

# THE NOVEL ON THE EMIGRATION DURING THE REVOLUTION

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## Introduction

The schemas of the sentimental novel remain largely in force in novelistic production at the end of the century, with Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Sophie Cottin, Germaine de Staël, Félicité de Genlis or Adélaïde de Flahault Sousa. We will talk here mainly about one of its ramifications, the emigration novel. Re-emphasised by the publication of Sénac de Meilhan's *Emigré* in the Romanesque anthology of the Pléiade, it has generated a recent revival of interest and several re-editions.

The importance of the motif for emigration, some forty titles recorded between 1792 and 1850, is obviously due to the sociological and numerical weight of the phenomenon. The emigrant is a political and social reality created by the Revolution. Under the laws on emigration, in the spring of 1793, several thousand Frenchmen were banished under penalty of death and their property was seized by the nation. We will see that while taking charge of the story of the misfortunes of time, the sentimental novel, by way of this motif, also faces the challenge of telling an astounding story.

## Part 1 – An adaptation of the sentimental novel

Whether or not novelists have experienced it themselves, emigration is first and foremost a novelistic theme of choice. As Sénac notes, "Everything is likely and everything is romantic in the French Revolution. The most extraordinary encounters, the most amazing circumstances, the most deplorable situations become common events and surpass what novelists can imagine." Reality goes beyond fiction and undermines plausibility. As the noble titles disappear and the places are exchanged, the moving potential is at its height. I always quote Sénac: "The French, scattered all over the world, present an infinite variety of touching scenes, too often tragic and many of which are romantic".

The novel no longer needs to claim to be drawn from rediscovered correspondences in order to bestow upon itself a truth given to it by history. The separation of lovers, husbands and wives, friends, family members, amply justified by the hazards of the Revolution, will provide a tension to the plot and a likelihood to the exchange of letters. The epistolary form also makes it possible to insert embedded stories, to multiply the number of secondary characters and thus to broaden the diversity of testimonies on the situations of emigrants. This is can be seen in Sénac's novel or in *Les Petits Emigrés* by Madame de Genlis.

But the emigration novel also extends the perimeter of fiction to European dimensions; France, England, Switzerland, Germany and as far as Iceland or the borders of Denmark in the novel by Madame de Souza, *Eugénie et Mathilde*, published in 1811. The reason for emigration throughout this period spreads to the point of sometimes appearing as an opportunistic adaptation of the sentimental genre. The figure of the emigrant, a word entered into the dictionary in 1798, quickly became a selling point for a readership in need of sensations and jaded by a hectic history. Thus, in 1801, came *L'Innocence échappée de plusieurs naufrages* presented by its subtitle as *Mémoires d'une femme émigrée* or in *Firmin ou Le Jouet de la fortune*, the story of a young emigrant from Rosny.

However, it would be difficult to understand the circulation of this kind, particularly in France, without taking into account among readers the need to exorcise the great revolutionary upheaval. The Revolution, often seen as a cataclysm, a masked ball or a great upheaval, is part of familiar novel forms, the novel-memoir or the epistolary novel that master the entry into the unknown.

But in contact with history, the novel is tinged with a new degree of realism. To tell the story of the end of his hero skinned by the people, Sénac's novel uses a process called collage. It juxtaposes, in

testament to the hero, an extract from the gazette that makes us read about revolutionary propaganda. I quote: "The people with the word of king entered into fury, threw themselves on the inanimate body of the aristocrat, whom they could not be prevented from tearing to pieces. Humanity revolts against these bloody excesses, but in all countries, the roots of the tree of freedom have been sprinkled with blood and how can we contain a people who see their government and the laws that are so dear to them insulted?"

## Part 2 - Making History meaningful

Through the vicissitudes of departure and survival or after Thermidor with the return of the emigrant, the novel will offer a mirror to the questions and uncertainties of men and women, who, as Stéphanie Genand notes, are citizens driven out of time and struggling to find their place and meaning in the century that is beginning.

The emigration novel can thus follow the tragic turn of the Revolution, in Sénac's already cited novel, *L'Emigré*, whose plot begins after the king's death. The motifs of the sentimental novel allow him then to say the impossibility of a future. The emigrant Saint-Alban was welcomed in Germany near the castle of the Countess of Levenstein, who soon fell in love with him. The awakening of feelings mapped out through a correspondence between the Countess and her friend Emilie de Wergentheim and we find the usual adventures of the genre: disappearance of the portrait made by Saint-Alban, ball and finally double wedding project when the Countess's old husband dies opportunely. But the desired marriage was prohibited by Saint-Alban's sense of duty, who, aware of the inequality of fortune, returned to fight and was taken prisoner by the revolutionary armies, committed suicide in Paris in the middle of a courtroom.

The epistolary form can also be used effectively to ward off the fanaticism of time. This is the case in the *Lettres trouvées dans des porte-feuilles d'émigrés*, composed between March and July 1793 by a Dutch noblewoman living in Switzerland, Isabelle de Charrière. During the Vendée uprising, the republican officer Laurent Fontbrune had such a dialogue in the Vendée with his friend Alphonse, who had fled the Princes' army in Switzerland, while Germaine in London received letters from her father who had gone to Germany to fight, forbidding her to see her fiancé Alphonse again.

Between uncompromising nobles, noble critics of the past, such as Alphonse, and reasonable republicans, the points of view will indeed become closer. Laurent and Alphonse thus agreed in their exchange on the forms of government, while Germaine's father finally accepted the wedding of the betrothed in Holland. The fiction stops, however, on this hope, the novel can do no better than to express the historical uncertainty through its incompleteness.

Finally, after Thermidor, some novels feature the return of the emigrant and reconciliation in a return to providential order. I am thinking in particular of *La Dot de Suzette* by Fiévée, or the anonymous *Mémoires d'une famille émigrée*, which contrasts the pathos of emigration with the story of a happy proscription accompanied by a return. Theodore de Clairsans, the hero, is forced to flee to Germany after the looting of the family estate and he can reveal his feelings for the young orphan taken in by his mother, called Alix, despite the prejudices of rank, then join her in Switzerland to start a family. This novel therefore responds to the Directory's ideological programme, which is that of the nation's reconciliation.

Emigration, the result of the Revolution, in any case, forces the novel to embrace history in its most immediate upheavals. It allows the reader to question the attitude to adopt in the face of historical changes. It is therefore understandable that, in addition to its truly moving potential, this motif could have marked the fictional production of the time. Thus, the emigration novel, in its diversity, is part of this novel production, which after having long been forgotten in the history of literature, nevertheless testifies to the vitality of the turning point in the Enlightenment.



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