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Metaphors of Life in European Culture

To Write, to Live: Writing about (in) Exile as a Metaphor of Life in Hermione Quinet's Memoirs

Elena Petrea¹, Liviu-Mihail Marinescu²

Abstract: Hermione Quinet's *Mémoires d'exil Bruxelles-Oberland*, first published in 1868, is an autobiographical work in which the author recounts her experience of exile, shared with her husband, the historian and philosopher Edgar Quinet, following the coup d'État of 2 December 1851. Hermione Quinet describes life in exile, first in Brussels, then in Switzerland, where the couple settled from 1858 onwards. Her writing blends personal memories, reflections on the condition of exile, and expressions of admiration for her husband. The writer explores the pain of separation associated with being forgotten and records the intellectual and political struggles led by Edgar Quinet and the other exiles. Our article aims to analyse Hermione Quinet's writing in and about exile, as her *Mémoires* – a text that is both intimate and politically engaged – are more than a simple narrative of events: they reveal a lyrical and militant style of writing, in which nature becomes the setting for a spiritual and artistic renaissance. Hermione Quinet reinvents the experience of exile as an act of literary creation and as a reversed metaphor for life.

Keywords: life writing; existential metamorphosis; womens' history; 19th century exile

JEL Classification: Z

1. Introduction

“My life has begun anew, since it is now linked to that of a soul who shares all my feelings with me; I was dead, she has brought me back to life; she has taught me how the present is possible, without the past ceasing to be.”³ (Quinet, 1885, p. 15)

When he wrote these lines to his friend Paul Bataillard, in a letter dated 17 September 1852, Edgar Quinet had been living in exile in Brussels for almost ten months, following the coup d'État of 2

¹ Associate Professor, PhD, “Ion Ionescu de la Brad” Iași University of Life Sciences, Romania, Address: 3 Mihail Sadoveanu Alley, Iași 700490, Romania, Corresponding author: elena.petrea@iuls.ro.

² Associate Professor, PhD, Danubius International University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, marinesculiviu@univ-danubius.ro.

³ « Ma vie a recommencé, depuis qu'elle est associée à celle d'une âme qui partage avec moi tous mes sentiments ; j'étais mort, elle m'a ressuscité ; elle m'a appris comment le présent est possible, sans que le passé cesse d'être. »

N.B. Here and throughout the article, we have translated the original text from French into English.



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December 1851, by which Louis Napoleon Bonaparte seized power; on the 3rd, faithful to his ideals of freedom, Quinet took part in the attempted resistance, which failed, leading to his proscription and clandestine escape to Belgium, aided by the Romanian princess Marie Cantacuzène (Gros, 2003, p. 133; Richer, 1999, p. 291; Baudson, 1975, p. 21). Another Romanian woman, the one mentioned in the letter cited at the beginning of our paper, joined the exile immediately and without hesitation, accompanied by her son Georges, to become Madame Edgar Quinet on 21 July 1852 and remain by her husband's side until his death, at the age of 72, on 27 March 1875, after which she signed as Veuve Edgar Quinet until the end of her life on 9 December 1900 (she lived to the age of 79).

The quotation with which we began our article highlights an existential and intellectual rebirth: for Edgar Quinet, Hermione embodied the vital force that enabled him to overcome his political disillusionment and his trials, whilst preserving the memory of his past struggles. From this perspective, Hermione is not merely a companion, as her influence extends beyond the private sphere and forms part of a dynamic of intellectual collaboration, where exile, far from being an end in itself, is transformed into a space for reflection and creative output.

Our study, focusing specifically on Hermione Quinet's memoirs of exile, fills a clear gap and contributes to provide a corpus and a perspective that are still lacking in the literature.

2. Women Writers and the Writing of Exile: Issues of Identity, Language and Politics

Devoid of political power, women in the 19th century relied on 'sociability', defined as the ability to live in society, which enabled them to acquire a certain influence (Krakovitch, 1997, p. 205). The ways in which women of the period in question engaged with the public sphere are numerous, rich in nuance and examples. Nineteenth-century women writers faced significant social and literary obstacles in their writing, and those living in exile used literature to challenge identity structures and express humanist values (Planté, 2015).

Recent research on women writers in exile, covering a period from the 19th to the 21st century, explores a variety of geographical contexts and demonstrate that exile, far more than a mere geographical displacement, fuels literary creation, transforms identities and brings to the fore female voices long relegated to the margins of literary canons. Exile presents itself first and foremost as an uprooting that triggers a process of self-recomposition, blending suffering, creativity and hybrid identity. The writing practices adopted by these women writers reflect the variety of issues associated with exile. Autofiction and autobiography occupy a central place, allowing for the reworking of identities, whilst blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction to create distance from trauma (González, 2017; Roman, 2025; Varela, 2020; Philip, 2016). The novels and memoirs of female emigrants intertwine historical trauma with women's life stories, using autobiography as a creative resource (Piesse, 2018; Rennhak, 2006).

The transition to a language of exile – French, English or another – as well as practices of self-translation profoundly reshape one's relationship with 'home'. These processes produce works that function as bridges between cultures and languages (Roman, 2025; González, 2017; Hogarth, 2022; Lorenz, 1998). In this context, writing becomes a habitable territory when one's homeland, family or native language are lost or inaccessible (Anis et al., 2023; Piesse, 2018; Higonnet et al., 1992; Chodon et al., 2025; Gibson & Rudy, 2015). It thus enables the recreation of a symbolic anchor and the negotiation of new forms of belonging.

The studies cited show that, for many women writers, exile extends far beyond the geographical dimension to become an experience of identity, language and politics. Writing – often autobiographical

or autofictional – serves to process trauma, challenge patriarchal and national norms, and invent new spaces of belonging. Whatever the context, exile remains a powerful driving force for women to speak out and rebuild their sense of self.

2. Hermione Asachi – Madame Edgar Quinet or the Double Exile

Whilst history took it upon itself to upend the life of the great French historian and bring him definitively closer to the woman who would become his second wife, it should nevertheless be noted that they met in 1846 at the house of Bianca Milesi-Mojon and immediately recognised one another as kindred spirits drawn to freedom and the defence of oppressed nations. “A fine example of the cultural fusions that 19th-century Europe was capable of producing” (Richer, 1999, p. 265), raised in the house of her adoptive father Gheorghe Asachi where she acquired a vast literary education, a writer and translator due to her multilingualism, a “bewitching musician” who played the harp to such perfection that her parents’ guests were entranced, as G. Sion attests (Sion, 1956, p. 403), but also a participant in the secret Moldavian political circles of the opposition (Jianu, 2015, pp. 340-341), an auditor of the lectures (the “feasts of the intellect”, as she calls them (Quinet, 2016a, p. 158) given at the Collège de France by the trio Mickiewicz, Michelet and Quinet, and actively involved in the activities of the small Romanian community in Paris at the time, Hermione showed great courage when, in January 1852, she took her husband’s correspondence to Belgium, as no one had dared to entrust it to the post office for fear of censorship.

A practical woman, Hermione now took charge of administrative and financial matters (Richer, 1997, pp. 293 & 326), which allowed Edgar to continue writing.

The nineteen years of exile spent in Belgium and Switzerland had a crucial impact on the couple’s life, as evidenced by titles such as *Mémoires d’exil Bruxelles-Oberland* (1869), *Edgar Quinet avant l’exil* (1888) and *Edgar Quinet depuis l’exil* (1889); signed ‘Mme Edgar Quinet’ – not only because of the conventions of the time regarding the right of female authors to sign their own work, but also because of the discretion with which she wished to place herself in a supporting role to her famous husband (Jianu, 2015, p. 342) – these texts are the result of a writing process that reveals Hermione Quinet as an attentive chronicler of the radical experience of exile. Described by expressions such as ‘terrible ordeal’, “true civil death” in the memoirs of 1869 (Quinet, 2016a, p. 8), “this other death” erasing from the memory of contemporaries the figure of the exile and his work (Quinet, 2016b, p. II), exile marks out in Edgar Quinet’s life “two distinct periods: one Before Exile, the other Since Exile” (Quinet, 2016c, Preface).

Whilst making reference to the biographies published by Hermione after Edgar Quinet’s death, our analysis focuses primarily on the *Mémoires d’exil Bruxelles-Oberland* (1869), Hermione Quinet’s first work as an author, published during her husband’s lifetime and possessing a distinctive status, which the author takes great care to note from the outset:

“The time has not yet come to recount the first seven years of exile in Brussels, so fraught with sorrow. But looking back over the sixteen years spent far from France, the year 1857 stands out as more serene and light against the dark and heavy backdrop of a foreign sky. I find in it for you consoling and sweet memories; I shall choose only the most cheerful ones; it is for you alone to write the annals of exile.” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 2)¹

¹ « L’heure n’est pas encore venue de raconter les sept premières années d’exil à Bruxelles, si fécondes en douleurs. Mais en remontant le cours des seize années écoulées loin de France, la date de 1857 se détache plus sereine et légère sur le fond sombre et lourd d’un ciel étranger. J’y trouve pour toi des souvenirs consolants et doux ; je n’en choisirai que les plus souriants ; à toi seul appartient d’écrire les annales de l’exil. »

While Quinet alluded in the opening quotation to a personal rebirth thanks to his partner, Hermione's writings reveal a voice of her own, that of a woman who takes ownership of the act of writing to give form to the couple's shared experience. Thus, Hermione Quinet's *Memoirs* are not merely the account of a faithful wife following her husband into exile, but constitute a work in their own right, in which writing becomes a tool of resistance against the historical erasure of exiles from collective memory and a means of reinventing identity in a context of uprooting. Through the pages of her diary, Hermione does not merely describe the hardships of exile: she reconstructs a world, blending intimate memories, political reflections and social observations. Her writing, overlooked by posterity, offers a necessary alternative to the masculine and heroic vision of exile, by incorporating a domestic, emotional and profoundly human dimension.

From this perspective, her work raises the question: how can writing about exile, for a 19th-century woman, be both an act of survival and an act of creation? How does Hermione Quinet, through her *Memoirs*, transcend the role of a secondary figure to become a fully-fledged author, whose pen sheds light on the silences of history?

Our article aims to analyse Hermione Quinet's writing in and about exile, as her *Memoirs* – a text that is both intimate and politically engaged – are more than a simple narrative of events: they reveal a lyrical and militant style of writing, in which nature becomes the setting for a spiritual and artistic renaissance. Hermione Quinet reinvents the experience of exile as an act of literary creation and as a reversed metaphor for life.

3. To Live in Exile is First and Foremost to Name and Define it

From the very first pages of the text, exile, described as a 'terrible punishment, a true civil death', is a metaphor for the human condition:

"Exile, a terrible punishment, a true civil death, a punishment reserved for traitors; it would be a most fitting substitute for the death penalty. Exile erases the exile from the memory of his fellow citizens, from the hearts of his parents; exile paralyses the creative faculties in most people; any career is shattered. [...] How can one list the hardships, the struggles endured? Not only is one far from one's country, one's people, one's familiar world, one's native land at last, but the foreigner is all too ready to regard the outcast as an outlaw, and to cast him out from the human race." (Quinet, 2016a, p. 8)¹

Exile appears as the symbol of all the ruptures that occur throughout a life: the gradual fading of relationships, being forgotten by one's fellow citizens, the disappearance of social landmarks. Hermione Quinet's writing presents exile not as a tragic interlude, but as a magnifying mirror of human frailties: the fear of being forgotten, the struggle for dignity, the desperate quest for recognition. To write of exile, then, is to write of life itself, that existence in which one is constantly threatened with finding oneself outside the law, outside time, outside hearts.

Hermione Quinet's *Memoirs* outline a typology of survival strategies in exile, where work, solidarity and intellectual contributions emerge as distinct yet complementary responses to a shared condition of precariousness. On the one hand, the author cites examples of forced professional adaptation, where exiles, "men of thought and struggle", retrain in various trades, going so far as to become "grocers,

¹ « L'exil, peine terrible, vraie mort civile, châtement dû aux traîtres ; il remplacerait admirablement la peine de mort. L'exil efface l'exilé du souvenir de ses concitoyens, du cœur de ses parents ; l'exil paralyse chez la plupart les facultés créatrices ; toute carrière est brisée. [...] Comment énumérer les privations, les luttes endurées? Non seulement on est loin de son pays, de sa race, de son monde accoutumé, de la terre natale enfin, mais l'étranger est bien près de considérer le proscrit comme un être hors la loi, et de le mettre au ban du genre humain. »

selling brown sugar and candles”. Their economic failure (“speculation fared very poorly”) reveals less an inability than a structural mismatch between their symbolic capital (inherited from the Revolution) and the demands of the market, “more accustomed to the ideal trade of principles [...] than to the interests of the back room” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 9). Furthermore, Hermione discusses solidarity as an organised system, “in the details of life in exile, as in the realm of principles” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 10). Finally, the third form of struggle highlights a paradoxical intellectual products, in which the exiles, “amidst so many distressing concerns”, maintain a creative activity, in the form of “intellectual works of such a high order: books, public lectures on the great subjects of history, philosophy and literature” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 12). This persistence in writing and teaching, despite constant threats, suggests a strategy of legitimisation through culture, which symbolically compensates for political exclusion.

In the context of exile, good humour emerges as a strategy of psychological resistance, transforming an individual virtue into an act of existential preservation. Faced with ‘the saddest of spectacles: no hope on the horizon’ where ‘public and private affairs [are] in ruins’, the exiles’ reaction – ‘we laugh, we defy misfortune’ – reveals a deliberate desire to subvert their condition. Serenity is not passive, but a self-imposed law. To save ‘what remains, that is to say, the soul’ (Quinet, 2016a, p. 13) is to preserve inner integrity despite the absence of hope and, in so doing, to achieve a symbolic victory over adversity.

Although it evokes the winter of 1856-1857, Hermione transforms it into a radiant season, where exile constitutes a space-time in which the couple’s life, far from being impoverished, intensifies, and thus the narrative contains a metaphor for existence as a quest for shared fulfilment despite constraints.

“That whirlwind that swept us along, intellectual joys mingled with perils, heightened the joy of living and acting; and far from wearing out one’s soul in the fiery fray, one felt one’s youth renewed each day. Everything pleased me in that existence, at once meditative and militant; I begged heaven to let us continue it in this land of exile, and even one day should we return to our beloved homeland. [...] Thank heaven, those two winter months shone behind us like a spring morning. Such perfect joy amidst profound mourning – is this not the greatest miracle of the heart?” (Quinet, 2016a, pp. 26-27)¹

Although it remains centred on the activities of the exiled men, “exile is therefore not merely a world of men, and if we turn our gaze to the couple and the family, both appear closely linked to the status and experience of the exile” (Aprile, 2020, p. 52). This fusion of the public and the private, this union between emotion and politics, is also reflected in the vocabulary used, which links family life, inner life and feelings (‘intellectual joy’, ‘joy of living’, reflexivity, meditation, prayer) with collective action and social engagement (‘perils’, ‘joy of action’, ‘militant existence’).

With the return of spring, the exile devotes himself to gardening as a labour of patience and remembrance, sowing “balsams, bindweed, Spanish carnations” that evoke the flowerbeds of his childhood spent in Certines. For the Quinet couple, the garden is the setting for an almost sacred observation of the mystery of germination: the “tiny seed, parched like sand, smothered in the night, in death”, which eventually “springs up and blossoms in the sun”, offers an “immortal image, a consoling revelation of nature” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 125). Thus, gardening in exile becomes an allegory of life: a struggle against oblivion, proof that perseverance, even in the ephemeral, can bring about beauty and meaning.

¹ « Ce tourbillon qui nous emportait, joies intellectuelles mêlées de périls, augmentait le bonheur de vivre et d’agir ; et loin d’user son âme dans l’ardente mêlée, on sentait chaque jour sa jeunesse renouvelée. Tout me plaisait dans cette existence à la fois méditative et militante ; je suppliais le ciel de nous la continuer sur terre d’exil, et même un jour si nous devions revoir notre chère patrie. [...] Grâce au ciel, ces deux mois d’hiver brillaient derrière nous comme une matinée de printemps. Une joie si parfaite au milieu d’un deuil profond, n’est-ce pas le plus grand miracle du cœur ? »

4. Writing on the Journey: Nature as a Mirror of the Exile's Condition

True to her commitment to recounting the brighter aspects of exile ("the holidays of exile", Quinet 2016a, p. 154), Hermione devotes a third of her diary to the couple's 1857 trip to Switzerland; initially marked by administrative hurdles, the journey becomes an allegory of the passage to freedom. The passport symbolises a transformation: thanks to this object, the exile regains a social identity, as if the border crossed were also an inner boundary. The Rhine embodies this duality: both a barrier and a symbol of liberation.

"That evening in Cologne was unrivalled for me. To describe what I have felt since crossing the Belgian border, after six and a half years of captivity, is impossible!" That is what my husband kept repeating as we looked out over the Rhine, which flowed beneath our windows at the Hôtel de Hollande; and he gazed with rapture at that beautiful river, which he has celebrated so many times. A thousand lights shone over the harbour, over the boats; the stars were reflected in the water. 'I can breathe, I feel free!' That cry of joy, that radiant face, that cheerfulness of a schoolboy on holiday, after all our misfortunes – that was the wonder before my eyes! There was a transformed being: the joy of living shone in his eyes, in every word. It had been so long since I had seen you in such a state of fulfilment. Will I ever see you like this again? Who knows? One day... perhaps!" (Quinet, 2016a, pp. 134-135)¹

Nature, ever-present, serves as a mirror for states of mind: the landscapes of the Rhine change their appearance and reflect the hopes and anxieties of exile. Finally, the Swiss countryside offers a respite where the exile can make the region their own, as if it were a matter of learning to live anew. Thus, the journey into exile reads as a metaphor for existence: a path strewn with obstacles, yet where every stage is a rebirth.

In the chapters devoted to the Righi, the Gotthard and the Oberland, Hermione Quinet constructs a narrative in which the journey through Switzerland evolves beyond a mere geographical movement and it constitutes a true existential metaphor for exile. Through her descriptions of Alpine landscapes, the author develops a poetics of deterritorialisation, in which nature serves to express uprooting and fragility, but also the possibility of inner transformation.

The Alpine landscape, initially perceived as an inert mass, gradually transforms into a living, almost animated presence.

"At first one is seized by a desire for passive contemplation; a sort of stupor robs you of thought and feeling; one lives only through the eyes; the stillness of the stones seems to take hold of you. Little by little one awakens, and the intensity of life increases as one becomes familiar with the Alps. Each of the mountains then acquires a different character and takes on meaning. One is faced with a living, intelligent creation, rather than a blind agglomeration of confused, indistinct forms. In these stone figures, a personality, a spirit of life, emerges." (Quinet, 2016a, p. 203)²

The excerpt depicts an inner movement that perfectly encapsulates the poetics of exile in Hermione Quinet's work. Facing the Alps, the exile first goes through a phase of stupor, where thought freezes

¹ « Cette soirée à Cologne n'eut pas d'égale pour moi. Dire ce que j'éprouve depuis que j'ai passé la frontière belge, après six ans et demi de captivité, c'est impossible ! Voilà ce que mon mari répétait en face du Rhin, qui se déroulait sous nos fenêtres, à l'hôtel de Hollande ; et il regardait avec transport ce beau fleuve, qu'il a célébré tant de fois. Mille lumières brillaient sur le port, sur les bateaux ; les étoiles se reflétaient dans l'eau. « Je respire, je me sens libre ! » Ce cri de joie, cette figure rayonnante, cette gaieté d'écolier en vacances, après nos désastres, voilà la merveille que j'avais devant les yeux ! C'était l'être transfiguré : le bonheur de vivre éclatait dans le regard, dans chaque parole. Il y avait si longtemps que je ne t'avais vu dans cet épanouissement. Te reverrai-je jamais ainsi ? Qui sait ? un jour... peut-être !... »

² « D'abord on est pris d'un désir de contemplation inerte ; une sorte de stupeur vous ôte la réflexion et la sensibilité ; on ne vit que par les yeux ; l'immobilité des pierres semble vous gagner. Peu à peu on se réveille, et l'intensité de vie s'accroît à mesure qu'on entre dans la familiarité des Alpes. Chacune des montagnes acquiert alors un caractère différent et prend un sens. On est en face d'une création vivante, intelligente, au lieu d'une aveugle agglomération de formes confuses, indistinctes. Dans ces figures de pierres apparaît une personnalité, un esprit de vie. »

and the immobility of the stones seems to take hold of the soul. Then comes a gradual awakening and the landscape ceases to be a backdrop and becomes a living presence, almost a community of beings. This subjectivisation of the landscape reflects the inner rebirth of the exile, who rediscovers in nature a form of connection and meaning.

5. The Impossibility of Words: a Poetics of the Unspeakable

On several occasions, Hermione Quinet highlights the inadequacy of language in the face of the beauty of the landscapes. This impossibility of expression is not merely aesthetic: it is deeply linked to the condition of exile. To describe nature is to attempt to capture that which, by its very nature, eludes us – like the lost homeland, like the time before.

“If I tried to describe what I was unable to draw, my frustration with the pen was all the more acute. How can one render in human language the forms, the precise contours, the clarity of nature? If style could ever manage to reflect the splendours of light, the majesty of the mountains, the architectural lines, the clarity of the peaks, the freshness and brilliance of the vegetation; if words could describe these wonders as faithfully as the eye sees them, then visible nature would need only to disappear, for it would be resurrected in the mind; the mind would contain a spiritualised universe. (Quinet, 2016a, p. 213)¹

Exile, which intensifies contemplation, heightens this desire to grasp the ungraspable. Writing serves as an act of resistance against the evanescence of reality, but also as an impossible quest: to capture light, to fix the infinite. The extract betrays a longing for the absolute, where nature serves as an unattainable model and where writing, aware of its limitations, nevertheless attempts to create a parallel world, that of the mind.

Exile is not merely suffering: for Hermione Quinet, it evokes a metamorphosis. The mountain, through its verticality, its play of light, its contrasts, constitutes the setting for a possible rebirth.

“Admittedly, he had two great consolations in Brussels: work and friendship; but one must know how to tear oneself away from work in order to strengthen the instrument; these hours of peace are God’s truces. The mind returns from high peaks with greater strength and more light too, to fight against the darkness and barrenness of cities.” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 253)²

This transfiguration involves a symbolic reading of the landscapes: thus, glaciers become ‘books’ in which the history of the world is read, the peaks embody virtues (‘peak of Goodness’, ‘peak of Liberty’) and avalanches resound like echoes of the French Revolution.

Alpine nature is thus imbued with a political and moral dimension. Exile is no longer merely a deprivation, but rather a place for the development of thought, ethics and fidelity to ideals. The mountain, through its purity, offers a counter-model to the corruption of the political world from which the exiles have fled.

“Images of a fulfilled soul, these white peaks rival one another in purity, height and splendour. Let us give them new names. Here is the peak of Goodness, that of Reason, the peak of Love, the peak of Heroism. That other one

¹ « Si j'essayais de décrire ce qu'il m'était impossible de dessiner, mon dépit contre la plume était bien plus vif. Comment rendre dans la langue humaine les formes, les contours précis, la netteté de la nature ? Si le style parvenait jamais à réfléchir les splendeurs de la lumière, la majesté des montagnes, les lignes architecturales, la clarté des cimes, la fraîcheur et l'éclat de la végétation ; si la parole pouvait dire ces merveilles aussi fidèlement que l'œil les voit, alors la nature visible n'aurait qu'à disparaître, elle ressusciterait dans la pensée ; l'esprit renfermerait un univers spiritualisé. »

² « Certes, il avait à Bruxelles deux grandes compensations : le travail, l'amitié ; mais il faut savoir s'arracher au travail pour en fortifier l'instrument ; ces heures de paix sont les trêves de Dieu. L'esprit rapporte des hauts sommets plus de force et plus de lumière aussi, pour lutter contre l'obscurité et l'aridité des villes. » p. 253

shall be the peak of Sacrifice, and you, the most inaccessible, you are the most veiled, alas! O peak of Liberty!

A great soul that bears within itself the majesty and purity of these summits—that is the divine creation I adore. My thoughts rise ceaselessly towards this realm of moral sanctity! Sublime Alps, you are but a vision of the mind!” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 247)¹

The landscape is like a palimpsest in which the exiled woman’s aspirations can be read. For Hermione Quinet, exile is not merely a theme, but a framework for interpretation that transforms the perception of the landscape. The Alps are far from being a neutral backdrop; on the contrary, they are imbued with history, memory and politics. The Righi, the Gotthard Pass and Lauterbrunnen become places where the present-day landscape, national legends (Tell, Winkelried), personal memories and political resonances (freedom, oppression, justice) overlap. The mountain, with its ascents, its chasms, its sudden clearings, its storms, symbolises an existence made up of ruptures, vertigo, and revelations. Hence the parallel between exile and death (“Is exile not the brother of death?”), from which, paradoxically, a reinforcement of life emerges, as landscapes become more vivid and emotions more intense. Writing about exile is thus inseparable from writing about life, which, deprived of a homeland, finds in nature a space of meaning, memory, and freedom.

6. The Experience of Transfigured Time: Exile as an Inner Refuge

In the chapter entitled ‘Philosophy of the Home’, Hermione Quinet distils one of the deepest insights of her writing on exile: life outside one’s homeland is an existence without a foundation, a life in limbo, where one can neither settle down, nor plan for the future, nor fully inhabit the world. The home, the quintessential place of stability, is impossible, which opens up a new space: that of the inner, spiritual home, which nothing can touch. In this way, exile signifies both the loss of the material world and the conquest of a moral homeland.

“One has to have been in exile to understand just how precarious life can be. You dare not settle down, make a home for yourself, or make plans for the future. How can you even think of making preparations to settle down when you tell yourself: ‘Tomorrow, perhaps, I’ll pitch my tent somewhere else?’

Only in the realm of the mind do we feel on unshakeable ground. Nothing can take this moral homeland away from us; in the serene realms of thought, no storm can reach you. It is the luminous hearth where we invite the benevolent spirits of all ages; we bless their company; it replaces that which the misfortune of the times has scattered.” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 341)²

The tent, fragile and nomadic, refers to an existential condition akin to that of the pilgrim or the exile, whose life is in transit, without roots, without a foothold in time.

Faced with this material precariousness, Hermione Quinet affirms the existence of another home, that of the spirit, which, moreover, possesses the power to bring minds together.

¹ « Images d'une âme accomplie, ces blanches cimes rivalisent entre elles de pureté, de hauteur et d'éclat. Donnons-leur des noms nouveaux. Voici la cime de la Bonté, celle de la Raison, la cime de l'Amour, la cime de l'Héroïsme. Cette autre sera la cime du Sacrifice, et toi, la plus inaccessible, tu es la plus voilée, hélas ! ô cime de la Liberté !

Une grande âme qui porte en soi la majesté et la pureté de ces sommets, voilà la création divine que j'adore. Vers cette région de sainteté morale monte incessamment ma pensée ! Alpes sublimes, vous n'êtes qu'une vision de l'esprit ! » p. 247

² « Il faut avoir été en exil pour comprendre tout ce que cette vie a de précaire. On n'ose s'établir, se créer un chez-soi, former un projet pour le lendemain. Comment songer à des préparatifs d'installation quand on se dit : ‘Demain, peut-être, je planterai ma tente ailleurs ?’ Dans le domaine de l'esprit seulement, on se sent sur un terrain inébranlable. Cette patrie morale, rien ne peut nous ôter ; dans les régions sereines de la pensée, aucun orage ne vous atteint. C'est le foyer lumineux où l'on convie les bienfaisants génies de tous les âges ; on bénit leur société ; elle remplace celle que le malheur des temps a dispersée. »

“Yes, I dare say it, we were already living in eternity, in infinity, so far removed and separated were we from the present!

Indeed, what was our material existence? We scarcely noticed it. Absorbed in meditation, the hours lasted no longer than a flash of lightning, an immortal flash. What have we done today? We have had a fleeting moment of ideal life; but it is of such moments that eternity is made.” (Quinet, 2016a, p. 342)¹

Hermione Quinet thus turns thought into an act of resistance. The inner sanctuary is not a passive refuge but a space of moral struggle, for ideals. Exile, which deprives one of everything, cannot deprive one of inner freedom, which gives true strength.

Cut off from the political present, removed from the social world, the exiles live in a different temporality. Far from being a mere slowing down or a void, this suspended time becomes a space of spiritual intensity, where every moment is imbued with infinity. This separation from the present produces a form of desynchronisation, since the world continues without them, history unfolds elsewhere, and daily life no longer holds sway.

Hermione overturns the usual conception of time, and eternity is not an afterlife, an infinite time, but the sum of moments of intensity.

Conclusion

Far from being a mere biographical or political theme, exile becomes, in Hermione Quinet’s *Memoirs*, a comprehensive metaphor for human life and a firm and compelling affirmation of the precariousness of the material world, the power of inner life and the spiritual value of the moment.

The opening chapters of the diary present exile as a concrete, burdensome experience, marked by obstacles, delays and uncertainties, shaped by geographical circumstances, and yet also as an experience of detachment, a way of being separated from the present, from the world, and from oneself. The motif of home crystallises the tension between the material home, which is impossible, and the inner home, described as a spiritual homeland that nothing can touch.

Swiss landscapes offer exile a setting worthy of it, characterised by immensity, verticality, and light, storms and chasms. The mountain is the mirror of the displaced soul, and also the site of a transfiguration. The peaks, glaciers, lakes and storms become symbols: of freedom, truth, justice and inner revelation.

Separated from the political present, the Quinet family discovers a different sense of time. Exile thus represents an experience of eternity, understood not as infinite time, but rather as a succession of moments in which life is condensed into truth. This conception of time makes exile a metaphor for spiritual life: true duration is not that of calendars, but that of moments when the self gathers itself and reveals itself.

Finally, writing itself constitutes the central metaphor. To write in exile is to write against dispersion, against oblivion, against symbolic death. Thus, for Hermione Quinet, writing about exile is therefore not merely a testimony: it is an existential poetics, a way of saying that human life, like exile, is a fragment of eternity.

¹ « Oui, j’ose le dire, nous vivions déjà de l’éternité, de l’infini, tant nous étions loin et séparés du présent !

En effet, quelle était l’existence matérielle ? On s’en apercevait à peine. Absorbées par la méditation, les heures n’ont que la durée de l’éclair, d’un éclair immortel. Qu’avons-nous fait aujourd’hui ? Nous avons eu un moment fugitif de vie idéale ; mais c’est de ces moments que l’éternité se compose. »

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