated as similarities with familiar objects enable the mind to grasp it.

In the American books of the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand distanced himself from the practice of analogy, a device that was omnipresent in his travel narratives, and particularly in the *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811).\(^4\) This symbolic dismissal is expressed implicitly in the tale of his crossing of the Atlantic. Chateaubriand recalls a certain Pierre Villeneuve and the conversations they had. Villeneuve was a man of considerable experience and “had served in India under the Bailli de Suffren and in America under the comte d’Estaing; he
was involved in myriad matters.” He answers the chevalier de Chateaubriand’s questions as an heir to the cosmographers of the sixteenth century:

I asked him how the people were dressed, the form of the trees, the color of the earth and the sky, the taste of the fruit; if the pineapples were better than the peaches, the palm trees more beautiful than the oaks. He explained *all of that to me by comparisons with things that I knew*: the palm tree was a large cabbage, an Indian’s dress that of my grandmother; the camels resembled donkeys with a hump; all the peoples of the Orient, and especially the Chinese, were cowards and thieves. Villeneuve was from Brittany, and *we never failed to finish* with praise for the incomparable beauty of our motherland. (1:436; emphasis added)

This summary of their conversations is both an implementation and an implicit questioning of the analogical approach. The European points of reference identified with the unfamiliar realities of the New World have an intentionally grotesque quality (“large cabbage,” “my grandmother’s dress,” “donkey with a hump”). To demonstrate the weakness of the analogical method that establishes correspondences between unconnected realities on the sole basis of a superficial resemblance, Chateaubriand eschewed the use of the logical element of comparisons, the adverb “like,” repeated many times by Thevet in the excerpt quoted previously. He lays bare the latent logic of analogy, which consists in concluding that two things are indissociable on the basis of an apparent similarity by identifying the European referent with the American object by the use of the auxiliary “to be.” By asserting that the palm tree is a large cabbage, he demonstrates by a *reductio ad absurdum* the inability of analogy to introduce adequately an object absent from the reader’s own universe. In addition, we recognize in Chateaubriand’s “donkey with humps” a distant descendant of Thevet’s “donkey-cow,” unless the author of the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* was recalling here the *tapiroussou*, an animal “half cow half donkey” according to Jean de Léry, or of the Egyptian hippopotamus that Herodotus described as a cross between an ox and a horse.

This implementation of the analogical approach leads to its questioning, because Chateaubriand was suggesting that it gave a pseudoscientific basis for the ethnocentrism of the person who was using it. The conversation with Pierre Villeneuve finishes, in fact, with generalizations that we would not hesitate today to call xenophobic: “all the peoples of the Orient, and especially the Chinese, were cowards and thieves.” Thus, the result of the analogical approach is to compare peoples and produce conclusions that, far from astutely analyzing their differences, shows how they are supposedly similar. When he finishes his generalizations, the conclusion of Chateaubriand’s travel companion is not surprising:
“Villeneuve was from Brittany, and we never failed to finish with praise for the incomparable beauty of our motherland.” The expression “we never failed to finish” denotes the mechanical character of an ethnocentric judgment derived from a reasoning based on analogy. The travelers—who had not even yet arrived at their destination at this point in the narrative—have already decreed the superiority of their own country over those that one of them had not even yet visited. With consummate art, Chateaubriand demonstrated the inability of analogical discourse to portray its object adequately and, without making a single comment on the conversations he has just summarized, suggests through irony his critical reservations.

It would be regrettable to only see in this brief exchange an example of the author’s humor. Its placement at the juncture between the travel narrative and the arrival in America endows it with a programmatic function. Chateaubriand announces here, indirectly, that he will not use analogy as a means of description of the New World: the posthumous representation of America in books VI to VIII of the Mémoires d’outre-tombe features rather an aesthetic of convergence.

Spatial and Temporal Convergence

In the Mémoires d’outre-tombe, Chateaubriand adopts a synoptic vision on landscapes as on the panorama of his life. An explorer of his own memory, Chateaubriand assumes this perspective when he seeks to account for his individual history in order to emphasize the secret relationship between the apparently unconnected events of his life: looking down from the summit of his life, advanced in age and approaching death, the author is able to establish parallels that he could not perceive when, younger and playing the role of his own life, he only had the limited perspective of a traveler tracing his path as best he could. Critics have already emphasized the existence of the parallels that abound in Chateaubriand’s work, not only between individuals (himself and Napoleon, Napoleon and Washington) and countries (France and Greece) but also between different moments of his existence. In a phrase that has remained famous, the author presents thus his typical bent of mind: “My memory constantly opposes my journeys to my journeys, mountains to mountains, rivers to rivers, forests to forests, and my life destroys my life” (4:157).

The first view of America was the pretext for one of these overlaps, sudden convergences of two distinct moments and places provoked by an experience of the author: “Two days after this accident, we sighted land. My heart leapt when the captain pointed it out to me: America! It was just barely discernable in the top of a few maples sticking up from the water. The palm trees at the mouth of the Nile beckoned to me from the shore of Egypt in the same manner” (1:454–55). This is the narrator of the Mémoires, writing after the journey to the Orient related in the Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem, offering a comparison that the
traveler was incapable of in 1791, since he was not to travel to Egypt until October 1806; reciprocally, Egypt reflects in its turn America, as also witnessed in the Itinéraire. One of the most revealing examples of this memorial operation by collision of memories takes place in another travel narrative by Chateaubriand, the Voyage au Mont-Blanc (1805):

Finally, the odor of pine is aromatic and agreeable; it has a particular charm for me, especially since I smelled it from the sea, twenty leagues from the Virginia coast. It therefore always awakens in my mind the idea of this New World that was announced to me by a perfumed breath, this beautiful sky, these brilliant seas where the perfume from the forests was wafted to me on the morning breeze; and as everything is linked in my memory, it calls also back to mind the feelings of regret and hope that occupied me when, leaning on the railing of the ship, I was dreaming of the motherland I had lost and of this wilderness I was going to find.”

To achieve the juncture between two memories, a common term is necessary. In the Voyage au Mont-Blanc, it is the odor of the pine tree; in the Mémoires and the Itinéraire, the sight of trees and pyramids. This common term calls forth, uncontrollably, a memory of the past in the present moment. The verb “to awaken” used in the passage just quoted suggests that an individual moves forward in time, bringing with him buried memories that are just waiting for an event that will trigger their arousal, intact. However, it is not just a question of confronting two memories, the odor of pine in the Pyrenees recalling that which perfumed the coasts of Virginia, and this scent only. Through this memory, a whole past affective universe rushes back into mind, the perfume only being a trigger: Proust was not mistaken in recognizing in the Mémoires the intuition of the phenomenon of “involuntary memory,” whose complexity would be explored in In Search of Lost Time. In the excerpt of the Voyage au Mont-Blanc, the “feelings of regret and hope” that Chateaubriand experienced upon the discovery of America come rushing back to him; the Itinéraire, instead, indicates the return of his “frame of mind” at the moment of his discovery of the pyramids of Egypt. When the conjunction of two memories occurs, a former attitude arises to color the present frame of mind of the author, producing an affective simultaneity of discrete moments in the past and the opportunity to meditate on what, in his life and in the general course of the world, has changed between the remembered moment and the instant of its later recollection.

The Logic of Convergence
At first glance, a purely personal logic presides over the chain of memories in the mind of the author. If the odor of the pine trees in Virginia and that of the pine
trees in the Pyrenees are intrinsically comparable, the maple of the New World has no objective similarities with the palm trees of the Nile, any more than the ruins in Ohio resemble the pyramids in Egypt. This detail shows an essential difference between analogy and convergence. Analogy is based on apparent similarities on which people in general can agree: to return to the example found in the work by André Thevet, the morphology of the tapir presents objective resemblances with that of the donkey and the cow that are borne out upon close examination. Contrary to analogy, spatial and temporal convergences do not result from the revelation of points in common that can be confirmed by simple observation. Indeed, convergence is rendered possible by an object that plays the role of an intermediary: the odor of the pine tree links the present moment and the memory of the Virginia coast. However, it is for Chateaubriand alone that this scent brings together two periods of his life, since he associates it with memories that are uniquely his. While analogy can be generalized, convergence remains a personal phenomenon. Moreover, analogy is a device at the service of dissemination of knowledge: it serves to introduce to others an unfamiliar object—at the cost, it is true, of an omission of subtle differences between the objects compared in order to emphasize their similarities. Alternatively, convergence remains restricted to the awareness of an individual in whom periods of life meet and merge. A brief detour in the thought of Spinoza will help us to further clarify the logic it obeys.

In proposition XLIV of the second part of his *Ethics*, Spinoza studies the mechanism by which two distinct objects appear simultaneously in the mind of an individual. The “soul” of the subject—to use Spinoza’s vocabulary—conceives of the existence of a necessary relationship between two objects while the establishment of this connection results from the repetition of a situation ruled by chance. In the course of proposition XLIV, Spinoza gives the example of a child who saw Pierre in the morning, Paul at noon, Simeon in the evening, and Pierre again the next morning. The child, he says, will ultimately associate each of these three men with the respective moments of the day when he had met them. However, although he conceives of it as a necessary relationship, this relationship established between Pierre and the beginning of the day only exists for the child. Likewise, the link that unites Ohio and the pyramids of Egypt, the shores of the Nile and those of Virginia, the forests of the New World and the desert of Sabba is contingent, for it is only for Chateaubriand that there is a connection between these spaces, a connection established by a common term (pyramids, trees, horses, etc.). These secret springs that govern the memory of Chateaubriand suggest to Riffaterre a typology of memories: “There are thus two types of recollections in Chateaubriand: the memory that is related to general truths of philosophical meditation, and the memory that, on the contrary, focuses on the authenticity of personal experience. The latter, which
we could call affective memory, is nothing other than the Proustian memory: its mechanism is the sudden superimposition of a current sensation and an old recollection.”

Nonetheless, the distinction established by Riffaterre between “philosophical memories” and “affective memories” minimizes the collective significance that his personal “recollections” hold for him. In fact, the spatial and temporal convergences observed in the Mémoires d’outre-tombe do not obey solely an affective logic that would permit us to oppose them to memories related to “general truths of philosophical meditation.” In the Mémoires, the singular is not opposed to the collective, given that the personal memories of the author are endowed with historical and political dimensions. What is the collective value of the convergences in the American books of the Mémoires? What political role do they confer on the commemorative representation of an America foundering at the turn of the eighteenth century?

From America to the Middle East

Before conceiving the project of the Mémoires d’outre-tombe, Chateaubriand had begun the Mémoires de ma vie, whose ambition was to “account for oneself to oneself,” to explain his “inexplicable heart,” in which “most of the sentiments have remained buried.” The Mémoires d’outre-tombe distinguish themselves from this original autobiographical project inspired by Montaigne by establishing a homological relationship between the history of the author and that of his epoch: “If I were destined to live on, I would represent in my person, represented in my memoirs, the principles, ideas, events, and catastrophes, in short, the epic of my time, especially since I saw a world begin and finish, and the opposing characteristics of this ending and this beginning are mingled with my opinions.”

The specificity of the autobiographical enterprise of Chateaubriand consists in this voluntary superimposition of the history of the hero of the Mémoires and that of his time, such that the evolution of one embodies metaphorically that of the other. The hero of the Mémoires is more than the contemporary of a historical evolution that he can report on for posterity: his destiny is described as the symbolic incarnation of a period of the history of the world. As Cavallin phrases it, “Not only the action of the historical person, but also the character, official identity, personal biography, childhood, adulthood, and old age, the history and personal identity of the man of the Mémoires are historical . . . , that is, capable of representing or symbolizing the history of human destinies in the age when he lived.” Interpreting his own life as if it were a myth before writing it as such, Chateaubriand did not attribute to chance the coincidences he discovered in the various events of his existence but interpreted them as signs of a global journey. This symbolic dimension of the experiences of the hero of the Mémoires is revealed, in particular, in
the analysis of the following passage, whose earlier version in the *Voyage* was briefly referred to above:

I had to send the Dutchman to Fort Niagara to seek a permit to enter the territory that was under British control; I did so with a heavy heart, because I remembered that France had once dominated both Upper and Lower Canada. My guide returned with the permit; I still have it; it is signed “Captain Gordon.” Is it not peculiar that I found the same English name on the door of my cell in Jerusalem? “Thirteen pilgrims had written their names on the door inside the room: the first was named Charles Lombard, and he was in Jerusalem in 1669; the last is John Gordon, and the date of his passage is 1804.” (1:487; emphasis original)

A recollection of Jerusalem arises during a retrospective narration devoted to the region of Niagara Falls. The convergence between these two periods is provoked by the mention of the English name “Gordon.” In his memory of America, as in the one left by Jerusalem, this name is associated with an obstacle: it designates the captain of whom Chateaubriand is obligated to request the authorization to continue his journey on a land that formerly belonged to France; it then appears to him on the door of a cell. In the second case, the name “Gordon” is the last one on a list that begins with a French surname: just as the French preceded the English in Canada, the Jerusalem list suggests that they were also the first to reach the holy city where the English have now succeeded them. The spatial and temporal convergence in this excerpt allowed Chateaubriand to indicate a direction of the history of his time: he points out the continuity between the French colonial enterprise in the New World and in the Orient and designates the English as the adversaries who posed an obstacle to French expansion in the Mediterranean basin as they had already done in America. More broadly, if we accept the idea that the *Mémoires* relate, through the destiny of their hero, the epic of a passage between two centuries or, as Cavallin says, “the myth of this palingenetic passage from an old abolished world to a new world to come,” it becomes necessary to reevaluate the recurrent convergences in books VI to VIII. These sudden convergences between discrete places and periods are endowed with a value that is less strictly subjective than the associations of ideas in Spinozan philosophy: they have a collective and political significance.

The story of captain Gordon is far from being the only example of a correlation between the two great journeys that Chateaubriand related in the American books of the *Mémoires* and in the *Itinéraire*. These two works evoke frequent parallels between America and the Orient, and allow Chateaubriand, as Dobie remarks, to “create an imaginary comparison between his own subjectivity and
the world, such that the circular completeness of his studies and of his life cycle correspond to that of the history of the world.”¹³¹ As we saw in the course of our study of the *Voyage en Amérique*, Chateaubriand deplores the disappearance of the French colonies of North America, for they would not only have represented a considerable economic advantage for metropolitan France but would also have facilitated the expansion of the French language overseas.¹³² French colonial ambitions, however, after suffering major setbacks in North America and Haiti, turned at the beginning of the nineteenth century toward a new space: Africa and, in particular, North Africa. Between 1798 and 1801, France undertook the Egyptian campaign under the command of Bonaparte, followed by that of his successors. After the assassination of Jean-Baptiste Kléber on June 14, 1800, and the Turkish offensive of August 31, 1801, the French expeditionary corps returned home. The colonial projects of France in North Africa were, however, far from being abandoned at this time, as the beginning of the colonization of Algeria in 1830 clearly proves.

In the course of his political career, Chateaubriand was an ardent partisan of French expansion in the Orient. In a speech given before the Chamber of Peers in 1816, he declared himself in favor of a new “crusade” in order to terminate the enslavement of Christians by the “Barbary powers.”¹³³ Since the slave trade had just been abolished by the English Parliament, it was urgent, Chateaubriand claimed, to lead a Christian-inspired initiative to “put an end to white slavery.”¹³⁴ Like Alexis de Tocqueville, Chateaubriand would also applaud with great enthusiasm the Algiers expedition (3:449) and consider the conquest of Algeria as one of the major accomplishments of the restored monarchy (4:310).¹³⁵ The French colonial project thus received his unconditional support, whether it took place across the Atlantic or in the region of the Mediterranean basin. Dobie observes, in this respect, the superimposition of the evolution of the French colonial enterprise and the personal experience of the author: “It goes without saying that the travels of Chateaubriand correspond to the migrations of French colonization; France had lost her American colonies in 1763, with the exception of Louisiana, but prompted by Talleyrand, it began to establish itself in the Levant, a region that promised to be just as receptive.”¹³⁶ The goal of these “correspondences” between the journeys of Chateaubriand and the displacement of French ambitions was to emphasize the continuity of the colonial enterprise from one space to the next and to announce through the portrayal of the past the potential of the future. The bond uniting these two colonial projects, however, is not only expressed metaphorically in the *Mémoires*. When he describes Niagara Falls, Chateaubriand compares explicitly the French missionaries in America to Napoleon’s soldiers in the Orient: “Our priests embraced the beautiful vistas of America and consecrated them with their blood; our soldiers applauded the ruins of Thebes and presented arms in Andalusia: all the genius of France is
in the joint militia of our camps and our altars” (1:490). In this passage, we find a pairing of two projects of conquest (spiritual and military) on two spaces (America and the Levant) for the greater glory of a single nation: France. By embodying in his personal journey the future destinies of his country, Chateaubriand designated the Orient as the new area of legitimate expansion of France after the disappearance of its empire in North America. In doing so, he mixed inextricably the commemorative representation of a past America and a programmatic political discourse. The convergence aesthetics developed in the Mémoires d’outre-tombe presents the Orient as the compensation offered to France for the loss of its North American empire. It compares discrete spaces in order to underline the extension of French ambition from America to Algeria and only evokes the colors and fragrances of the Orient in the middle of the landscapes of the New World to balance the loss of an empire with the promise of another that France would need to take control of and preserve in a more sustained manner. By emphasizing the void that the disappearance of its empire across the Atlantic had left in the history of France, the posthumous representation of America designated the Orient as a second chance for it to cover itself with glory and shine throughout the world.

THE DISSEMINATION OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The End of the Concordance

Claude Lévi-Strauss was an attentive reader of Chateaubriand. If he readily recognized the debt he owed to Rousseau, the shadow of the author of Atala also hovers over Tristes tropiques. The elegiac style and sumptuous sentences, the twilight vision of an Amerindian humanity in its final gleaming before a clearly irremediable decadence, the inclusion by the older author of textual fragments written by the person he was at the time of his travels, and even the functioning of his memory by sudden temporal convergences—there are numerous characteristics of the unclassifiable work signed by Lévi-Strauss in 1955 that recall the writing of Chateaubriand. Among the multiple echoes between their works, none can be heard so clearly as that of the regret concerning an original experience of alterity, an epiphany that never occurs twice and after which the modern ethnographer pines in viewing his travels as pale copies of those that had been accomplished centuries before: “I would have liked to have lived in the time of real journeys, when one could see in all of its splendor a spectacle not yet spoiled, contaminated, damned; not having crossed this area myself but like Bernier, Tavernier, Manucci. . . .” However, Lévi-Strauss was not frozen in a melancholic posture, observing that the innumerable losses that the ethnographer is justified in regretting—these customs, celebrations, and beliefs of which nothing remains other than the fragmentary testimony of their predecessors—are to some extent
compensated for by the knowledge and curiosity with which the modern traveler is armed when he observes so-called primitive societies. Losses and gains balance out in this alternative that the ethnographer cannot escape: “sometimes an ancient traveler, confronted with a prodigious spectacle of which he understood nearly nothing—or still worse, that moved him to mockery and disgust; other times a modern traveler, seeking the remnants of a world that has disappeared.”

These reflections were capable of dispelling some of the regrets felt by the most recent visitor of the New World, since his predecessors could only contemplate with the most rudimentary optical equipment the most shimmering and diverse spectacle that was offered to them. *Tristes tropiques* is marked both by a strong melancholy for a mythical time, that of the beginnings, but seeks nevertheless to eschew nostalgic lamentation by assigning to ethnography a new object, “the study of modes of organization of the sentient experience—and that is what Lévi-Strauss will explore in *La Pensée sauvage* and *Mythologiques*.”

More than a century earlier, Chateaubriand was also turning toward the period of the first contact between Europe and the New World, both to lament not having been its contemporary and to seek the means of reviving it: “The Canadians are no longer how they were depicted by Cartier, Champlain, Lahontan, Lescarbot, Laffiteau, Charlevoix, and the *Lettres édifiantes*: the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth were still the time of outsized imagination and naïve mores; the marvel of the one reflected a virgin nature, and the candor of the others reproduced the simplicity of the savage” (1:495). The verb “reflect” underlines the harmony that formerly existed between the European imagination and American nature. In the sixteenth century, the imagination of the travelers was capable of fictions whose marvels equaled those that nature still offered, in this period when human activity had not yet altered it. Likewise, the simplicity of Chateaubriand’s predecessors in America was just like that of the first inhabitants of the New World: the traveler was scarcely different from the Amerindian, for both of them were inclined to believe in the existence of monsters that would not have been out of place in the *Odyssey* (495). The fragile miracle of this harmony between the observer and the observed, still possible in the sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, had definitively dissipated at the time of the writing of the *Mémoires*. Henceforth, the traveler could no longer escape the second paradox of the New World: he always comes too late when he arrives in America in search of a virgin nature and a new world—in which he discovers a society whose advanced state of civilization reminds him painfully of Europe.

Chateaubriand explained the disappointment that awaited the Europeans in America by the considerable increase of knowledge available on its subject: “[T]he interest in travel narratives diminishes each day, as the number of travelers increases; the philosophical spirit has put an end to the marvels of the wilderness,” he observed in the article devoted to the explorer Alexander Mackenzie.
The “philosophical spirit” that accumulates and organizes knowledge on the American continent was directly opposed to the “outsized imagination” of the sixteenth century, just as the “modern scholars” and the first European travelers in America were set in opposition. While the spirit of the Enlightenment considered the increase of knowledge to be one of the instruments of human progress, Chateaubriand felt that it accomplished simultaneously a work of destruction, since it promoted a rational mundaneness by reducing the place left to dreaming and imagination. He directly foreshadowed the analyses of Max Weber in his studies of religious sociology and Marcel Gauchet in Le Désenchantement du monde (The Disenchantment of the World).

The term “disenchanted,” precisely, was used by Chateaubriand when he cited in his article devoted to the discovery of the Northwest Passage an alexandrine by his friend Fontanes: “The disenchanted woods have lost their miracles.” It is to this disenchantment that Chateaubriand opposed the charms of his writing in books VI to VIII of the Mémoires d’outre-tombe. Indeed, the problem that he met consisted in representing the New World as he would have liked to discover it and consistent with the image bequeathed by the European travelers of the sixteenth century, instead of representing it as he had seen it, that is, as a country whose reality disappointed one’s desires and deceived one’s expectations. In other words, it was incumbent upon him to provide an analeptic representation of the United States.

An analeptic representation of North America accomplishes a double flashback: the narrator remembers both his journey and an earlier period whose recollection allows him to reenchant the America that he formerly knew. In the case of Chateaubriand, the analeptic representation of the New World permitted him to merge together the memories of his journey in 1791 with the unsatiated dream of a trip that would have taken place during the Renaissance. The alternative evoked by Lévi-Strauss—between the travelers of yore partially blind to the prodigious spectacle before them and their successors who, better able to appreciate it, discover it nonetheless after its contamination by the emissaries of their own culture—was overcome by Chateaubriand, who dreamed that he was a modern traveler transported through the magic of literature to the very heart of this bygone age. Thus, the analeptic representation of America in the Mémoires d’outre-tombe presupposes an aesthetic operation in which the choice of vocabulary is a critical dimension: it is in the choice of the signifiers, in the materiality of the writing, that Chateaubriand’s effort to reenchant his tardy voyage was expressed.

The Logic of the Signifiers
In books VI to VIII of the Mémoires, Chateaubriand uses a vocabulary belonging to the sixteenth century and provides, at key moments of his narrative, quotes borrowed from French authors of the Renaissance. His posthumous
America represents an attempt to revive this past period: because he had not belonged to those naive and brave Frenchmen who tread upon a continent unknown to their compatriots, Chateaubriand availed himself of the aesthetic of the sixteenth century to resuscitate, as Lévi-Strauss calls it, a “crucial moment of modern thought,” the moment when, “thanks to the great discoveries, a mankind that believed itself complete and perfect suddenly received, like a counter-revelation, the announcement that it wasn’t alone.”

Described as “the supreme reward” by Lévi-Strauss, the original experience that the ethnographer tries to reproduce in being “the first white man to enter an indigenous community” remains inaccessible to Chateaubriand, who had not journeyed very far into the American wilderness and had only met tribes that had been in contact with European colonists for ages. While the direct experience of a journey back in time remains possible—although it is infinitely rare and always threatened—for the enterprising ethnographer who discovers a village “still intact,” for Chateaubriand this ideal experience was necessarily mediated by the literary reinvention of a journey completed long ago and that he wished still more distant. It was thus to writing that he entrusted the task of implementing a brief abolition of time in order to transport himself to the period of the first French gaze upon America.

The use of a vocabulary belonging to a past state of the French language is relatively rare in the Mémoires d’outre-tombe: “If we consider the whole work, the total number of rare words, archaisms, technical terms, and out-and-out neologisms is modest: a little more than a hundred; and for the most part this batch appears in toto in the twelve first books and in the sections of the 4th part written between 1830 and 1833,” observes Mourot. These anachronistic terms are virtually absent from the Voyage en Amérique. A comparison of certain passages of this narrative with their rewriting in the Mémoires reveals distinct and significant vocabulary choices.

In order to describe the movement of a sign hung on a branch, Chateaubriand uses the verb “to swing” (balancer) in the Voyage. However, he prefers the verb “to shake” or “to wave” (brandiller)—an old term that Maurice Scève uses in “Le Microcosme”—to depict the same scene in the Mémoires: “Since English manners follow the English everywhere, after crossing countries where there was no sign of inhabitants, I noticed the sign of an inn that was shaking [brandillait] on the branch of a tree” (1:484). What is the logic that dictates this use of terms belonging to the language of the sixteenth century? Chateaubriand himself answered this question: “Through a bizarre assembly, there are two men in me, the man of earlier times and the man of the present: it happens that the old French language and the modern French language are both natural to me; lacking one of them, a part of my ideas was lacking as well; I therefore created a few words and rejuvenated a few others;
but there is no affectation, and I was careful to only use the expression that came to me spontaneously.”

This passage reveals that the use of anachronistic words and neologisms depended on what came into the author’s mind naturally. If there is any pastiche of the “old French language,” it is not the result of a deliberate choice: following a long immersion in works from the Renaissance, Chateaubriand acquired a perfect mastery of their lexicon, whose terms came to mind of their own accord when he tried to express a specific nuance of his thought. In books VI to VIII of the Mémoires, he uses terms from the sixteenth century when he strives to portray the New World, indicating by this fact the incompleteness of a representation of America that would make no reference to this period.

In large part devoted to the story of the crossing, book VI displays a specific vocabulary: it unites maritime and technical terms, as well as a certain number of Latinisms. Conversely, terms belonging to the vocabulary of the sixteenth century appear in Chateaubriand’s writing when he relates his journey by land in America, and, revealingly, beginning with the chapter that follows the depiction of the cities that he hastened to leave. Chateaubriand uses, notably, terms that are characteristic of the poetry of the Renaissance: “We camped in prairies adorned [peinturées] with butterflies and flowers” (485). This “peinturées” that is found in the poetry of Ronsard’s contemporaries, adds a light sixteenth-century sheen to a scene of nature from the end of the eighteenth century, sorely needed to restore it to its original splendor and enhance its colors. Following the same logic, the verb “s’enguirlander” (“to embellish”) and the substantive “affiquets” (“jewels,” “ornaments”), employed a little further on (509), contribute to the Renaissance ornamentation of a landscape, increasing its attractiveness at a time when civilization had already disfigured it.

Elsewhere, Chateaubriand seeks to recapture a past psychological state through the use of an anachronistic term. Such is the function of the substantive “vastitude” (“vastness”) in the following sentence: “Mackenzie, and after him several others, to the benefit of the United States and Great Britain, made conquests over the “vastitude” of America that I had dreamed of to expand my native land” (469). This word was used in the translation of the Sermons de Guerricus (1540) by Jean de Gaigny and was hardly seen again before its reappearance in the dictionaries of the nineteenth century. The form is based on the term “vastité,” which we find in Du Bellay in the Défense et illustration de la langue française and in Montaigne in the Essais. While we would have expected the term “immensité” in the Mémoires, “vastitude” expresses more intensely the idea of a limitless space. Indeed, the similarity of the words “vastitude” and “vastité” adds the connotation of “desert,” since “vastité” comes from the Latin word vastitas, which carries this meaning. Its use allowed Chateaubriand to offer an echo of the old French language spoken by the contemporaries of Michel
de Montaigne, who is evoked, precisely, in the seventh book of the *Mémoires*. Through this anachronistic term, he attempted to revive the voice and psychological state of the first French travelers, fascinated by the mysterious depths of the American spaces in which they sought a passage to China, while recalling simultaneously the irremediable disappearance of the New World as they had known it.

The use of the verb “s’énaser” (“to bump into”; literally, “to hit one’s nose against”) plays a similar role in the following sentence: “Alas! I imagined I was alone in this forest where I walked so proudly; suddenly “je viens m’énaser contre” [I bumped into] a shed!” (1:473). Chateaubriand uses it during a crucial scene in the story of his journey. After escaping the American cities, here he is, finally, in the forests where he thinks he has found the state of nature evoked by Rousseau. Well, the young chevalier soon finds himself confronted with a stupefying scene: he meets a Frenchman playing a violin and giving dancing lessons to some Amerindians. Chateaubriand concludes the chapter with this statement: “Wasn’t this this a crushing blow for a disciple of Rousseau, this introduction to primitive life by a ball given by the former kitchen boy of General Rochambeau to some Iroquois? I had a great urge to laugh, but I was in fact sorely humiliated” (1:474).

As Berchet notes, however, in his edition of the *Mémoires* (1:474), Rousseau had experienced a similar misadventure himself: Chateaubriand was, in fact, well within the lineage of Rousseau that he thought he was refuting when he met a disappointment in which could be read, between the lines, as the decline of “primitive life.” Indeed, Rousseau relates in the seventh walk of the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 1782) his euphoria at the idea of having found “a refuge unknown to the whole universe”—before discovering, not far from the place where he was standing, a stocking factory. In Chateaubriand’s text, the use of the term “s’énaser” connects the dream of a virgin nature such as the travelers of the sixteenth century knew it and the brutal discovery of a mark of civilization demonstrating that the state of nature was only an illusion.

This hiatus between dream and reality, between an imagination nourished by books and a period that no longer permits its blooming, recalls irresistibly the figure of Don Quixote, briefly mentioned by Chateaubriand in the *Mémoires* (1:377–78) and a parodic double to which he was maliciously compared.39 Like Cervantes’s hero, his brain stuffed with books on chivalry and battling windmills, Chateaubriand set out for America, his mind ablaze with grandiose visions drawn from travel narratives, only to collide—in both the physical and metaphorical senses of the term in the aforementioned example—with a reality that bitterly disappointed his expectations. But just as Cervantes presents a Don Quixote who persists in harboring chivalrous hopes in a world devoid of magic, Chateaubriand describes himself as another Knight of La Mancha in
America, chasing the evanescent dream of a New World remained intact since the sixteenth century. When everything contradicted the illusion in which they were absorbed, the traveler—and years later the author—continued to favor what they had desired to see instead of what they did in fact observe, and only the subtle irony of Chateaubriand leads us to understand that he was not a dupe of his own dream. Ultimately, the effect of the anachronistic terms that flow from Chateaubriand’s pen was to unite the sixteenth century (the time of the quotations), the eighteenth century (the time of the action), and the nineteenth century (the time of the narration) within the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*. The search for lost time undertaken by Chateaubriand thus goes beyond the period of his youth: it also attempts to conquer a period that he deplored not having known.

**The Logic of Quotations**

The use of an anachronistic vocabulary is not the only literary means implemented to accomplish the flashback that the analeptic representation of the United States presupposes. The quotations used by Chateaubriand also facilitate the cohabitation in the same text of different ages and the merging in the same posthumous representation of the dream of a distant sixteenth century and the memory of a vanished eighteenth century.

In particular, the memory of Montaigne’s *Essais* arises in the *Mémoires* when Chateaubriand speaks of the song of a young Amerindian named Mila: “Wasn’t this the couplet quoted by Montaigne? ‘Grass snake, stop; stop, grass snake, so that my sister may draw from the pattern of your painting the manner and the fine work of a rich cord, so that I may give it to my mistress; thus may your beauty and disposition be forever preferred to all other snakes.’ The author of the *Essais* saw in Rouen some Iroquois who, according to him, were very reasonable people: ‘But all the same,’ he added, ‘they aren’t wearing breeches!’” (1:494).

The parallel between the Amerindians observed by Chateaubriand and those that Montaigne met in Rouen is rather surprising. Contrary to what Chateaubriand claims, Montaigne did not meet Iroquois but Tupinambás from Brazil. It is therefore impossible that the Iroquois of Chateaubriand sang in 1791 the same song as the “Brazilians” with whom Montaigne chatted in 1562. As absurd as it seems, this parallel reveals in Chateaubriand the dream to abolish time. To compensate for not having had the opportunity to see the Amerindians in a state of nature, this repentant disciple of Rousseau takes pleasure in believing that he heard a voice that, by means of oral transmission linking the generations together, was the very voice of the Amerindians met by Montaigne. Although he had come too late to America, at least the traveler could console himself with the illusion of having been linked with the sixteenth century momentarily, the time of a song. Thus, the presence of both the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries does not only occur in the posthumous
representation of America: the traveler briefly experienced it—at least, the author feigns to believe he did—upon hearing from beyond the grave the voice that resonated in the ears of Montaigne, a predecessor whose autobiographical project originally influenced his own.  

The quotation from Ronsard in the eighth book of the Mémoires seems still less motivated by the context than that from Montaigne. It comes after one of the most frequently commented scenes of the whole American section of the Mémoires. Chateaubriand recalls his meeting with “two Floridian ladies” whom he describes in an amorously poetic way: “They lived in an atmosphere of perfume emanating from them, as do orange trees and flowers in the pure exhalations of their leaves and calyces” (1:514). Alas, the two young women were forcibly taken from him by a “Bois-brûlé” (“mixed race”) and a Seminole warrior (1:518; emphasis original). After their abduction, Chateaubriand quotes the poem by Ronsard dedicated to Mary, Queen of Scots, on the eve of her departure for Scotland:

> In such robes were you dressed,  
> Leaving alas! the beautiful country  
> (whose scepter you held in your hand)  
> When pensive and bathing your bosom  
> With the pensive crystal of your tears rolling down,  
> Sad, you walked down the long paths  
> Of the great garden of this royal castle  
> That takes its name from a spring of water.

Chateaubriand accompanied this verse with the following commentary: “Did I resemble Marie Stuart strolling at Fontainebleau when I walked in my savannah after my widowhood? What is certain is that my mind, if not my person, was wrapped in a crespe, subtil et délié [“a black crêpe, subtle and delicate”], as Ronsard adds, an old poet of the new school” (519; emphasis original).  

Through this parallel, Chateaubriand was feminized and stressed how humiliating it was for him not to have been able to prevent the ravishing of the two ladies by the two warriors. In all respects, this scene was in no sense glorious, since the two young women in question were practicing the oldest trade in the world, and the second one resembled a mosquito (520). Chateaubriand describes his personage here, not without irony, as another Don Quixote, fallen in love with the coarse peasant girl that he names his Dulcinée du Toboso: he saw radiant nymphs where others would have recognized prostitutes. However, Chateaubriand does not compare himself to just any woman but to a famous queen, beginning through the quotation of Ronsard’s verse a process of “purification”—to use the term of Béatrice Didier—that helps to glorify the scene.  

This process was completed by the writing of Atala and Les Natchez,
works in which Chateaubriand recalls the memory of the two Floridians in order to create the characters of Atala and Céluta. Far from being represented there as courtesans, they are transformed by Chateaubriand, who makes of one “a virgin, and of the other a chaste spouse, as a form of expiation” (520). The complete redemption of their models cost their lives to both Atala and Céluta: the first poisons herself rather than break her mother’s promise, and the second, inconsolable after René’s death, leaps to her death from the top of a waterfall.

Immediately after describing the abduction of the two Floridians, Chateaubriand remarks: “That is how everything fails in my story, since all I have left is images of what passed so quickly: I will walk down the Champs-Élysées with more shadows than any man has ever brought with him” (518). These memorial images preserved by the author cry out to be set and transmitted in the form of literary paintings: those that he offers his readers in the Mémoires d’outre-tombe in the form of tableaus worked over to such an extent that one wonders what is owed to dream and what to reality in these compositions in which the human body conveys the essence of a sublimated décor. The analeptic representation of the United States is the means to a double victory over time, since it permits the recreation of both a past period and another that preceded it. It does not reveal a documentary truth on America but the personal truth of an individual who recreated it in remembering it.

However, there arises in the Mémoires d’outre-tombe, beside this posthumous America, the representation of another America, contemporary with the writing and whose characteristics are radically different. When Chateaubriand is no longer describing the United States visited in 1791 but what they had become in the years 1835–40, the elegiac tone becomes critical and, paradoxically, the eulogist of the New World, the one who had never completely recovered from the fascination of his American solitudes, participates in the elaboration of French anti-Americanism.

FROM POSTHUMOUS AMERICA TO CHRYSOGENOUS AMERICA

A Growing Pessimism
From Voyage en Amérique to Mémoires d’outre-tombe, Chateaubriand exhibited a growing concern toward the future of the United States. In the final chapters of Voyage en Amérique, published in 1827, Chateaubriand used the following terms to describe the manner in which the American character was being transformed: “Are Americans perfect men? Don’t they have their vices like other men? Are they morally superior to the English to whom they owe their origin? Won’t the homogeneity of their national character be eventually destroyed by this strange foreign emigration that constantly flows into their population from
all over Europe? Won’t their commercial spirit come to dominate them? Isn’t financial interest beginning to become the preeminent national failing?”

Although these reasons for concern are quite real, the interrogative form adopted by Chateaubriand tends to reduce the impression of urgency: the “commercial spirit” is only beginning to assert itself, and one may still doubt that it will ever become the principal passion of the Americans. After 1840, such reticence could no longer be justified, and Chateaubriand broadened and toughened the criticism he had timidly suggested in 1827. Before relating his departure from America in the Mémoires d’outre-tombe, he made a point of summing up his impressions of the New World when he finished chapter 5 of book VIII, which he developed between 1822 and the 1840s. Berchet observes that the second part of chapter 5 was very likely composed in a later period than the first part: “The subsequent development certainly constituted, in the 1845 version, a separate chapter added later” (1:524, note 2). Composed only three years before Chateaubriand’s death, this chapter thus contains the ultimate state of his reflections on the United States, reflections that are striking in their radical pessimism.

**Philistine America**

The 1845 section begins by creating an unbridgeable gap between the America of yesteryear—whose posthumous representation is preserved in the preceding pages—and the America that exists at the time of the writing of the Mémoires d’outre-tombe: “If I were to see the United States today, I would not recognize it. The forests that I knew have been replaced by planted fields; instead of beating my way through bushes, I would travel on highways; in the land of the Natchez, Céluta’s hut has given way to a city of around five thousand inhabitants; today Chactas could be a member of the House of Representatives.”

It is precisely his conviction that he had visited a country whose character had changed radically that induced the author to memorialize the country that used to be. In a famous passage from the Préface testamentaire, Chateaubriand describes his existence as a crossing between two shores: “I found myself between the two centuries as if I were at the confluence of two rivers; I dived into their troubled waters, leaving in the distance the old shore where I was born, and swimming buoyed by hope towards the unknown shore where the new generations are going to land.” The America of 1791 sits on the “old shore,” whereas the 1840 version awaits it on the “unknown shore,” the two separated by a river impassable in the opposite direction. Does the hope that the author previously nursed prove to be justified when he measures it against the evolution of the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century? No: the America he saw before him proved to be disappointing, as was the America of 1791. Now the memoir writer no longer attempted to highlight the experience of the traveler but rather to analyze the reasons for the current decadence that portends even
worse for the future. For after having evoked the impressive development of the United States and its growing population, Chateaubriand moved on to a new, more critical, stage in his reflections: “Nonetheless, it is useless to seek in the United States what distinguishes men from other beings on earth, their spark of immortality and the embellishment of their existence: literature and the fine arts are nowhere to be seen in the new Republic” (527). The following passage treats a critical question in the edification of French anti-Americanism: philistinism.

In an article from 1928, Paul Hazard points out the similarity of the fifth chapter of book VIII of the Mémoires d’outre-tombe and a work published in 1841 by Eugène A. Vail, De la littérature et des hommes de lettres des États-Unis (On Literature and Literary Figures in the United States). What does Vail say in this text? That writers are a virtually unknown species in the United States, that Americans prefer by far the practical arts to literature, and that they only deign to take up the pen in the “infrequent intervals offered by the various activities of agriculture, commerce, and industry, if it is not the practice of the scientific professions.” However, these reservations do not lead him to deviate from his true goal: to prove that despite the short history of their literature, the American writers have already distinguished themselves in numerous genres, such as religious literature, history, and political economy, and that there are good reasons to hope that, in the future, they will also distinguish themselves in works of the imagination. Chateaubriand’s reading brings him, however, to the opposite conclusion: “[W]hile Chateaubriand developed the same theme as Vail, he adapted it to his own ends. The ideas are the same, the developments analogous, and the images similar—and in adding it all up, Vail concludes with praise, Chateaubriand with criticism,” observes Hazard.

Indeed, Chateaubriand describes disdainfully the state of literary production on the other side of the Atlantic in the first half of the nineteenth century. He chooses to explain the flowering of practical literature by the historical circumstances of the formation of the American people: “The American has replaced intellectual operations with practical ones. Do not attribute to native inferiority his mediocrity in the arts, for these have not been his focus. Thrown by diverse causes into a wilderness, agriculture and commerce were his sole concerns: before developing more elevated modes of thought, one has to live; before planting trees, one has to cut them down in order to plow the fields” (527).

The national genius of the Americans, in this perspective, was thus oriented toward material operations, because the conquest of a hostile land and the need to use their intelligence in the resolution of concrete problems had long been their principal focuses. By emphasizing the feeble development of literature in the United States, Chateaubriand revives, alternatively, an old debate between the Abbé Raynal and Jefferson in the preceding century. While the former ironically expressed surprise that America had not yet given birth to any great talents in the arts and sciences, Jefferson answered with the example of Washington,
Franklin, and Rittenhouse. Chateaubriand is, of course, in no way denying the capacity of the United States to produce exceptional inventors: on the contrary, the sciences appear to him to be an area in which the Americans excel naturally (528). And he certainly does not go so far as to deny the existence of writers in the United States, since he cites Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving: “Today the American novelists, Cooper and Washington Irving, are forced to take refuge in Europe to find literary reviews and a public” (531). If America has indeed produced authors, they are nonetheless obliged to leave their motherland, since their talent is virtually unrecognized there; worse, it is scorned and considered “childish” (531). It is as if, several years in advance, we are hearing Baudelaire’s fulminations against the Americans, guilty of having ignored the genius of his “poor Eddie” (Edgar Allan Poe). As for the American poets, Chateaubriand has only this condescending comment: “[T]hey scarcely rise above the mediocre” (531). Disdaining to cite Bryant, Longfellow, and Sigourney, he nonetheless names a few of their works to which his haughty benevolence awards this compliment: they “deserve a glance” (531). Berchet comments on the weakness of the conclusion of chapter 5, which tries to create an artificial parallel between America and Greece, certain philhellenic American poets having complained about “the lost liberty of the Old World.” Is Chateaubriand becoming evasive here, hesitating to formulate a conclusion that, if we follow his train of thought, could only be scathing? Let us suggest, as a pastiche, a version of the conclusion he could have penned: “The Americans offer the sad spectacle of a people whose degenerated language is a reflection of their own decadence.”

Indeed, the end of chapter 5 completes the picture of a philistine America by the evocation of a language for which Chateaubriand displays unconcealed scorn: “The language of the great writers of England has been creolized, provincialized, and barbarized without having gained any energy in the cradle of virgin nature; it has been necessary to draw up catalogs of American expressions” (531; emphasis original). Nature’s glorious spectacle, far from driving the language spoken in America to sublime heights, has been unable to free it from the confinement that renders it less and less intelligible to the rest of the Anglophone world, which is reduced to consulting lists that provide the correct expressions for their “barbaric” equivalents. This stagnating idiom suggests more a colony developing its own particular character than the language of an independent nation—which introduces the judgment pronounced by Chateaubriand a little further on: “In sum, the United States gives the impression of a colony and not a motherland” (536).

The Twilight of the Leaders

This spiral of deterioration likewise threatens the Americans themselves: “But we need to point out one sad thing: the rapid degeneration of talent, from the first men involved in the American turbulence to those of the present time; and nonetheless these men exist in the same era” (528). Such decadence appears to
have come too early according to Chateaubriand, who maintains that the American people had no period of youth and has not yet reached old age: this nation in the full bloom of maturity is experiencing a premature debilitation, a judgment that foreshadows that of Baudelaire. In order to evoke the mediocrity of the American statesmen of the mid-nineteenth century, Chateaubriand compares their meager talent to the eloquence of the first American presidents. He cites the farewell speech of General Washington, given on the occasion of his departure from the presidency in 1797, as well as an excerpt of a letter written in 1782 by Jefferson following the death of his daughter. The duo of American presidents is, however, joined by an unexpected guest: Logan, an Amerindian chief who distinguished himself in 1774 in the war between the Virginia colony and the Shawnee and Mingo warriors. Chateaubriand illustrates his eloquence with an excerpt from a famous speech he gave to Lord Dunmore known as “Logan’s Lament,” which is engraved on the monument raised in his memory in Pickaway County, Ohio. The inclusion of this quote, alongside those by Washington and Jefferson, is rather surprising: Logan fought beside the British during the Revolutionary War, and the reference to him comes in a paragraph that is connected neither to the preceding nor the following one. There is nonetheless an implicit logic in the linking of these three quotes of very diverse origin.

From among a much larger group of quotes found in Vail’s De la littérature et des hommes de lettres des États-Unis, Chateaubriand only borrowed the short excerpts that he offered in the Memoirs from Beyond the Grave. These three excerpts develop the idea of grieving, of disappearance: Washington gives his farewell and begs for the indulgence of posterity; Jefferson grieves the death of his child and Logan that of his whole family. A strong theme thus links together these three examples of eloquence. Chateaubriand implicitly emphasizes the underlying continuity that unites the Amerindian chief with the two American presidents. By putting on the same level three great “chiefs,” Logan, Washington, and Jefferson, he suggests that the destiny of the latter two will soon be the same as that of the first: no men of their mettle, of their “race,” exist anymore; the great Americans, like the great Amerindians, will have no successors. Chateaubriand, who described the men of the July Monarchy as “mites” (3:22), has no better opinion of the leaders who followed Washington and Jefferson; once again, the degeneration is noted on both sides of the Atlantic. And again, after establishing a parallel between Frenchmen and American Indians, he uses the disappearance of the latter to issue a warning.

Chrysogenous America
In the following chapter, Chateaubriand pursues his analysis of the “degeneration” of the Americans. Chapter 6 of book VIII suggests two explanations: the omnipresence of commercialism and the spread of selfishness in American society. In 1827, Chateaubriand only foresaw the possibility of a triumph of the
commercial spirit in the United States. After 1840, there can no longer be any doubt, and he now expresses the same idea firmly: “The mercantile spirit is beginning to invade them; self-interest is becoming the national vice” (534). One of the unexpected consequences of this mentality was the creation of diverse social classes in the United States. If we are to believe Chateaubriand, the fear that equality would disappear from the New World became a reality after 1840: “One imagines that there is one general social level in the United States: that is a complete error. There are social strata that are mutually disdainful and do not frequent each other” (534). To designate the growing aristocracy in the United States, born of capitalist wealth, Chateaubriand uses the neologism “chrysogenous.” This term deserves further attention, for it accompanies a reflection on the paradoxes of a gentry founded on money.

During the Old Regime, nobility could be acquired either by birth or by purchasing a title. The dual nature of this system was governed by a hierarchy: given that superiority of rank within the aristocracy was directly proportional to the distance of its origin, a nobility that was acquired more recently and by money was inferior to ancient nobility based on the heroism of a distant ancestor. Since money in France was considered to be a lowly means to attain a higher status, newly minted noblemen attempted to conceal the source of their position by adopting the values and prejudices of the old nobility. Initially the social situation in America appeared different, since there is no hereditary nobility comparable to what is found in Europe. Moreover, if money was the means to reach the pinnacle of society in the United States, anyone was theoretically capable of climbing to the highest ranks by becoming wealthy: this was the source of the ideology of the American Dream and the mythology of the self-made man. However, Chateaubriand showed that in the United States the aristocracy of wealth imitated the manners of the Old World in much the same way as the minor French nobles who attempted to dissimulate the recent origin of their privileged condition. Possessed by “the love of distinctions and the passion for titles” (534), the wealthiest Americans eventually came to disdain their own country and to imitate the European aristocrats: “Suppose an American possesses an income of a million or two. Yankees like this, members of elite society, can no longer live like Franklin; the true ‘gentleman,’ disgusted by his new country, seeks the old in Europe. You meet him in inns imitating the English—with all their extravagance or spleen—by doing a grand tour of Italy. These prowlers from Carolina or Virginia buy run-down abbeys in France and plant English gardens with American trees in Melun” (535).

The chrysogenous aristocracy in the United States threatened the spirit of equality in the New World, since it adopted the social ethos of the Old World: noble by their money and yet plebian by birth, the American aristocrats were a true paradox. Trying to find roots for their social superiority, they espoused the prejudices of European nobility and behaved with more arrogance than
a “German prince with sixteen quarters” (534). In addition, this social class threatened the equality of social status by accumulating such excessive wealth that it provoked hostility from the rest of society: “And what is extraordinary is that while financial inequality flourishes and an aristocracy rises, at the same time there is an egalitarian impulse from the outside that forces the industrial or landed gentry to hide their luxuriance, to dissimulate their opulence for fear of being murdered by their neighbors” (535). Chateaubriand criticized the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, but contrary to Tocqueville, for whom the following question was paramount, he did not bring up the problem of inheritance. Nevertheless, by asserting that the accumulation of capital by a minority facilitated the birth of a form of aristocracy in the United States, Chateaubriand suggested that the excessive fortunes compromised equality by creating a dominant class that was capable of perpetuating itself.

In Capital in the Twenty-First Century, Thomas Piketty analyses the origin of the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minute percentage of the world population and demonstrates that the testamentary transmission of said wealth progressively accentuates the inequalities. The United States is cited as one of the countries where this tendency is particularly evident: the caste of the ultrarich that is currently evolving is the contemporary equivalent of the chrysogenous aristocracy described by Chateaubriand. When Chateaubriand criticized the disproportionate importance of money in America, he sought to highlight the paradox of a society that believed it had guaranteed for everyone the possibility of climbing the social ladder by making this dependent on the accumulation of capital rather than by the possession of a hereditary title. In his opinion, American society had not succeeded in making elevated social positions accessible by everyone; on the contrary, it permitted people with sufficient capital to achieve a position of superiority that they could then preserve by passing their fortune on to their heirs and by creating a separate caste through the adoption of the exclusive social habits and practices of European aristocracy.

Concerned originally with the financial sphere, the criticism of the spectacle given by the United States in the 1835–40 period eventually landed on the moral plane: “A cold, hard selfishness reigns in the cities; piasters and dollars, banknotes and coins, the rise and fall of stocks, that’s all they can talk about. It’s like being at the stock exchange or at the counter of an enormous shop” (536). By attacking selfishness in the United States, Chateaubriand was at the same time targeting philistinism: hungry for money, Americans had no other topic of conversation or thought about anything else, as was demonstrated by the narrowness of the subjects discussed in their newspapers, which were “filled with business matters or rude cackling” (536).

In the conclusion of chapter 6, Chateaubriand led a final somewhat muddled charge against the Americans: “Are Americans being subjected, unawares, to the law of a climate in which plant nature has thrived at the expense of animal
nature, a law combatted by the best minds but whose refutation hasn't been completely successful? One might wonder if Americans weren't too quickly worn down by philosophical liberty, like Russians by enlightened despotism” (536). Juxtaposed in this brief passage, two profoundly different theses arrive at the same conclusion. The first tends to prove that North America’s climate has had a beneficial influence on the growth of plant species while it has proven to be harmful to the development of animal species. In other words, the development of the vegetation is inversely proportionate to that of the animals. Supposedly scientific, this “law” purports to demonstrate the progressive dumbing down of Americans, since it applies to men as much as to the other animal species. This implicit conclusion is quite shocking, especially since the rationale on which it is founded itself rests on a theory that was refuted by “the best minds” that Chateaubriand did not bother to identify. He was thinking most likely of Buffon’s theory on the degeneration of species in America, which he deformed somewhat, however, by making an arbitrary distinction between “animal nature” and “plant nature,” only the former being affected by the debilitating influence of the climate.75 Far from developing his thoughts in the following sentence, he advanced a new explanation for the so-called intellectual mediocrity of the Americans: the premature abuse of “philosophical liberty.” Abandoning the climate theory as soon as he had evoked it, he proceeded to explain the decadence of American mores by the influence of ideas. The expression “to wear down” is revealing here, for it again reveals the nature of the underlying reflections of Chateaubriand on the fate of the United States and its inhabitants: the idea of decline, of progressive degeneration. It hardly matters that Chateaubriand tried to give the appearance of caution in using the interrogative form or careful formulas like “One might wonder if . . . ;” he was nonetheless suggesting that America was on the road to ruin, and that Americans were becoming decadent, themes that would have considerable longevity.76

These pages devoted to the United States by Chateaubriand are striking by the peremptory nature of criticism that is not founded on any personal observation. He had not seen, since a five-month stay in 1791, the America of which he was speaking in the present after 1840, and he nonetheless did not deign to cite the sources that supported his reflections. One senses his bad humor, the gloom of an old man criticizing the evolution of a country in which he no longer recognizes his America. If he was indeed the eulogist of a posthumous America, which was not the real America that he had visited in 1791 but another more personal America reinvented in the course of his writing and throughout the years, in the end Chateaubriand showed himself to be, paradoxically, after Talleyrand and La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, between Stendhal and Baudelaire, before Huysmans and Céline, one of the links in the interminable chain of French anti-Americanism.