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Samantha Mowry

Conor Murphy

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Political Fragment

Excerpted from
The Papers of Napoleon,
Dead in Saint Helena

By Mr. Tézenas de Montbrison

*Nil actum reputans, si quid superesset agendum*¹
Lucan, *Pharsalia*

In Paris,
DELAUNAY, Bookstore, Palais-Royal
MONGIE, Bookstore, Boulevard Poissonnière
AUDIN, Bookstore, quai des Augustins, n. 25
July 1821

¹ Marcus Annaeus Lucanus' *Pharsalia* reads "sed Caesar in omnia praeceps, nil actum credens, cum quid superesset agendum" or "but Caesar, headlong in all his designs, thought nothing done while anything remained to do." [J.D. Duff, ii. 656-657] The now popularized alteration that is present here most likely stems from Philip Stanhope, the 4th Earl of Chesterfield, in his letters to his son: "For God's sake aim at perfection in everything: *Nil actum reputans si quid superesset agendum.*" [emphasis in original, written March 8th 1750 from London] The distinction here is transparent within Duff's translation but is primarily between *credens* and *reputans*, *trusting* or *believing* versus *thinking*. Regardless, this quote is not properly cited. This and all proceeding notes are products of the translators, Samantha Mowry and Conor Murphy, unless otherwise noted.

Translator's Introduction

What is of importance in this text is not necessarily its historico-political significance—its bibliographical facts and political offerings—but instead the particular insights into Napoleon's personality: his desires, anguish, and, most importantly, the carnal role of power within his political domination. This text reveals a great fall from power.

Tézenas de Montbrison here presents Napoleon's confessions to his closest confidant, Henri Gatien Bertrand, a celebrated soldier and "his most faithful companion in work and misfortunes," who accompanied Napoleon throughout the majority his career and to the two sites of his exiles, Elba and Saint Helena. This conversation took place on the island of Saint Helena—the location of his death—and was published in July of 1821, two months after his passing. Written in rhyme and meter and including a glorifying introduction, this piece is part of a four-part series of poems, heretofore untranslated, published as the public awaited the release of his memoirs.

One must preserve a certain skepticism in regards to the intended function of this text: it operated to some extent as propaganda. We can extrapolate this skepticism, quite simply, from the history of propaganda in early 19th century Europe, the exalting introduction, and the other more explicitly propagandist pieces within and outside DePaul University's archives. This fact does not radically rupture our relation to the text but nonetheless the reader is well advised to monitor this intentionality, asking simply whether Napoleon's anguish itself is fabricated or manipulated or if it is instead its inciting incident, here claimed to be Napoleon's more philanthropic desire to be a rightful king.

Napoleon speaks of his alienation and his torment, beginning by comparing himself to Prometheus and later revealing his last remaining desire after a renowned career: to be *a legitimate king*. Napoleon confides in Bertrand his rise from lowly origins, the necessity of a sovereign state's strength, a deliberation on suicide, his fated end and the role of chance, the flattery of his entourage, in addition to his response to Waterloo. Each line, far different from some of the stark militaristic documents in our collection, echoes Napoleon's discontent, allowing us precious insight into his personality, which is to say his immediate relation to the world.

To the Reader

The extraordinary man who filled the world with his renown, in whatever way one considers a destiny this diverse, will forever be an influence upon future generations. His death, however, did not produce amongst us the profound sensation that one would have expected. Perhaps death is like all other human actions: *one must be on time for it*. Napoleon, in searching for a glorious tomb, in command of his guard in the flatlands of Belgium, buried himself under the debris of a throne twice overthrown by all the armies of Europe. He quite rightly became, for his followers, the object of a sorrowful enthusiasm. Today, the end of his obscure existence is nothing more than a common event, two thousand leagues away from us, which found its place, like so many others, in between the sagas of Perlet² and Ipsilanti³, and the sometimes so pleasant discussion of the law of censorship.

I but passed, and no one spoke further of it.

The public attention will feel a renewed excitement with the appearance of Napoleon's *Memoirs* if, as can scarcely be doubted, he left them to his confidants. He did not lack leisure and solitude any more than material and we should expect a bountiful crop of scandals. In the meantime, we will impart to our readers an entirely political conversation between the former emperor and his most faithful companion in work and misfortunes, the brave Bertrand. We can guarantee the accuracy of the stenographer of Saint Helena, who collected this conversation from the mouths of the interlocutors, and who transmitted it to us over the course of the last year. Discretion alone keeps us from naming him, but his identity can be easily guessed.

Some circumstances delayed the publication of a heroic-comedic poem in four cantos, entitled: *Napoléon en retrait, or le Nouveau Seigneur de Village*⁴. This work, which being read by a particular few first brought support to this author of renowned sufferings, and of which excerpts were published in several newspapers, should appear very shortly in a volume in-18⁵.

² Charles Frédéric Perlet, 1759-1828, founded a royalist-leaning newspaper at the start of the Revolution and worked as an informant under the First Empire.

³ The specific referent here is unclear. It is possible this could refer to Alexander Ypsilanti (1792-1828), a senior officer in the Russian cavalry during the Napoleonic Wars and a hero in the Greek war for independence, his father, Constantine Ypsilanti (d. 1816), or his grandfather, Alexander Ypsilanti (1793-1832), prince of Wallachia and Moldova.

⁴ "Napoleon in Retreat" and "The New Lord of the Village"; these poems are heretofore untranslated. *Le Nouveau Seigneur du Village* was also turned into a famous opera by François Adrien Boieldieu (1775-1834).

⁵ A traditional bookbinding method in which a paper is folded to make 18 pages or any volume using this format.

Dialogue between Napoleon and Bertrand

NAPOLEON

It is done: in exile, I am abandoned by the universe!
Five years have come and gone since the crown,
For the second time, slipped out of his hands,
Napoleon languishes on this far-off rock.
Much like Prometheus, a vulture devours me;
And, dying each day, I must live on!
What fate! Oh, fortune!

BERTRAND.

Oh! Sire, to your grievances
I have, as you know, only my tears to give.
Twice I have, without regret, left everything to follow you,
But what sudden change has transpired for you to hate living?
A hero of your stature . . .

NAPOLEON.

Eh! Bertrand, stop.
You love me, you say: eh! how you flatter me!
A hero of my stature... when misfortune devastates him,
When he is without hope, he is all the more miserable for it.
On the throne of the world where I spent fifteen years,
I knew too well these complacent friends,
Who, guessing my tastes, catering to my whims,
Deemed my injustices to be virtues.
I was, according to them, beyond mortals.
They would have shamelessly erected altars to me,
And most of them, bowed down before a new master,
Despicably praise him. . . perhaps betray him.
If I tasted their poisoned honey for long,
I realized it. . . but too late, and I was dethroned.

BERTRAND

Sire, you know my affection and my zeal.
Through your misfortunes, I have been faithful to the day;
I have never been counted among the ranks of your flatterers:
I despised them too much to take up their colors.
But since I am allowed to break the silence
To which my respect imposed obedience,
Suffer that your friend (you give me this title)
recalls reason to your troubled mind.
Your feats have merited long remembrance,
Sire, and still living, you are entering into history.
You who, from the lowest ranks, thrown among kings,

Saw all Europe enslaved by your laws,
Tossed by fortune, you make a wretched example!
Today the world beholds you in shackles!
But for twenty kings united, whom you vanquished long ago,
The victory of each day is one more honor.
Our nephews, detesting the common outcries,
Will not see any part of you as an ordinary mortal.
By fate demoralized, struggle against fate:
What makes you invite death at each second!
It is no longer the time for this: live!

NAPOLEON.

Friend, what do you dare to say?
What! You want me to live, and I lost the empire!
Reign? I can no longer!

BERTRAND.

Know life and suffer:
It was at Waterloo that you should have died.

NAPOLEON.

After twenty years of carnage and alarm,
When weary Europe lashed out with its weapons at disheartened Paris,
When France begged the Bourbons for help;
France seemed to pronounce itself between them and me for all time;
From the imperial throne, when they made me relinquish it,
Should I have died, unable as I was to defend it?
You saw me effortlessly outliving my power:
I abdicated... but my heart kept all its hope.
By the senate of kings I was relegated to an island,
Like a port of salvation, I accepted this refuge.
They dared to spare me! Joyous premonitions
Offered me a future of great happenings.
It appeared as though my soul, forbidden, stunned,
Had not yet fulfilled all its destiny.
One day... ten full months I awaited this day,
When out of exile, at last, I could flee my retreat!
Counting on my star, into peril I throw myself...
The sun shines twenty times..., and I conquer France,
I seize the scepter once again. Oh good fortune!

BERTRAND.

Oh bad luck!
Did you forget that here we are in chains?
Did you forget the blood remaining from a hundred battles,
Those whose funerals were held on the fields of Waterloo?

Your noble soldiers... Oh cruel memory!
They could no longer win; they wanted to perish!
Why did I not accompany them in their glory to the grave!

NAPOLEON.

I would have followed them, friend, you can believe me in that,
If, saved in spite of myself during such a great danger,
I had not preserved the hope of avenging them.
Yes, fleeing by chance, on that fatal night,
Unarmed, lost, far from my capital,
By a final call to the honor of the French,
I still thought myself able to assure a success.
And, soon strengthening my grip on the reins of the state,
I saw myself climbing back up the heights of sovereignty.
But, as you know: victorious, nothing could have withstood me:
Vanquished, everything was armed against my will.
A row of orators, mute in my presence,
Are awakened, ashamed of fifteen years of silence;
And their enthusiastic shouts, daring for a day now,
Predict the return of the most dreadful times.
These rebels should have been silently dispersed;
I should have done it, perhaps, and a few faithful hands
Were readied⁶ ... I hesitated... pressed from all sides,
Could I have still braved the war and its turns of fortune?
The foreign battle flag floated far off on the field;
I had but a moment or my loss was certain,
And, fearing the wrath of my enemies,
I fell into the hands of the most hated of all!
There is no longer any hospitable land for me,
And I could, without dying, descend into prayer!
Oh sorrow! Aware of my fate from now on,
Can you thus be surprised that I beg for death?

BERTRAND.

Sire, it's only too true: excessive misery
Brings despair in a common soul.
To fall twice from a throne, and to bear these pains,
It is too much for a king, but not for a hero.
Raised far from the courts, a soldier from birth,
You knew how to capture supreme power.
The stunned universe, fixing its eyes on you,
Knew your genius but not your ancestry.
But can one, in the end, live without a diadem?
Ah! To reign over oneself is still to reign!

⁶ Historic, as Madame Genlis says. (--De Montbrison) Stéphanie Félicité Ducrest de St-Aubin, or the Comtesse de Genlis (1746-1830) was a French female writer known for her romances in the Napoleonic era. (--Trans.)

Think of Charles V: an absolute monarch like yourself,
Of his authority, what king was more jealous?
He advanced, like you, from conquest to conquest;
Like you he reached the pinnacle of greatness:
And soon, disgusted by power,
He could only search for happiness in darkness.
See him shut away in the depths of a monastery. . .

NAPOLEON.

I see the repentance of a solitary monk,
And of all mortals, the most unfortunate,
Friend, I feel it too much, he is a king dethroned.
Memories of the past, of glory, of fame, of power,
In my sickened heart, everything turns into suffering.
I cannot venture into those dreadful deserts
Without thinking that, with a word, I shook the universe,
And in a corner of the world, forgotten, I breathe!
I revived the empire of Charlemagne;
Busy night and day with the most magnificent endeavors,
I fought fifteen years for a usurped scepter,
And by so much work, I could not, on my head,
Bolster the prize of my conquest.
On an uncertain throne, I continued to waver.

BERTRAND.

Sire, what did I hear? What is this speech?
The people, holding your feats in such high esteem,
Chose you. . .

NAPOLEON.

Their choice was not legitimate.

BERTRAND.

Thus, recognizing the rights of the Bourbons. . .

NAPOLEON.

I expected everything from time, which makes the fate of kings.
When I chased away the princes from Naples and from Madrid,
When I occupied the provinces of Germania,
With new sovereigns, I populated these states;
Do you think that in braving perilous combats,
My dearest aim was to raise my brothers?
Alone and like them deprived of hereditary rights,
I wanted, the past unable to help me,
To find myself the best of all European kings.
My dynasty then, happy and peaceful,

Took root in France, and became ancient:
And posterity, in consecrating my greatness,
Placed Napoleon on the level of founder.

BERTRAND.

Sire, I understand the importance of your intentions:
Their depth amazes me and I admire it in silence.
But, at last, Albion, ruler of the seas,
With its continent, did not bear your chains;
And its hatred. . .

NAPOLEON.

Albion could reign over the waves;
I would have reigned alone over the rest of the world.
Their treasures evaporating in their greedy hands,
To these sailors, I closed every port,
And if, better-enlightened, more faithful to treaties,
Europe, at my side, had aided my zeal,
The overproud Albion, deceived in its plots,
Would have patrolled the waters of a useless empire;
The wealth of India piled up each day in its deserted cities,
Their riches had increased their losses;
And without fighting, the peak of the inverse,
Its radiant ruin had avenged the universe.
But what insanity do I speak? Plaything of a futile system,
I prepared its fall and fell myself;
With the fruit of fifteen years of glory and lofty deeds,
My empire crumbled forever with me!

BERTRAND.

More sensitive to his grievances than my own, perhaps,
In his fall I revere my master.
I cry for his sorrows, they are great; but at last,
What mortal can change the course of destiny?
Sire, call consistency to your aid;
Resign yourself: forswear hope of the throne,
And for your repose, forget the French!

NAPOLEON.

Friend, can I forget that they were my subjects?

BERTRAND.

Let their happiness at least charm your misfortune!

NAPOLEON.

Their happiness!

BERTRAND.

Excuse my poorly timed frankness;
But ever since fate threw you,
The people are awakened by the cry of liberty.

NAPOLEON.

Under my reign the people summoned victory.

BERTRAND.

Sire, liberty is a consolation for glory.

NAPOLEON.

And who are the defenders of liberty?

BERTRAND.

All your former friends . . .

NAPOLEON.

Call them my former flatterers.
You know it, rising though immoral deeds,
Starved for power, for honors, and for wealth,
These false republicans, murderers of a good king,
Served me in my court and trembled before me.
Friend, liberty, as preached by the rebels,
Nearly always veils their criminal plots.
As for myself, when I abandoned the Nile's banks,
What was my plan? What, then, was I intending?
I rushed up, animated by a heroic fervor,
To liberate my country, to save the republic;
And, to crown the avenger with liberty,
In order to guarantee that they made me Emperor!

BERTRAND.

I am devoted to you, my faith is not in question . . .
But the people have rights, they want them respected.
Perhaps, looking after such dear interests,
You would have forever shackled the French.
The opinion. . .

NAPOLEON.

To concede to the violence of the people
Is to reopen the work of Revolutions.
When a people become restless and declare their rights,
They are closer still to attacking those of kings.
All power, in their opinion, becomes illegitimate,

And in a sovereign, weakness is a crime.
What king has been more deserving of his subjects
Than this unfortunate king, martyr of his kindness,
Whose bloody inheritance my hand gained?
He was a noble and true image of all virtues,
His heart, constantly animated with the public good,
Sacrificed itself without regret to the charms of being loved.
He made only one vow: the good fortune of France.
The terrified world knows his reward
Despot, his power would have been well respected:
The salvation of an empire is in firmness.

BERTRAND.

A prince must⁷ undoubtedly be firm and severe;
But, sire, I appeal to your character.
You reigned for a long time over submissive people,
Without ever backing down from your enemies;
And the first setback plunges you into the abyss:
What more, then, did you desire?

NAPOLEON.

To be a legitimate king.

FROM THE PRINTING HOUSE OF P. DUPONT.

⁷ The first letter of the source French here is illegible; “must” fits most logically into the sentence