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From the other side of silence: Huguenot life-writing, a dialogic art of narrating the self¹

The evil that men do lives after them.

Julius Cæsar.

The writing of memoirs in seventeenth-century France was an activity that took place on the margins. On the margins of society: those who wrote memoirs usually did so from exile, from prison, because they had fallen from grace into disgrace, or because they had come to a crisis point in their lives. On the margins of history: memoirs and their writers had a conflictual relationship with the official history of their time, which they set out to contradict, correct, or amend with their own story, their own outsider (yet also, insider) point of view.² Memoir writing is a literature of testimony, which points to a tension between individual experience and culturally sanctioned narratives. Thus, to write memoirs in the early modern period is to perform an act of inscription that is always political. It is an act of resistance to the tendency of cultures to remember and forget in partisan fashion, which exposes that tendency by inscribing other experiences and voices into the collective memory of the past.³

Memoir writing by Huguenots, in my view, is a doubly marginalised activity – in its own time, and in ours. Although French Protestants

- 1 I am grateful to Bernadette Gardiner, librarian at NUI Maynooth, for her persistence in securing on inter-library loan some of the books on which I draw here; and especially to John Hughes, President of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, who granted me a research professorship (2004–2005), which freed me from the ordinary obligations of academic life and bestowed the time to research and write this essay.
- 2 Briot, *Usage du monde*, pp.83–95; Charbonneau, *Silences de l'histoire*, pp.61–76; Lesne, *Poétique des mémoires*, pp.27–81.
- 3 Victoria Best and Kathryn Robson, 'Memory and innovation in post-holocaust France', *French Studies*, 59 (2005), pp.2 and 5.

were deeply imbedded in the society and culture of their time, they were also on the margins of it. The particularism of their belief in the seventeenth century, and their militant defence of the right to that belief in the sixteenth century, placed them apart from a society and culture that persisted in seeing them, and portraying them, as heretics and rebels. So, like all other writers of memoirs, Huguenots wrote to inscribe their own misrepresented story into the historical record of their time. Yet, only two of those who did – the ducs de Rohan et Sully – were included in the collections of *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France* published in the nineteenth century. And only Agrippa d'Aubigné (1552–1630) and Isaac Dumont de Bostaquet (1632–1709), the two most prominent Huguenots who wrote memoirs, but were omitted from the earlier collections, make it into recent books on French memoirs in the early modern period.

There are plausible reasons for this particular 'silence de l'histoire', to borrow Frédéric Charbonneau's phrase – at least at first glance. Unlike the Puritans, French Protestants do not seem to have been particularly active in writing diaries, autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, or even accounts of their spiritual lives. A goodly number of escape narratives have survived, but the fifty-four of these located by Carolyn Lougee⁴ seem few when compared with surviving autobiographical writings by Puritans. Some Huguenots did write memoirs, but the most important of these were edited in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Furthermore, editors and readers of Protestant memoirs have to date been content to study them as documents for the writing of the history of French Calvinism, and to eschew any study of form or rhetorical strategies. Yet, sensitivity to such matters, as I have argued elsewhere, can contribute to our understanding of the autobiographical act and the ways that narrating the self also constructed the self that was being narrated.⁵ In this paper, I want to extend my study of the form and rhetoric of memoir and diary-writing to include Huguenot life-writing more generally, and, in particular, the accounts written by and about Élie Neau

4 See Lougee, *supra* n.2, p.121.

5 Whelan, 'Writing the self', pp.463–77; and 'Marsh's Library and the French Calvinist Tradition: the Manuscript Diary of Élie Bouhéreau (1643–1719)', in *The Making of Marsh's Library. Learning, Politics and Religion in Ireland, 1650–1750*, ed. Muriel McCarthy and Ann Simmons (Dublin and Portland: Four Courts, 2004), pp.209–34.

(1662–1722). While Huguenot memoirs may not be central to the grand tapestry of the history of France, they do provide insight into another symbolic world, that is simultaneously part of the ‘grand siècle’, and yet apart from it.

Anyone who is familiar with the literature of the Huguenot Refuge will be dubious about such an enterprise. Literary masterpieces do not figure among the copious writings of pastors and intellectuals who chose the hard road of exile in preference to the enforced conformity to Roman Catholicism required by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. We may expect even less stylistic grace in Élie Neau’s writing, since he was a person, as Jean Morin, his biographer, informs us ‘sans étude et sans lettres’ who ‘s’est acquis par la force de son bon naturel, et par son application aux choses de la piété, une disposition heureuse à écrire, et à composer des lettres et des hymnes’.⁶ And, as if in anticipation of the critical reactions of an age for whom good taste was everything, Morin advises readers in the unpaginated Preface that what follows is ‘un recit simple et sans art, plein du langage de Canaan’ (I return below to the notion of a language of Canaan). This is not the customary false humility of prefatorial comments. Élie Neau’s writing is unpolished, at best, as is also that of his biographer, Jean Morin. There is some evidence to suggest that contemporary readers found it in bad taste, finding it ‘trop fort, c’est à dire piquant et injurieux’.⁷ However, it is the real, rather than artistically contrived, spontaneity of Neau and Morin that makes these texts worthy of study.

The publication of the life-narrative of Élie Neau is so exceptional as to require explanation. The account of his experiences was published in his own lifetime, rather than posthumously as was usually although not exclusively the case, when Neau had barely reached mid-life, being thirty-eight or thirty-nine years old at the time the book was published. Furthermore, although Morin presents his biographical subject as exemplary, he is conscious that he was telling the story of a very ordinary man

6 *Histoire abrégée des souffrances du sieur Élie Neau, sur les galeres, et dans les cachots de Marseille* (Rotterdam: Abraham Acher, 1701), p.1 (hereafter HA); on Neau’s hymn-writing, see Jon Butler, ‘Les “Hymnes ou cantiques sacrez” d’Élie Neau: un nouveau manuscrit du “grand mystique des galères”’, *Bulletin de la Société de l’histoire du protestantisme français*, 124 (1978), pp.416–23.

7 [Étienne Girard], *Histoire des souffrances et de la mort du fidele confesseur et martyr, M. Isaac Le Febvre* (Rotterdam: Abraham Acher, 1703), pp.xxii–xxiii.

in a genre dominated by nobility and clergy. Élie Neau was born in 1662 in the small town of Moëze, not far from Soubise in the Charente maritime, whose population lived mainly from seafaring or the salt marshes.⁸ In 1674, Neau, aged twelve, went to sea as a cabin boy ('garçon de bord'), and in 1679 he left France altogether for 'les Isles de l'Amérique', as he calls them, settling in Saint-Domingue, now the Republic of Haiti, where there was an established French colony.⁹ In one of his early letters to Jean Morin, who had been his pastor at Moëze from 1670, Neau explained why he emigrated: 'Les troubles qui arriverent en France au sujet de la Religion, me firent craindre le combat qu'on m'auroit livré si j'avois demeuré plus long-tems parmi les François'.¹⁰ So Neau was among the earliest of the thousands of Huguenot refugees who fled the Poitou-Charente to escape the legal vexations and escalating persecution visited on them by the regime of Louis XIV.

After the Revocation in 1685, the Protestants in Saint-Domingue came under pressure to conform to Catholicism, and many of them left for New England, settling in New York or Boston. Élie Neau settled in Boston, where in 1688 he married Susanne Paré, whose family had emigrated from La Rochelle after the dragonnades in Poitou in 1681. Paré and Neau had a daughter in 1690, who died eight days later, then a son in 1691, and Susanne was expecting their third child when crisis hit. In January 1690, Élie Neau had applied to London for the naturalisation he needed in order to captain British ships, and a few months later, he moved his family to New York. On 8 September 1692, Neau left New York as captain on the eighty-ton merchant ship, *La Belle Marquise*, destined for Jamaica. One hundred and twenty leagues from New York, at 35° latitude and 308° longitude, not far from Bermuda, as Jean Morin informs us, *La Belle Marquise* was taken by French privateers, captained by one Julien Boussaut, sieur du Motté, 'Corsaire de Saint Malo', who demanded 3,500 *livres* in ransom (HA, p.3). As Neau was unable to pay, he was taken captive, *La Belle Marquise* was allowed to return to New York, but Neau was taken back to Saint Malo – arriving in October 1692

8 *Histoire des souffrances du sieur Élie Neau sur les galères et dans les cachots de Marseille (1701)*, ed. Gaston Tournier (Cévennes: Musée du Désert, 1939), p.17.

9 HA, pp.2, 24; Frank Lestringant, *Le Huguenot et le sauvage. L'Amérique et la controverse coloniale en France, au temps des guerres de religion* (Genève: Droz, 2004, 3rd edn.), pp.341–3.

10 Tournier, *Histoire*, p.10; HA, pp.24–5.

– where, it was presumed, he would be able to raise the ransom from the merchants, the brothers Le Boiteux, to whom the ship belonged. Neau was incarcerated on arrival, ‘dans la prison publique’, according to Morin, ‘où il fut reconnu pour François; ce qu’il ne dissimula point, ni sa condition’ (HA, p.4), namely that he was Protestant. And so began Neau’s ‘sufferings’, which is the word both he and Morin use in the title of what they also call memoirs. Since the prelude to the story of those sufferings reads like a romance, it is tempting to think that Neau’s narrative is a set of fictional memoirs – it was also published in Holland, as were most fictional memoirs. However, the story is true, which is not to say that it is not ‘emplotted’, to use Hayden White’s term, emplotted in ways that are reminiscent of literature.¹¹

Neau was a French Protestant, who had emigrated to America without the permission required as a result of a royal declaration passed in 1662 – this was his crime, which was perceived, according to Morin, as ‘le crime de sa désobéissance, et de sa rebellion contre son Prince naturel’ (HA, p.10). He remained in jail¹² at Saint Malo for four months, during which time he was repeatedly offered his freedom, the ransom money he required to pay off the privateers, and the possibility of gainful employment at Brest, if he would convert to Roman Catholicism. The alternative, imposed by law, was a life sentence of bondage to be served in chains on the King’s galleys, which historians are unanimous in describing as almost worse than the death penalty, and which Neau himself later described as ‘une mort vivante’.¹³ Neau argued his case, claiming exemption because he was a naturalised Englishman:

- 11 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp.5–11; 93–7.
- 12 Pieter Spierenburg, *The Prison Experience: Disciplinary Institutions and their Inmates in Early Modern Europe* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p.8, advises the use of the word ‘jail’ to distinguish the more open methods of confinement of early modern Europe from the closed penitentiaries that gradually replaced them.
- 13 HA, p.154; Gaston Tournier, *Les galères de France et les galériens protestants des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Montpellier: Presses du Languedoc, 1984. 2 vols), 1st edn, 1943–1949; Marc Vigié, *Les galériens du Roi* (Paris: Fayard, 1985); André Zysberg, *Les galériens. Vies et destins de 60,000 forçats sur les galères de France 1680–1748* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); Spierenburg, p.10, argues that ‘bondage’ is the most suitable term for penal sanctions other than imprisonment.

en vertu de ma *naturalité*, je disois qu'on n'étoit pas en droit d'exiger de moi un changement de Religion. On écrivit derechef en Cour, on y envoya ma déclaration, on translata ma lettre de *Fridanison*, ou franchise. A tout cela il n'y avoit point d'autre remede pour éviter la chaîne et la Galere que de changer de Religion. Je pris le parti de la chaîne en demeurant dans ma Religion. Comme on me vit resolu d'aller aux Galeres, on me promit la somme que je devois pour le rachat de mon Navire, qui étoit de 3,500 livres. Je répondis que l'offre étoit bonne à un homme interessé; mais que pour moi je ne voulois pas donner à si bon marché ce que j'estimois infiniment plus que tous les biens du monde.¹⁴

Sentence was passed on 12 February 1693, appealed by Neau to the *parlement* of Brittany, whereupon he was transferred to Rennes, only to have his sentence confirmed on 6 March 1693. On 3 April 1693, according to the account of Neau's experiences that appeared in English, Neau was 'ty'd to the great Chain with fifty-nine other Slaves, which were condemn'd to that dreadful Punishment, some for desertion, others for defrauding the King's Duties upon Salt, and others for horrid Crimes, as Robbery, Murther, and four for Rapes'.¹⁵ The convicts then proceeded to Marseille by forced march via Saumur, Angers, Tours, Bourges, Lyons, where they went by the river Rhône to Pont-Saint-Esprit, and thence to Marseille, picking up other convicts from jails on the way until they were upwards of one hundred and fifty on arrival on 10 May 1693.¹⁶ The rigours of the thirty-seven day journey, as Neau describes them, were appalling. The men bore chains weighing dozens of kilos, walked in heavy rainfall, were undernourished, ill-clad, and more often than not had to sleep on the bare ground, in stables where possible, but sometimes in the open. Commenting retrospectively on the experience, Neau observed, 'it is indeed a horrid Spectacle to see such a number of men fastened to a Chain, and exposed to so many miseries that Death is not so hard by half as this punishment' (AS, p.5). And spectacle it was.

The great chain, as this ritual of transportation was called, departed twice a year from three different starting points in France. Convicts were

14 HA, p.26 (emphasis in the original), note the Anglicisms that have crept into Neau's French during his residence in British America: '*naturalité*', '*translata*', '*fridanison*' (free denization).

15 Elias Neau, *An Account of the Sufferings of the French Protestants, Slaves on Board the French Kings Gallies* (London: Richard Parker, 1699), p.4 (hereafter AS).

16 AS, pp.4-5; Vigié, p.136.

chained together at the neck, and this shorter manacle was attached to the great chain, linking together some two hundred men, who made their way across country to Mareille by forced marches, finishing the journey by boat. The chain from Paris routinely took about one month to reach the Mediterranean port, but since Neau's chain departed from Rennes, it took thirty-seven days to arrive. In each of the towns and villages they traversed the convicts attached to the great chain were on public display, constituting what André Zysberg called Louis XIV's 'baroque theatre of punishment'. Early modern rulers relied heavily on display to control the population. The great chain was an ostentatious and spectacular ritual of power and punishment, which spread fear among the spectators and brought shame and destitution upon the households of the unwilling actors in the drama.¹⁷

On arrival in Mareilles the convicts were stripped of the rags they wore, had their heads shaved 'as a sign of their slavery', and were provided with clothing, which was renewed annually on 1 January, public finances permitting. This consisted of two shirts, two drawers of coarsest linen, two pairs of stockings, a sort of upper coat of reddish stuff, a capot (or cloak), and a red bonnet – the mark of their infamy to all who saw them from the port of Mareilles.¹⁸ The prisoners were then allocated to one of the King's galleys, where they were fettered with a heavy chain ten to twelve feet long and chained five to a form, where they rowed, ate, slept, and were obliged to carry out what Neau discreetly calls their natural functions. As might be expected, they were, according to Neau, 'devour'd in Winter by Lice and in Summer by Bugs and Fleas', and 'forced to lye one upon another as Hogs in a Stie' (AS, p.8). To physical suffering was added moral pressure, which came from two sources, and caused the Protestant galley slaves profound psychological pain. On the one hand, Catholic chaplains worked tirelessly to bring about their conversion. According to Neau, 'they are every day threatened and tormented by Priests and Fryers, who, being unable to convince them by reasons, think that severity alone can do it' (AS, p.8). On the other, the Protestants, whose only crime was their refusal to

17 André Zysberg, 'Convertir et punir sous le règne de Louis XIV: l'exemple des galériens protestants', in *La conversion au XVII^e siècle*, ed. Godard de Donville p.130; Spierenburg, p.11, 278.

18 AS, pp.7–8; Vigié, p.169.

conform to the King's religion, found it harrowing to find themselves in the company of hardened criminals, whose behaviour they did not even wish to name. In one of his letters to Jean Morin, Neau speaks of them as 'impies', and observes, 'Je navrerois vôtre coeur, si j'entreprendois de vous en faire le portrait' (HA, p.32). In his English narrative, he alludes to his distress as: 'the trouble and vexation a Christian Soul is afflicted with, to live with wicked and desperate fellows, who never use the tremendous name of God, but for cursing and swearing' (AS, p.8). Obviously, this prison experience, like all such experiences, had a profound impact on those who were forced to endure it.

Many of the 1,500 Protestants imprisoned on the galleys between 1685 and 1715 (4% of a total of 35,000) died; others converted; some suffered a complete psychological breakdown.¹⁹ A minority like Neau managed to find both the means (quill, ink and paper) and the moral courage to record the story of an experience that struck at the very heart of their human identity, and precipitated them into a crisis of significance. It is probably for this reason that a greater proportion of Protestants condemned to the galleys wrote about their experiences than did any other of their co-religionists who suffered persecution.²⁰ Obviously, they did this for reasons of survival. Writing letters, testifying to their sufferings, keeping in contact with the world outside of the galleys, brought them financial support from fellow Protestants and also kept their cause alive in political circles. But even when they were prevented from sending their letters, or when they received no replies for months at a time, they continued to write. If they did so it was because narrating their experiences was a means of contesting the representation of them as common criminals being broadcast by the propaganda machine of the Sun King. It was also a means of renegotiating that representation for their own selves, to their own selves, and to the world around them. Writing enabled Neau, and others like him, to turn the infamy that had overtaken them into an alternative story, of heroic – and more often tragic – resistance to the role bestowed on them in Louis XIV's baroque theatre of punishment.

19 Zysberg, 'Convertir et punir', p.129.

20 *Ibid.*, p.128.

Life-writing is dialogic, by definition, because it is writing against,²¹ and Élie Neau's narrative is no exception to that rule. However, the dialogism of most memoirs is encased, indeed has to be encased in a monologic framework, because the writers compose them in order to promote their own story, their own views over those of others. In contrast to this the *Histoire abrégée* seems to exemplify what Mikhail Bakhtin called 'ultimate dialogicality', or polyphony, that is, a text 'constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousness, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other'.²² Although Jean Morin refers to himself as the author of the book, the main body of the text is made up from what Morin calls '[le] commerce des lettres de consolation respectives' (HA, p.172) between Neau and Morin, his pastor. The use of the word 'respectives' points to reciprocity between the educated Morin, and the humble sailor, which is surprising in the hierarchical society of seventeenth-century France. Conscious of how unusual this is, Morin seeks to confer authority on his text by making two claims. The first is that he, Morin, put the volume together at the request of refugees of noble birth and exemplary lives, which lends to the text a nobility that is not its own. The second claim, which he makes in the unpaginated Preface, is that he is merely an editor: 'je n'ai d'autre part à cet ouvrage, que d'avoir mis en ordre les pieces qui le composent'. This is something of a prefatorial understatement, because Morin opens the text with a narrative of Neau's experience, and weaves what he calls 'memoirs', that is, the full text of some letters and quotations from others, together with a running commentary. At the end of the volume, he also reproduces the full text of a letter written to Neau on 28 September 1696 by the consistory (church vestry) of the French Church in New York (HA, pp.212–19), and two letters from one of Neau's fellow inmates in July and September 1698, who is not named (HA, pp.219–45). Furthermore, one of Neau's letters includes a signed note to Morin from three of Neau's fellow prisoners in the dungeons at Mareilles: Antoine Capion, Paul Ragats, and Jean

21 Briot, p.37; *L'Écriture de soi comme dialogue*, ed. Alain Goulet, a special issue of *Elseneur*, 14 (1998).

22 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, ed. and tr. Carl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.18.

Mognier. The *Histoire abrégée* is, then, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices, where meaning is produced by the dialogic interaction of multiple voices. Neau's identity is constructed in the course of that interaction. The alternative identity that the text promotes, of a man innocent rather than infamous, emerges from the dialogicality of a polyphonic text.

These are not the only voices in the text, however. As French Reformed Christians, both Neau and Morin's consciousnesses were deeply imbued with the Bible, which they had heard read publicly during the church services they had attended over their lifetime, and which they were both in the habit of reading for themselves. Even in captivity, Neau managed to acquire a copy of the Authorised King James Version (1611) from which, as Morin remarks, 'il trouva des consolations en abondance pendant le reste du tems de sa prison' (HA, pp.86, 106). In fact, both men spontaneously write in what French Protestants called the language of Canaan, that is, an in-group language peppered with the cadences and phraseology of the Bible and allusions to biblical verses, concepts and characters. It was a way of speaking and writing, which was opaque to those who did not share the symbolic world of the Huguenots, and which their contemporaries decried as comical and in very bad taste.²³ However, Neau and Morin communicate in this way unselfconsciously with the result that those other voices resound in their correspondence and the authors of the biblical texts are inscribed in their narrative.

Indeed, the way Neau cites or alludes to Scripture transforms textual into real presences,²⁴ whose words and beliefs he introjects, creating a strong self-identification with the biblical writers. Time and again, he begins sentences with expressions such as 'C'est ce qui me fait dire avec l'Apôtre des Nations [...]' (HA, p.168), by which he means the apostle Paul; 'je chante avec le Prophete Royal [...]' (HA, p.189), an allusion to David, the presumed author of the Psalms; or he simply quotes verses from the Bible as coming from his own self, so that the words end up conveying two or more voices. Now, given that both Morin and Neau

23 Olivier Millet, 'Intolerance, friendship and urbanity: Balzac and his Huguenot correspondents', in *Toleration and religious identity. The Edict of Nantes and its implications in France, Britain and Ireland*, ed. Ruth Whelan and Carol Baxter (Dublin and Portland: Four Courts Press, 2003), p.162.

24 George Steiner, *Real presence. Is there anything in what we say?* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991).

believed that the Bible was 'la Parole de Dieu', that is, the Bible as God-speaking, these quotations and allusions also inscribe the voice of their God in the story. On more than one occasion, Neau begins a citation from Scripture as follows: 'c'est ce glorieux Seigneur qui me dit [...]' (HA, p.103, quoting Isaiah 41:14); 'il me semble que j'entens sa voix dans le fonds de mon coeur, qui me dit comme à son Prophete Esaye [...]' (HA, p.152, quoting Isaiah 58:1). In other words, Neau negotiates his way through the crisis of signification in which he found himself by relating his real experience to a symbolic, ancient world mediated to him by the Scriptures. There is nothing unusual about this 'hétérochronie' (heterochronicity), to use the term coined by Thomas Pavel to express 'la perception du temps présent comme organiquement rattaché au temps jadis'.²⁵ All early modern people derived meaning, as we do, from interweaving their own experience with experiences derived from other times and worlds. In this case, however, there is a peculiarly Protestant twist to a dialogic interaction that enabled Neau to create a meaningful story out of crisis and incoherence.

The two accounts Neau provides of his trial at Saint Malo are a pertinent example of this process. In the earliest of his extant letters to Morin (9 April 1694), Neau concludes the account of his trial at Saint Malo (from which I quoted above) with a pithy reference to the accusation brought against him of disobedience to the King, observing only that 'Je répondis à cette tentative aussi bien qu'aux autres' (HA, p.27). However, in the account he wrote in English, published in 1699, Neau is more expansive:

I answered, that [...] the Gospel commanded me, when I was persecuted in one Kingdom to fly into another Country. The Judge, being likely a stranger to Scripture maxims and expressions, told me that I *blasphemed*; but having desired him to tell me wherein, he would not, and repeated the same word. I replied, that this was an expression of the Son of God contained in the Gospel; whereupon he inclined his head, looking upon the *Greffier* or Clerk of the Court, repeating once more that I *blasphemed* (AS, p.2, emphasis in the original).

It is quite possible that this exchange occurred as Neau reports it. However, the charge of blasphemy, which is somewhat strange in the

25 Thomas Pavel, *L'art de l'éloignement. Essai sur l'imagination classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p.37

circumstances, may indicate that two narratives are being conveyed here at the same time. I mean that Neau's own experience is being retrospectively 'emplotted' in terms that assimilate it to that of Jesus of Nazareth, also accused of blasphemy when he was brought to trial (Matthew 26:65; the earlier allusion is to Matthew 10:23). What brought about this change between 1694 and 1699?

The shift in both Neau's perception of his experience and the way he writes about it came about as a result of a dialogic interaction between Neau and his fellow Protestant prisoners on the galleys, his pastor Morin, the Scriptures and his God. In his earliest letter to Morin, Neau describes his initial response to meeting the Protestant convicts who were to be his companions on the galleys for what he thought would be the remainder of his life:

J'ai été encouragé dans la perseverance par un nombre de vrais fideles, qui depuis huit ans confessent le glorieux nom de nôtre Seigneur Jesus-Christ. [...] Mais, Monsieur, je ne suis qu'amateur de leurs vertus chrétiennes, et non pas un vrai *imitateur* (HA, p.28, emphasis in the original).

The bravado that Neau attributes to himself before his judges has given way here to uncertainty, no doubt at the sight in the men around him of the courage that he too would need to endure what lay ahead. Yet again, however, Neau's account of his response under pressure is 'emplotted' by allusion to a theme in the epistles of Paul, where the apostle repeatedly urges his correspondents to imitate or follow him, as he imitates Christ (1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:6). Neau turns these allusions in a specular manner on himself, and uses them to scrutinise his own self in the light of them, only to find his self wanting. He is engaging in a process as old as Antiquity – the use of sacred or ethical writings as a framework for what Michel Foucault termed 'le souci de soi', a relationship of the self to the self in dialogue with others made textually present,²⁶ which he probably acquired by participating in the liturgy and ceremonials of the French Reformed Church.²⁷ In this case, the relationship to the self is traversed by the refracted voice of the apostle, who is made present by allusion, par-

26 Michel Foucault, 'L'écriture de soi', *Corps écrit*, 5 (1983), pp.3–23.

27 HA, p.179, Neau tells Morin that he remembers some of the texts Morin chose to preach during his ministry at Moëze, citing one from Genesis 32:26.

ticipating symbolically in Neau's self-development and self-construction.

Of course, Neau's self-scrutiny also occurs under the gaze of his pastor Morin, to whom his surviving letters were addressed. At the point when Neau becomes conscious of what he lacks to confront the appalling circumstances he faced, he beseeches his correspondent to 'implorer le secours de la grace pour me fortifier en la foi, et pour me rendre *digne de souffrir pour la verité*' (HA, pp.28–9, emphasis in the original). The second half of that request is an allusion to a verse in the Acts of the Apostles (5:41), where the apostles are recorded as rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for Christ's name. The polyphony – that is, the presence of those other voices in the allusion – serves to point up the contrast between the apostles' confidence and Neau's uncertainty about his own self and his capacity to endure. Within a year of his arrival on the galleys, however, Neau was singled out for special punishment because he was successful in encouraging his fellow prisoners to resist the pressure to convert (AS, pp.5–7; HA, p.78). As a consequence of his new found confidence, he was removed to jail in Mareilles and later transferred to a dungeon in the château d'If, where he served out his sentence, for some of the time in solitary confinement. Nonetheless, as his letters reveal, his solitude was peopled by other presences, made real by reading or remembering what had been read or heard over a lifetime of engagement with Scripture. The writer of the letters constitutes his own identity by recollection of things written and said, and by inscribing that recollection in his letters, which then act performatively on the writer by means of that inscription.²⁸

A later letter to Morin, probably written in November 1696, reveals just how performative that dialogic engagement was in constructing the self-confidence that had at first eluded Neau:

On m'a mis ici dans les entrailles de la terre: Je dis, l'Eternel veut que je fasse retentir les fondemens de la terre de ses divines loüanges, comme j'ai fait les airs depuis trois ans; à peu près comme S. Paul à qui il fut dit, *Tu as rendu témoignage de moi à Jerusalem, il en faut faire autant à Rome* [...] C'est pourquoi je me ris de tout ce qu'on me fait, par le moyen de la puissance de la grace, qui fait voir sa vertu d'une puissance admirable dans mes infirmités (HA, p.158, emphasis in the original).

28 See Foucault, *ibid.*, p.13.

The citation reveals Neau's self-identification with the apostle during his final imprisonment, and also constitutes Neau's own self as an interlocutor with the God who is recorded as speaking to Paul in the Acts of the Apostles (23:11). The last sentence contains an allusion, this time to a verse in one of Paul's epistles to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 12:9), where the apostle hears the voice of God saying 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness'. Neau's writing is therefore permeated with these two voices, that of the apostle and that of his God, which he has introjected into his consciousness and allowed to be internally persuasive so when he speaks, they also speak, making him perceive and construct his experience as similar to that of the apostle. And because he writes the process of his self-development into his letters, that dialogic process is transformed into a representation of the self, which is not only internally but also externally persuasive. Thus, through the act of writing, a reciprocity of gazes is established, wherein the self under construction is both heard and seen into being by the correspondent, with whom the self converses in the letters, making the absent person present to the self. And that dialogic relationship shapes a self that is also dialogic, inhabited by the voices, and held by the gazes of those real, yet also imagined presences, who together make the self capable of agency in the world.

A remark by Morin confirms that during the time of his captivity, Neau came actually to embody, and to be seen to embody, the apostolic ideals that he had adopted as his own. Commenting on the exemplary punishment meted out to Neau, Morin observes, 'La patience avec laquelle il [Neau] souffroit toutes ces épreuves, édifia merveilleusement tous ceux qui en furent témoins' (HA, p.78). There is a theological and even a political point being made here in the expressions used by Neau and Morin to speak about Neau's experience. When he first encountered his fellow prisoners, Neau referred to them as 'un nombre de vrais fideles, qui depuis huit ans *confessent* le glorieux nom de nôtre Seigneur Jesus-Christ' (HA, p.28, emphasis added); referring to himself three years later, and paraphrasing the apostle Paul, he affirms that it was 'grace, qui *fait voir* sa vertu d'une puissance admirable dans mes infirmités' (HA, p.158, emphasis added); and Morin refers to his fellow prisoners as *témoins*. Neau is using the word 'confesser' in its primary sense, as defined by Furetière: 'Confesser: publier, soutenir l'Évangile la première des vérités. Les Saints ont confessé, publié la Foy en pre-

sence des Tyrans, malgré leurs menaces et les supplices'.²⁹ Neau and Morin are configuring the experience of the Protestant galley slaves as an experience of martyrdom; the Greek words (*martureo*, *marturia*, and *marturion*), from which the English word derives, means precisely this, to confess, bear witness, give testimony, even under duress and unto death. Through his experience, his interaction with his fellow prisoners, and with the polyphony of the Scriptures, Neau has come to see himself and be seen as a 'Confesseur de Jesus Christ', that is a martyr, in the phrase used routinely by Morin to describe Neau and the other Protestants on the galleys. He has come to that sense of self by a process of mimetic communication with other figures, experiences and voices made present and internalised by self-reflection, reading and/or recollection.

To argue that Neau and his fellow Protestant galley slaves were martyrs may seem obvious, but in the seventeenth-century it was far from being so. Furetière, having defined the word martyr as I have in the previous paragraph, continues:

Martyr se dit abusivement des Heretiques et des Payens qui souffrent pour la deffense de leur fausse Religion, et qui se sacrifient à leurs idoles. Le Diable a de son costé des *Martyrs*. Les Calvinistes mettent au rang de leurs *Martyrs* tous ceux qui ont peri pour soustenir leur doctrine.³⁰

The association of heretics, pagans, devil and Calvinists speaks for itself.³¹ By ascribing to the galley slaves (and to Neau himself) the status of martyrs, Neau and Morin were defying the Catholic consensus of their time, and the machinery of power that went with it. When they spoke to each other in the 'language of Canaan', Neau and Morin were inscribing themselves and their coreligionists into sacred history, becoming, through the process of recollection and inscription, actors in a divine drama that conferred dignity and humanity on people who had been turned into the dregs of society through no fault of their own. Concomitantly, that self-inscription served to turn the Catholic and state powers that persecuted them into outsiders to the ongoing history of the

29 See the definition of the word *confesser* in Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (La Haye and Rotterdam: Arnout et Reinier Leers, 1690).

30 See the definition of *martyr*, *ibid.* (emphasis in the original).

31 For the wider context, see Bernard Dompnier, *Le venin de l'hérésie. Image du protestantisme et combat catholique au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1985).

people of God, precisely because they were represented as 'stranger[s] to Scripture maxims and expressions' (AS, p.2), to quote Neau's English narrative. By embracing those maxims and expressions, internalising them, Neau was able to construct a self and an identity that enabled him to resist the way his jailers saw him, because he came actually to embody the apostolic identity he elaborated through his meditations. When Morin became Neau's biographer, and published his correspondence with his former parishioner as the *Histoire abrégée*, he broadcast an alternative history to the official historical record of Louis XIV's reign with its elaborate machinery of propaganda designed to deny, extenuate, or minimise what was occurring. Writing the self, auto-biographically, is – in the case of both Neau and Morin – a political act of resistance.

However, the *Histoire abrégée* is also the story of the interior journey that Neau undertook in his quest to bring meaning out of the 'disgrace' (HA, p.24) that he had so unexpectedly suffered. When he found himself in solitary confinement, Neau writes, 'je ne me suis pas plutôt vû dans la solitude, que je me suis appliqué à la recherche de la connoissance de moi-même' (HA, p.146). In his letters to Morin, he pours out the results of that self-examination, giving the impression of a man who was combing through his experience, trying to find the reason why his life had taken such a turn for the worse. At times but not all that frequently, he rails against the injustice of his situation, and proclaims his innocence (HA, pp.154–5). For the most part, however, he is inclined to believe that his confinement on the galleys was a punishment from God, which he deserved for the way he had lived prior to his captivity, and especially in his youth. He refers to the temptations of 'le monde et la chair' (HA, p.30), and of the way he had lived 'me plongeant dans toute[s] sortes de soüillures, et commettant mille abominations' (HA, pp.31–2). During his time on the galleys, he continues to portray himself as tempted by the sins of 'la volupté' and 'l'orgueil', and subject to 'les violents combats' (HA, pp.175, 178) that these temptations brought with them.

Neau's explanation of his misfortune is nothing if not commonplace among Huguenot writings at that time. Pastors and people alike were wont to see the terrible times in which they found themselves as a punishment from the God whom they thought of as the Almighty. But Neau's own internalisation of this commonplace is more personal, and

takes the form of a confession of all that he thinks of as unworthy in himself, a confession which he makes in his letters to his pastor. He writes at one point:

Aussi vous confessé-je avec candeur et sincérité, qu'il ne me falloit pas moins d'affliction pour me faire connoître mon erreur et pour m'arracher d'entre les bras d'une traîtresse volupté, laquelle me crevoit les yeux de l'entendement, et m'empêchoit de voir dans mon cœur pour y examiner sa conduite (HA, p.30).

As Reformed Christians, French Protestants did not normally practice the auricular confession favoured by their Catholic neighbours. However, their tradition allowed such practices in special circumstances, particularly in times of personal crisis. Calvin referred to this as the cure of souls, and saw it as a very private interaction between pastor and penitent.³² And this is how Morin reacts to Neau's confessions, bringing his pastoral sensitivity to bear on Neau's inner self-examination. Morin does not deny Neau's interpretation, which he obviously shared. But he reformulates it to inspire confidence in his correspondent and former parishioner, portraying Neau's penitence as a sign of his election and of the fact that that 'l'esprit de Dieu agit puissamment en vous' (HA, p.52). This aspect of the correspondence between the two men transforms the memoirs into the specular relationship of the confession, and makes the dialogic exchange performative, by creating in Neau a sense of self that enables him to avoid despair and to endure.

Of course, there is another specular relationship in the *Histoire abrégée*, another dialogue, which is mediated to Neau through the polyphony of the Scriptures. As we have seen, Neau believes that the Bible is God-speaking, and he experiences the words of Scripture, which he reads or recalls, very personally as God speaking to him. At one point, for example, he observes: 'C'est ce glorieux Seigneur qui me dit, *Ne crain point vermisseau de Jacob*, car je suis ton protecteur' (HA, p.103, quoting Isaiah 41:14, emphasis in the original). The use of 'tu' is typical of French Protestants, who bore the nickname at this time, of 'les tutoyeurs de Dieu', because they thought of themselves as on familiar terms with the Almighty. But in Neau's writings this commonplace becomes an intimate relationship to his God, which he pours out in his

32 Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960. 2 vols.), I, iii, 4, pp.633-5.

letters, sometimes breaking into actual dialogue with the God whom he worships. In these moments, he quite often alludes to the Song of Songs, the biblical text much favoured by mystics. Morin quotes from a letter of 14 November 1695, where Neau exclaimed: 'O que je serois malheureux, si le Dieu de mon ame ne me faisoit dire avec assurance, je ne suis pas seul, *car j'ai mon bien aimé avec moi!* [...] c'est lui seul qui essuye mes larmes avec une bonté paternelle'.³³ Passages like these in the correspondence made Émile Léonard, the distinguished historian of French Protestantism, call Neau 'le grand mystique des galères'.³⁴ Morin was careful not to let the point escape his readers, and scripts our response with a short commentary, observing, 'voici l'extrait qui édifiera le lecteur fidele, en y voyant ce cher Confesseur rempli de l'amour de son Dieu' (HA, p.94). In the unpaginated 'Avertissement' to the volume, Morin underlines the importance of this more intimate content of the letters, saying 'on a eu singulierement en vûë de faire connoître le caractere interieur et l'esprit de ce genereux Confesseur'. Morin is, of course, making another theological point; namely that convicts like Neau were not only martyrs ('confesseur'), but also saints on intimate terms with their God. In our own time, we are more interested in the concept of interiority used here, and the way that subjectivity, a conceptualisation of 'inwardness',³⁵ and a dialogic self are constructed through interaction with an unseen but – as far as the writers are concerned – ever present God.

By way of conclusion, I want to explore the way Neau's dialogue with the supreme interlocutor, namely his God, points to one of the commonplaces of early modern culture that permeates the entire text – namely the conceptualisation of human existence as a *theatrum mundi*. In the symbol system of early modern people, all the world really was a stage, on which humans as actors played social roles that they laid down at their death, all the while held in the scrutinising gaze of God.³⁶ Early modern Protestants, like Neau and Morin, shared this concept, but

33 HA, pp.96–7, alluding to Song of Songs 2:16; also Isaiah 25:8, Revelation 7:17, 21:4.

34 Émile G. Léonard, *Histoire générale du protestantisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2nd edn., 1988. 3 vols.), III, pp.61–4.

35 Taylor, *Sources of the self*, pp.111–14.

36 Charbonneau, pp.189–92.

conceptualise it in the terms of their own particular symbolic world. In reply to a letter to Morin, Neau makes the following observation:

Il [Dieu] est, comme vous le dites tres-bien, le spectateur de tous nos combats, il considere attentivement tous les mouvemens de nos ames. Il sera aussi le Juge et le Remunérateur de nos actions (HA, p.180, wrongly paginated as p.130).

The specular relationship to their God, which the correspondence between Neau and Morin both expresses and performatively brings into existence, is therefore also a theatrical one, with Neau and his fellow prisoners (and, of course their jailers) as actors in a spectacle being performed before the eyes of the all-seeing God. This, however, is a theatre with a difference, one where the principal actors wear no masks or disguises. Neau repeatedly affirms his truthfulness, observing at one point: 'Comme je parle avec candeur, vous croyez bien que je vous dis la verité' (HA, p.175). Morin reinforced this when he recorded Neau's experiences in the jail at Saint Malo, underlining the fact that Neau did not conceal his Protestantism, rather the contrary. And when Morin insists in the Preface that Neau's letters were composed 'sans art', he makes the narrative embody the transparency that both men claim for their utterances.

The particular conception of the theatre of this world espoused by Neau and Morin, as a number of allusions to Scripture reveal, was derived by introjection of the experience of the early Christians, martyred for speaking their simple truths without disguise in the Roman circuses. Neau's remark to Morin, quoted in the previous paragraph, began with this sentence: 'Et comme vous m'insinuez, c'est Dieu seul qui nous arrachera d'entre les griffes des lions qui nous déchirent' (HA, p.180, wrongly paginated as p.130). The reference to lions is unmistakable, and is confirmed by Morin's statement in the unpaginated 'Avertissement' that he is placing before our eyes 'de si beaux exemples [...] de ces heureux Athletes qui sortent victorieux du combat'. Quoting Paul's first letter to the Christians at Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:9), Neau also proclaims, 'je sers de spectacle aux Anges, et aux hommes dans la carriere que Dieu m'a destinée de toute éternité' (HA, p.145). Morin and Neau's dialogic interaction with Scripture, which, as they believed, was the voice of God speaking, allowed them to frame their own experience in such a way as to turn infamy into a mark of election, defeat into a

triumph over their enemies. On the stage of this world, as they conceptualised it, the gaze of the ultimate spectator transformed incoherence into meaningfulness, providing an alternative reading of the roles scripted for them in that baroque theatre of cruelty, the galleys of the French King.

A second lexis present in the way they speak about this paradoxical experience of triumph in defeat marries the particularism of their language of Canaan to the broader literary culture of their time. Repeatedly, both Neau and Morin use the epithets 'glorieux' and 'magnanime', and the substantives 'gloire' and 'magnanimité' to describe the lives and deaths of the Protestants confined to the galleys. By employing this lexis, they were 'emplotting' their own story in terms of the heroism, portrayed by the dramatist Pierre Corneille, among others, and of the neo-Stoicism that inspired that heroic drama, on the actual, real stages of France's theatres. Within their own symbolic world, Protestants condemned to the galleys saw themselves as living out their lives on the ultimate stage, where glory was attributed to them by the greatest spectator of all. This lexis points to their sense of a transcendent meaningfulness, inscribed into both their lives and their life narratives by means of a specular and dialogic relationship with their God. As a result, it is arguable that the *Histoire abrégée*, in the final analysis, is a monologic text whose narrators and characters are inscribing and acting out the purposes of the ultimate author and reader, dramatist and spectator.

It is precisely the sense of transcendent and monologic meaningfulness that empowered unremarkable individuals to live lives of counter-statement to the world, and inscribe their resistance in a counter-history that called into question the corrupt values of their society. The judicial meaning of the word 'mémoire' is therefore never absent from Protestant memoirs,³⁷ which present the case for the defense before the eyes of the world, and inscribe the memory of 'l'innocence affligée'³⁸ into the historical record. Protestant memoirs are therefore first and foremost memoranda, accounts of what they thought should be remembered, which they wrote to counter the policy of denial and the studied amnesia of the reign of Louis XIV. On the stage that was the

37 Marc Fumaroli, 'Les mémoires du XVII^e siècle au carrefour des genres en prose', *XVII^e siècle*, 94-5 (1971), pp.7-37.

38 *Les derniers efforts de l'innocence affligée* (Amsterdam: Daniel Du Fresne, 1682).

court society of Louis XIV, Protestant writers of memoirs adopt the role of the holy fool, a role introjected once again from the Scriptures, where Neau and Morin are concerned.³⁹ Theirs was both a religious and political act of inscription, undertaken to ensure that the evils that people had done lived after them. This may be one of the reasons why life narratives by Protestants were excluded from the collections of memoirs published in the nineteenth century – they contested the image of France those collections were designed to promote.⁴⁰ Protestants like Neau and Morin dared to speak truth to the power of absolute monarchy and tarnish its glory with their homespun language of Canaan, which they insisted on voicing from the other side of silence.⁴¹

- 39 Neau's quotation from 1 Corinthians 4:9 (HA, p.145) continues in verse 10 with Paul's reference to himself as a 'fool for Christ's sake'.
- 40 Pierre Nora, 'Les mémoires d'État, de Comynnes à De Gaulle', in *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992. 3 vols.), II, pp.354–400.
- 41 Élie Neau (naturalised English in 1690) was pardoned by Louis XIV on 3 July 1698, as a result of the diplomatic intervention of Lord Portland, English ambassador to the French Court, who was acting on the instructions of William III of England.