

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE AS HERO AND SAVIOUR

IMAGE, RHETORIC AND BEHAVIOUR IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF A LEGEND

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Abstract—The media of the day represented three predominant models around Napoleon: the all-conquering victorious general, the virtuous republican who stood above factions, and the man who brought peace to the Continent. These images became the foundation of a 'hero-saviour' myth that helped Napoleon take power on his return from Egypt at the end of 1799. However, they sit uncomfortably with the manner in which he represented power in public that, outside France, took on quasi-monarchical trappings. This article attempts to explain not only the origins and evolution of Napoleonic propaganda in the early years of his career, but also the ambiguity between the political imagery and rhetoric used to promote Napoleon in France on the one hand, and the manner in which he behaved in public outside France on the other. The hero-saviour myth was further developed and exploited during the Consulate and the Empire as a means of legitimating Napoleon's accession to power.

An examination of the paintings, engravings, newspaper articles and Napoleon's own proclamations produced during his first military campaign in Italy (1796–97) all point to the fact that it was also a political campaign, a war of representations, that shaped both the myth with which we are now familiar—the dynamic young general who swept aside all in his path—as well as the individual who became known to history as Napoleon.¹ The whole time Napoleon was fighting in Italy (and to a lesser extent in Egypt), he was cultivating an image by enhancing and exaggerating his victories, feeding the Directory inaccurate reports, or simply omitting any embarrassing setbacks that he or his generals may have suffered. The audience he cultivated was in France. Indeed, just

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¹ The distinction between 'myth' and 'legend'—adopted by both F. Bluche and S. Hazareesingh, *The legend of Napoleon* (2004), p. 4—in which the former signifies an attempt by Napoleon to shape his public image during his lifetime, and the latter refers to a broader, spontaneous phenomenon which took place after 1815, has been used for this article, but with this difference: I also use the term 'legend' to refer to the spontaneous phenomenon of idolizing Napoleon which took place during his reign. The legend drew on the myth even before Napoleon became ruler of France.

about everything Napoleon did in Italy and later in Egypt was done with public opinion in France in mind.²

This article focuses on two complementary aspects of that multi-faceted myth-making exercise—the image of Napoleon Bonaparte as hero and saviour. That image was not carried out in a cultural–political void, and has to be placed in context and explained in relation to French society in revolution. A number of developments, therefore, have to be kept in mind: the emergence of a hero cult around various public figures in the years preceding the outbreak of Revolution, a phenomenon the revolutionaries put to good use in the hope of galvanizing public opinion in favour of the Republic; the debate about faction fighting within the French body-politic; the prolonged war of the First Coalition and the general desire for peace evident among the French public; and the consequent receptivity of the French to images of warrior heroes, and especially that projected by Napoleon as pacifier of Europe.

Napoleon, almost instinctively it would appear, knew how to tap into and exploit for his own political ends the prevailing public mood, much more receptive to the myth than has been acknowledged to date by historians. As is evident from some of the material examined, Napoleon as hero inspired numerous artists and journalists of the day, who spontaneously echoed the myth promoted by him (not to mention those in his entourage). In other words, Napoleon did not necessarily control the myths he created; artists and journalists took hold of them and developed them in their own ways. This does not mean to say that the French public unthinkingly accepted Napoleon's image. As we shall see, the public's receptivity to these images was by no means straightforward and encountered some opposition, especially in the royalist press. Moreover, the image of the good republican, warrior-hero is complicated by Napoleon's private use of court etiquette, at least when he was not in France. At home, on the contrary, Napoleon put on a very different public façade—that of the humble hero who shunned acclaim and who preferred the sciences to politicking or making war. Napoleon, in fact, seems to have been playing a double game that reveals much about both his character and his political ambitions.

An examination of the iconographical evidence, therefore, as well as the rhetoric found in the media of the day, alongside Napoleon's behaviour both inside and outside of France, will throw much light on just how he promoted a public self. Because that public self was, at its origins, ambiguous, this analysis

² The classic French work on the legend is: P. Gonnard, *Les origines de la légende napoléonienne: l'œuvre historique de Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène* (1906). A number of recent works have reappraised various aspects of the legend: N. Petiteau, *Napoléon, de la mythologie à l'histoire* (1999), chs. 1 and 2; R.S. Alexander, *Napoleon* (2001); and esp. Hazareesingh, *The legend of Napoleon*. The classic work on Bonapartism is F. Bluche, *Le Bonapartisme: aux origines de la droite autoritaire (1800–1850)* (1980). More recent works are: R.S. Alexander, *Bonapartism and revolutionary tradition in France* (Cambridge, 1991); B.A. Day-Hickman, *Napoleonic art: nationalism and the spirit of rebellion in France (1815–1848)* (Newark, 1999). On the difficulties of defining Bonapartism see, R.S. Alexander, 'The Hero as Houdini: Napoleon and 19th-century Bonapartism', *Mod Cont Fr*, 4 (2000), 457–67.

also seeks to lay bare aspects of Napoleon's character that would otherwise have remained hidden. It was, after all, the image of Napoleon as hero, saviour and peacemaker that facilitated his rise to power in November 1799.

I

The two most familiar images of the Italian campaign focus on the battle of Lodi (June 1796) and the battle of Arcole (November 1796), the former centred on a bridge over the river Adda in Lombardy, the latter on a bridge over the Alpone in Venetian territory.³ The resounding moral and psychological impact the representations of the crossings had on the public imagination in the propagation of Napoleon's reputation was enormous, both in France and the rest of Europe. This is astonishing under the circumstances: Napoleon was not directly involved in the assaults at Lodi—indeed, he is not even mentioned in the memoirs of the day⁴—and he did not get within fifty paces of the (in reality, disappointingly small) bridge at Arcole before being driven back by withering Austrian fire. And yet within the space of a month, Lodi was as well known in Germany and England as it was in France, while Arcole was immortalized by Antoine-Jean Gros's painting of Napoleon on the bridge, exhibited at the Salon of 1801, even if it met with little initial public enthusiasm.⁵

Both Lodi and Arcole were to become cornerstones in the construction of the Napoleonic myth (and later the legend). They were turning points in Napoleon's attempt to promote himself as a victorious general, but they were also important stages in the development of an inner conviction that he was a 'superior being' destined for great things. According to his own later accounts, Lodi gave Napoleon an enormous boost of self-confidence. Many years later on Saint

³ The most important recent works on the iconography surrounding Italy are: C.M. Bosséno, 'La guerre des estampes: circulation des images de thèmes iconographique dans l'Italie des années 1789–1799', *Mélanges de l'Ecole Française de Rome, Italie et Méditerranée*, 102 (1990), 367–400; idem, '“Je me vis dans l'histoire”: Bonaparte, de Lodi à Arcole, généalogie d'une image de légende', *Ann Hist Rév Fran*, 313 (1998), 449–65; J.L. Connolly, 'Bonaparte on the bridge', *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750–1850*, 15 (1985), 45–65; A. Duprat, 'La construction de la mémoire par les gravures: C. Vernet et les *Tableaux historiques des campagnes d'Italie*', in J.P. Barbe and R. Bernecker (eds), *Les intellectuels européens et la campagne d'Italie, 1796–1798* (Münster, 1999), pp. 199–207; E. Sayag-Boyer, 'La liberté en Italie, d'après les Archives de l'Armée d'Italie: vérité et apparence d'un aspect de la campagne de Bonaparte (1796–1797)', *Revue du Souvenir Napoléonienne* 408 (1996), 44–9; and M. Vovelle, 'Naissance et formation du mythe napoléonien en Italie durant le triennio. Les leçons de l'image', in L. Samarati (ed), *Napoleone e la Lombardia nel Triennio Giacobino (1796–1799)* (Lodi, 1997), pp. 18–43.

⁴ See, for example, A. Masséna, *Mémoires d'André Masséna, duc de Rivoli, prince d'Essling, maréchal d'Empire*, 7 vols (1966), ii. pp. 63–4;

⁵ Pierre Lelièvre, 'Gros, peintre d'histoire', *Gazette de Beaux Arts*, 15 (1936), 292. The French author, Stendhal, wrote many years later that within a month of the event a rough woodcut print of the crossing of Lodi could be found in inns in the smallest village in the most remote parts of northern Germany (Stendhal, *Napoléon* (1998), edited by C. Mariette, p. 380). Stendhal wrote his *Mémoires sur Napoléon* between 1836–37, but the manuscript remained unfinished and was actually published posthumously. The most recent work on Gros is D. O'Brien, 'Antoine-Jean Gros in Italy,' *Burlington Magazine*, 137 (October, 1995), 651–60; and his forthcoming book *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, painting, and propaganda, under Napoleon* (University Park, 2005).

Helena, while reflecting on his life and career, he revealed to Baron Gourgaud, 'I saw the world flee before me as if I were being carried in the air'.⁶ And on another occasion he confided in the comte de Montholon that 'It was only on the evening of Lodi that I believed myself to be a superior man, and that the ambition came to me of executing the great things which so far had been occupying my thoughts only as a fantastic dream'.⁷ This was not all hyperbole, although, it has to be underlined, it is also part of the creation of the legend. There is, nevertheless, a link between Napoleon's inner realization of greatness, and the types of images that were being commissioned to represent him.

The first pictorial representations of Lodi (fifteen in all were eventually produced) were collective in nature, focusing on the troops crossing the bridge in the face of enemy fire, and not on Napoleon as an individual. By the time of Arcole, however, these representations gave way to images of Napoleon crossing the bridge, at first with General Augereau, who had attempted to storm it earlier in the day, but gradually alone, first on horseback and then on foot, as Napoleon displaced Augereau in the popular imagination. Eventually the memory of Napoleon advancing alone against enemy fire was to prevail, in spite of Augereau's efforts to promote his own role.⁸

This type of self-promotion was only possible because of a revolution that had taken place in the use of the press, coupled with a change in attitudes towards the individual in society in the decades preceding the Revolution. Admittedly, the French had been accustomed to worshipping a canon of 'great men', including *philosophes* like Voltaire and Rousseau, and generals like Condé, Turenne, Luxembourg and Saxe.⁹ Indeed, the French government played a key role in fabricating these heroes, since many paintings and statues were commissioned by the monarchy.¹⁰ In the second half of the eighteenth century, these 'great men' increasingly took the place previously occupied by kings and saints. This phenomenon led, among other things, to an increase in the number of relatively cheap secular busts seen in bourgeois households. History, in other terms, was becoming national and any man who had carried out great acts, indeed just about anyone of any notoriety, could aspire to public recognition, whether on a grandiose scale on some public square for which subscriptions had been carried out, or as a miniature clay representation for private use. Full-scale statues, which had once been reserved for monarchs, were being

⁶ G. Gourgaud, *Journal de Sainte-Hélène 1815-1818*, 2 vols (1944), ii, 94. See also, E. de Las Cases, *Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, 2 vols (1983, first ed. 1823), i, 117; Marmont, *Mémoires*, i, 178.

⁷ C. Montholon, *Récits de la captivité de l'empereur Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène*, 2 vols (1847), ii, 424.

⁸ See Vovelle, 'Naissance et formation du mythe napoléonien en Italie', p. 32;

⁹ See E. Pommier, 'L'invention du monument aux Grands Hommes (XVIII^e siècle)', in *Entretiens de la Garenne Lemot. Le culte des Grands Hommes au XVIII^e siècle. Actes du Colloque 3 au 5 octobre 1996* (Nantes, 1998), pp. 8-23; J.C. Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon: essai sur le culte des grands hommes* (1998); idem, 'Naissance du Panthéon', *Poétique* 33 (1978), 46-55; D. Bell, *The cult of the nation in France: inventing nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), chap. 4.

¹⁰ J.A. Leith, 'Youth heroes of the French Revolution', *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850*, 16 (1986), 127; idem, 'Nationalism and the fine arts in France', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 89 (1972), 926-7.

used to represent important civic and military figures by the late eighteenth century.¹¹

This phenomenon, referred to by Annie Jourdan as a 'democratization' in statues and other artistic representations of public figures, increased with the fall of the monarchy during the Revolution in 1792. Just who was represented in busts or otherwise was in large part determined by political correctness or expediency. Voltaire and Rousseau were among the favourites, and in the early stages of the Revolution so were Necker, Lafayette and Mirabeau, while later one could find representations of radical republicans and popular demagogues like Robespierre and Marat. If these people were still part of the political elite, the Revolution also brought about a democratization of the official iconography so that the heroes of the Revolution were also made up of unknown individuals prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the fatherland (*patrie*), Republican heroes categorized as 'martyrs of liberty', victims of internal as well as external enemies. Indeed, the Committee of Public Safety put in place a cult to honour all those who sacrificed their lives for the *patrie*. For a time, then, the cult of the martyr dominated the revolutionary iconography,¹² but after the fall of Robespierre and with the corresponding decline in revolutionary zeal, the cult of the martyr gradually gave way to the cult of the military hero, created in large part as a result of mass mobilization.

To begin with, the military exploits of the common soldier were promoted rather than those of individual generals. Between 1793 and 1794, for example, a series of brochures was published under the title *Recueil des actions héroïques et civiques* that dealt specifically with the actions of the common soldier, who nevertheless often remained anonymous, and which were meant to be posted publicly and read out at schools by teachers to their students on the days of rest in the revolutionary calendar, the *décadi*. It is impossible to know whether any of these so-called heroic actions were based in reality or whether they were invented, but the point was to extol the virtues of the common republican soldier, often portrayed fighting a numerically superior enemy to the death. To take but one example of the kind of devotion that Republicans were obviously trying to inculcate in young children, this is an entry dated 4 June 1794: 'Thénard [a common soldier] was on patrol with seven of his comrades: attacked by fifty Austrians they held fast; seven were killed [*couchés par terre*]; Thénard remained alone. "Surrender or you're dead," cried a Hullan; LIVE FREE OR DIE replied Thénard, blowing his brains out; but he fell almost immediately cut down [*percé de coups*]'.¹³ The tradition of romanticizing and idealizing the wars was continued by Napoleon when, in 1797, he ordered histories of the Italian campaign from every demi-brigade in his army.¹⁴ Many of the stories

¹¹ A. Jourdan, *Les Monuments de la Révolution, 1770-1804: Une bistoire de représentation* (1997), pp. 89-138; idem. 'Du sacre du philosophe au sacre du militaire', *Rev Hist Mod Contemp*, 34 (1992), 403-22.

¹² Jourdan, 'Du sacre du philosophe au sacre du militaire', 411-15.

¹³ *Recueil des actions héroïques et civiques des républicains français* (an II), n. 1, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Correspondance de Napoléon II*, 32 vols (1858-1870), ii. n. 1251 (8 December 1797).

recounted by common soldiers were reprinted in his own newspaper, the *Courrier de l'Armée d'Italie*. The following is representative of the stories reported about individuals who helped carry the day: 'A sergeant of the 5th company of the 3rd battalion, citizen Moreau, rushed at the enemy in a sortie at the head of a few chasseurs, took an entrenchment by bayonet, and killed two men with his own hands'.¹⁵ True, more often non-commissioned and junior officers are cited in these accounts, but the point was that the heroism of particular individuals was constantly brought out. It was a kind of reward for having done one's duty and an incentive for others in the future to do so, but the idea of a collective fraternity of soldiers was slowly giving way to the ideal of the heroic individual.

Napoleon was thus able to profit from this trend in the media, although he was certainly not the only person to promote and dramatize his own role in the combats delivered against the enemies of the Republic. The accounts the representatives-on-mission sent back to Paris after the fall of Toulon, for example, not only celebrated the courage of the troops, but also emphasized and exaggerated their own contributions to the victory. Thus Barras was able to write, 'The hail of shots fired at us did not respect the representatives of the people. [Stanislas] Fréron, who was in the other division, had his horse wounded; [Augustin] Robespierre received a ball in the scabbard of his sword'.¹⁶ This kind of dramatization was an essential part of Jacobin ideology, and corresponded with the idea of free men conquering any obstacle through sheer will-power. It was also important to demonstrate that the nation's deputies, the members of the Convention, were at the forefront of the struggle against the enemies of the Republic.¹⁷ Individual members of the Convention, often skilled publicists themselves, were thus meant to be confounded with the idea of the nation, but in dramatizing their own roles they contributed further to the cult of the individual and the cult of the hero, leaving the way open to soldiers like Napoleon intent on promoting their own careers.

II

From this it is obvious that Napoleon did not invent the image of the revolutionary hero sweeping aside all in his path. It was an image created by revolutionaries at a time when they were desperate to galvanize the people of France behind their cause. Napoleon's image, therefore, can be placed in a much larger context; the individual general can be subsumed within the whole. Of far more interest to the historian as biographer, however, is what type of image Napoleon attempted to project and whether this can help us better understand the individual it was meant to promote.

¹⁵ *Courrier de l'Armée d'Italie*, 15 but also 23, 25 October, 2, 4, 22 November 1797.

¹⁶ *Archives Parlementaires*, lxxxii. 261 (24 December 1793).

¹⁷ I. Germani, 'Representations of the Republic at war: Lille and Toulon, 1792-1793', *Canadian Journal of History*, 29 (1994), 12.

Between the spring of 1796 and the end of 1797, seventy-two pamphlets appeared that took Napoleon or his victories in Italy as their subject, sometimes reaching a print-run of three thousand.¹⁸ Any number of examples of the way in which Napoleon was praised in these pamphlets could be given,¹⁹ but the interesting thing is that most of the journalists did so of their own accord, probably inspired by Napoleon as heroic subject. One of these, an anonymous English pamphlet supposedly written by someone who knew him at Brienne (extracts of which were later printed in one of Napoleon's Italian newspapers), portrayed a picture of him in his youth as 'sombre and even shy. Constantly alone, he was the enemy of every game and every amusement [...] he seemed to know that destiny would call upon him one day [...] it was as though he was practising in advance a role he was to play [...]. The idea of dependence was something that was completely degrading for him [...]. The enthusiasm he has since deployed was used in reading the lives of great men which he proposed as a model as soon as he entered the world'. Napoleon then took on a taste for solitude: 'It was in that inaccessible retreat that Napoleon's soul, avid for glory, slowly fertilized the seeds of a noble ambition [...]'.²⁰ The only amusement that Napoleon shared with his fellow students was playing war games: 'It was during these adolescent games that he took the first lessons of victory'. We find a similar image in an anonymous pamphlet published in 1802, also supposedly by a former schoolmate:

Cold, reserved, taciturn, almost always alone, replying only in monosyllables, for a long time he retained among us the nickname of *Spartiate*. Rarely taking part in our games and our amusements, he preferred to be alone to read a serious but instructive book. For a long time he was without any trustworthy friend: he studied a student for a long time before forming the slightest liaison with him; he appeared to be looking in his fellow schoolmates a soul of his own calibre.²¹

The image of the child Napoleon as a social loner, bullied by his fellow students, who showed a strong desire for liberty, and who already displayed republican virtues, is in some respects a political image that needs accordingly to be treated with a certain amount of scepticism. If not Napoleon, then others were cultivating the image of an outsider who had been called on by destiny since childhood to play a great role, and whose heroic potential was evident even as a boy. It fits the classical mould of the individual hero: alienated from his surroundings because misunderstood, he finds inner strength to continue on his path towards greatness.

The hero image was fostered by the newspapers sponsored by Napoleon in Italy. Napoleon was not the first general to create his own newspaper. Indeed,

¹⁸ J.-P. Bertaud, 'L'expédition d'Égypte et la construction du mythe napoléonien', *Cobiers de la Méditerranée*, 57(1998), 282.

¹⁹ See, for example, the poem published in pamphlet form entitled *Napoleon général d'armée* (an V).

²⁰ *La France vue de l'Armée d'Italie*, n. 15.

²¹ *Traits caractéristiques de la jeunesse de Napoleon et réfutation des différentes anecdotes qui ont été publiées à ce sujet* (Leipzig, 1802), pp. 17–18.

the Revolution saw the appearance of a number of newspapers, often subsidized, written by and for the army. But Napoleon separates himself from these other papers, and from the generals behind them, by adopting the mantle of destiny, and by creating the aura of a myth. The *Courrier de l'Armée d'Italie ou le Patriote français à Milan, par une société de républicains*, aimed at the new revolutionary elite, and the much more moderate *La France vue de l'Armée d'Italie*, aimed at the more politically traditional elements in French (and Italian) society, were founded within a couple of weeks of each other in July and August 1797.²² They were available in Milan and Paris, and were distributed free of charge, but because many of the articles were taken up by other newspapers—like the republican *Ami des Lois*, the *Révéléateur* and the *Journal des Hommes Libres*—they touched a much wider audience than they would otherwise have done. At the top of the first few editions of the *Courrier* was a quote from the *philosophe*, Raynal: 'The Republic lost the little that remained of action and life; the cadaver had to be reanimated. That resurrection was not impossible because people were generally disposed to trying any remedy; the difficulty was in finding some that worked'. The implication was clear; the Republic was suffering. Was Napoleon the remedy? By looking 'objectively', and from a distance at the political goings-on in Paris, driven as they were by passion, factions and hatred, the paper presented itself as moderate, above factions and capable of unifying the French under one banner. Everything suggested that the man capable of doing just that was Napoleon. Politically diverse though they may have been, both papers focused on the simplicity of the general, his disdain for luxury, the purity of his morals and, ironically, his refusal of all dictatorships. A stark contrast was meant to be drawn between Napoleon and the politicians of the Directory, some of whom, like Barras, were notoriously debauched:

You, who with one word has broken so many chains, who with one word has awoken ancient Italy [...] you, who have dazzled and astonished Europe with such brilliant and terrible operations; you who have not for one instant been stopped by so many rivers, so many mountains, so many armies, and so many generals.²³

Virtue on one side, corruption on the other, war on one side, the possibility of peace on the other. If peace could not be concluded, it was largely because of 'the revival of factions [in Paris], the intrigues of the enemy powers, and the corruption sown by their agents'.²⁴ Napoleon, however, was spoiled by Providence, a hero without reproach, a just man for the oppressed, inflexible against oppressors, a fanatical republican, a friend of order and a barrier against anarchy.

²² On Napoleon's use of the press in Italy see, Hanley, *Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796–1799*, www.gutenberg-e.org ch. 4; and M. Martin, *Les origines de la presse militaire en France de la fin de l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution (1770–1799)* (Vincennes, 1975), pp. .

²³ *La France vue de l'Armée d'Italie*, n. 4.

²⁴ *La France vue de l'Armée d'Italie*, n. 1.

III

How much of an impact these newspaper articles actually had on the public in France is difficult to tell. Jacques Mallet du Pan, a Swiss pamphleteer, was under the impression that 'the story of Italy is of far less concern to the public of Paris, whose attention span did not seem to cross the border, than the smallest domestic incident'.²⁵ But Mallet du Pan had royalist tendencies and so his account is suspect. We know from a number of secret police reports that from about July 1796 on, hardly a day went by when Napoleon and the Army of Italy were not topics of conversation in the cafés of Paris.²⁶ Some private letters written during this period also give an indication, however slight, of the impact Napoleon's victories were having on certain sections of the population. General Clarke, for example, wrote to Josephine in May 1796 to say that, 'The successive victories of the Army of Italy have electrified my whole household and even my aides-de-camp who wanted to leave me to serve with General Napoleon'.²⁷ Another example that the rhetoric emanating from Italy was making some impact on the minds of young revolutionaries can be seen in a letter by the journalist Marc-Antoine Jullien to Napoleon in June 1796, in which he expressed the naïve desire to be received into the Army of Italy so that it would become for him 'the school of virtue, the temple of friendship, the sanctuary of glory'.²⁸ By the end of 1797, wrote Mme de Staël, 'the superiority of his mind, together with the brilliance of his talents as general gave his name an importance that no other individual had acquired since the beginning of the Revolution'.²⁹

Possibly. What seems certain, though, is that more than any military victory, more than the newspaper articles that kept his name alive when the Front had gone quiet, it was news of peace, first with the preliminaries at Leoben (April 1797) and then with the Treaty of Campo Formio (October 1797), that made Napoleon popular in Paris.³⁰ In fact, Campo Formio is fundamental for understanding the evolution of Napoleon's image in France (not to speak of Italy).³¹ After all, he had managed to do what no other general, or politician for that matter, had been able to—to bring the war on the Continent to an end. Military victory and peace are generally two sides of the same coin, but the people of Paris seem to have been more genuinely impressed by the fact that Napoleon had brought the war to an end than by his military prowess. Of

²⁵ J. Mallet du Pan, *Correspondance inédite de Mallet du Pan avec la cour de Vienne (1794-1798)*, 2 vols (1884), ii, pp. 91 (4 June 1796), 98 (11 June 1796).

²⁶ See the sections entitled 'Esprit public' in A. Aulard, *Paris pendant la réaction thermidorienne et sous le Directoire*, 5 vols (1898-1902), iii.

²⁷ Cited in A. Dry, *Soldats ambassadeurs sous le Directoire*, 2 vols (1906), ii, 17 (18 May 1796).

²⁸ V. Daline, 'Marc Antoine Jullien après le 9 thermidor,' *Ann Hist Rév Fran*, 37 (1965), 201-3.

²⁹ G. de Staël, *Considérations sur la Révolution française* (1983), p. 328.

³⁰ Any number of expressions for peace both in the public and in the army can be found during this period. See, for examples, Aulard, *Paris pendant la réaction thermidorienne*, iii, 522 (16 October 1796); 582 (19 November); 749 (14 February 1797); iv, 14 (19 Mar.); 15-16 (20 Mar.); 61 (14 April); 71 (20 April); 75 (22 April); 84 (27 April); 87 (28 April).

³¹ Martin, *Les origines de la presse militaire en France*, pp. 352-57.

course, he had been working towards that image for some time: his newspapers portrayed him as the man most capable of bringing peace about.³²

An indication of this is that plays that had earlier highlighted Napoleon's military exploits, like *La Bataille de Roverbella, ou Napoleon en Italie* (10 February 1797), *La Redition de Mantoue* (23 February 1797) or *La Prise de Mantoue* (27 February 1797), were not particularly well received in Paris.³³ That might have something to do with the fact that they were mediocre love stories in which Napoleon sometimes did not appear, but even what might be called the first theatrical manifestations of the Napoleon legend — *Le Pont de Lodi* (15 December 1796), or *Buonaparte, ou la Bataille d'Arcole* (February 1797) — were much less successful, if not coldly received, than the plays that had as their subject peace. Around seven plays appeared in the months of April and May 1797 based on the preliminaries with Austria. It was only then that Napoleon as theatrical subject started to meet with some success, although admittedly these plays were never runaway hits. In October and November 1797, a dozen or so plays and impromptu operas appeared dealing with the peace treaty of Campo Formio.

From that moment on, the prestige surrounding Napoleon was considerably enhanced. 'At last, we are going to enjoy the benefits of peace', wrote one contributor in the *Journal des Campagnes*, 'thanks to you, invincible armies that destroyed the efforts of all of Europe in league against our liberty'.³⁴ Napoleon inspired some mediocre poetry,³⁵ but the sentiments are at least clear. Others underlined the fact that 'Hannibal did not do what Napoleon has done in Italy; Scipio did not surpass him and a grateful Rome honoured him with the name of the African'.³⁶ This is undoubtedly why Napoleon was now referred to in some circles in Paris as the 'Italique'. (A connection was meant to be made between Ancient Roman generals, like Scipio, dubbed the 'African' for his conquests in that country, and Drusus, dubbed 'Germanicus' for his victories against the Germans, and Napoleon's conquests in Italy.)

It is also about this time that a number of engravings began to appear linking the hero Napoleon and peace. An example, by an unknown artist, depicts Napoleon holding out the treaty of Leoben to Archduke Charles of Austria,

³² *Courrier de l'Armée d'Italie*, 22 July 1797; *La France vue de l'Armée d'Italie*, n. 5.

³³ This is taken from L.H. Lecomte, *Napoléon et l'Empire racontés par le théâtre, 1797-1899* (1900), pp. 3-6. Some secret police reports about plays can be seen in Aulard, *Paris pendant la réaction thermidorienne*, iv. 458, 466, 473.

³⁴ *Journal des Campagnes et des Armées*, 3 May 1797.

³⁵ See, for example, the *Journal des Campagnes et des Armées*, 9 April, 3 May 1797:

A Buonaparte
Jeune héros, vainqueur de l'Italie,
Poursuits, étonnes, abats l'orgueil des rois:
Que tes succès affermissent nos lois:
Confonds tes ennemis et ceux de la patrie.
Tu n'étoufferas point la rage de l'envie:
Eh bien, mérites-la par de nouveaux exploits.

³⁶ F.R.J. de Pommereul, *Campagne du général Buonaparte en Italie pendant les années IV^e et V^e de la République française* (1797), p. 274.

receiving a laurel from a female allegorical figure, representing France, while another figure representing Fame, trumpeting victory, hovers in the sky above his head; the clouds part to let the light through.³⁷ Even the other military figure in the print, the Archduke Charles of Austria, seems to be paying homage to Napoleon as he moves forward, hand outstretched, to greet him.

There are any number of examples of this kind of allegory appearing after the peace preliminaries. It would nevertheless be a mistake to think that the image projected by Napoleon on to the French public was unquestioningly accepted. On the contrary, by 1797 Napoleon was coming under increasing attack, especially from the royalist press in Paris, not slow to note the similarities between Napoleon and Caesar, but in a negative way: 'Is the Rubicon already crossed', asked the *Messenger du Soir* after one of Napoleon's proclamations to the Army was published in July 1797. 'Will we avoid a military Republic by going to prostrate ourselves at the feet of the dictator?'³⁸ This particular newspaper had been warning against Napoleon's dictatorial ambitions since the end of March 1796.³⁹ Those dubbed Clichyens, royalists who increasingly made up the members of the two legislative Councils, attempted to minimize the efforts of the young general, and lobbied in favour of a return to peace in foreign policy through newspapers like *La Quotidienne*, *Le Miroir*, *Le Mémorial* and *Le Thé*.⁴⁰ *La Quotidienne* ironized about Napoleon's flowery discourses and the untruthful proclamations, ridiculing his victories, highlighting his defeats, his victims and the excesses committed. Buonaparte, as they insisted on calling him, was portrayed as a Jacobin fanatic, an angel of death, pursuing his own 'philosophical crusade'.⁴¹ It also compared him with Alexander, Hannibal and Caesar but in a sardonic manner. For them, it was a question of unmasking the exaggerated accounts emanating from Italy, and until the time when *La Quotidienne* was banned, after the coup of Fructidor, it never ceased to point out the contradictions and to amplify the rumours propagated by the Austrians and Italians.

V

One can also draw some useful insights from Napoleon's outward behaviour, his gestures, and the way he behaved in public. And here we find a remarkable contrast between the republican rhetoric of the simple virtuous general, and the elaborate etiquette with which he surrounded himself when not in France.

³⁷ An excellent introduction to the use of allegory in revolutionary prints is to be found in J.B. Landes *Visualizing the nation. Gender, representation, and revolution in eighteenth-century France* (Ithaca, 2001), esp. Introduction.

³⁸ *Messenger du Soir*, 23 July 1797. The proclamation it refers to is in Corr. iii. n. 2010 (14 July 1797).

³⁹ See, for example, *Messenger du Soir*, 30 March 1796 (dated 26 March by mistake); J. Popkin, *The right-wing press in France, 1792-1800* (Chapel Hill, 1980), p. 86.

⁴⁰ *Le Thé*, 18, 29 April, 1, 4, 12 May 1797.

⁴¹ See, for example, *La Quotidienne*, 304 (24 February 1797).



Figure 1 Artist unknown, *Préliminaires de la Paix avec l'Empereur* ('Peace Preliminaries with the Emperor'), circa 1797, etching, 17 x 12.5 cm. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris

A number of examples illustrate how he went about this. In Italy, after the conclusion of peace preliminaries with Austria at Leoben in April 1797, Napoleon set up residence in the château of Mombello, a short distance from Milan. With the military campaign over, Napoleon paid much more attention to promoting both himself as well as to attacking royalist elements in French politics (hence the newspapers he founded). One of the first things he did was to fashion his life according to the conventions of the world to which he aspired, that is, he constructed a small court around his person. Miot de Melito, a *commissaire* attached to the Directorial government, has left us with a description of what he witnessed at Mombello where a 'strict etiquette' reigned around Napoleon. Thus the aides-de-camp did not dine daily with the commander, as was the rule in most other armies; it became an exception and a privilege to be invited to dine at his table. Nor did he dine in private, but in public, like a sovereign.⁴² Italians who came to catch a glimpse of the conqueror of Italy were allowed into the galleries to watch while he ate in a remarkable public display of the self reminiscent of Louis XIV's performances at Versailles.⁴³ The salon at the château of Mombello was prolonged into the garden by means of a vast tent. Everyone who was intelligent, ambitious or simply enthusiastic about Italy could be found there consorting with bureaucrats, administrators, and French generals. In the process, Napoleon received homage 'as if he had been born to it'.⁴⁴ There were other, exterior signs of the increasing personalization of Napoleon's power. On his arrival in the town of Rastatt (in Baden), for example, on the evening of 25 November 1797, Napoleon caused a sensation because he used the symbols, if not the trappings of monarchical power. That is, his *berline* was drawn by eight horses, the number usually reserved for kings, and accompanied by an escort of thirty hussars.

Napoleon's audacious representation of a public self in Italy and Germany is in stark contrast to his behaviour once he returned to Paris, where he arrived on 5 December at five in the evening in civilian dress and in a simple 'voiture de poste', without any great fuss or bother. This gesture, that is, wanting to avoid the public eye and wanting to appear as a simple citizen,⁴⁵ is to be found time and again during his stay there between the end of the Italian campaign (December 1797) and his departure for Egypt (May 1798), and again on his return from Egypt (October 1799). At first sight, it seems out of keeping with the image he seems to have gone out of his way to foster in Italy and Germany but, in fact, it too was another form of persuasiveness, a studied, intelligent calculation designed to enhance his reputation as a humble hero, and to avoid the Parisian political quagmire. As soon as Napoleon was away from Paris, however, he reverted to a strict etiquette, based on the usages adopted at the court

⁴² Count A. F. Miot de Melito, *Mémoires du Comte de Miot de Melito*, 3 vols (1873), i. 150.

⁴³ There are a number of fine accounts of the theatre of politics for earlier periods of European history: R. Strong, *Splendour at court: Renaissance spectacle and illusion* (1973); J. Duindam, *Myths of power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European court* (Amsterdam, 1994), esp. ch. 5.

⁴⁴ Miot de Melito, *Mémoires*, p. 150.

⁴⁵ *Gazette Européenne*, 8 November, 22 December 1797.

of Versailles. During the crossing from France to Egypt, for example, etiquette was observed the whole time to the point where at least one republican, a tailor by the name of François Bernoyer, who came on board the flagship, the *Orient*, one evening for dinner, found Napoleon's behaviour offensive.⁴⁶ Most, however, seem to have taken it in their stride.

There are three things about Napoleon's behaviour that are worth pointing out. First, the apparent contradiction in playing the monarch to a closed circle outside of France, all the while publicly espousing the republican cause, was entirely out of keeping with the military etiquette expected of generals in the French Republican armies. During the *ancien régime*, on the other hand, it was expected of senior officers, that is, from colonels upwards, to operate a common table for unit and or staff officers while on campaign. It was, in fact, one of the many financial burdens associated with holding senior military office. This tradition was also often maintained as a display of wealth and magnificence; edicts were introduced to try and restrict the luxuriousness and extravagance of the number of courses, as well as the elaborateness of the service. That is, the table was an element in the competitive struggle between high-ranking officers. As far as I am aware, this practice ceased with the republicanization of the French army, so it is interesting to see that Napoleon had resurrected the tradition, although it is impossible to say whether he was paying for it out of his own pocket or whether it was an exercise in 'competitive conspicuous consumption' as it was the case before the Revolution.⁴⁷ Napoleon, it has to be underlined, was the only republican general to maintain table in this manner. Moreover, he gave it a personal twist by shifting to a 'court' style of dining, completely out of keeping with standard military practice.

Second, Napoleon was obviously making a political statement. It is well known that he confided in Miot in June 1797: 'Do you believe that I triumph in Italy for the Carnots, Barras, etc [...] I wish to undermine the Republican party, but only for my own profit and not that of the former dynasty [...] As for me, my dear Miot, I have tasted authority and I will not give it up'.⁴⁸ Miot's account was written from notes taken at the time, and even though he was fundamentally hostile to Napoleon, it is safe to assume that they are reasonably accurate. This sort of statement, coupled with Napoleon's court-like behaviour, is revealing therefore, not only of his ambition, but also of a much deeper desire to be treated almost as though he were a monarch. The passage in Miot de Melito's memoirs describing the small court at Mombello is sometimes used by biographers to demonstrate that Napoleon had now become a 'conqueror in his own right',⁴⁹ but the significance of his behaviour in Italy and Germany, and later on

⁴⁶ F. Bernoyer, *Avec Napoleon en Egypte et en Syrie* (1981), p. 20.

⁴⁷ I am grateful to David Parrott of New College, Oxford, for this and the following details on military etiquette during the Ancien Régime.

⁴⁸ F. Markham, *Napoleon* (1963), p. 38; A. Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (1997), p. 65; F. McLynn, *Napoleon* (1997), p. 153.

⁴⁹ See, for example, A. Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (1997), p. 63; F. Markham, *Napoleon* (1963), p. 35.

the voyage to Egypt, seems to have escaped the notice of historians. Be that as it may, Napoleon's regal performance was a question of fashioning his public appearance in such a way as to increase the aura of power. It is even possible that Napoleon was mimicking the absolute rulers of France: it was only at Versailles, for example, that the king dined in public, whether alone (the *petit couvert*) or with his family (the *grand couvert*).

Finally, there is a clear distinction to be made between Napoleon as republican general, flaunting a courtly etiquette, and Napoleon as emperor who went to great lengths to appear to share the hardships of the ordinary soldier.⁵⁰ At this stage in his career though—that is, in Italy and Egypt—it would seem that the formalized etiquette with which Napoleon surrounded himself served the same purpose as it did at any eighteenth-century court. It deliberately placed a distance between the prince, or in this case the general, and those in his entourage so that they were obliged to look up to him. In other words, the etiquette may have been an expression of a craving for deference on the part of Napoleon. It also played to the aura of uniqueness he was attempting to create for it was in Italy that the notion of Napoleon as 'saviour' first appeared when poets alluded to him as such during the early stages of the campaign. In one anonymous acclamation, for example, one can read, 'I praise this hero, child of Italy. Who, having become French, has saved his *patrie*'.⁵¹ Pro-Napoleon newspapers were constantly referring to him as the 'preserver of liberty' while writers lauded 'the young artillery officer of twenty-eight years' as the Caesar that France needed and had found.⁵² The idea gained credence after peace was signed with Austria at Campo Formio when Napoleon was presented as a 'protective hero', as 'saviour' and even 'father' of the people. The French had implicitly placed their fate in Napoleon's young hands.⁵³

VI

It is not surprising, then, that when Napoleon suddenly returned from Egypt, 'everyone saw in [him] the man who would save France and end the Revolution'.⁵⁴ Pierre-Jean de Béranger was with thirty other people when news of Napoleon's arrival reached Paris. 'Everyone got up spontaneously and gave a long cry of joy'.⁵⁵ By eight o'clock that evening, people were running through the gardens of the Palais Royal crying out 'General Napoleon has landed at

⁵⁰ See A. Forrest, *Napoleon's men. The soldiers of the Revolution and Empire* (2002), pp. 70–5.

⁵¹ *Bonaparte général d'armée* (an V).

⁵² *Ami des Lois*, 15 thermidor V (2 Aug. 1797); F.R.J. de Pommereul, *Campagne du général Buonaparte en Italie pendant les années IV^e et V^e de la République française* (1797), p. 3.

⁵³ J.Y. Leclercq, 'Le mythe de Bonaparte sous le Directoire (1796–1788)' (*Mémoire de Moïtrise*, Université de Paris I, 1991), pp. 177–8. Leclercq, 'Le mythe de Bonaparte', pp. 177–8.

⁵⁴ That, at least, was the sentiment when news reached the army in Switzerland (Bigarré, *Mémoires du général Bigarré: 1775–1813* (2002), p. 105).

⁵⁵ P.J. de Béranger, *Ma biographie, ouvrage posthume de P.-J. Béranger*, 2 vols (1857), i. 70.

Fréjus!' The theatres had to interrupt their performances in order to allow the public to sing patriotic hymns. Antoine-Claire Thibaudeau, a 'powdered Jacobin' who was to rally to Napoleon but who was later to disapprove of the Empire, was at the Théâtre Français when news arrived of Napoleon's landing: 'It was as though an electric shock had passed through the room. No-one paid any attention to the show. People went from lodge to box, came out, entered, ran, unable to remain in one place. [...] on every face, in every conversation, was written the hope of salvation and the presentiment of happiness'.⁵⁶ Military bands had spontaneously spilled out of their barracks on to the streets, filling the districts of Paris with military music. The taverns stayed open and filled with workers drinking toasts to the 'return'. Rumour had it that one of Sieyès's close friends, Baudin des Ardennes, was so overwhelmed with joy on hearing of Napoleon's return that he supposedly died of an apoplectic fit.⁵⁷ Sieyès would hardly have been impressed.

At Toulon, a commemoration was held to celebrate 'the hero of Italy, the brave, the immortal Bonaparte'.⁵⁸ Similar demonstrations were repeated all along the route of the general's triumphal journey to Paris. General Boulart wrote thus:

At Avignon the crowd was enormous. At the sight of the great man, the air echoed with acclamations and shouts of 'Vive Bonaparte!' and this crowd, and that shout, accompanied him right up to the hotel where he put up. It was an electrifying scene. Hardly arrived, he received the authorities and the officers. It was the first time I saw that extraordinary being. I contemplated him with a sort of voracity; I was in an ecstatic state. I didn't think he resembled the portraits I had seen of him. As early as that time, he was seen as being called to save France from the crisis into which the pitiful government of the Directory and the setbacks suffered by our armies had thrown it.⁵⁹

At Aix, 'the entire city' turned out to greet the general as he passed through. Someone supposedly called out from the crowd: 'I don't need anything anymore; Bonaparte is with us!'⁶⁰ Peasants from the Basses-Alpes escorted Napoleon during the night by torchlight to protect him from brigands, which were rife in the region; the towns illuminated his way. In his memoirs Marbot, who was a simple hussar in 1798, recounts how he and his father came across Napoleon at Lyon while en route to the capital. 'All the houses were lit and decked out with flags, guns were shot into the air, the crowds filled the streets to the point of

⁵⁶ A.-C. Thibaudeau, *Mémoires de A.-C. Thibaudeau* (1913), p. 1.

⁵⁷ Cited in I. Woloch, 'Introduction', *Ann Hist Rev Fran*, 318 (1999), 594; *Le Publiciste*, (25 Vendémiaire VIII), 17 October 1799.

⁵⁸ M. Crook, *Napoleon comes to power: democracy and dictatorship in revolutionary France, 1795-1804* (Cardiff, 1998), p. 49.

⁵⁹ J.F. Boulart, *Mémoires du général d'artillerie baron Boulart (1792-1815)* (1892), pp. 67-8.

⁶⁰ *Ami des Lois*, 30 vendémiaire VIII (22 October 1799).

preventing our carriage from advancing. People were dancing in the public squares, and the air echoed with the cry of "Long live Bonaparte who has come to save the patrie! [...]" The closer we got, the more the popular tide became compact and, on arriving at the door, we saw that it was covered by lanterns and guarded by a battalion of grenadiers. It was where General Bonaparte was staying [...]. Marbot was, in fact, quite shocked at seeing the people 'run before Napoleon as if he were already sovereign of France'.⁶¹ Napoleon decided to stay in Lyon in order to receive the local authorities, as if he were already on an official tour of the country. Within eighteen hours, a play was hastily written and improvised in his honour—*The Return of the Hero or Bonaparte at Lyon*—at the Théâtre des Célestins where the actors read, or rather stammered out, their roles, holding their parts in their hands, intimidated by the presence of the man himself (13 October 1799). Invited to the theatre to see it performed, he affected that humble discretion he assumed when in France, remaining at the back of his box while he pushed his aide-de-camp, Duroc to the front. When the crowd began chanting 'Bonaparte!' he condescended to take his place in full view of the auditorium.⁶²

This unparalleled outburst of popular enthusiasm for Napoleon can be interpreted on a number of levels. For the people of the south and south-east of France, who outside of Paris seem to have been the most enthusiastic about Napoleon's return, it may have been relief at the threat they felt by the invasion of Northern Italy in 1798 to 1799 by coalition armies. They thus saw in Napoleon someone who could cross the Alps and contain the danger.⁶³ For the people of Paris, it may have been a kind of nostalgia for a time when Napoleon's name and victory in Italy were indissolubly associated. He was thus mentioned in the cafés of Paris as early as April, that is five months before his return, as someone who could straighten out the disastrous military situation and stand up to a general like Austria's Archduke Charles.⁶⁴ These reports were, in fact, mirroring the image Napoleon had constructed in Italy. Whether they did this out of sheer enthusiasm, lack of imagination, or simply to conform to what had become an accepted image is impossible to say, and is in any case beside the point, which is that Napoleon was now welcomed throughout France not only as a hero, but also as a saviour.

Despite his prolonged absence in Egypt, Napoleon's memory had been kept alive in the public thanks to people like his brother, Lucien, who had been busy

⁶¹ J.A. de Merbot, *Mémoires du général baron de Merbot*, 3 vols (1892), i. 46, 49.

⁶² A.M. de Lavalette, *Mémoires et souvenirs du comte de Lavalette* (1994), pp. 225–6; M. Albert, *Les théâtres des boulevards: 1789–1848* (1902), pp. 176–7. Other plays were to follow—*Le Retour à l'Espérance, ou l'Arrivée du général Bonaparte* (20 October 1799), *L'Heureux Retour* (22 October), *Le Héros de retour d'Égypte* (26 October), *Les Nouvellistes de Pantin, ou le Retour inattendu* (30 October), and *Le Premier rayon de soleil* (12 November) (Lecomte, *Napoléon et l'Empire*, pp. 45–7).

⁶³ Marmont, *Mémoires*, ii. 51.

⁶⁴ N. Gotteri, 'L'esprit publique à Paris avant le coup d'Etat de Brumaire an VIII', in J.O. Boudon (ed.), *Brumaire. La prise du pouvoir de Bonaparte* (2001), p. 18.

collaborating with neo-Jacobin journals like the *Journal des Francs*, the *Journal des Hommes Libres*, and *L'Ennemi des Oppresseurs*, to publish a number of flattering articles while Napoleon was away. Moreover, every now and then an official report got through the British blockade and even if months late they always reported victories of one kind or another. The French public knew, for example, that Napoleon had taken Malta, that he had landed in Egypt, taken Alexandria, fought and won a battle before the Pyramids, taken Cairo, and that he had set out into Syria.⁶⁵ Journalists paid by the Napoleon family also manipulated the news so that the disastrous battle of the Nile (August 1798), in which the French lost thirteen ships, was reported as an unfortunate event, but it was played down, an accident along the glorious path that was Napoleon's, a victory for the British but not worth the taking of Malta in strategic importance. The revolt of Cairo (October 1798) was also reported and played down; so, too, was the abandonment of the siege of St John of Acre (May 1798), described as 'une habilité tactique (a tactical, manoeuvre)'. Instead, Napoleon preferred to return to Egypt to prevent a landing of hostile Turkish forces, where he defeated them at the battle of Abonthr (October 1798). If the victory did not overshadow the misery caused by the plague, the blame for the defeat in Syria was thrown squarely at the feet of the Directory, or at least of a number of politicians.

When information lacked, and this was the case after the Battle of the Nile, journalists did what they always do in such cases: they speculated. Newspapers published articles on what they thought was happening in Egypt, some conjecturing that Napoleon was planning to attack the English in India (this was probably put around by the Napoleon family in Paris),⁶⁶ while the comte de Volney, author of a travelogue on Egypt, Volney wrote a series of articles for the *Moniteur* describing, predicting and developing 'the true situation, the probable tactics, the ideas, the administration and the fate of Bonaparte'.⁶⁷ At one stage, the *Journal des Hommes Libres* reported that Napoleon was only eighty-five leagues from Constantinople at the head of 200,000 troops.⁶⁸

In the face of these reports, any news of defeat and failure that might have slipped through was simply discounted as the product of the enemies of France.⁶⁹ The general impression that Napoleon was victorious was reinforced by the sudden arrival of news of the battle of Aboukir in October 1799, shortly before Napoleon disembarked on the coast of France. The first of Napoleon's dispatches on the battle was made public on 6 October simultaneously in a number of papers: the *Moniteur*; the *Journal des Hommes Libres*; the *Clef du Cabinet*; and the *Ami des Lois*. The next day, Napoleon's proclamation to the Army of the Orient following the retreat from Syria was published, but the

⁶⁵ *Journal des Hommes Libres*, 16, 20, 28 Thermidor VI (3, 7, 15 Aug. 1798); *Moniteur Universel*, 20 Aug., 16 and 29 September 1798; Corr. iv. n. 3045 (19 Aug. 1798).

⁶⁶ *Journal des Hommes Libres*, 20 Thermidor VI (7 Aug. 1798).

⁶⁷ *Moniteur Universel*, 19 and 21 November 1798.

⁶⁸ *Journal des Hommes Libres*, 7 Messidor VII (25 June 1799).

⁶⁹ *Clef du Cabinet*, 4 and 13 Thermidor (23 July and 1 Aug. 1799).

victory at Aboukir somehow transformed the disastrous defeat at St John of Acre into a victory in the popular imagination.⁷⁰ This impression was reinforced by the publication of Napoleon's dispatches concerning the Syrian campaign,⁷¹ as well as the serialization of Berthier's *Relation de l'expédition en Egypte*, glorifying the commander of the Army of Orient.⁷² These reports dominated the press in the days preceding Napoleon's arrival, so that Napoleon not only returned exuding the aura of victory, but his decision to abandon the army in Egypt could easily be explained. When he learnt of the defeats of Jourdan in Germany and Scherer in Italy, 'I immediately left, that same hour, with the frigates *Muiron* and *Carrère*, even though they were slow ships. I did not think of the dangers; I had to be where my presence could be the most useful. Animated by these sentiments, I would have wrapped myself in my coat and sailed on a barque if there had not been any frigates'.⁷³ This reasoning enabled the *Décade Philosophique* to write, 'the hero of Italy could lead our troops to new triumphs and to a new peace that Europe so much needs [...]'.⁷⁴ Pro-Napoleon newspapers were thus quick to argue that he had returned because of the situation in Germany.⁷⁵ Napoleon was called on not only to save France from the Coalition by defeating its enemies, but to create a new paradise on earth. The workers of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, drinking in the cafés of the rue de Lappe and the rue de la Roquette, declared: 'We sing the triumph of our armies and the arrival of *our Father, our Saviour*, Buonaparte [...] We don't have any work, well then we will march en masse under the command of our good father Buonaparte'.⁷⁶ Napoleon had thus returned to France to take up the work that had been compromised by the Directory, to set aright the faults that had been committed since his absence, and to consolidate the successes that had been compromised. Alone Napoleon appeared capable of achieving victory and, as a result, of bringing about peace, first on the Continent, and then in France.⁷⁷ The people, even according to one of his opponents, saw in him a general who was always victorious and who would bring about honour through victory,⁷⁸ and in the eyes of the people the means of bringing an end to the Revolution was to finish the war.

⁷⁰ *Moniteur Universel*, 7 October 1799.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 11 and 28 May, and 10 October 1799.

⁷² *Journal des Hommes Libres*, (12 October 1799); *Moniteur Universel*, 11 October 1799; the *Clef du Cabinet*, (7 October 1799). The reports were also published in book form in the *Relations de l'expédition de Syrie, de la bataille d'Aboukir, et de la reprise du fort de ce nom* (an VIII).

⁷³ Corr. v. n. 4382 (10 October 1799). The theme was taken up by the press (*Le Publiciste*, 16 and 22 October 1799 (24 and 30 Vendémiaire VIII)).

⁷⁴ *Décade Philosophique*, 1 November 1799.

⁷⁵ *Ami des Lois*, 28 Vendémiaire VIII (20 October 1799).

⁷⁶ Gotteri, 'L'esprit public à Paris', pp. 23-4.

⁷⁷ See Leclercq, 'Le mythe de Bonaparte', pp. 205-7.

⁷⁸ 'Le dix-huit Brumaire: extrait des mémoires du maréchal Jourdan', *Carn Bist Litt*, 7 (1901), 164.

VII

If the groundwork for Napoleon as saviour had been laid before the coup, much of the construction of this particular image took place after Brumaire.⁷⁹ Indeed, images of the hero gave way to a greater emphasis on that of the saviour. Instances of it can be found in the newspapers, pamphlets, plays and paintings that appeared at the end of 1799 and the beginning of 1800. Take this line from an impromptu play put on shortly after the coup:

The flight to Egypt once Preserved the saviour of men,
And yet a few malicious spirits
Doubt it in the century in which we find ourselves,
But one thing is certain in this day,
Whatever one might think of the old miracle,
It is from Egypt that there is a return
That has brought a saviour to France.⁸⁰

It was perhaps the first, but certainly not the last time, that a parallel would be drawn between Christ and Napoleon as Saviour.

Amid the hundreds of pro-Brumaire pamphlets that circulated in the weeks and months after the coup, one in particular is worth paying some attention to. Written by the same person who was placed in charge of one of Napoleon's newspapers in Italy, Jullien (although published anonymously), it is in the form of a dialogue between two people identified as 'A' and 'B'; the latter was immediately recognized to be Napoleon. In it, Jullien lays the groundwork by lamenting the deplorable state of affairs in France before Napoleon came on the scene:

There was no national representation, no government, no constitution. Our conquests lost, our laurels tarnished, peace impossible except on dishonourable terms, our armies destroyed, the French name reviled by both enemies and allies, the Republic fallen into

⁷⁹ The iconography surrounding Brumaire is relatively thin, a dozen engravings in all but, in comparison, the total number of engravings depicting the fall of the monarchy on 10 August only comes to thirty. Of course, the number of prints made from these engravings could reach the hundreds. See, S. Roy, 'Le retentissement de Brumaire en image: rupture ou continuité?', in J.P. Jessene (ed.), *Du Directoire au Consulat*, 4 vols. iii; *Brumaire dans l'histoire du lien politique et de l'Etat-nation* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq, 2001), pp. 581-93; B. Jobert, 'Les représentations contemporaines du dix-huit Brumaire dans les Arts'; and B. Foucart, 'Les images du coup d'Etat et la formation de la Légende', in Boudon (ed.), *Brumaire*: pp. 115-30 and 131-50.

⁸⁰ *La Girouette de Saint-Cloud: impromptu en un acte, en prose mêlé de Vaudeville*. Paris, Théâtre du Vaudeville, 14 November 1799, p. 17:

La fuite en Egypte jadis
Conserva le sauveur des hommes,
Pourtant quelques malins esprits
En doutent au siècle où nous sommes,
Mais un fait bien sur en ce jour,
Du vieux miracle quoi qu'on pense,
C'est que de l'Egypte un retour
Ramène un sauveur à la France.

the utmost debasement and misery, the aims of the revolution miscarried, the fruits of our labours, sacrifices and victories annihilated, the dregs of faction agitating and disputing with foreigners over the shreds of our country—that is what struck the observer.⁸¹

And that was only a taste of a long list of complaints, many of them either false or grossly exaggerated. But the whole point was to show just how bad things were so that Napoleon came out looking as though he had dragged France from the edge of the abyss. It is a theme found in some of the paintings and allegories depicting Brumaire during the Consulate and the Empire, which were part of a larger attempt to legitimate the new dynasty through the arts: Napoleon was always alert to the political uses of art.⁸² In Antoine-François Callet's *Tableau allégorique du 18 brumaire an VIII ou La France sauvée* (1800), for example, the forces of light drive away the forces of darkness.⁸³ To the bottom left of the painting, probably ordered by Napoleon, one can see a boat that is meant to be, according to the description in the catalogue of the Salon for that year, 'le vaisseau de l'Etat' arriving in port. That is, the boat has a political significance and in this instance was a reference to the plebiscite of January 1800 which legitimated Brumaire, although the image of a vessel, representing the Republic, arriving in port was fairly common in the final years of the Directory.⁸⁴ On board the ship one can see a number of the best known pieces of art pillaged from Italy—the horses from Venice, the Laocoon, the Apollo of Belvedere, the Transfiguration by Raphael—next to which are piles of enemy flags. France is represented by a woman holding an olive branch, and supported by fifteen *Renommées* that represent the armies of the Republic. Especially prominent is a figure in Egyptian headdress standing in for the army of Egypt.

The notion of the 'saviour' was one that had to be inculcated and was done so over a long period of time. Antoine Gros's *Napoleon Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa* (1804), the highlight of that year's Salon, is all that more interesting because it portrays the French army decimated by the plague.⁸⁵ French troops, in other words, were no longer portrayed as active heroes, but as passive victims of death and sickness. Indeed, the painting is of a scene of dire misery in which the arrival of the saviour, appropriately recognized by the light that is cast on him, enlightens the whole and brings the promise of healing, for after all, the real subject of the painting is not so much the army as that of Napoleon. The active hero is Napoleon who extends his hand in a Christ-like gesture to (apparently) heal a victim of the plague, as if Napoleon's touch could heal the

⁸¹ *Entretien politique sur la situation actuelle de la France et sur les plans du nouveau gouvernement* (December, 1799). Translation in R.R. Palmer, *From Jacobin to Liberal: Marc-Antoine Jullien, 1775-1848* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 94-100.

⁸² See, A. Jourdan, 'Images de Napoléon—un *imperator* en quête de légitimité', *Mod Cont Fr*, 8 (2000), 442-3; idem., *Napoléon: Héros, Imperator, Mécène* (1998), pp. 161-84.

⁸³ See, J. Benoît, 'La peinture allégorique sous le consulat: structure et politique', *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 121 (1993), 78-9.

⁸⁴ Jourdan, 'Du sacre du philosophe au sacre du militaire,' p. 422.

⁸⁵ See D.C. Gripsy, 'Rumor, contagion and colonization in Gros's *Plague-Stricken of Jaffa* (1804)', *Representations*, 51 (1995), 1-46.



Figure 2 Antoine-François Callet, *Tableau allégorique du 18 brumaire an VIII ou La France sauvée* (1800). Oil on canvas, 1.010 x 1.250 m. Vizille, Musée de la Révolution française

sick, while both Arab and French medical personnel are busy around him trying to stem the tide of death. The failure surrounding the Syrian expedition was thus transformed through this glamorous gesture into a victory, of sorts.⁸⁶

As late as 1810—in another allegorical painting that refers to Brumaire—Jean-Pierre Franque's *Allégorie sur l'état de la France avant le retour d'Égypte* (1810), Napoleon is woken from a dream by France, who out of the shadows of the Pyramids, calls on him to save France.⁸⁷ The inscription on the altar reads, 'France, suffering under an unhappy government summons from the bosom of Egypt the hero on whom her destiny depends'. France allegorically, and in reality, was meant to be in trouble. The figures behind the scantily clad symbol of the *patrie* were meant to personify Crime and Blind Fury, while Plenty and the Altar of Law have been overturned. Another subtext is present even if it was not intended—Napoleon went to Egypt on a civilizing mission, but he returned from Egypt to bring 'pharaonic stability' to France. In other words, the Egyptian

⁸⁶ Grigsby, *Extremities*, pp. 118–19.

⁸⁷ See T. Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire. Art in the Service of French Imperialism, 1798–1836* (Princeton, NJ, 1998), p. 76.



Figure 3 Jean-Pierre Franque, *Allégorie sur l'état de la France avant le retour d'Égypte* (1810). Oil on canvas, 2.610 x 3.260 m. Louvre

campaign somehow invested Napoleon with the political as well as the moral authority needed to put an end to the political woes being inflicted on France.

VIII

Napoleon vainly attempted to use the saviour myth on his return to France from exile on Elba. On landing in the Golfe-Juan, he is supposed to have pronounced a speech in which he justified his return by saying that he had come 'once again to save you [that is, the French people] from anarchy'.⁸⁸ It was, in some ways, a vain attempt to relive what he had been through fifteen years previously, this time however with the disastrous consequences we know — defeat and renewed exile. On Saint Helena, Napoleon persisted with the myth, usually by reinforcing the image of a pre-Brumaire France brought back from the brink of the abyss by his arrival from Egypt.⁸⁹ The construction of the myth and indeed of the legend of Napoleon which developed in France in the Restoration period was, quite naturally, much more complex than the images

⁸⁸ Cited in Hazareesingh, *The legend*, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Las Cases, *Mémorial*, ii. 8-9.

that have been analysed here. What is evident from this examination of a few of the more notable themes in the propaganda during the early years of Napoleon's career is that he fully understood, even if only intuitively, the power of representing the self in a particular light. In the process, he not only constructed a political image, but also laid the foundations of a legend around his person. This was done within a remarkably short space of time, in the three-and-a-half years that elapsed between the spring of 1796 until the end of 1799.

The French people did not unquestioningly accept this image either during his reign or indeed during the Restoration. As we have seen, scepticism and even opposition were expressed in the press of the day when it was first being constructed. The degree to which Napoleon as hero-saviour found an echo in French society, however, is telling on a number of levels. First, it is evident that once the image-making process had begun, Napoleon did not necessarily control its flow. Artists, and journalists, inspired by the hero typos, contributed to its semination by writing newspaper articles, pamphlets and plays, and by creating artistic works that mirrored the message coming from Italy. On another level, though the types of representations Napoleon commissioned, the articles he wrote for the newspapers of the day, and his behaviour in certain contexts, all reveal aspects of the self that were rarely openly expressed.⁹⁰ We enter the realms of the speculative here, but images and gestures can be interpreted in much the same way as rhetoric. What, then, does the hero-saviour myth reveal about Napoleon? There are two suppositions that I would like to put forward.

The first is Napoleon's desire to emulate a hero, a desire that can be found as far back as his childhood. Elsewhere, I have attempted to demonstrate that Napoleon was inspired to imitate his adolescent idol, and leader of the Corsican independence movement, Pasquale Paoli.⁹¹ He did so for a number of reasons, but essentially the young Napoleon was creating an image of what he believed he could or ought to become, fantasizing about doing one day what Paoli, and for that matter his father, were never able to accomplish—to liberate Corsica from the French. In the process, I argued, Napoleon had cast himself in a heroic mould, and from that point of time on the mould was set. It did not matter whether he saw himself as Corsican, French or European, he always adapted to the mould and constructed an idealized image of himself. This was certainly the case in Italy, and he continued to do so, that is, to construct an idealized image of himself, once he came to power.

By creating the hero-saviour myth, and this is the second supposition, Napoleon gradually isolated himself, augmenting his inaccessibility in a way that was meant to make him unique. It is no coincidence, for example, that Napoleon adopted a form of monarchical etiquette with which to express power or that he portrayed himself as a young conquering hero to the public in France. This behaviour, and the images he projected on to the French public, can be interpreted both in personal and in political terms. In personal terms, the strict

⁹⁰ Jourdan, 'Images de Napoléon', p. 434.

⁹¹ P. Dwyer, 'From Corsican nationalist to French revolutionary: problems of identity in the writings of the young Napoleon, 1785–1793', *Fr Hist*, 16 (2002), 143–6.

etiquette he obliged others to observe when not in France was, in some respects, a convenient means of distancing himself from those close to his person.

This promotion of self, however, can also be explained by a desire to dominate, to rise above others, to feed one's ego. But that is only part of the answer. In fact, just as Napoleon projected on to Pasquale Paoli an idealized image of what he thought a freedom fighter-cum-father-figure should be like, here too in some respects he projected on to the French people an idealized portrait of how he wanted to be perceived. In political terms, Napoleon's propaganda in Italy was also part of a struggle with the Directory to break free from its hold and then to maintain his independence. Once he had done so, there were only a number of options open to him: to gain power through the Directory (something that was not going to happen in the immediate future because Napoleon did not meet the minimum age requirement of forty years); to fall into obscurity; or to take power by extra-legal means. This last option led to the coup of Brumaire. After that, the state was harnessed to promote his image in ways that have only been briefly touched on here. Yet, ultimately, Napoleon's own belief in the hero-saviour image, combined with an unhealthy sense of his own infallibility, would contribute to the fall of his regime.