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The Radiance of the Hero

Representations of the Heroic in French Literature from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century

L'éclat du héros

The analysis of representations of the hero and the heroic in French literature from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century is interesting, in terms of not only literary history, but also in terms of the fundamental questions about how we approach heroes, and how we understand heroism. The relationship between the heroic and literature is not an arbitrary one; rather, it is fundamental to the process of heroization, without which there would be neither heroes nor heroism. In 1965, the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot wrote in an article titled “Le Héros” (“The End of the Hero”) that heroism can only exist through deeds, and heroes only in and through words (Blanchot, *End of the Hero* 370-371). Art “guarantees the name by its renown” (“assure le nom dans la renommée”) and “eternalizes, and itself becomes eternal” (378). I also want to point out that this close connection between literature, art and the heroic has far-reaching consequences for the artist’s self-understanding. Artists’ representations of heroes offers them the chance to bask in the hero’s radiance, while also allowing them to understand their own artistic achievement – the presentation of heroic deeds and the creation of the hero in the first place – as a heroic deed in and of itself.

The reference to the artists who begin to glow in the light of their created hero brings forward an attribute that can be found in countless representations of heroes, some of which will be the focus of this discussion. I am referring here to the idea of a hero’s radiance: a heroic leading light or a radiant hero who represents the ideal of unbroken strength has a powerful allure that

captures our imagination. The fascination with the radiant appearance of the hero has proven to be so timeless, resistant to change and the crisis of historical images of heroes, that it has long been regarded as the essence of heroism. The corresponding French expression for this is *l'éclat du héros*.¹ In its many variations, this expression refers not only to the allure or aura of heroes, but also to the radiant and glorious heroic deed with which they make a name for themselves. In his article, Blanchot writes: “Heroism is revelation, this marvellous brilliance of deed that joins essence and appearance. Heroism is the act’s luminous sovereignty. Only the act is heroic, and the hero is nothing if he does not act – nothing outside the clarity of the act that illuminates and brings him to light” (370).² In addition, the *éclat* of heroes is an expression of the close connection between heroes and their followers. The heroes’ radiance and charisma captivate their followers, and this captivation serves to reflect and magnify the radiance back onto the heroic figures.

In light of this view of heroes, heroic deeds, and the relationship between heroes and society, one would think that the appearance of heroes – their presentation as a leading light in literary works or as an analogy of omnipresent light of their unquestionable presence – should render questions of origin, legitimacy, social function and nature of heroes superfluous. And yet, the sublime and radiant appearance of heroes is mysterious and ambiguous for several reasons. Heroes, by example, actualise social norms through their deeds; if they did not, society would not elevate them to heroic status in the first place. However, heroes also transgress the very norms of society, thereby proving their own exceptionality. Heroes emit a radiance that both illuminates and blinds the audience. Heroes’ actions inspire imitation, although they are inimitable. A hero’s status must be earned, affirmed by society and repeatedly defended. Nonetheless, their *action d'éclat* seems absent of presuppositions; it is evident, a revelation free from all

*This article was first published as: Gelz, Andreas. “Der Glanz des Helden – Darstellungsformen des Heroischen in der französischen Literatur vom 17.–19. Jahrhundert.” *Französisch heute* 49.2 (2018): 5-13.*

causality. In the following, I will examine several examples from French literature (for a more detailed analysis, see Gelz). Through literature, I will get to the root of the mystery of heroes in the light of their glory; a light whose waning they fear and must reignite time and again: “At any moment, we must overcome darkness and duration, return to the light by bringing it back to life” (Starobinski 60).

The apotheosis of the hero

Exemplary representations of this phenomenon can be found in many French classicist works. In Corneille’s tragicomedy *Le Cid* (1637), the term *éclat* describes both the heroic deed and the exceptional position of the hero in society. When The Cid explains the radiance of his heroic deeds, he turns to the term: “L’éclat de mes hauts faits fut mon seul partisan” (Corneille, *Œuvres* 716) (“My glorious exploits were my sole support” [Corneille, *Le Cid* 22]³). Moreover, after The Cid kills Chimène’s father in a duel, she demands that The Cid be executed in order to deny him the radiant and glorious death that would elevate him above others (“I seek his death, but not a glorious one. [“Non pas dans un éclat qui l’élève si haut”]/ I’d have the locus of his dying be / No field of honor, but the gallows tree” [93]⁴). *Éclat* also describes the aura of the hero, the radiance of his way of being: “For though Rodrigue’s renown is bright” (“Et que dans quelque éclat que Rodrigue ait vécu”) (100).⁵

Still, more than a century later, the entry for “Héroïsme” in the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772) – an important work for the self-fashioning of the French Enlightenment – denotes *éclat* as essential for distinguishing true heroism from other exceptional human qualities, such as greatness of spirit: “heroism differs from the simple grandeur of the soul in that it supposes virtues of brilliancy, which excite astonishment and admiration” (Anonymous 181).⁶ Here, the reversal of what is essential for the definition of the heroic is remarkable: the virtue of the *éclat* itself, rather than the aura of the virtue, evokes astonishment and admiration in the audience. Furthermore, in Marmontel’s entry for “gloire”, also in the *Encyclopédie*, glory is described as a “renommée éclatante”, “glowing fame” (Marmontel 716) that spreads like light and creates a direct connection between the hero and society that is stronger than the concept of honour, which refers to the estate. On the other hand, in Voltaire’s entry on “gloire, glorieux, glorieusement, glorifier”, he writes that glory always presupposes “des

choses éclatantes”, or “radiant things”, by which he means actions, virtues, talents and the overcoming of great difficulties (Voltaire, *Gloire* 716). Of the three elements that constituted the heroic code at the time – honour, glory and emulation (*aemulatio*) – it was primarily glory that, due to its *éclat* and hence its social radiance, was regarded as an end in itself. As a result, the heroic became somehow disconnected from its societal function and became a grand entity that seemed to need no questioning. This assumption is the basis for its legitimizing function in regard to notions about ideal behaviour in society. The assessment that the bedazzlement or blinding of the audience (“l’éblouissement”) forms the core of the visual identity of French Classicism and its poetics (Guyot 127) – its “poétique de l’éclat” (Pavel 53) – an identity in which the presence of a transcendental, seemingly unalterable order (such as a political order or an order of knowledge) can ultimately become perceivable in an aesthetic sense, is illustrated by the first sentence of Madame de Lafayette’s novel *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), which evokes a sublime image:

Grandeur and gallantry never appeared with more lustre [*éclat*] in France, than in the last years of Henry the Second’s reign. This prince was amorous and handsome, and though his passion for Diane of Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois, was above twenty years standing, it was not the less violent, nor did he give less distinguishing proofs of it [“des témoignages moins éclatants”] (Lafayette, *Princess of Cleves* 1).⁷

The term *éclat* here does not only refer to the hero, in this case the ruler, it also characterizes the monarchy and the gallant courtly culture overall; indeed, *éclat* characterizes this radiant era in France’s history. High birth, marks of favour, offices, wealth, clothes, beauty, generosity, courage, esprit, politeness, and an aptitude for conversation and games are all attributes of *éclat* in courtly society, and can be found in many works during this age (Niderst 86-87).

Given the many different social contexts that can be linked to one another through the term *éclat*, it is no surprise that it also has a political meaning. In a number of works in the tradition of the courtesy book, or treatise from political philosophy – such as Nicolas Faret’s *L’honneste homme ou l’art de plaire à la cour* (1630) or Guez de Balzac’s *Le prince* (1631) –, the term *éclat* is used as a normative description of the order of the absolute monarchy (see Disselkamp). Considering the history of the image of the sun,

which has been used as a metaphor for the figure of the ruler since ancient times (Telesko, *Erlösermythen* 43-44), these works compare the relationship between the king and the aristocracy to that of the sun and the planets: “Princes and great men are about a king like goodly stars, which receive all their light from him, but it is all confounded in this great light” (Faret, *Honest Man* 3).⁸ In his *comédie-ballet*, *Les amants magnifiques* (1670), Molière writes this kind of self-understanding for the role of the King, who appeared as an actor himself between 1651 and 1670, both in this play and in numerous other *comédies-ballet* and *ballets de cours* at court (Quaeitzsch 87):

Verses for the KING representing Apollo.
/ I am the source of brilliant Light, / And
not the proudest Star / That circles around
my Car, / Without my bounteous Rays is
bright. / Seated on my resplendent Throne,
/ Nature entire I see / Big with desire of me
/ Due to my Light it's Blessings own. (Molière, *Magnificent Lovers* 182, 184)⁹

From an aristocratic perspective, however, the radiant past, or the glory of one's ancestors, was the source of one's political legitimacy – “The Splendor of his Family” (Molière, *Man-Hater* 17),¹⁰ or “illustrious Blood” (“éclat du sang”) (Molière, *Psyche* 221).¹¹ Molière also demonstrates this idea of genealogy in his play *Dom Juan* (1665): Dom Juan's father criticizes his son's scandalous behaviour by referring to the glorious deeds of his forefathers, arguing that their *éclat* represents an obligation to their descendants. In this case, however, “on the contrary, their Lustre reflects upon you only in your Dishonour, and their Glory is a Torch which shews the Infamy of your Actions in the most glaring Light to the Eyes of the whole World” (Molière, *Don John* 339, 341).¹² Here, not only can *éclat* be traced back to the heroic deed as a quality of aristocracy, Molière also plays upon the dimension of light in the context of a revelation or an enlightenment by stating that the glory of his forefathers is a torch that reveals the truth – the truth about the morally reprehensible and anti-heroic behaviour of Dom Juan.

The transformation of models of the heroic

The portrait of the ideal type generated by the quotes above, which imply that the essence of heroes is nothing more than the brilliance we can

see on their faces due to their glorious deeds, is sometimes revealed as a phantasm. The hero's radiant appearance (see Vogel/Wild) thus proposes several questions regarding the real and fictitious elements of heroic representations or self-presentation, questions regarding the deception of others, self-deception and doubts, all of which often form the driving force of different heroic narratives.

The ‘demolition’ of the hero?

This particular image of the hero underwent a revision as part of the political and/or socio-cultural developments of the seventeenth century (however, I will not go into the details of this here). Moralists such as Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, and La Bruyère focused on the wonderful radiance of heroes, the “*éclat prodigieux*” (La Bruyère, *Caractères* 97), or “prodigious brilliancy” (46), as La Bruyère calls it in his 1688 work *Les Caractères ou Les mœurs de ce siècle*. These heroes are like the stars; we know very little about their origins and their future, they have no ancestors and no descendants and are content with their own company: “These men have neither ancestors nor posterity; they alone are their whole race” (46).¹³ La Rochefoucauld attempted to penetrate the brilliant surface of heroic allure in his *Maximes et réflexions morales* (1664) by examining the actions of the self-absorbed hero for hidden motives or emotions, such as self-interest. In this work, great and brilliant heroic deeds that fascinate the audience are often not the result of a superior plan. Rather, the hero is driven by either whims and passions, or by pure vanity: “Great and brilliant deeds that dazzle the onlooker are depicted by strategists as the result of great plans, whereas they are usually the result of temperament and passion” (La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims* 5)¹⁴ and “Apart from the greatness of their vanity, heroes are made like other men” (11).¹⁵ Here, La Rochefoucauld condenses concepts of heroism into maxims that demonstrate the fundamental ambivalence of the heroic, the radiance of which could even make a crime appear justified: “There are crimes that become innocent, and even glorious, because of their brilliance, number, and enormity” (173),¹⁶ and “There are heroes in evil, just as they are in good” (53).¹⁷ These transformations in the evaluation of the heroic during the seventeenth century have been dubbed “*la démolition du héros*” (the demolition of the hero).¹⁸

From hero to *grand homme*

In the eighteenth century, ideas of the Enlightenment, rather than moralistic or religious notions, led to a critique of aristocratic military heroism (for more on the transformations of the heroic, see Ritter 2004; Menant 2007; Menant/Morrissey 2010). New ideas of the heroic evolved, such as the concept of the *grand homme* (great man) (see Bonnet, *Culte des grands hommes* and *Naissance du Panthéon*; Gaetgens). There was talk of a cult of great men without sceptre and sword (Menant 441). They appeared among others in Voltaire's fresco featuring *Le siècle de Louis XIV* (1751) and became institutionalized by the Académie Française through a system of annual eulogies to the nation's famous men from 1759 to 1765. "Achievements in the areas of science and art that had merit, or were important and useful for society, became a criterion for heroization (Bell 715) and characterized the *grand homme*. According to Rousseau, the *grand homme* or 'true hero' surpassed the traditional hero – who Voltaire had described as a scavenger (Voltaire, *Correspondance* 554-555)

– in that the true hero no longer stands above the people, but rather stands on the same level as them. As Montesquieu writes in his *Pensées* (1726/1727–1755): "to do big things, [...] one must not be above men, one must be with them" (*My Thoughts* 294).¹⁹

All of this resulted in the differentiation and problematization of types of heroes – for example, in Charles-Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre's *Discours sur les différences du grand homme et de l'homme illustre* (1739). This differentiation and problematization was accelerated and amplified during the French Revolution, despite the remilitarization of the concept of the hero during this time (see Vovelle). The acceleration of these differentiation processes can be traced in the chequered history of the integration of various revolutionary heroes and great men into the Pantheon (along with their successive 'depantheonization'), where France has been honouring its outstanding sons and daughters since 1791 (see Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon*; see [fig. 1](#)). By referring primarily to ancient contexts and by elevating concepts like patriotism (Rousseau believes "that all patriotic virtues should be



Fig. 1: *Aux Grands Hommes*. Le Panthéon, Paris (Freepenguin, Wikimedia).

glorified” [(“qu’)on donnât de l’éclat à toutes les vertus patriotiques”] [*Political Writings* 170]²⁰), heroism was intended to be understood as a human quality, and no longer as an attribute of an estate. This was especially true for *philosophes*, writers, journalists and other representatives of the evolving *République des Lettres*, who promoted the concept of the *grand homme* in works and speeches, as well as in a comprehensive programme of pictures and sculptures (see Pigéaud/Barbe; Gaehtgens). One reason for intellectuals to partake in this process was their interest in augmenting their own role in society (for more on the *République des Lettres* see Goodman; Gordon). For this purpose, they did not hesitate to use key concepts like *éclat* or *gloire* or to borrow methods of (self-)heroization from contemporary systems of heroes that they otherwise vigorously criticized. As Claude-Adrien Helvétius writes in *De l’Esprit*,

If the military art is the most useful of them all, why have there been so many generals whose glory is more eclipsed in their life-time, and so many illustrious men of all kinds, whose memory and exploits are buried in the same tomb, when the glory of the authors and their contemporaries is still preserved in its first state [“conserve encore son premier éclat”]? (Helvétius, *Essays* 98)²¹

Some authors compare the situation of earlier times with the situation of their own day and age. For example, Voltaire believed that if the radiance of glory could conceal certain cruelties in the past, it was now tainted by such cruelties: “In the former ages cruelties of this kind were hidden in the blaze of success [“l’éclat de la gloire”], but now they sully the glory of a conqueror” (*Russian Empire* 176).²² There are further examples of satirical approaches to traditional ideas of heroes and key concepts, such as the *éclat*. One such example is Voltaire’s novella *Candide*, in which a battle is described as a “boucherie héroïque” (*Romans et contes* 150), or a “heroic carnage” (*Candide* 20). These are accompanied by ironical approaches, for example, in libertine novels, such as Choderlos de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* from 1782, where the seduction of the innocent Cécile de Volanges is referred to as a heroic adventure, or “digne d’un Héros” (Laclos 2011, 18) (“worthy of a hero”, Laclos 1961, 25). These and other literary methods, like the parody of ‘heroic’ literary genres such as the ode (see Menant/Quéro), not only document the historical and cultural contingency of traditional notions of the heroic, they have also made an

essential contribution to the emergence and further development of literary genres over the centuries (Menant 439). This is especially true for the genre of the novel, which developed rapidly in the eighteenth century. ‘Novelesque’ heroism increasingly complemented or replaced ‘tragic’ heroism, and the novel’s protagonist became successively interchangeable with the novel’s ‘hero’ (436). This empirically defined portrayal of a multitude of human lives beyond the traditional norms of behaviour and model-like biographies accelerated the rethinking of traditional images of the hero.

As a result of this acceleration of differentiation, the public engaged in discussions about which concepts of the heroic were suitable for a new kind of society. What is remarkable is that these processes of heroization were now located on different levels, featuring different agents, such as individuals, groups (for example *Les vainqueurs de la Bastille*) and the ‘people’ as a collective subject, and even the revolution as a historical process *sui generis*. Against the backdrop of the radical historical changes during this time and due to its performative character and appeal, the concept of the *éclat* was therefore also used as a category in the philosophy of history, expressing a historical dynamic that determined individual and collective action in light of the heroic.

The term *éclat* therefore became gradually separated from the traditional and defining socio-cultural and historical key concepts of specific heroisms and underwent a re-contextualization. This explains the transition from the aforementioned relevant categories of aristocratic heroism in the seventeenth century – *gloire*, *générosité*, *magnanimité*, as well as the religious connotation of the term *éclat* – to concepts of an *éclat de la raison* in the eighteenth century and an *éclat de la liberté* in the nineteenth century. The particularities of the semantic transformations of *éclat* are evident in the term’s transition from an expression of older, asymmetrical public structures, and thus instruments of absolutist propaganda, to a representation of a communicative dynamic in a (post)revolutionary, modern public, characterized for example by scandals in which the hero falls and new heroizations occur.

The return of the hero

The contextual shift in the use of *éclat* visibly signalled historical changes and, especially after the French Revolution, raised the question of the social role the aristocracy, as the heroic estate *par*

excellence, could play in a society governed by postulations of equality. On the other hand, the continuity of revolutionary heroism was equally virulent, due to the restorative tendencies of society in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Various works of literature in the first half of the nineteenth century would comprise what could be called the 'return of the hero' narrative, through which writers were able to revise the existing images of heroes, while also experimenting with new ones. Campbell referred to the hero's return as one of the essential stages in the life of a hero, alongside the 'departure' and 'initiation'. However, these works no longer described the social benefits of the extraordinary abilities and powers acquired by heroes during their adventures. Rather, the return of the hero from the battlefield and the attempt to reintegrate them into society acted, for the most part, as a trigger for nostalgic reminiscing about the glorious past. Especially in light of the defeat at Waterloo, which marked the end of the Napoleonic era and which was often addressed in nineteenth century literature, this trope was used as a symbol of the end of a heroic age (see Descotes). This perception characterizes many works of French Romanticism and the beginning of Realism, including Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) and *Lucien Leuwen* (1834), Victor Hugo's *Les chants du crépuscule* (1835), Alfred de Vigny's *Servitude et grandeur militaire* (1835) and, especially, Alfred de Musset's *La confession d'un enfant du siècle* (1836). The protagonist of this last book represents a generation that, according to the novel, was born between two battles, born in and for the war and now mourns the heroic life that is no longer obtainable: "Never had there been suns as unalloyed as those which dried up all the blood. People said that God had made them for that man and called them Suns of Austerlitz" (*Child of the Century* ch. 2).²³ This led to the (romantic) and proverbial "maladie du siècle" ("sickness of the present century").

But what happened to the heroes of the Napoleonic campaigns, the ones who survived and returned to French society, worrying about their social recognition after the final downfall and exile of Napoleon during political restoration (see Mascilli Migliorini)? A number of works explored this question in unexpected, poignant ways. Stendhal begins his novel *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839) with the heroic narrative of Napoleon's troops' glorious crossing of the Alps and the 'liberation' of Italy: "On the 15th of May, 1796, General Bonaparte marched into the city of Milan, at the head of the youthful army which had just crossed the Bridge of Lodi, and taught the

world that, after the lapse of centuries, Caesar and Alexander had found a successor at last" (Charterhouse 1).²⁴ The novel goes on to depict how, after the statues of Charles V and Philipp II are toppled, the people who had lived in the darkness of absolutism become illuminated by light; Stendhal thereby suggests that the censorship of the church is no match for the *éclat* of the *Encyclopédie* and Voltaire. Later in the novel, "La masse de bonheur et de plaisir" (*Œuvres* 145), the "volume of happiness and pleasure" (Charterhouse 3), that flows into the country with the French troops shows the Italian people that happiness also means patriotism and the striving for heroic deeds. However, even after the young protagonist Fabrice del Dongo, who wants to serve under Napoleon, has made his way alone to the battlefield at Waterloo, has seen combat and experienced it as a sequence of individual, seemingly disconnected skirmishes, and has fled with the scattered French army, he does not know whether he has actually participated in a real battle. His dream of heroism falls apart, just as Stendhal's innovative, highly fragmented 'realistic' description of the battle deconstructs it as a place where heroes can prove themselves.

In *Le colonel Chabert* (1844), Balzac's narrative of the unexpected and miraculous return of a presumably dead hero of the Napoleonic army is more radical and more pessimistic. The essentially impossible return of the hero from the dead (impossible also because the death of a hero is one of the conditions for their heroization by society) enables the hero to observe, in a way, what effect their ascribed glory has on posterity. That the sudden appearance of the hero presumed dead is regarded as a disturbance – even his wife, who has remarried and risen in society, denies who he is – and that he is considered a threat to society is the force that drives the plot of the novel. At the same time, the return of the hero indicates that a certain model of heroism has become obsolete. It is not by chance that, when Colonel Chabert tells his story to a lawyer at the beginning of the novel and asks the lawyer to represent him in court to defend his identity as person and hero, he describes his heroic death by referring to its mention in a military history book on the Napoleonic wars, *Victoires et Conquêtes*. Although this book is the basis of his heroic fame, it is this very book that, at the same time, prevents him from living as a hero after rising from a mass grave on the battlefield of Eylau: "I've been buried beneath the dead, but now I'm buried beneath the living; beneath certificates, facts – the whole society would rather have me buried underground!" (Balzac, *Colonel Chabert* 26-27).²⁵ The hero's

éclat thus defines the beginning of Balzac's novel, at least indirectly, through this reference to a history book on Napoleon's victories and conquests that lists Colonel Chabert's heroic deed, as well as through Chabert's own vivid and mesmerizing account that transfixes the lawyer. However, Balzac arranges the entire plot of the novel around the *éclat* in an even more fundamental way by creating semantic tension between its different elements of meaning: 'radiance', 'splendour' or 'charisma' on the one hand, and 'splinter' or 'shard' on the other. As a result, Balzac suspends the affirmative use of *éclat* as an expression of the presence of the heroic in society. The Colonel is described as the following: "The passerby, only to see him, would have recognized at once one of the noble wrecks of our old army, one of the heroic men on whom our national glory is reflected, as a splinter of ice on which the sun shines seems to reflect every beam" (*Colonel Chabert*).²⁶ This comparison of the Colonel's brilliant appearance with the *éclat* of a shining mirror (rather than with the *éclat* of a "splinter of ice", as *glace* has been translated into English here) is diminished when Balzac also describes him as a national hero and representative of a perished *grande armée*. The reference to him as a "beaux débris", one of the "noble wrecks", is a rather contradictory oxymoron; as the word *débris* also means 'shard', *éclat de glace* can be logically interpreted not as a mirror, but as a shard of glass that captures and reflects the sunlight. The ambivalence of this image is remarkable because Balzac thus portrays the old radiance of Colonel Chabert and the Napoleonic era he represents as broken and damaged, as well as a visible object of nostalgic idealization. Furthermore, the reference to the "passerby" means that the focus shifts from an audience who recognizes the hero in a traditional heroic context, to the uninvolved observers of an urban environment. Balzac is thus anticipating a structural feature of modern society: anonymity and heterogeneity make a common identification with a heroic leading figure much more difficult.

Because Chabert's painful experience is shared by an entire generation, it plays a role in many other works from this time. Jules Sandeau's novel *Mademoiselle de la Seiglière* (1847), for example, concerns a soldier who allegedly died in the battle of Moscow and returns as a revenant. His miraculous and brilliant appearance – "the military stamp on his look" ("le belliqueux éclat de son front") (Sandeau 1902, 166)²⁷ – is the driving force behind this plot full of conflicts. The story ends with the death of this hero of Napoleon's army and, at the same time, with the certainty that the restored and artificial

radiance of the aristocracy will not prevail in the age of democracy: "under the fictitious brilliance that has just been restored to him, she already has the melancholy air of a star which is becoming pale and declining" (204).²⁸ In order to survive, the aristocracy must coalesce with the new bourgeoisie, as if – as written in the text – it were a rare melted metal, forced to alloy to harden itself.

Chateaubriand's autobiographical *Memoires d'outre-tombe* (1848–1850), on the other hand, ultimately elevates these reflections on the death and miraculous resurrection of the hero to a metatextual level. In this work, Chateaubriand makes the lucid remark that he had been admitted to the Order of Malta at the exact time the National Assembly abolished noble privileges. Despite his intermittent engagement in the *Armée des émigrés*, he knew the ideas about aristocratic heroism that he had grown up with were changing. Therefore, Chateaubriand's works are dominated by the question of what possibilities exist – new and old – to present oneself as an exceptional figure. As a result, Chateaubriand's works are preoccupied by the fact that he ranks among the great literary figures, diplomats and politicians of the first half of the nineteenth century, as well as the fact that he was one of the founding figures of French Romanticism. Chateaubriand is self-confident enough to present Napoleon as not just a contextual factor in his own biography, but also as a leading light who must be surpassed and who can and must be used as a benchmark for his own success in life (see Marquart).

The points of departure for Chateaubriand and Napoleon could not have been more different, however, as can be seen in Chateaubriand's comparison of his depression during his exile in London with the "élévations et l'éclat de Napoléon" ("Napoleon's height and radiance", Chateaubriand 739-740). The use of metaphors to characterize Napoleon as radiance and light runs as a leitmotif through *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* and corresponds in an astonishingly similar way with how Napoleon presented himself in public (see Telesko, *Napoleon Bonaparte*). This characterization can be seen, for example, in the description of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign (see [fig. 2](#)): "Bonaparte turned to the East, in a double sense befitting his nature through despotism and radiance" ("par le despotisme et l'éclat") (Chateaubriand 694).²⁹ This formulation, which echoes the public praise of Napoleon as the rising sun, as *Oriens Augusti*, also recalls the description of Moscow in flames after the French army had taken the city. Napoleon not only threatens Chateaubriand's life as a royalist,



Fig. 2: Antoine-Jean Gros. *La bataille des Pyramides*. 1810 (oil on canvas, 389 x 505 cm), Château de Versailles (Wikimedia/Public domain; Achim55).

Napoleon's radiance also threatens to overshadow Chateaubriand's literary project: "The previous book was written under Bonaparte's expiring tyranny and by the light of the last sparks of his glory" (75).³⁰

Chateaubriand thus worked against Napoleon's omnipresent heroization in contemporary French society by heroizing himself and his own work. This required the heroic field of reference to shift to the literary field – an area where Chateaubriand could be dominant, just as Napoleon was on the battlefield. Chateaubriand was not the only author to focus on the parallelism of military and literary glory, to refer to Napoleon or even to use the (retrospective) mythologization of military heroism. It was quite common among the generation of writers active around 1830 to express their reaction to the *ennui* – the boredom and tedium of the 'prosaic' situation during the July Monarchy – in this way. For example, Stendhal, who admitted in 1804 to having an outright thirst for glory ("passion excessive pour la gloire" [Boussard 171]) that he shared with Fabrice, the protagonist of his novel *La chartreuse de Parme* (1839), had also taken

part in Napoleon's campaigns. In his novel *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830), Stendhal criticizes the hypocrisy of the bourgeois society that believes freedom arises from the striving for material possessions by presenting the older, heroic military virtue and glory as the measure of social ambition and advancement of Europe (Crozet 370). For his monumental novel cycle, the *Comédie humaine* (1829–1850), Balzac claims that he strove to complete with the pen what Napoleon did not achieve with the sword (Garval 84).

Chateaubriand, in his autobiographical *Mémoires d'outretombe*, gives a detailed description of Napoleon's tomb on St. Helena – the starting point of the emperor's heroization and sacralization in public consciousness – and juxtaposes it with his 'memoirs from beyond the grave' as the central site of his own heroization. As a result, the text itself becomes a literary monument, a kind of tomb. The memoirs form an apparatus through which the return (of the voice) of a seemingly dead hero can be presented; in this way, allowing the heroized and sacralized author to achieve what Chabert, as a kind of revenant, could not in Balzac's book. Namely, the

ability to dictate to posterity as a voice from the next world, as a ‘posthumous’ narrative voice, the desired representation of one’s own life as a heroic narrative. In these latter works, the paradoxes revealed in the presentation of the narrative agency, treatment of time and processes of heroization represent a complex literary reaction to the crisis of heroism in a post-revolutionary age.

Nonetheless, although these attempts were typical for this time, Balzac had already problematized the idea of the heroism of the artist in his novel *Illusions perdues* (1837–1843), by juxtaposing the life of a writer with that of a journalist. He thereby also criticises the notion that had been popular from Romanticism to Hugo of an independent intellectual aristocracy that should be able to take over the role of a preceptor in society. Flaubert did not hold back with his criticisms of the bourgeoisie in his novels, especially in *Éducation sentimentale* (1869). However, he simultaneously deheroizes the people singing the Marseillaise during the Revolution of 1848 when he writes about the storming of the king’s palace: “Heroes don’t smell very nice!” (*Sentimental Education* 313).³¹ His attempt to formulate a literary project focusing on the aesthetic ethos of *impassibilité*, *impersonnalité* and *impartialité* in order to imply both heroic and a-heroic ideas at the same time reveals a new way of talking about the further development of the heroic (and artistic) self-understanding of modernity. Baudelaire’s remarks in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1863) on modern art and the dandy as the founder of a new aristocracy, and as the symbol for a time of transition between aristocracy and democracy, point in a similar direction: “Dandyism is the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages [“le dernier éclat d’héroïsme dans les décadences”] [...] Dandyism is a setting sun; like the declining star, it is magnificent, without heat and full of melancholy” (Baudelaire, *Painter* 421–422).³² Here, the dandy is the embodiment of the hero and artist merged into one figure. The dandy merges art and life; he presents himself as a hero to a society that is indifferent to the artist, art, and art’s ideals – and thus anything extraordinary – and he unites art with social action. The figure of the dandy is therefore not about a so-called ‘aesthetic heroism’ or, as Nikolas Immer put it, the “shifting of the heroic from social and political reality to aesthetic experiential spaces” that, according to Immer, has been so decisive for the history of heroism since bourgeois modernity (Immer/van Marwyck 12). Rather, it is more about a development that spans from Baudelaire to the avant-garde movements of the turn of the twentieth century – movements with socially

subversive aesthetic programmes in which the abolition of art and its translation into practical life was always an option.

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1 In French, *éclat* originally means ‘splinter’ as well as ‘noise’, ‘bang’, ‘radiance’ and ‘charisma’. Since the seventeenth century, it can mean ‘splendour’, ‘sensation’ or ‘scandal’. Some of these rather heterogeneous meanings have emerged in the history of the term of *éclat* in the heroic context and can be regarded as an indicator of the ambiguities and historical changes in certain ideas about heroes.

2 “L’héroïsme est révélation, cette brillance merveilleuse de l’acte qui unit l’essence et l’apparence. L’héroïsme est la souveraineté lumineuse de l’acte. Seul l’acte est héroïque, et le héros n’est rien s’il n’agit et n’est rien hors de la clarté de l’acte qui éclaire et l’éclaire” (Blanchot, *Héros* 104).

3 “L’éclat de mes hauts faits fut mon seul partisan” (Corneille, *Œuvres* 716).

4 “Je demande sa mort, mais non pas glorieuse, / Non pas dans un éclat qui l’élève si haut, / Non pas au lit d’honneur, mais sur un échafaud” (*Œuvres* 761). For more on the notion of *gloire* in Corneille, see Kablitz; for more on the affect logic of classicist theatre, see Willis, *Emotions and Affect*.

5 “Et que dans quelque éclat que Rodrigue ait vécu” (Corneille, *Œuvres* 766).

6 “l’héroïsme diffère de la simple grandeur d’âme, en ce qu’il suppose des vertus d’éclat, qui excitent l’étonnement et l’admiration” (Anonymous 181).

7 “La magnificence et la galanterie n’ont jamais paru en France avec tant d’éclat, que dans les dernières années du règne de Henri second. Ce Prince était galant, bien fait et amoureux; quoique sa passion pour Diane de Poitiers, duchesse de Valentinois, eût commencé il y avait plus de vingt ans, elle n’en était pas moins violente, et il n’en donnait pas des témoignages moins éclatants” (Lafayette, *Œuvres* 331).

8 “Les Princes et les Grands sont autour du Roy comme de beaux Astres, qui reçoivent de luy toute leur splendeur, mais qui confondent tout leur éclat dans cette grande lumière” (Faret, *Honneste homme* 7).

9 “Pour le ROI, Représentant le SOLEIL / Je suis la source des Clartés, / Et les Astres les plus vantés / Dont le beau Cercle m’environne, / Ne sont brillants et respectés / Que par l’éclat que je leur donne. / Du Char où je me puis asseoir / Je vois le désir de me voir / Posséder la Nature entière, / Et le Monde n’a son espoir / Qu’aux seuls bienfaits de ma lumière.” (Molière, *Œuvres* vol. 1, 994–995.)

10 “l’éclat de sa Race” (650).

11 “[l]’éclat du sang” (Molière, *Œuvres* vol. 2, 439).

12 “au contraire, l’éclat n’en rejailit sur nous qu’à notre déshonneur, et leur gloire est un flambeau qui éclaire aux yeux d’un chacun la honte de vos actions” (Molière, *Œuvres* vol. 1, 889).

- 13 "ils n'ont ni aieuls, ni descendants: ils composent seuls toute leur race" (La Bruyère, *Caractères* 97).
- 14 "Ces grandes et éclatantes actions qui éblouissent les yeux sont représentées par les politiques comme les effets des grands desseins, au lieu que ce sont d'ordinaire les effets de l'humeur et des passions" (La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes* 8).
- 15 "qu'à une grande vanité près, les héros sont faits comme les autres hommes" (12).
- 16 "Il y a des crimes qui deviennent innocents et même glorieux, par leur éclat, leur nombre et leur excès" (150).
- 17 "Il y a des héros en mal comme en bien" (47).
- 18 For a critical discussion of this thesis, see Willis, *Glanz und Blendung*.
- 19 "Pour faire de grandes choses, [...] il ne faut pas être au-dessus des hommes; il faut être avec eux" (Montesquieu, *Pensées* 391).
- 20 "[qu]on donnat de l'éclat à toutes les vertus patriotiques" (Rousseau, *Œuvres* vol. 3, 962).
- 21 "Si l'art militaire, de tous les arts, est le plus utile, pourquoi tant de Généraux, dont la gloire éclipsait, de leur vivant, celle de tous les hommes illustres en d'autres genres, ont-ils été, eux, leur mémoire et leurs exploits, ensevelis dans la même tombe, lorsque la gloire des Auteurs leurs contemporains conserve encore son premier éclat?" (Helvétius, *De l'esprit* 123).
- 22 "Autrefois l'éclat de la gloire couvrait de telles cruautés, aujourd'hui elles la ternissent" (Voltaire, *Empire de Russie* 457).
- 23 "jamais il n'y eut de soleils si purs que ceux qui séchèrent tout ce sang. On disait que Dieu les faisait pour cet homme, et on les appelait ses soleils d'Austerlitz" (De Vigny, *Enfant du Siècle* 10).
- 24 "Le 15 mai 1796, le général Bonaparte fit son entrée dans Milan à la tête de cette jeune armée qui venait de passer le pont de Lodi, et d'apprendre au monde qu'après tant de siècles César et Alexandre avaient un successeur" (Stendhal, *Œuvres* 143).
- 25 "J'ai été enterré sous des morts, mais maintenant je suis enterré sous des vivants, sous des actes, sous des faits, sous la société tout entière, qui veut me faire rentrer sous terre!" (Balzac, *Colonel Chabert* 328).
- 26 "À le voir, les passants eussent facilement reconnu en lui l'un de ces beaux débris de notre ancienne armée, un de ces hommes héroïques sur lesquels se reflète notre gloire nationale, et qui la représentent comme un éclat de glace illuminé par le soleil semble en réfléchir tous les rayons" (ibid., emphasis AG).
- 27 "le belliqueux éclat de son front" (Sandeau 1887, 175).
- 28 "sous le factice éclat qu'on vient de lui rendre, elle a déjà la mélancolie d'un astre qui pâlit et décline" (217).
- 29 "Bonaparte se tourna vers l'Orient, doublement congénial à sa nature par le despotisme et l'éclat" (Chateaubriand 694).
- 30 "Le livre précédent fut écrit sous la tyrannie expirante de Bonaparte et à la lueur des derniers éclairs de sa gloire" (75).
- 31 "Les héros ne sentent pas bon!" (Flaubert, *Éducation sentimentale* 320).
- 32 "Le dandysme est le dernier éclat d'héroïsme dans les décadences [...] Le dandysme est un soleil couchant; comme l'astre qui décline, il est superbe, sans chaleur et plein de mélancolie" (Baudelaire, *Peintre* 711-712).

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