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**MEMOIRS FROM BEYOND
THE GRAVE**

1768-1800

FRANÇOIS-RENÉ DE CHATEAUBRIAND

Translated from the French by

ALEX ANDRIESSE

Introduction by

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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

nyrb

New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS
435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.nyrb.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chateaubriand, François-René, vicomte de, 1768–1848 author, |
Andriessse, Alex translator.

Title: Memoirs from beyond the grave : 1768–1800 / by François-René de
Chateaubriand ; introduction by Anka Muhlstein ; translation by Alex
Andriessse.

Description: New York : New York Review Books, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017025073 (print) | LCCN 2017028760 (ebook) | ISBN
9781681371306 (epub) | ISBN 9781681371290 (alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: France—History—Consulate and First Empire, 1799–1815. |
Napoleon I, Emperor of the French, 1769–1821—Contemporaries.

Classification: LCC DC255.C4 (ebook) | LCC DC255.C4 A3 2017 (print) |
DDC 944.04—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017025073>

ISBN 978-1-68137-129-0

Available as an electronic book; ISBN 978-1-68137-130-6

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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is the voice of the private man behind the public façade, the grown-up boy who left home out of fear and in search of the Northwest Passage, the death-haunted exile, the solitary writer at his desk at night, who knew that he had to imagine himself and his world into being, as if everywhere were America, a second space and a dominion of dreams.

—ALEX ANDRIESSE

MEMOIRS FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

PREFACE

Paris, April 14, 1846;

Revised July 28, 1846

“as a cloud . . . as the swift ships . . . as a shadow”

—*Job*¹

AS IT IS impossible for me to predict the moment of my death, and at my age the days accorded a man are but days of grace, or rather days of rigor, I am going to offer a few words of explanation.

On September 4, I will have reached my seventy-eighth year. It is high time for me to leave a world that is fast leaving me and that I shall not mourn.

The same sad necessity which has always held its foot against my throat has forced me to sell these *Memoirs*. No one can know what I have suffered, having been obliged to pawn my tomb; but I owed this final sacrifice to my solemn promises and to the consistency of my conduct. It is perhaps cowardly of me, but I have regarded these *Memoirs* as private, and I would have liked not to part with them. My plan was to leave them to Madame de Chateaubriand, who could have sent them out into the world as she pleased, or else suppressed them. The latter seems more preferable to me than ever today.

Ah! if only, before leaving this world, I could have found someone trustworthy enough, someone rich enough to buy back the shares of the Society²—someone who would not, like them, be compelled to put my work to press the moment my death knell tolls! A few of the shareholders are my friends, it's true, and several others are kind

people who have tried to be of use to me; but finally the shares may be sold; they may be transferred to third parties whom I do not know and whose family interests must come first. It is only natural that my life, so long as it continues, should be an importunity to them, or at least a bother. In short, if I were still master of these *Memoirs*, I would either keep the manuscript to myself or delay their publication until fifty years after my death.

These *Memoirs* have been composed at different dates and in different countries. For this reason, I have been obliged to add some prefatory passages which describe the places that I had before my eyes and the feelings that were in my heart when the thread of my narrative was resumed. The changing forms of my life are thus intermingled. It has sometimes happened that, in my moments of prosperity, I have had to speak of times when I was poor, and in my days of tribulation, to retrace days when I was happy. My childhood entering into my old age, the gravity of experience weighing on the lightness of youth, the rays of my sun mingling and merging together, from its dawn to its dusk, have produced in my stories a kind of confusion, or, if you will, a kind of ineffable unity. My cradle has something of the grave, my grave something of the cradle; my sufferings become pleasures, my pleasures pains, so that I no longer know, having just finished reading over these *Memoirs*, whether they are the product of a brown-haired youth or a head gray with age.

I cannot say whether this mixture, which anyhow I cannot remedy, will be pleasing or displeasing to the reader; it is the fruit of my ever-changing lot: the tempests have often left me with no writing table except the rock where I was shipwrecked.

Though I have been pressed to let some pieces of these *Memoirs* appear in my lifetime, I would prefer to speak from the depth of my coffin. My narrative will then be accompanied by those voices which have something sacred about them because they issue from the sepulcher. If I have suffered enough in this world to be a happy shade in the next, a ray from the Elysian Fields shall cast a protective light on these last pictures of mine. Life fitted me badly; death, perhaps, will suit me better.

These *Memoirs* have been my constant thought. Saint Bonaventure was granted heavenly sanction to go on writing his book after death: I cannot hope for such a favor, much as I would like to be resurrected one night, at the witching hour, to correct my proofs. Yet soon enough Eternity will have clapped its hands over my ears and, having joined the dusty family of the deaf, I will no longer hear anyone.

If one part of my work has been more captivating to me than others, it is that which concerns my youth—the obscurest corner of my life. There, I have had to reawaken a world known only to me; I found, as I wandered in that vanished company, nothing but memories and silence. Of all the people I have known, how many are still alive today?

On August 25, 1828, the inhabitants of Saint-Malo appealed to me, through their mayor, regarding a wet dock that they wanted to build in the harbor. I hastened to reply, asking only that, in an exchange of goodwill, I be granted a few feet of earth for my grave on Le Grand-Bé.* There were difficulties, owing to the opposition of military engineers, but finally, on October 27, 1831, I received a letter from the mayor, M. Hovius. He wrote to me:

The resting place that you requested at the edge of the sea, a stone's throw from your birthplace, shall be prepared for you by the filial piety of the Maloans. But how sad it makes us to consider this task! May the monument stand empty a long time yet, though Honor and Glory outlive everything on earth!

I quote M. Hovius's words with gratitude. There is nothing excessive in them but the word *Glory*.

I shall go to rest then on the shore of the sea that I have loved. If I should die outside of France, I request that my body not be brought back to my native land until fifty years have elapsed since its first interment. Let my remains be spared a sacrilegious autopsy; let no one search my cold brain or my extinguished heart for the mystery

*A small island in Saint-Malo harbor.

of my being. Death does not reveal the secrets of life. A corpse traveling by post fills me with horror; but dry, white bones are easily transported. They will be less weary on that final voyage than when I dragged them over the earth, burdened with my troubles.³

BOOK ONE

I.

ORIGINS

La Vallée-aux-Loups, near Aulnay, October 4, 1811

FOUR YEARS ago now, on my return from the Holy Land, I bought a country house close to the hamlet of Aulnay, near Sceaux and Châtenay, hidden among the wooded hills. The area around the house is sandy, uneven—a sort of wild orchard with a gully and a grove of chestnuts at the far end. This narrow space seemed room enough to contain my long hopes; *spatio brevi spem longam reseces*.¹ The trees that I have planted here are thriving, though they are still so small that I give them shade when I stand between them and the sun. One day, they will give me shade: they will shelter me in my old age as I have sheltered them in their youth. I have chosen them, so far as I was able, from the many places I have wandered. They put me in mind of my travels, and nourish other illusions in the depths of my heart.

Should the Bourbons ever resume the throne, I would ask nothing more of them, in return for my loyalty, than to be made rich enough to buy the woodlands surrounding my estate. Ambition has taken hold of me; I would like to add a few acres to my walks. Knight-errant though I am, I have the sedentary tastes of a monk. Since I have lived in this place, I doubt whether I have set foot outside my enclosure more than three times. If my pines, my spruces, my larches, and my cedars live up to their promise, someday the Vallée-aux-Loups will be a veritable hermitage. And when Voltaire was born at Châtenay, on February 20, 1694, how did it look—this hillside where, in 1807, the author of *The Genius of Christianity* would come to retire?

The place pleases me. It has supplanted, in my mind, even my

father's fields. I have paid for it with my dreams and my sleepless nights. It is to the great wilderness of Atala that I owe this little wilderness of Aulnay, and to create this refuge I did not, like the American settlers, have to scalp any Florida Indians. I am fond of my trees; I have read elegies, sonnets, and odes to them. There is not one of them that I haven't cared for with my own hands, that I haven't relieved of a worm attached to its roots or a caterpillar clinging to its leaves; I know all of them by their names, like children. They are my family—I have none other—and I hope to die among them.

Here, I wrote *The Martyrs*, the *Abencerages*, the *Itinerary*, and *Moïse*. Now what shall I do, these autumn evenings? This October 4, 1811, my saint's day and the anniversary of my entry into Jerusalem, tempts me to begin the story of my life. The man who gives France power over the world today only to trample her underfoot, this man whose genius I admire and whose despotism I abhor, this man encircles me with his tyranny as with a second solitude; but though he crushes the present, the past defies him, and I remain free in everything that preceded his glory.

Most of my feelings have hitherto stayed hidden in the depths of my soul or shown themselves in my work in the guise of imaginary beings. I still miss my chimeras today, but I shall not pursue them. I want to climb back up the slope of my better years. These pages shall be a funerary shrine raised to the light of my memories.

The circumstances of my father's birth and the trials of his early life gave him one of the gloomiest characters that there have ever been. No doubt, this character influenced my ideas by terrorizing my childhood, desolating my youth, and deciding the manner of my education.

I was born a gentleman. And I think I have profited from this accident of birth, for I have retained that very firm love of liberty which belongs principally to the aristocracy whose last hour has struck. Aristocracy has three successive ages: the age of superiority, the age of privilege, and the age of vanity. Once through with the first, it degenerates into the second, and dies out in the last.

One can find my family, if the fancy strikes him, in Moréri's dictionary, in the various histories of Brittany by d'Argentré, Dom Lobineau, and Dom Morice, in the *Histoire généalogique de plusieurs maisons illustres de Bretagne* by Father Dupaz, in Toussaint Saint-Luc, Le Borge, and finally in Father Anselme's *Histoire des Grands Officiers de la Couronne*.*

The proofs of my lineage were made out by Chérin when my sister Lucile was admitted as a canoness to the Chapter of L'Argentière, before she went on to the Chapter of Remiremont; they were reproduced when I was presented to Louis XVI, again when I joined the Order of Malta, and once more when my brother was presented to that same unfortunate Louis XVI.

My family name was originally written *Brien*, then *Briant* and *Briand*, after the invasion of French spelling. Guillaume le Breton renders it *Castrum-Briani*. But there's not a name in France that lacks such variations. Who knows the correct spelling of Du Guesclin?

The Briens, at the beginning of the eleventh century, gave their name to an important castle in Brittany, and this castle became the seat of the Barony of Chateaubriand. Originally, the family coat of arms was a cluster of pinecones bearing the motto: *Je sème l'or*.² Then Geoffroy, Baron de Chateaubriand, went with Saint Louis to the Holy Land. Taken prisoner during the battle of Masura, he returned; his wife Sybille died of joy and shock at seeing him again. Saint Louis, as a reward for his services, granted him and his heirs, in exchange for their old coat of arms, a shield of gules³ scattered with gold fleurs-de-lys. *Cui et ejus haeredibus*, attests a cartulary in the priory at Bérée, *sanctus Ludovicus tum Francorum rex, propter ejus probitatem in armis, flores lilii auri, loco pomorum pini auri, contulit*.⁴

Almost from the outset, the Chateaubriands diverged into three branches. The first, called the Barons de Chateaubriand, formed the stock of the other two and began in the year 1000 in the person of

*A summary of this genealogy can be found in the *Histoire généalogique et héraldique des Pairs de France, des grands dignitaires de la Couronne* by M. le Chevalier le Courcelles.