Reconnaissance and the Politics of Memory in 
Demands to Repatriate Napoleon's 
Remains in 1821

Natasha S. Naujoks 
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Amid the spate of odes, apologetics, and panegyrics occasioned by Napoleon's death in May 1821, a vigorous argument ensued among the writers of pamphlets and other ephemera concerning the fate of his mortal remains. Penned by largely unknown or anonymous authors and ranging in form from classical elegies to heroic poems to political essays, these texts flooded the increasingly popular market for literary novelties in Restoration France.¹ Often overshadowed by literary lights of greater reputation (and admittedly of greater talent) like Alessandro Manzoni, Victor Hugo, and Alphonse de Lamartine, they nonetheless merit the historian's attention because they reveal just what was at stake in the contest over remembering the Napoleonic past.² These authors predicated their demands for the repatriation of Napoleon's body on the idea of reconnaissance, suggesting recognition of and gratitude for services rendered to France. Almost unanimously, they concluded that the Vendôme Column, that triumphant monument constructed out of melted-


² In fact, the more famous creators of the Napoleonic myth were all greatly indebted to these lesser known "œuvres de circonstance." Georges Lote, "La mort de Napoléon et l'opinion bonapartiste en 1821," Revue des études napoléoniennes (July–December 1930): 58.
down enemy cannon and dedicated to the exploits of the Grand Army, was the most suitable resting place for France's greatest military hero. In the course of these arguments, liberal adherents made plain the political uses of collective memory, turning the repatriation project into a yardstick for measuring Louis XVIII's commitment to constitutional government.

Efforts to reclaim Napoleon's remains from the island of St. Helena began shortly after news of his death reached Europe early in July 1821. Letters written by members of the Imperial family to the British government and sovereign members of the Holy Alliance went unanswered. England's official position was equivocal; General Bertrand and the comte de Montholon, having petitioned George IV personally upon their return from St. Helena, were informed that the British government considered itself guardian of Napoleon's remains until such time as the French government manifested its desire to have them. The Restoration regime showing little inclination to do so, deputies and pamphleteers began vocalizing a variety of arguments intended to pressure the French government into action. The idea that the body of France's greatest warrior should remain in the hands of her mortal enemy was an irritant to wounded national pride, still smarting from the defeat at Waterloo and the humiliating treaties of 1814–1815. On 14 July 1821, a petition was advanced to the Chamber of Deputies by no less a personage than the Marquis de Lafayette, who laid aside his former opposition to the Emperor for the sake of French dignity. In the name of national honor, the signatories demanded

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3 Napoleon's mother and sister Pauline made several attempts to have their claims recognized by the British government, even soliciting the assistance of Lord Holland, known to be a partisan of the Emperor's cause throughout his exile. Napoleon's adopted son and former viceroy of Italy, Eugène de Beauharnais, also wrote a much publicized letter to the Holy Alliance, published in France as Lettre du prince Eugène de Beauharnais aux souverains alliés, ou Protestation contre le pouvoir arbitraire que s'est arrogé l'Angleterre de retenir à Sainte-Hélène le corps de Napoléon Bonaparte (Paris, 1821).

the return of Napoleon's body so that it might not become a trophy of war for the insolent English.⁵ According to the polemicist and opposition journalist, Pierre Barthèlemy, such an act would allow the "partisans of glory and national prosperity" to deliver a parting shot to the English by declaring: "Napoleon's ashes are here, for the French didn't want to leave to the English the mortal remains of a man who was the honor of the patrie and the eternal shame of England."⁶

But wounded pride and bellicose sentiments were not the only motivations for reclaiming Napoleon's body from the island of St. Helena. At their core, these arguments revolved around the role of collective memory as an act of reconnaissance, defined as "the most beautiful and most sublime price of great deeds, enthusiasm, and genius."⁷ Recalling to memory the benefits that Napoleon had bestowed upon France was a way of rendering thanks to "the hope, the foundation, the regenerator of France."⁸ The duties imposed by reconnaissance rendered it imperative for the sake of French dignity to reclaim his body and lay it to rest on native soil, lest they be perceived as a nation of ingrates.⁹ In constructing their rhetoric, these authors availed themselves of the mythic narrative of Napoleonic history that had been

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⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ *Panégyrique d'un mort. Par un homme sans titre.* (Paris, 1821), 4.

developing ever since his first abdication in 1814 and that furnished heroic images of Napoleon as a savior and patriot. The year 1798, when Napoleon miraculously emerged from the depths of Egypt to rescue France from the abyss, was a key moment in this narrative. His accession to power marked the return of domestic peace and general prosperity.  "His presence put an end to anarchy and our unhappy dissensions; he recalled religion from exile and restored our battered altars; he brought order and economy to our finances; his code was an immortal collection of the wisest laws; he covered France with monuments both useful and glorious."  Having saved France from the terrors of a civil war, Napoleon established the stability and order necessary for commerce, the sciences, and the arts to flourish, while French flags floated victoriously on the fields of battle across all of Europe.

Furthermore, the love of country that had motivated Napoleon's military exploits elevated even his most dismal defeats into glorious moments unparalleled in the annals of history. France had no cause to reproach the Emperor for her recent misfortunes, for he "raised her to the highest degree of glory and splendor, made all of Europe fear and revere the name French, and when he could no more good for her sake, immolated himself for her happiness and tranquility."  To those who charged Napoleon with incessant warmongering to satisfy his own ambition and self-aggrandizement, his apologists insisted on his pacifism. Provoked by the forces of counter-revolution, he went to war only to secure an honorable peace that would ensure the welfare of France. Thus, in 1814, Napoleon

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10 Panégyrique d’un mort, 5-6.  
13 B. Serrurot, Dialogue militaire sur la mort de Napoléon, entre une compagnie de braves sortis de l’ex-garde (Paris, 1821), 9, 12.  
14 Beaujour, Encore une larme, 8.
chose to risk it all on the field of battle and ultimately to abdicate rather than sign a treaty that would shame France by truncating her borders and besmirch the memory of those brave soldiers who had sacrificed their lives in her defense. Implicit in this didactic tale of the patriotic sovereign was a rebuke to the Bourbons for consenting to France's humiliation in order to reclaim their throne.

Not surprisingly, veterans of the Imperial wars were in the vanguard of the campaign to return Napoleon's body to France. One of the earliest pamphlets to appear in print was penned by a former artillery officer, Alexandre Goujon, who took up a literary career after defeat in 1815 brought an end to more than fifteen years of service in the Revolutionary and Imperial campaigns. In the name of "martial piety" and French national honor, he implored the government to allow the few brave men who remained faithful to Napoleon's memory to build a tomb for him. All they asked for was "a simple stone . . . provided that stone rests on French soil." For Goujon, the Vendôme Column was the only suitable resting place for the Emperor's ashes; Napoleon, prescient of his own mortality even during his days of prosperity, had already ordained his own funerary monument. While the Bourbons may have succeeded in toppling the statue atop the column, "providence seemed by design to have spared the pedestal" so that it might serve its intended purpose. Moreover, as a commemorative monument, the Vendôme Column was meant to appease royalist and other anti-Bonapartist opinions by defining Napoleon's role in French history almost solely by his military exploits. "If the title of Emperor irritates or offends you, do you no longer remember General Bonaparte," victor of Arcola, the Pyramids, and countless other battles? Goujon's arguments were often quoted and cited by other proponents of repatriation efforts, nearly all of whom echoed his

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15 Serrurot, Dialogue militaire, 10.
17 Ibid., 7.
18 Ibid., 4-5.
opinion that Napoleon's ashes should be deposited beneath the Vendôme Column.\textsuperscript{19} Recognizing the divisive nature of the Empire's political legacy, Goujon sought to make Napoleon's memory more palatable by distilling the history of the entire epoch into one of glory and prestige, a legacy that belonged to the entire nation rather than of any one party or faction.

Perhaps the most curious characteristic of this discourse surrounding the fate of Napoleon's remains was the tendency to address these demands directly to Louis XVIII. Some appealed to the king's sense of honor. A former law student named Giraud almost tried to shame Louis XVIII into making a show of courage against the arrogant sovereigns of the Holy Alliance by reclaiming the body of their enemy: "[T]ell them, enjoying the amity of your people, you have nothing to fear from them."\textsuperscript{20} Others adopted a more flattering tone, appealing to Louis' sense of clemency and justice. Surely, gushed one anonymous author, Louis in his magnanimity and patriotism could not fail to admire and feel pity for a warrior like Napoleon, thorn in the Bourbons' side though he may have been.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, history, both ancient and modern, furnished instructive examples of such noble behavior. Did the Romans refuse the body of Germanicus, asked Barthélemy? No, for "when the Great Man is no more . . . his glory is the property of the patrie, and an entire people have no less right than that of a single citizen to reclaim the remains of a friend who died in a foreign land."\textsuperscript{22} Did France, who had so often in the past granted asylum to dethroned kings, not have "a small plot of earth" for one of her own?\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19} Pierre Barthélemy was one of the few dissenting voices, arguing that a trophy to military victories was not a fitting venue for a funeral monument. Instead, Barthélemy proposed constructing a pyramid-shaped monument across from the Champ du Mars, in accordance with Napoleon's request that he be laid to rest on the banks of the Seine. Barthélemy, Demande de la translation, 13.


\textsuperscript{21} Panégyrique d'un mort, 5-6.

\textsuperscript{22} Barthélemy, Demande de la translation, 6.

\textsuperscript{23} Sentiment d'un jeune français, 4.
The duties imposed by reconnaissance also involved a certain amount of quid pro quo. After all, as Goujon pointedly reminded his audience, Napoleon had honored the memory of the Bourbons for the sake of the common patrimony, going so far as to reconsecrate the ancient resting place of French kings at Saint-Denis. In carrying off Frederick the Great's sword among the spoils of war, he vindicated the veterans of Rossbach; could the Bourbons not likewise offer a sop to the wounded pride of Imperial veterans? \(^{24}\) Furthermore, Napoleon had shown a disinterested clemency when, upon taking leave of his loyal guard at Fontainebleau in April 1814, he admonished them to remain as faithful in their defense of the Bourbons as they had for his own. \(^{25}\) It was only just that Louis reciprocate by honoring the memory of the man who did so much to embellish the throne which the Bourbons now occupied. \(^{26}\)

At first glance, this confidence in Louis XVIII's magnanimity appears naïve at best. The Restoration government, particularly after the Hundred Days, went to great lengths in its attempts to erase the usurper's presence from the national consciousness by vigorously prosecuting the least suspicion of Bonapartist sedition. Although Napoleon's death put an end to fears that he would escape and return to terrorize the crowned heads of Europe yet again, the government had little reason to relax its vigilance, as Bonapartist hopes were kept alive in the person of Napoleon II. Furthermore, given France's precarious diplomatic position, the government had little reason to antagonize England with importunate demands for Napoleon's body. But considered within the context of the Restoration's failure to "unite and forget" and the royalist reaction of 1820, the shrewdness of this tactic becomes clearer. Enshrined in Article 11 of the 1814 Constitutional Charter, which ordained a policy of "forgetfulness" by forbidding investigation into individuals'
political opinions held prior to the Restoration, this attempt to enforce collective amnesia represented a desire to forge national unity by burying the proverbial hatchet.\footnote{David Skuy has called attention to the ambiguous meaning of oubli in this context. Rejecting the definition posited by Sheryl Kroen, who argues that oubli became "compulsory forgetting" under the Second Restoration, Skuy insists that between 1814 and 1821 it was emphatically a call for conciliation for the greater good of France, an effort to "forgive and forget." David Skuy, \textit{Assassination, Politics, and Miracles: France and the Royalist Reaction of 1820} (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003), 67; Sheryl Kroen, \textit{Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815–1830} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 41. Rather than taking these definitions to be mutually exclusive, I view the \textit{union et oubli} policy as an attempt to achieve national reconciliation through selective forgetting.} It was doomed to fail, not least because of the resilience of collective memory. As Sheryl Kroen has argued, the highly public and ceremonial destruction of Revolutionary and Imperial symbols tended to encourage the process of remembering rather than forgetting.\footnote{Kroen, \textit{Politics and Theater}, 59-62.} Furthermore, the assassination of the duc de Berry in 1820 by a Bonapartist fanatic sounded a death knell for the "unite and forget" principle, unleashing a royalist reaction that precipitated the demise of the Liberal majority in the Chamber of Deputies and rendered further cooperation between the king and the left untenable.

By appealing to Louis' sense of justice and reconnaissance, these authors were in effect challenging him to make good on his promise to forget the bitter past for the sake of national reconciliation. Proponents of repatriation claimed that their motives transcended the pettiness of party spirit and partisan divisions. In a polemical pamphlet directed at ultra-royalist and "counter-revolutionary" writers, Alexandre Barginet, a journalist and jack-of-all-literary-trades, blamed his opponents on the right for injecting "party spirit" into the debate. In an effort to cover up their own insidious machinations against the government, charged Barginet, the ultras had raised a false cry of alarm over the seditious nature of public mourning for Napoleon, attempting to turn the king against the nation. None of the "little books"
occasioned by Napoleon's death contained even the faintest whisper of a threat against the Bourbon family, yet the ultras foresaw the end of the monarchy itself, "as if Napoleon's coffin could open and let loose again the triumphant victor of Europe!" Was it not possible, he asked, to mourn Napoleon without insulting "a lawfully-reigning king?" Was it an insult to the memory of Henri IV to honor the unhappy courage and glory of an exiled hero? As one anonymous author put it, "I love my king, my country, and my honor! But I also mourn a hero who was my Emperor." In its earliest iterations, the Napoleonic myth was not unequivocally positive in its assessment of the Imperial interregnum. Barginet was no exception. He conceded that Napoleon was guilty of despotic excesses, which had alienated "the friends of constitutional liberty." To those who accused the Liberals of hypocrisy, having opposed Napoleon in life and mourned him in death, he insisted that it was important to distinguish between the two aspects of Napoleon's character—"the conqueror and the Great Man." To honor the latter was not the same thing as forgiving the former. For Barginet, Bonapartism was less a political doctrine and more a willingness to recall "the great acts of a beneficent and glorious Revolution," and thus reconcilable with liberalism.

Nonpartisan claims notwithstanding, liberal politicians and their adherents were quick to make use of the repatriation project as a proxy in their opposition to the erosion of constitutional liberties that commenced shortly after the duc de Berry's assassination in February 1820. The arguments of Barginet and others contained subtle warnings to the king that he could count on the support of the nation only so long as he reigned in accordance with the Charter. They implored Louis to make a show of good faith by uniting himself with the majority of the French people and concede to their desires to reclaim Napoleon's

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30 *Sentiment d'un jeune français*, 6.
body. Pierre Grand, a student and later a lawyer at the royal court, was even more explicit in linking the repatriation project to the liberal cause. In a pamphlet entitled, "The Cry of France," Grand lamented the death of the Charter, "no more than a phantom, a vain simulacrum of illusory liberty!"33 Having satisfied the wishes of the French nation in 1814 with a constitutional guarantee of their political liberties, Louis XVIII had caved into the hysteria of the Jesuits and the ultras, who held the Liberals responsible for Berry's assassination and who seized the event as a pretext for violating the Charter.34 For Grand, the perpetual exile of Napoleon's body was as much a symptom of liberty annihilated as arbitrary censorship and the suspension of habeas corpus; "[T]oday France demands in vain that the lifeless remains of this Great Man, over which even Caesar would have mourned, be deposited beneath the [Vendôme] Column." In a nation where such a thing is possible, suggested Grand, "perhaps it is dangerous to even hope to obtain a new constitutional charter."35 The campaign to repatriate Napoleon's remains was thus insinuated into the wider context of parliamentary politics that pitted the Liberal Opposition against the ultra-royalists.

Support for the repatriation of Napoleon's remains became a sort of litmus test for loyalty to France and to the constitutional regime. Contrary to the wishes of the national majority, enemy factions had conspired to banish Napoleon from France, and now compounded their perfidy by attempting to consign his memory to oblivion.36 They were castigated as "French only in name," for whom "the sacred title of patrie was nothing but a vain and

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32 Ibid., 19; Giraud, Remercimens d'un ex-étudiant, 5.
34 As Charles Nodier famously declared in the royalist journal, Le Drapeau Blanc, "I have seen the dagger that killed the duc de Berry," he said, "it was a liberal idea." Quoted in Emmanuel de Waresquiel and Benoît Yvert, Histoire de la Restauration, 1814–1830: Naissance de la France moderne (Paris: Perrin, 1996), 290.
35 Grand, Le cri de la France, 6.
36 Barthélemy, Demande de la translation, 6-7.
empty word." In contrast, every "good Frenchman," including
the king himself, was called upon to defend national honor by
joining in the demands to reclaim the ashes of France's greatest
warrior from her eternal enemy. By offering Napoleon a resting
place beneath the Vendôme Column, a testament to the glory
that France enjoyed under his reign, French citizens could fulfill
the sacred duties of reconnaissante and prove their patriotism by
manifesting their willingness to remember.

37 Beaujour, Encore une larme, 7; Grand, Le cri de la France, 2.