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French Identity, French Heroes: From Vercingétorix to Vatel

When in “Bad Blood” Arthur Rimbaud claims: “From my Gallic ancestors I have blue-white eyes, a narrow skull, and clumsiness in wrestling,”¹ should we assume that he is asserting the Gauls as his authentic ancestors? Rimbaud is not the only Frenchman to have elected the Gallic barbarians as his distant relatives, so has the French Republic and its people; for France, the Gauls represent a common chosen ancestry, a unifying symbol. Similarly, when sociologist Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson argues that France was able to convince the world of its culinary superiority through the written text, and make its art form a vector of national identity and pride,² should we believe all French citizens to be culinary masters? Do the French have to trace their lineage to Vercingétorix or be Vatel-like chefs to share the same national pride? Are not stories and legends passed down through generations more important than historical facts and cookbooks when it comes to national identity? Indeed, what is relevant when Rimbaud chooses the Gauls as his legitimate ancestors is that this choice keeps him and his readers within the mythical ancestral link. Likewise, what constitutes true gastronomic identity is the telling of extraordinary actions revealing patriotic greatness through stories about food, unifying

France under one common goal, the supremacy of French Cuisine. This need for sharing a story is a very French characteristic, as pointed by Ferguson: “a recognizably French model of social relations, one in which conversation plays a prime role” (99). National Identity is therefore created by its heroes and the telling of their myths according to a unifying design, whether conscious or unconscious. . . a shared legend accepted and praised by all.

The French did not always claim the Gauls as their ancestors, and until the nineteenth century, the Francs were the ancestors recognized by French nobility of the Ancient Régime, while Gallic ancestry was claimed only by commoners. Jean-Louis Brunaux, in his excellent book on demystifying the Gauls,³ reminds us that before public schools existed (late 1880s), the teaching of history was left mostly to the clergy who continued to view the Francs as their noble ancestors. In 1807, Father Louis-Pierre Anquetil wrote a *Histoire de France*⁴ that was unusual because it began with the Gauls. Although Anquetil is described as a rather bad historian, his text initiated a new approach to French antiquity. According to Brunaux, we need to credit the very dedicated and tenacious historian Amédée Thierry with enlightening France about, and creating a passion for its newest uncovered (or rediscovered) ancestors, the Gauls. In 1828, Thierry published his remarkable and voluminous *Histoire des Gaulois depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à l'entière soumission de la Gaule à la domination romaine*,⁵ which enjoyed great popularity and was republished throughout the 19th century. Importantly, Thierry is the first historian to have developed the idea that Gaul and France are one and the same as a country and homeland because of the heroic characters who left their marks on the budding history of the nation. Thierry goes on portraying several prestigious

Gauls, most of them having resisted the Roman invaders; first among these is the legendary and unfortunate young Gallic chief, Vercingétorix. As Brunaux points out, Vercingétorix becomes the focus of Thierry mostly because he is the only Gaul included in Julius Caesar's *History of the Gauls* with any biographical details. Vercingétorix's Cornelian relationship with Caesar brings on an attractive romantic portrait and therefore lends itself to the stubborn legend of the valiant Arverne chieftain. In Thierry's own words: "Vercingétorix was too much of a patriot to owe his rise to his country's disparagement, too proud to accept it from the hand of a foreigner."⁶ Thanks to Julius Caesar and then Thierry, a hero was born for the collective French memory.

From the middle of the nineteenth century to 1870, there is a consensus among the cultured society of France that the Gauls are France's most ancient ancestors, and that the natural borders of France were set with them. This claim was sustained by the French Emperor, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's passion for archeology, a passion that became a national pastime. Indeed, living his passion more than studying history, he declared: "New France, ancient France, Gaul are one and the same moral person. [. . .] The Gauls' personality has subsisted among us all, just as their blood has passed from generation to generation until it reached our veins."⁷ Stemming from the Gallic infatuation, the teaching of French history became mandatory under the Third Republic (1870-1940) and was first delivered by Ernest Lavisse's history textbooks in the late 1870s.⁸ The Republican teaching of French history contributed to the creation of a national consciousness encompassing all patriotic feelings. Furthermore, following Thierry's idea, Lavisse's textbooks imposed the hexagonal myth by demonstrating that the borders of the French nation are natural, following a logical progression, a normal evolution that began

with a unified Gallic territory: *la Gaule*. The French Republic imposed the concept of the Gallic origin, making Vercingétorix, unfortunate but worthy defender of the Gauls against the Romans, the very first national hero. The common reference to *nos ancêtres les Gaulois* (our ancestors, the Gauls) is the confirmation of the existence of a unified territory (one land since the beginning of civilization) and a unified people, blotting away all disparities and the succession of waves of invaders. Its intention was to create a unified people stemming from the common chosen ancestors, *les Gaulois*.⁹

Although we cannot claim that Rimbaud is a product of this Republican teaching, what seems to be most important for him in choosing *les Gaulois* as his legitimate ancestors is that this choice keeps him outside the history of a civilized France, in effect reversing the tendency of his time to adopt the Gauls as the starting point for French history, as if for him the history of France *did not* begin with the Gauls: “If I only had ancestors at some point in the history of France! / No! no antecedent. / It is very clear to me that I have always belonged to an inferior race” (267).¹⁰ In any case, the attraction to the Gallic ancestry is the declared inferiority that will allow for the infusion of “bad blood,” a subversion of France’s other ancestral claim: “France, eldest daughter of the Church” (267),¹¹ the noble, civilized blood-line.¹²

Rimbaud, as all French citizens, has to reconcile his dual barbarian and Christian identity. As a matter of fact, through the Republican teaching of national heroes, starting with Vercingétorix, and because of the perceived ability of the French people to rise from the oppression of the Ancien Régime, bringing to the world enlightenment through its Revolution and its manifesto, *La Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen*, the French have no doubt that they belong to an exceptional nation (if not a nation of

exception[s]), a civilization of reference, envied by the whole world. . . just like its cuisine is! It is this exceptional nature, rich in history and national heroes, that “Bad Blood” questions and rejects in asserting such a shocking opposite view: “It is very clear to me that I have always belonged to an inferior race” (267).¹³ Rimbaud, by presenting himself as a despicable barbarian, a Gaul that is not the legendary Vercingétorix, lacking all the noble savage qualities attributed to the mythical defender of the Gauls, *de facto* betrays the French National Identity in his portrayal of the common chosen French ancestors: “The Gauls are flayers of animals and the most inept scorchers of grass in their time. / From them I inherit: idolatry, and love of sacrilege, — oh! all vices: anger, lust — lust that is grandiose — and especially deceit and sloth” (265).¹⁴

Who are these Gauls so inept even in their crimes, so full of vices that no sensible people would want to claim them as theirs? By claiming the *vile* Gauls as his legitimate ancestors Rimbaud rejects the mythical Vercingétorix, rejecting thus the official French history, but preserving his Gallic identity. Pressing his point, Rimbaud explains the Gallic defeat that brought the Roman victory by acknowledging their lack of organization and discipline, their preference to individual looting over the common good: “I am unable to understand revolt. My race never rose up except to loot: like wolves over the animal they did not kill” (267).¹⁵ Rimbaud brings to light the myth of the Gauls as disorganized and unruly warriors because as such, they cannot be worthy of civilization: Christianity will have no hold on such low savages. In effect Rimbaud is both contradicting the Emperor’s claim to the precious blood (are we all sharing the blood of these despicable savages?), as well as the imposed history as exemplified in Lavissee’s textbook: “It is during Roman times that the Gauls converted to the *Christian faith*.”¹⁶ According to Lavissee, the Gauls

are willingly brought to civilization through their defeat: “The Romans knew how to do a lot of things the Gauls did not. But the Gauls were very smart. They learned to do all the things the Romans did. Then, they built beautiful cities. They dressed like the Romans did.”¹⁷

What Rimbaud is rejecting is not so much the French Gallic ancestry, an ancestry that he actually claims, but he denies his belonging to a worthy heroic lineage. Rimbaud rejects the legend which transformed the Gauls into civilized barbarians; he wants to be seen as a savage, unspoiled by civilization and Christianity. Rimbaud’s claim to ancestry, whether singular or plural, barbarian or Christian, shapes his identity, and thus, the identity of his readers, presenting a perverse retelling of the Gallic legend, forfeiting all heroes and glory. Transformed into a new barbarian: “I am a beast, a savage. But I can be saved” (271);¹⁸ forced into baptism, clothed just like Lavisser’s tamed Gauls: “We will have to be baptized and put on clothes and work” (271);¹⁹ accepting all the values that he first rejected, Rimbaud-the-Last-Untamed-Gaul and his readers are forced into Christianity and civilization by the invaders: “The white men are landing” (271),²⁰ just like his ancestors were forced into civilization by the Romans. In the end, French history wins over the barbarians. . . in a sad about-face, Rimbaud embraces both the Christian faith as well as the new history, ending “Bad Blood” he writes: “That would be the French way of life, the path of honor!” (275).²¹ All the Gauls are defeated, the savages are swallowed up by civilization, whether Roman or White, only the History of France remains. We are all offspring of the legend of Vercingétorix!

If Rimbaud can give a new perspective on French identity by despoiling the chosen Gallic warrior of his heroic qualities, Mme de Sévigné’s letters on Vatel’s tragedy

present an almost completely opposing view of French heroism.²² Her story is not one of a nationally accepted hero (Vatel is not a household name like Vercingétorix's is), but of an individual human tragedy that brings on national pride because of its quintessentially French context. Because her story deals with a culinary drama, a subject of national interest and pride, the self sacrifice of her hero transforms it into a quasi French legend. Vatel, just like Vercingétorix, represents legendary courage and pride in the face of adversity, although in a very different domain. . . but for the French, food can be as patriotic a subject as organized (or disorganized) resistance.

Vatel (a Swiss by birth) was the Prince of Condé's *Maître d'hôtel*, who was to organize the celebrations at Chantilly (Condé's castle) for Louis XIV's visit. After a series of mishaps (lack of roast for guests at a low table, fireworks dampened by weather conditions), which the Sun King did not notice, Vatel committed suicide when fish was not delivered on time Friday morning for the preparations of the day's feast. Mme de Sévigné rushes to write the extraordinary story to her daughter in a first letter dated "Friday evening, April 24, 1671," the very day Vatel killed himself. She begins with explaining the event on which she had planned to report: "I intended to tell you that the king arrived last night at Chantilly,"²³ but she has to change her story because of what she has just been told: "But here is what I am told upon arriving, I cannot get over it, I don't know what I wanted to tell you."²⁴ The need to tell is obvious, but the reporting is all broken up, phrases marked by emotion, not yet a constructed story that will give birth to a hero. Two days later, in a second letter dated "Sunday, April 26, 1671," Mme de Sévigné has her story ready, and as she points out: "this is not a letter, this is the story Montreuil just told me, for your sake, about what happened at Chantilly concerning Vatel." And she

continues: “here is the detailed story,”²⁵ to introduce her tale as a faithful recount of true events. Eliminating any ambiguity on the veracity of her facts, she concludes her letter invoking her witness: “Here is what Montreuil told me, hoping that I would let you know.”²⁶ This story, unlike Vercingétorix’s, is unfolding without any historical distance or filters.

Because of the extraordinary nature of the event, the veracity of Vatel’s being is transcended by his last deed through Mme de Sévigné’s report which transforms the gruesome suicide into a *fait culturel* specific to French gastronomic culture. We are presented with a heroic story because of Vatel’s excessive behavior: killing himself to save his honor as a master of culinary ceremony. It is a useless but compelling death since the fish arrived just after Vatel’s self sacrifice, making him all the more tragically heroic, just like Vercingétorix in his futile attempt at resisting civilization. Nevertheless, we cannot trivialize the dire situation created by the missing fish: Friday is a day of abstinence, and in seventeenth-century France absolutely no meat can be served on Fridays, only fish is allowed. Because of Vatel’s action, food and not politics takes center stage, pushing the Sun King to the peripheries of the story, at the very beginning: “the king arrived Thursday evening; the walk, the late snack in a spot covered with daffodils, all of it was perfect,”²⁷ and at the very end: “However, Gourville tried to mend Vatel’s loss; it was mended: the company ate very well, snacked, had dinner, took a walk, played, hunted; daffodils filled the air, all was delightful,”²⁸ just another party for the king. What makes the “Vatel story” worth telling is the excess of Vatel’s reaction to the situation for which: “he was highly praised, he was praised and he was blamed for his courage.”²⁹ And although excessive, this is exactly what creates the story event and the legend, the want

for the telling as noted by Mme de Sévigné in the closing lines of her second letter: “Hacqueville, who was there the whole time, will probably tell you the story; but since his handwriting is not as legible as mine, I am still writing; and if I send you this infinity of details, that is because I would enjoy them in such circumstances.”³⁰ The true goal of the letter is explicitly declared in the very last phrase: sharing the pleasure of a worthy, extraordinary story, with all the details. Not Vatel’s death (mended by Gourville), but the sharing of The Vatel Story, introducing a true French hero, one who does not hesitate to sacrifice his life to save his honor when fish is lacking, gives immortality to the event which is highlighted instead of the king’s visit, transforming thus Vatel’s absurd suicide into a heroic action worthy to find its place among national heroes’. Mme de Sévigné’s letters on Vatel can be accepted as a vector of national identity because the actions of her unexpected hero are relevant to exemplify the greatness of French gastronomic culture, and therefore the greatness of its people.

Did Vercingétorix and Vatel die for the Glory of France? Certainly not, but the inclusion of their deeds and deaths into a patriotic perspective brings a sense of national unity and pride. Of course, as we are well aware, trying to define French Identity has acted more as a divisive than unifying device in 2009-2010 in the French Parliament, Senate, and among France’s ethnically and culturally varied population. More than establishing any factual truth to these fabricators of national identity, ancestry and food, can be served by their French-made legendary heroes. Vercingétorix and Vatel share, to some extent, a common sacrificial fate which allows their mythical appropriations into a national French culture. The fact that their sacrifices are useless, Vatel’s death is mended, and Gaul is integrated into the Roman Empire, allows readers and listeners to treasure all

the more their legendary persona even if they are pseudo representations of a French image than may not fit with the current French population. They can still provide great bits of conversation to share at a dinner table: interesting, yet controversial enough. . . that is true French Identity, “the French way of life.”³¹

¹ Arthur Rimbaud, “Bad Blood.” *A Season in Hell*. Translated by Wallace Fowle (Rimbaud. *Complete Works, Selected Letters. A Bilingual Edition*. Chicago & London: The U of Chicago P, 2005 [265]). This edition is used for all translations of Rimbaud’s work. “Mauvais sang.” *Une saison en enfer* : “J’ai de mes ancêtres gaulois l’œil bleu blanc, la cervelle étroite, et la maladresse dans la lutte.” (Ed. Louis Forestier. Paris: Gallimard, 1984 [124]).

² *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*. Chicago & London: The U of Chicago P, 2004.

³ C.f. Jean-Louis Brunaux, *Nos ancêtres les Gaulois*. Paris: Seuil, 2008. The entire book explores and explains all the myths surrounding the Gauls and their relationship to French ancestry and history in a most clear and compelling fashion. Brunaux notes that nowadays France is no longer claiming its Gallic ancestry as forcefully. Translations from Brunaux’s work, including quotes and titles, are mine.

⁴ “French History.”

⁵ Paris, Librairie académique Didier, 1881, 10^e éd. The title means: “History of the Gauls Since the Most Remote Times Until the Total Submission of Gaul to Roman Rule.”

⁶ Quoted by Brunaux (196): “Vercingétorix avait trop de patriotisme pour devoir son élévation à l’avilissement de son pays, trop de fierté pour l’accepter des mains de l’étranger.”

⁷ Quoted by Brunaux (27): “La France nouvelle, l’ancienne France, la Gaule sont une seule et même personne morale. [. . .] Le caractère des Gaulois a subsisté chez nous tous, comme leur sang a passé de génération en génération jusque dans nos veines.”

⁸ Lavissee published several textbooks, starting in 1876 with *La Première année d’histoire de France, avec récits: Ouvrage contenant des gravures, des cartes, des questionnaires, des devoirs et un lexique explicatif des mots difficiles, à l’usage des élèves qui recherchent le certificat d’études primaires* (Paris: Colin); the most famous of his textbooks, *Histoire de France. Cours élémentaire* and *Cours moyen* first published in 1912 (Paris: Colin), was followed by fifty editions until 1950.

⁹ This claim to Gallic ancestry has not, of course, brought the unifying cohesion of one people, one nation expected by the French Republic. It is especially of interest to revisit this claim to ancestry twisted by André Chamson’s unusual novel, *Nos ancêtres les Gaulois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), where the return of a Gallic warrior in the early 20th century erases the existence of France. Another questioning to the Gallic ancestry comes from the Francophone countries, former French and Belgian colonies, supposedly unified under one language. There, too, the Republican message does not seem to resound as smoothly as in the French legends, as can be heard in Vincent Engel’s sarcastic comments in his introduction to dialogues between Francophone writers: “Heureusement, il y eut les colonies, le bon temps des colonies, où Belges et Français vinrent offrir aux nègres assoiffés d’assimiler cette merveilleuse culture. « Nos ancêtres les Gaulois » se virent dotés de descendants bigarrés, noirs, jaunes, rouges, ânonnant sans conviction la litanie de leurs anciens rois, de Clovis le Belge à Louis le décapité” (*Nos ancêtres les Gaulois*. Belgique: Ed. Quorum, 1996. [9]. “Fortunately, colonization came, colonial happy times, when Belgians and French came

to offer to the thirsty Negroes the possibility to assimilate to this wonderful culture. ‘Our ancestors, the Gauls’ found themselves with a medley of colorful offspring, black, yellow, red, mumbling and blundering without conviction the litany of their former kings, from Clovis, the Belgian, to Louis, the beheaded” [my translation]).

¹⁰ “Si j’avais des antécédents à un point quelconque de l’histoire de France! / Mais non, rien. / Il est bien évident que j’ai toujours été race inférieure” (125).

¹¹ “France fille aînée de l’Eglise” (125).

¹² Clovis, king of the Franks, converted to Christianity in 496, making his new faith the official religion of the state. This date is often seen as the beginning of France.

¹³ Cf. note 10.

¹⁴ “Les Gaulois étaient les écorcheurs de bêtes, les brûleurs d’herbes les plus ineptes de leur temps. D’eux, j’ai : l’idolâtrie et l’amour du sacrilège; — oh! Tous les vices, colère, luxure, — magnifique, la luxure; — surtout mensonge et paresse” (124).

¹⁵ “Je ne puis comprendre la révolte. Ma race ne se souleva jamais que pour piller: tels les loups à la bête qu’ils n’ont pas tuée” (125).

¹⁶ Translations from Lavissee’s textbooks are mine. “C’est au temps des Romains que les Gaulois se convertirent à la *religion chrétienne*” (*Histoire de France. Cours Moyen*. Edited by Alexander Green and René Vaillant. Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1923 [12]).

¹⁷ “Les Romains savaient faire beaucoup de choses que les Gaulois ne savaient pas faire. Mais les Gaulois étaient très intelligents. Ils apprirent à faire tout ce que faisaient les Romains. / Alors ils bâtirent de belles villes. Ils s’habillèrent comme les Romains.” (*Histoire de France. Cours Élémentaire*. Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1919 [8]).

¹⁸ “Je suis une bête, un nègre. Mais je puis être sauvé” (128).

¹⁹ “Il faut se soumettre au baptême, s’habiller, travailler” (129).

²⁰ “Les blancs débarquent” (129).

²¹ “Ce serait la vie française, le sentier de l’honneur!” (131).

²² Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné, « Lettres du 24 et du 26 avril 1671 » (*Lettres choisies*. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1869. [77-79]).

²³ Translations from Madame de Sévigné’s letters are mine. “J’avois dessein de vous conter que le roi arriva hier au soir à Chantilly” (77).

²⁴ “Mais voici ce que j’apprends en entrant ici, dont je ne puis me remettre, et qui fait que je ne sais plus ce que je vous mande” (77).

²⁵ “ce n’est pas une lettre, c’est une relation que Montreuil vient de me faire, à votre intention, de ce qui s’est passé à Chantilly touchant Vatel” . . . “voici l’affaire en détail” (78).

²⁶ “Voilà ce que Montreuil m’a dit, espérant que je vous le manderais” (79).

²⁷ “le roi arriva le jeudi au soir; la promenade, la collation dans un lieu tapissé de jonquilles, tout cela fut à souhait” (78).

²⁸ “Cependant Gourville tâcha de réparer la perte de Vatel; elle fut réparée: on dîna très bien, on fit la collation, on soupa, on se promena, on joua, on fut à la chasse; tout était parfumé de jonquilles, tout était enchanté” (79).

²⁹ “on le loua fort, on loua et l’on blâma son courage” (79).

³⁰ “M. d’Hacqueville, qui était à tout cela, vous fera des relations sans doute; mais comme son écriture n’est pas si lisible que la mienne, j’écris toujours; et si je vous mande cette infinité de détails, c’est que je les aimerais en pareille occasion” (79).

³¹ Rimbaud, see note 21.

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