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The extraordinary voyage of Élie Neau (1662c.–1722), naturalized Englishman and French Protestant galley slave*

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Élie Neau, also known in English as Elias Neau (sometimes spelled Naud), began life as an illiterate Protestant seafarer on the west coast of France during the personal reign of Louis XIV.¹ Yet, a few years before his 40th birthday, this man of humble origins was to become the author of a short semi-autobiographical piece, published in English in 1699,² and the subject of a partly biographical, partly autobiographical narrative, written in French that same year but published two years later in 1701.³ This was highly unusual in an era when *Memoirs* were generally written by or about the aristocracy, and were mostly composed at the end of people's lives or after their deaths.⁴ Not only that, Élie Neau's story lived on after his own death, reappearing almost half a century later in two separate editions of a slightly abridged English translation of the French narrative, by Johann Christian Jacobi (1670?–1750), the German-born but London based bookseller and translator, associated with Halle pietism.⁵ Significantly, the earlier of these editions appeared in 1748 as an

* An earlier version of this paper was presented as a lecture to the Huguenot Society in January 2011; I am grateful to Rosemary and Euan Kennedy for the warm hospitality on that occasion.

¹ C. Weiss, *Histoire des réfugiés protestants de France depuis la Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris and Genève, 1853. 2 vol.) is mistaken when he states (vol. 1, p.372) that Neau was 'le chef d'une grande famille' from Soubise in Saintonge; he is also incorrect in alleging that Neau arrived in Boston in 1679, as will become clear below.

² E. Neau, *An account of the sufferings of the French Protestants, slaves on board the French King's galleys* (London, 1699), hereafter *Account*.

³ *Histoire abrégée des souffrances du sieur Élie Neau, sur les galères, et dans les cachots de Marseille* (Rotterdam, 1701), hereafter *HA*; Jean Morin, Neau's former pastor, is the author/compiler of this narrative, but he probably composed it in collaboration with Neau after his release. Morin establishes Neau's humble origins at the outset of the narrative when he states that Neau was 'sans étude et sans lettres', (*HA*, p.1).

⁴ See E. Lesne, *La poétique des mémoires (1650–1685)* (Paris, 1996), p. 15, 17, 86.

⁵ *A short account of the life and sufferings of Elias Neau upon the galleys, and in the dungeons of Marseilles, for the constant profession of the Protestant religion. Newly translated from the French by John Christian Jacobi*

appendix to the Rev. Richard Thomas Bateman's abridged edition in two volumes of John Foxe's *Book of martyrs*, which had been published for the first time in 1563 and gone into many subsequent editions.⁶ Finally, Élie Neau figures under his English moniker in the revised Episcopal Church calendar in the United States of America, which recently instituted a feast day in his honour on the 7th of September, when he is commemorated as 'the Huguenot Witness to the Faith'.⁷ What possible connection could there be between a humble French seafarer, England's Protestant martyrology, and the revised Episcopal Church calendar? The answer lies in Élie Neau's extraordinary voyage, not just across the treacherous Atlantic Ocean, but also into the depths of his own inner world and, as a result, across social boundaries sacrosanct in early 18th-century New York, the city where he died on 7 September 1722.

From the old world to the new

Élie Neau grew up in Moëze, the small town of his birth, about a mile south of Soubise in the Charente-Maritime, at a time when the population of the western seaboard of France lived mainly from seafaring or the salt marshes.⁸ Boys growing up in the region were wont to dream of taking to the seas and travelling to far-away places; Élie was one such boy. In 1674, when he was only 12 years of age, he went to sea as a cabin boy. Five years later, in 1679, by then a fully-fledged merchant seaman, he emigrated definitively to the West Indies, settling initially in Saint-Domingue, a French colony on the Caribbean Island of Hispaniola, which was to become Haiti in 1804.⁹ Over the following five or six years Neau worked as a merchant seaman in the Caribbean, trading between

(London, 1749). On Jacobi, see G. Jefcoate, 'Jacobi, Johann Christian (1670?–1750)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, May 2005; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53805>, accessed 13 Jan 2011].

⁶ J. Foxe, *The book of martyrs; or the history of the church from the beginning of Christianity, to the conclusion of the reign Q. Mary I [...] Heartily recommended to the perusal of all those who have a zeal for God's glory, and the prosperity of the Protestant religion under the present happy government. By the Rev. Mr Bateman* (London, 1747–1748). The title page of volume 2 (1748) also carries the following: *To which is added, An account of the sufferings of Elias Neau, upon the galleys, and in dungeons of Marseilles, for the profession of the same faith which our martyrs died for. Newly translated from the French by John Christian Jacobi.* R.T. Bateman was rector of St Bartholomew's the Great in London from 1738 to 1761.

⁷ <http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/webcasts/videos/hidden/news/commemorating-elias-neau>, consulted 18 February 2011].

⁸ *Histoire des souffrances du sieur Élie Neau sur les galères et dans les cachots de Marseille (1701)*, ed. G. Tournier (Le Mas-Soubeyran, 1939), p.17, hereafter Tournier, *Histoire*.

⁹ *HA*, p.2, 24.

the various islands, which had been colonised by the French, the Dutch and the English.¹⁰

Although he reveals little about this period in his life, we know from other sources that the Caribbean offered many opportunities for white settlers at the time, particularly those involved in trade and seafaring. Plantations of tobacco, indigo, cotton and especially sugar were being established in response to European demand for these commodities, which also served to fuel the need for slave labourers from Africa (see Figure 18a)¹¹ who were transported to the Caribbean in large numbers. Officially, Protestantism was prohibited in the French colonies, but it was tolerated unofficially because the majority of French vessels were under the command of Huguenots who originated from the western seaboard of France, as did almost half of the population of the Caribbean islands under French control.¹² For baptisms and marriages, Huguenot settlers could travel to one of the English or Dutch colonies, and the minister of the Dutch church on the island of Saint Eustatius preached in both Flemish and French.¹³ However, French Protestant settlers usually assembled for worship on Sundays in one or other of their homes with the tacit approval of the governors of the island colonies,¹⁴ and Neau probably attended these gatherings.

In stark contrast to the traditional hierarchies of continental Europe, the social structures in the colonies were fluid: wealth not birth bestowed social status on those who were able to acquire it.¹⁵ As a single white male, Neau probably lived in a *matelotage*, a term used at the time to designate bachelor households, where single men lived in twos and threes, holding everything in common, including servants and slaves, and sharing the living expenses.¹⁶ Those colonists, whose plantations were

¹⁰ HA, p.2.

¹¹ Reprinted from J.-B. du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François* (Paris 1667, 2 vol.), by kind permission of the Governors and Guardians of Archbishop Marsh's Library, Dublin. I am grateful to Sue Hemmens for her help in preparing the photo for publication.

¹² J.-B. du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François*. Réédition exécutée d'après l'édition de 1667–1671 aux frais de la Société d'Histoire de La Martinique (Fort-de-France, 1958–1959, 4 vol.), vol.2, p.398–399, 433, 453; vol.3, p.278–282; B. Van Ruymbeke, 'Le refuge atlantique: la diaspora huguenote et l'Atlantique anglo-américain', in *D'un rivage à l'autre. Villes et protestantisme dans l'aire atlantique (XVIe–XVIIe siècles)*, ed. G. Martinière, D. Poton, F. Souty (Paris, Poitiers, La Rochelle, 1999), 195–196.

¹³ C. W. Baird, *Histoire des réfugiés Huguenots en Amérique*, trans. A.-E. Meyer et de Richemond (Toulouse, 1886), p.165–166.

¹⁴ Du Tertre, vol.3, p.280; Baird, p.165.

¹⁵ Du Tertre, vol.2, p.445.

¹⁶ Du Tertre, vol.2, p.404.

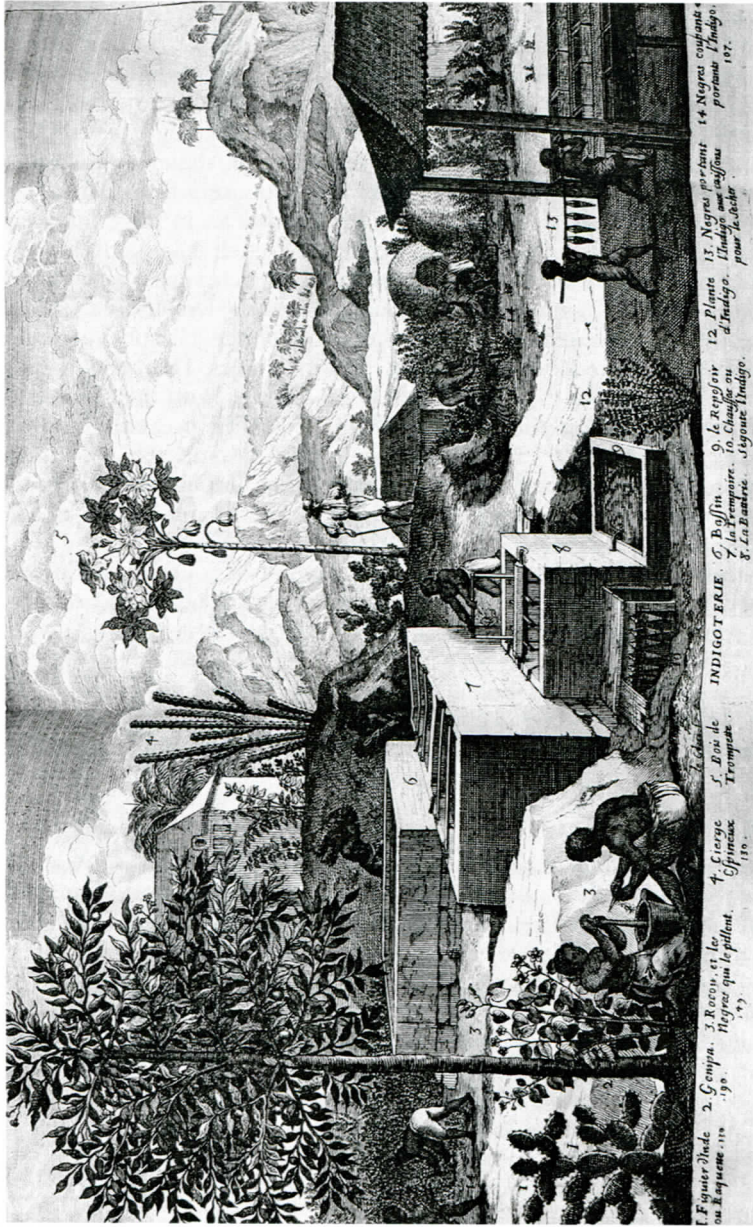


Figure 18a A Caribbean indigo plantation worked by African slave labour.

being managed and farmed by indentured and slave labourers, had leisure sufficient for an active social life and the pursuit of pleasure.¹⁷ Neau probably took advantage of all that was on offer to a single white male in the overseas colonies, because he was later haunted by the memory of how he had yielded in his youth to what he came to see as the 'treacherous embrace of pleasure'. But he also later described the time he spent in the Caribbean as bringing about a shift in his inner life towards a more personal experience of the love of God, whose promptings Neau felt in his heart but for the time being chose to drown out with 'creature pleasures', as he called them.¹⁸

In the years immediately preceding the Revocation, French Protestants who had settled in the Caribbean colonies came under increasing pressure. The anti-Protestant legislation concerning the colonies had heretofore been tacitly ignored, unless specific cases were prosecuted by the local population or resident Catholic missionaries. But in 1683, royal declarations explicitly prohibited French Protestants from residing in the islands, taking up public offices, acquiring land, or practising their religion, although they were to be permitted to come and go in the interests of trade.¹⁹ Neau had left France in 1679 not only in response to the call of the sea, but also because the Reformed church in Moëze was being victimised by the legal chicanery that preceded the Revocation, and its pastor, Jean Morin, had been imprisoned.²⁰ When the same thing began to happen in the colonies, he and many other Huguenot settlers thought only of escaping the confrontational atmosphere, despite the fact that the royal declarations expressly prohibited emigration from the island colonies.²¹ However, escape from the Caribbean French colonies was easier than it was from France; the Protestant settlers only had to move discreetly to one of the islands under Dutch or English control, and from there they could travel to one of the North American colonies, or cross the Atlantic to one of the Protestant countries of Europe.

Élie Neau chose to move to post-Puritan New England, to Boston, where about a dozen Huguenot families had settled by 1681, and possibly as many as 100 families by the mid 1680s, some of whom had come from the Caribbean.²² He was obviously seeking the security of this

¹⁷ Du Tertre, vol.2, p.445, 447.

¹⁸ HA, p.29–31, 99: 'les bras d'une traîtresse volupté'; 'je me répandais impudemment dans les créatures'.

¹⁹ Baird, p.170–171, 174.

²⁰ Tournier, *Histoire*, p.11.

²¹ HA, p.24–25; Baird, p.186.

²² Baird, p.189, 430; J. Butler, *The Huguenots in America. A refugee people in a new world society* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1983), p.1, 73.

overwhelmingly English Protestant town, populated with Quakers and Calvinists; but he no doubt also moved there in the confidence that he would find work in the port. Boston was at the centre of an international commercial network that extended through the other American colonies and across the Caribbean to London, and Huguenot merchants who had immigrated to the town were actively expanding their trading ventures with continental Europe.²³ Ships left Boston for London once a month, returning in the 1680s not just with precious cargo but also with Huguenot refugees seeking asylum.²⁴ Obviously, the town council was aware of the persecution of the Huguenots in France (Increase Mather exchanged letters in the 1680s on the subject with other New England clergy), and councillors were sympathetic to the refugees, proclaiming a day of fasting and taking up a collection in 1682 for the relief of those arriving from London.²⁵ The Huguenots in Boston were mostly from the west and north-west coast of France, which may also have been one of the factors that attracted Neau to the town. We know that Huguenot refugees tended to cluster in exile according to their geographical origins, often marrying someone from their own region, as Neau was to do a few years later. In fact, he met Suzanne Paré in Boston, the daughter of Jean Paré and Marie Tissau from the parish of Saint-Sauveur in La Rochelle, who was a widow by the time she left France, abandoning substantial property in 1681 to settle in Boston with her three daughters Suzanne, Marie and Judith.²⁶ In 1688, Élie and Suzanne married and, in 1690, a daughter was born to them, who lived only eight days.²⁷

Marriage and the prospect of fatherhood may have made Neau think about bettering himself; all around him in Boston, Huguenot immigrants, who had arrived during the 1680s, were moving on to other opportunities in the interior.²⁸ The couple had contacts in New York, where Suzanne's sister Marie had moved after her marriage to Ezéchiél Grazillier, a leading figure in the city's French Protestant community; apparently her sister Judith, who had married Étienne Robineau from Narragansett, had also moved to New York. In the late 1680s Huguenot refugees began

²³ M. P. Valeri, *Heavenly merchandize: how religion shaped commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton, 2010), p.3; Butler, p.80.

²⁴ Baird, p.440.

²⁵ Baird, p.435; Butler, p.71–90.

²⁶ Baird, p.435.

²⁷ *HA*, p.85.

²⁸ According to Baird (p.459), by winter 1687 there were only about twenty French families left in Boston, the others having moved into the hinterland to engage in agriculture.

²⁹ Baird, p.435; Tournier, *Histoire*, p.34.

arriving in New York City in significant numbers, which meant that by the end of the century they made up approximately 10% of the city's 4,200 inhabitants, and their numbers included some wealthy Huguenot merchants who were active in international trade.³⁰ Many of the French moving to the city in the 1680s and 1690s came from the Caribbean and Boston, as well as from England and other colonies in British America. Moreover, at least 15% of the French immigrants were from the western seaboard of France, including at least two families from Moëze (Élie Neau's home town); the city also boasted a French Church, founded in 1688.³¹ The City Council of New York brought the Huguenots into the colony's political and economic life very early, granting them legal privileges and electing them to public office.³² To these attractions must be added the fluidity of New York City's social structures and its heterogeneous population, which opened up possibilities to men of ambition.³³ Élie and Suzanne no doubt believed that the city would be a good place to bring up a family, as it offered both commercial opportunities and the familiarity of a vibrant Huguenot community and church.

Some time between leaving France and moving to New York over a decade later, Neau had acquired sufficient literacy skills to think of moving upwards in his profession. The English Navigation Acts of 1660, 1662 and 1663 restricted the Atlantic trade with England to ships owned and commanded by Englishmen, so Neau decided to apply to become a subject of the British crown.³⁴ It is interesting that Neau had been able to live and work in British America for a decade, without applying for either denization or naturalization, which only serves to confirm Jon Butler's conclusion that such matters tended to be overlooked in the colonies in order to foster easier assimilation of immigrants.³⁵ Neau applied to London, and on 31 January 1690 was granted denization;³⁶ the fact that he had become a British subject was later to prove crucial to his survival and probably saved his life, as we shall see. A few months later, he and his wife moved to New York City, where in 1691 their second child was

³⁰ J. D. Goodfriend, 'Seventeenth-century New York City: fertile ground for planting a Huguenot community', in *D'un rivage à l'autre*, p.175.

³¹ Van Ruymbeke, p.195; Baird, p.276, 278.

³² Butler, p.147, 149.

³³ Goodfriend, p.175–176.

³⁴ B. Bailyn, *The New England merchants in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p.113; *HA*, p.25.

³⁵ Butler, p.147–148.

³⁶ *Letters of denization and Acts of naturalization for aliens in England and Ireland 1603–1700*, ed. W.A. Shaw, *HSQS* 18 (1911), p.221.

born, this time a son, who survived.³⁷ On 25 August 1692, when Suzanne was heavily pregnant for the third time, Élie took command of the *Marquise*, an 80-tonne merchant vessel, on behalf of Gabriel Laboyteaux³⁸ — one of the most important merchants in New York City and an elder of the French Church from 1688 — and set sail for Jamaica.³⁹ It was at that point that his life overturned.

From the new world back to the old

Neau set sail at a time when Europe was at war, the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–1697), which was an aggressive coalition of major European powers (including England), against the expansionist politics of France. The conflict was fierce, on both land and sea; the Anglo-Dutch navies effectively cut off French commerce; privateers were licensed by the French crown, mandated to disrupt enemy shipping and to protect and engage in overseas trade.⁴⁰ On 8 September 1692, 120 leagues from New York and over 15,000 leagues from continental Europe, at 35° latitude and 308° longitude, not far from Bermuda, Neau's ship was taken by a French privateer returning home from Saint-Domingue.⁴¹ Julien Boussaut, sieur du Motté, was from Saint-Malo, a port in Brittany known at the time as 'la cité des corsaires', because at one point an estimated 200 privateers were using it as a base for attacking English and Dutch ships.⁴²

³⁷ *HA*, p.85, Neau's son was eight months old when his father sailed from New York.

³⁸ G. Laboyteaux (also written Le Boiteux, or Le Boyteulx) (1652–1734), originally from La Rochelle; naturalized 5 January 1688; bourgeois of New York City, 2 August 1688 and appointed elder of the French Church in the same year; probably the brother of Pierre and Paul, merchants in Amsterdam, see Baird, p.239; according to Butler (p.145), Gabriel was ranked in the top 10% of all city taxpayers in the New York City tax lists in 1695 and 1699.

³⁹ *Account*, p.3, states that Neau set sail on 15 August; *HA*, p.3, states that he was taken by privateers two weeks later and gives the date as 8 September; the discrepancy over dates may be the result of the 10-day difference between the Julian calendar still in use in Britain and British America, and the Gregorian calendar in use in France and Holland. If this is the case, Neau set sail on 25 August.

⁴⁰ A. Savignon, *Saint-Malo, nid de corsaires* (Paris, 1931), p.84, 92, 95; É. Dupont, *Le vieux Saint-Malo. Les corsaires chez eux* (Coutances, 1970), p.39.

⁴¹ There is some discrepancy concerning the date the *Marquise* was taken; *Account*, p.2 states that the vessel was taken on 29 August, whereas *HA*, p.3, states that it was 8 September; again the discrepancy may be the result of the 10-day difference between the Julian and Gregorian calendars.

⁴² Dupont, p.38, 51; it is alleged that privateers from Saint-Malo took some 1,400 vessels during the War of the League of Augsburg, see Savignon, p.95, although these figures may be exaggerated, according to Dupont, p.65.

Usually privateers sailed in convoys of between three and five vessels, which put them in a position of strength vis-à-vis enemy shipping; the objective was to escort the enemy vessel back to the home port, where the spoils were divided between the privateers, with a substantial percentage — as much as 15% — going to the royal coffers.⁴³ However, Boussaut did not have sufficient men to escort the *Marquise* back to Saint-Malo; instead, he demanded 3,500 *livres tournois* in ransom as an alternative to sinking the ship.⁴⁴ As the ship's captain, Neau was concerned to save both the ship and its cargo, so he offered himself as guarantor for the ransom, and the *Marquise* was dispatched to New York.⁴⁵ Neau, now a hostage, was taken back to Saint-Malo — arriving towards the end of October 1692 — where the French privateer who held him presumed, as did Neau himself, that he would be able to raise the ransom from the merchant who owned the ship, particularly as Gabriel Laboyteaux had two brothers, Paul and Pierre based in Amsterdam. On arrival, however, the authorities recognised that Neau was French (and not English), and when he did not seek to hide that he was Protestant, he was incarcerated, pending instructions from Court as to how his case should be processed.⁴⁶

Efforts were made by Paul and Pierre Laboyteaux in Amsterdam to secure Neau's release, but in vain; the privateer, anxious not to lose the promised ransom, also acted on his behalf, but also to no avail.⁴⁷ Neau also contacted friends in London, who had two French captains arrested and imprisoned for two months, in the hope that Neau's release might be secured by exchanging the two prisoners for him.⁴⁸ However, Neau had fallen foul of the anti-Protestant legislation of the day, because he had emigrated in defiance of the royal declaration promulgated in 1669, which prohibited French subjects from leaving the kingdom without authorization.⁴⁹ Word came back from Court that Neau would be

⁴³ Savignon, p.88; Dupont, p.44.

⁴⁴ Ships that could not be taken for whatever reason were either ransomed or sunk by privateers, according to Savignon, p.88; for the details of the ransom of the *Marquise*, see *HA*, p.4, 25.

⁴⁵ The *Marquise* never arrived in New York because the pilot left in charge was inexperienced and sailed in the wrong direction, arriving in Tenerife, where the boat and its cargo was seized by the governor, see *HA*, p.35–36.

⁴⁶ *HA*, p.4, 25–26.

⁴⁷ *HA*, p.4–5, 26.

⁴⁸ *HA*, p.5.

⁴⁹ The original Declaration was promulgated on 1st February 1669, and was reiterated in 1681, 1685 et 1686, see É. Labrousse, «Une foi, une loi, un roi » *La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes* (Genève and Paris, 1985), p.146–147; Jean Morin is mistaken in dating the Declaration to 1662 (*HA*, p.10), or perhaps this is a typographical error in the printed narrative.

released only if he converted to Catholicism; the alternative was life-imprisonment on the king's galleys, which was the sentence regularly meted out to men who were either caught trying to escape from France, or apprehended while attending clandestine religious services. Neau argued his case, claiming exemption because he was a naturalized Englishman; his pleas were rejected.⁵⁰ On 12 February 1693, Neau was condemned to serve the French king in perpetuity on the galleys, which was a sentence that historians are unanimous in describing as almost worse than the death penalty, and which Neau himself later described as a living death.⁵¹ Without holding out much hope, Neau exercised his right of appeal to a higher court, which in the event was the *parlement* of Brittany sitting at Rennes, where his sentence was confirmed on 6 March 1693. Less than a month later, on 3 April 1693, he set out on another journey, this time overland to the galleys anchored in the port of Marseilles.

The transportation of convicts to the galleys was a ritualized spectacle of power and punishment that departed twice a year from three different starting points in France. It was known as the Great Chain because convicts were placed in iron neck-collars from which a short chain ran to a longer and heavier chain linking as many as 200 men together at any one time.⁵² Neau left Rennes chained to 59 other prisoners, who had been condemned for a variety of crimes, such as salt smuggling, desertion, robbery, murder and rape.⁵³ The convicts proceeded to Marseilles by forced march via Saumur, Angers, Tours, Bourges, and finally Lyons, where they went by the river ferry on the Rhone to Pont-Saint-Esprit and on to Marseilles.⁵⁴ The Great Chain picked up other convicts from jails on the way until they numbered upwards of 150 on arrival on 19 May 1693.⁵⁵ According to Neau, it was an appalling journey that lasted 37 days. The men bore chains weighing up to 50 pounds, often walking in heavy rainfall; they 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. Inevitably, many of the men became sick from

⁵⁰ *HA*, p.6, 26–28; I have analysed the different courtroom scenes in the English and French accounts of Neau's trial in R. Whelan, 'La scène judiciaire dans les *Mémoires* d'Élie Neau, galérien protestant sous le règne de Louis XIV', in *L'idée de justice et le discours judiciaire dans les Mémoires d'Ancien Régime*, ed. J. Garapon and C. Zonza (Nantes, 2009), p.83–92.

⁵¹ *Account*, p.4; *HA*, p.143; M. Vigié, *Les galériens du roi* (Paris, 1985), p.17, 18.

⁵² Vigié, p.114–26; A. Zysberg, *Les galériens. Vies et destins de 60 000 forçats sur les galères de France 1680–1748* (Paris, 1991. 2nd ed.), p.16–19.

⁵³ *Account*, p.4.

⁵⁴ Vigié, p.135–159.

⁵⁵ *HA*, p.12; however *Account*, p.4–5 has 10 May 1693; again this discrepancy may be explained by the 10 day difference between the Julian and Gregorian calendars.

malnutrition, pneumonia, or dysentery, as did Neau who suffered from what he called a bloody flux that made walking unbearable. 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'⁵⁶— and a spectacle it was. Display and representation of monarchical authority played an important part in early modern politics. In each of the towns and villages they traversed the convicts attached to the great chain constituted what André Zysberg has called Louis XIV's 'baroque theatre of punishment', which was designed to bring shame and destitution on the unwilling actors, and impress spectators with the sovereign's power.⁵⁷ But worse lay ahead.

On arrival in Marseilles, scribes meticulously recorded the personal details of the convicts in official registers, assigning each convict a number: Neau's was 15,717.⁵⁸ Doctors assessed the convicts' health; officers from the galleys determined their fitness for service; they were stripped of their rags and supplied with the rough clothing of the galley slave; then their heads were shaved, ostensibly for reasons of hygiene, but also to signal their degradation. Neau listed the clothes he received as follows: two shirts, two sets of drawers, open in the middle, two pairs of stockings, an upper coat, a cloak and a red bonnet — another sign of the galley slaves' infamy, which could be spotted at a distance from the port of Marseilles.⁵⁹ Then, his neck chain having been removed, he was fettered at the ankles with a heavy chain ten to 12 feet long, and brought aboard the galley known as the *Vieille Madame*. There Neau was chained to a bench with four other men; on this narrow form the men rowed together, ate, slept, and were obliged to carry out their natural functions. As might be expected, a foul stench rose from the benches of the galleys, and the convicts, according to Neau, were 'devoured in winter by lice and in summer by bugs and fleas', and 'forced to lie one upon another as hogs in a sty'.⁶⁰ Neau remained for six months on the *Vieille Madame*, but then he was moved to another galley, called the *Magnanime*.

On 28 April 1694, he was transferred from the galleys to a dungeon in the Citadel Saint-Nicolas, a secure jail in the port, where he was confined

⁵⁶ *Account*, p.5

⁵⁷ A. Zysberg, 'Convertir et punir sous le règne de Louis XIV : l'exemple des galériens protestants', in *La conversion au XVIIe siècle. Actes du XIIe colloque du Centre méridional de rencontres sur le XVIIe siècle*, ed. L. Godard de Donville (Marseille, 1983), p.130.

⁵⁸ G. Tournier, *Les galères de France et les galériens protestants des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Montpellier, 1984. 3 tomes in 2 vol. 2nd ed.), t.2, p.371, hereafter Tournier, *Galères*.

⁵⁹ *Account*, p.7–8; Vigie, p.169.

⁶⁰ *Account*, p.8.

for 26 months, much of it in solitary confinement, and his jailors were ordered not to speak to him.⁶¹ However, he was able to talk to the prisoner in the cell below him — who was probably Victor Cosson de Chayssac — for 23 months, before his jailors caught on and moved Neau to another cell.⁶² After a month, Neau was moved again, this time to the dungeons for 40 days, because his solitary psalm singing was disturbing his jailors.⁶³ On 1 July 1696, Neau and Cosson were transferred to the infamous Château d'If, built on a rock just off the shore of Marseilles, where they were placed in solitary confinement. For the first 50 days, Neau was in a cell at the top of the tower that had natural light enough to eat and write by, and he could even catch a glimpse of the sea; but on 20 August, his jailors placed him in a dungeon in the bowels of the Château that was completely deprived of light.⁶⁴ The following year, in order to save themselves some trouble, Neau's jailors moved him on 14 February 1697 into another dark and insalubrious dungeon with three other French Protestant captives: Paul Berger, Jean Monnier, and Antoine Capion.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Tournier, *Galères*, t.1, p.258, according to an official report drawn up in 1697 or 1698; however, Neau and Morin date his transfer 5 May, 1694, *HA*, p.80–81, 85–86; Morin says that Neau was confined in the Citadel Saint-Nicolas for 23 months (p.86), but this is a miscalculation: 5 May 1694 to 1 July 1696 is almost 26 months.

⁶² *HA*, p.114, 148, 150–151, 165, 171 194; Victor Cosson, sometimes also called Barthélemy, was from Chésane in the Auvergne, and had been a Catholic priest before he converted to Protestantism; he acted as a guide to Huguenots trying to escape the kingdom. Arrested sometime in 1685, he spent five years in jail in Paris before being sentenced on 14 March 1690 by the *parlement* of Paris; left for Marseilles with the Great Chain in July 1690. Imprisoned in the Citadel Saint-Nicolas, he was weighed down by two chains, hand and foot, for singing psalms at the top of his voice; at some point, however, he lapsed into silence, and died without regaining the ability to speak. He was transferred to the Château d'If, 1 July 1696, at the same time as Neau, who shared a cell with him for a time. As a former Catholic priest, Cosson was treated with exceptional cruelty, which ruined his health and drove him mad. He died in the Château d'If on 4 August 1697 in appalling conditions, Tournier, *Galères*, t.2, p.311–313.

⁶³ *HA*, p.85, 148.

⁶⁴ *HA*, p.105–108, 150.

⁶⁵ *HA*, p.106–107, 171; Tournier, *Galères*, t.2, p.372. P. Berger (known as Ragats), a Swiss national from Coire, arrested for guiding Huguenots out of the kingdom; imprisoned for three years in the Tour de Constance; served on the *Vieille-Réale*; transferred to the Citadel Saint-Nicolas, 4 April 1695; to the Château d'If, 25 May 1696, because he was in receipt of a small pension paid to him by a Swiss man resident in Marseilles; released, 20 April 1700. J. Monnier (also Moynier, Mounier, Mognier, known as Lacroix), a shepherd from Ste-Croix-Vallée-Française, arrested in Nîmes for preaching at clandestine

The reason Élie Neau was transferred from the galleys to the Château d'If, as indeed were other Protestant galley slaves, was because he, like them, resisted the tireless efforts made by Catholic chaplains to the galleys to convert them, and he encouraged others to follow his example.⁶⁶ The chaplain on board the *Magnanime* nicknamed Neau 'the minister' (that is, the pastor), because of the spiritual leadership he gave to the other slaves and the letters of spiritual encouragement he wrote and caused to be circulated among them.⁶⁷ Although the Protestants were closely watched by their jailors and by the chaplains, they regularly succeeded in having letters smuggled to and from the galleys, and among themselves, and even sometimes to and from the dungeons if they could bribe their jailors. Bibles, religious books, paper, quills, pencils, ink, food and money were also smuggled for the Protestant slaves by messengers, who were nicknamed Mercury — an allusion to the winged God of trade in Antiquity —, and were paid for their services.⁶⁸ Often the smugglers were Muslim slaves, who were not chained, and who were permitted to come and go, and do paid odd jobs in the port when the galleys were anchored in Marseilles. However, they refused all bribes, being prompted only by their piety to take the enormous risk of helping the Protestants, whose innocence, and dignity in the face of oppression, was obvious to all.⁶⁹ At some point, Élie Neau managed to get hold of a King James Bible and to keep it for the duration of his captivity, because his jailors, not understanding English, overlooked its importance to their prisoner.⁷⁰ During the four years that Neau spent in the dungeons, he sometimes had the company of other men, notably in the year before his release, but for almost half of that

assemblies, 10 August 1695; served on the *Grande-Réale*; transferred to the Citadel Saint-Nicolas, 14 September 1695; to the Château d'If, 25 May 1696, because of his influence over the Protestant slaves; died in the Galleys hospital in the port, 4 March 1700. A. Capion, from a bourgeois family in Montpellier; left France in 1681; he was in the service of William III when he was surprised at sea returning from Venice in 1695; sentenced to life-imprisonment on the galleys in 1696; imprisoned in the Citadel Saint-Nicolas as soon as he arrived in Marseilles; then transferred to the Château d'If; released 13 June 1698; see Tournier, *Galères*, t.2, p.328–329; 386–388; 395–396.

⁶⁶ *HA*, p.78–80; at first Neau was fettered with a second chain, but when that did not stop him from writing letters of exhortation to his fellow galley slaves, he was transferred off the galleys, see *HA*, p.191–192.

⁶⁷ *HA*, p.192.

⁶⁸ *HA*, p.116, 127–128

⁶⁹ Tournier, *Galères*, t.1, p.150–152, if the Muslim slaves were caught helping the Protestants they were beaten to within an inch of their lives.

⁷⁰ *HA*, p.105–106.

time he was in solitary confinement.⁷¹ It is clear from the few extant letters by Neau from this period of his captivity that he expected to die from malnutrition and ill-treatment. On 5 November 1696, he sent a short pen-portrait to Jean Morin, describing himself and other prisoners being transferred from the Citadel Saint-Nicolas to the Château d'If at the beginning of July: 'Picture us men, being moved from one dungeon to the next, dragging bodies that are but skin and bone. Our faces inspire compassion, for they are as white as snow, our beards are as long as our hair, and we are covered in lice and fleas that are eating us alive'.⁷² Nonetheless, contrary to all expectations, Neau survived and lived to tell the tale.

In 1698, as Élie Neau was completing his sixth year in captivity and preparing himself for death,⁷³ powerful forces were at work in the Huguenot Refuge, seeking a general manumission of all French Protestant prisoners of conscience. For years, Huguenot publicists had been keeping the plight of the Huguenot galley slaves alive in the minds of the public and seeking their release, but to no avail.⁷⁴ In fact, of the 1,450 Protestants condemned to a life of servitude on the galleys in the reign of Louis XIV, 44% died in captivity, the majority of them within the first three years. A further 20% were released fairly quickly, probably because they abjured; the remaining 36% served a minimum of four years, and many served between five and 30 years on the galleys before they were liberated.⁷⁵ But Neau was a naturalized Englishman. William

⁷¹ *HA*, p.146–148, Neau says he was in solitary confinement for 23 months; however, for part of that time he was confined with Victor Cosson de Chayssac, who had lost his reason and the ability to speak, which, from Neau's point of view, meant he was virtually in solitary confinement (*HA*, p.151); see above n.62.

⁷² *HA*, p.149: 'Représentez-vous des hommes qu'on mène de cachot en cachot, qui traînent des corps qui n'ont que les os et la peau étendue dessus. Nos visages font compassion, blancs comme du plâtre, la barbe aussi longue que les cheveux, pleins de poux et de punaises, qui achèvent de nous ronger'; Victor Cosson de Chayssac was transferred at the same time as Neau, see above n.62.

⁷³ *HA*, p.143.

⁷⁴ On the publicity campaign for the release of the galley slaves, see R. Whelan, 'Monuments, memorials and martyrs in French Protestantism after the Revocation: the case of Louis de Marolles', in *Marsh's Library: a mirror on the world*, ed. M. McCarthy and A. Simmons (Dublin and Portland, 2009), p.145–164; and R. Whelan, 'Diamants dans les ténèbres: la fortune en France et en Angleterre des «Mémoires» de Louis de Marolles, galérien protestant. Enjeux de la mémoire protestante', in *La Réception des Mémoires d'Ancien Régime: discours historique, critique, littéraire*, éd. M.-P. Pilorge (Paris, 2009), p.75–99.

⁷⁵ These figures are given by A. Zysberg in the Preface to J. Marteilhe, *Mémoires d'un galérien du roi-soleil* (Paris, 1989), p.26, 31: the figures for those released are more precisely as follows: 39% after three years or less; 20% after four to nine years; 24% after ten to 15 years; 17% after 16 to 30 years. The last two Protestant slaves were liberated in 1775.

III, as is well known, was a patron of the Huguenots in exile; evidently, the case of the merchant sailor, and others who had been naturalized, was brought to his attention. Following the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick on 20 September 1697, which brought the Nine Years War to an end, William Bentinck, first Earl of Portland, engaged in extensive negotiations with Louis XIV for the release from the galleys of French Protestants who had become subjects of the English Crown. On 16/26 March 1698, Bentinck — who had been appointed ambassador to France in January 1698 — reported that he had been to Versailles, where he had delivered a written request concerning ‘the subjects of his Majesty who are in prison or at the galleys, whose release is claimed’.⁷⁶ Finally, on 3 July 1698, Élie Neau was pardoned by Louis XIV.⁷⁷ Although an earlier letter of pardon had been issued on 13 June, it had been addressed to the Citadel Saint-Nicolas, and the governor of the Château d’If refused to liberate Neau unless an official letter, carrying the royal seal, was sent to him personally.⁷⁸

Neau left Marseilles on 7 July 1698 and received what can only be described as a hero’s welcome from Protestant Europe, where religious services were held in joyous thanksgiving for his release and purses were opened to provide for him.⁷⁹ He travelled via the principality of Orange, which had been restored to the English crown under the protocols drawn up at Ryswick, to Lyons and on to Geneva. There he remained several weeks, trying to regain his health as a guest in the home of Benedict Calandrini, professor of New Testament at the University, who was active in providing practical and spiritual support to the Protestant galley slaves.⁸⁰ At the end of the summer, he went to Berne, where he petitioned the authorities to seek the manumission of the Swiss nationals confined on the galleys, including his former cellmate Paul Berger. From Berne, he travelled to Holland, where he arrived in September 1698, and had an audience with Anthonie Heinsius, Grand Pensionary of Holland, presenting him with a memorandum about the men still confined on the

⁷⁶ *Calendar of State Papers (Domestic) of the reign of William III (1698)* (London, 1933), p.76–77: 8 February and 16/26 March 1698.

⁷⁷ *HA* Epistle dedicatory; on Bentinck, see H. Dunthorne and D. Onnekink, ‘Bentinck, Hans Willem, first Earl of Portland (1649–1709)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2007 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2160, accessed 15 Jan 2011].

⁷⁸ *HA*, p.199–200; Antoine Capion, who had been in the service of William III when he was apprehended, was also pardoned on 13 June 1698, and left Marseilles on the same day, see above n.64

⁷⁹ *HA*, p.201–204; Marteilhe gives a lively description of the celebrations that greeted him on arriving at Geneva, see *Mémoires*, p.249–251.

⁸⁰ *HA*, p.202–203; M. Grandjean, ‘Genève au secours des galériens pour la foi (1685–1718)’, in *Genève et la Révocation de l’Édit de Nantes* (Genève and Paris, 1985), p.415–433.

galleys. Armand de Bourbon, marquis de Miremont, who had been actively campaigning for the liberation of the Protestant slaves, arranged an audience for Neau with William III, when he had returned to Het Loo from Germany. Neau availed himself of the opportunity to present a petition to the king, and pleaded with him to take diplomatic steps for the release of the Protestants from the galleys. Two days later, William Blathwayt, the king's Secretary at War and acting Secretary of State, presented Neau with 300 florins and assured him that William III would do everything in his power to secure the liberation of the slaves, although he was pessimistic about the outcome. Mindful of all that he owed to William Bentinck, who had been instrumental in securing his release, Neau sought him out to express his gratitude, and met with a kind reception from the Earl of Portland and his family.⁸¹ Neau probably also met up with Jean Morin, his former pastor from Moëze, whose letters and financial assistance had sustained him in captivity, and who had been appointed pastor at Bergen-op-Zoom in 1687.⁸² It is likely that the two men also discussed the narrative of Neau's captivity, which Morin was to write the following year, in which he planned to publish some of the letters they had exchanged. This is the French *Histoire*, whose publication was delayed until 1701 because some people, whom Morin does not name, were afraid it would incite further violence against the Protestants still on the galleys.⁸³

In the meantime, Neau travelled on to London on one of the escort vessels accompanying William III to England, and remained there for several months.⁸⁴ During his stay in London, possibly in collaboration with an English-speaking ghost writer, he published the short semi-autobiographical *Account* in English about his experiences, to which was appended a list of the names of the men whom were known to be still in captivity.⁸⁵ Neau also took advantage of a naturalization bill presented to the Houses of Parliament in March 1699, and swore the required oaths on the 4th of that same month in order to become a naturalized English

⁸¹ All of these meetings are succinctly recorded in *HA*, p.202–207.

⁸² H. Bots, 'Les pasteurs français au Refuge des Provinces-Unies: un groupe socio-professionnel tout particulier, 1680–1710', in *La vie intellectuelle aux Refuges protestants*, éd. J. Häselser et A. McKenna (Paris, 1999), p.55.

⁸³ *HA*, Avertissement, unpaginated; the *HA* is not a French translation of the *Account*, as Tournier alleges (*Histoire*, p.7, 33) but a completely independent and longer narrative of Neau's experience; nor was it prepared in London.

⁸⁴ *HA*, p.211.

⁸⁵ It is possible, of course, that the *Account of the sufferings of the French Protestants, slaves on board the French King's galleys* is actually a translation or reworking of the petitions that Neau presented to the various authorities in Switzerland and Holland.

subject.⁸⁶ Finally, in the summer of 1699, Élie Neau sailed for America, arriving in Boston on 3 August 1699, where he stayed for three weeks; on 7 September the City Council of New York ordered £30 to be paid to Neau 'in commiseration of his great suffering as a Protestant in France'.⁸⁷ Later that month Neau returned to New York City to the wife, Suzanne, who had last set eyes on him seven years previously — whom he laconically described as impatient to be reunited with him — and to their two children, the second being Suzanne, the daughter named after her mother, whom he had yet to meet, born some six weeks after he was captured by privateers in 1692.⁸⁸ Apparently, Neau and Paré had set up house in New York with Paré's two sisters and their families, which is how she and the two children had managed to survive during the long years of his captivity.⁸⁹ But before we turn to Neau's life after his return to New York, it is time to consider the inner, spiritual journey he undertook during those years.

From the old man to the new

The five years that Élie Neau spent on the galleys and in the dungeons of Marseilles were marked by daily humiliation, degradation, deprivation

⁸⁶ *Letters of denization*, p.269. Neau's witnesses were Ruben Cailleau, from Saintonge in Charente and Mathieu Latour, from Bordeaux; he obviously took advantage of his time in London to mix with people from his own region in France. Neau had been granted denization in 1690, and it is not clear why he felt the need to apply for naturalization. According to Shaw, denization (granted by the sovereign) and naturalization (granted by parliament) conferred the same rights and privileges; although denization came incidentally to be associated with more limited rights. Neau uses the two categories interchangeably in his letters to Morin, and Shaw argues that this was often the case, see *Letters of denization*, p.vi–vii.

⁸⁷ *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies (1699)* (London, 1908), p.425.

⁸⁸ Born 27 October 1692, Tourmier, *Histoire*, p.29. Neau managed to send a letter to his wife care of the Laboyteaux brothers in Amsterdam, to whom he wrote on 20 July 1696 (*HA*, p.120–121), and received a reply from her in August the following year (*HA*, p.162), also care of the Laboyteaux brothers. Cotton Mather published a translation of a letter from Neau to his wife Suzanne in *A present from a farr country* (Boston, 1698), which he described as 'an excellent letter full of divine rarities, lately written from a terrible prison from France'; I have been unable to consult this pamphlet, but it is discussed in N. Kamil, *Fortress of the soul* (New York, 2005), p.402–408. The copy of the pamphlet available in *Early Printed Books on-line* is damaged, and Neau's letter is wanting.

⁸⁹ Tourmier, *Histoire*, p.34. Neau's mother's name was Suzanne (died 1696); and the sister who joined him in New England when he sent for her was called Suson, see *HA*, p.82, 134; *Letters of denization*, p.269.

and outright cruelty. His was a limit-experience that many did not survive. While some of the Protestants who were held for years in captivity demonstrated remarkable resilience, others suffered irretrievable psychological breakdown. In fact, on 20 August 1696, when Neau was moved to the dark dungeon in the Château d'If, he was placed with Victor Cosson de Chayssac, whom Neau described as struck dumb by suffering and no longer in his right mind; Cosson died the following year in appalling conditions, without having regained the ability to speak.⁹⁰ That Neau did not suffer a similar fate was partly a matter of luck — arising out of a combination of his English denization and successful political lobbying — but also partly a matter of attitude. There were times when he was almost overwhelmed by hunger, illness, and cold, afflicted in every one of his senses, as he observed in a letter to Jean Morin written from the Château d'If on 5 November 1696.⁹¹ Nonetheless, he was able to reframe his limit-experience in ways that made its senseless injustice meaningful to him, thereby escaping permanent psychological damage. This aspect of the experience of French Protestant galley slaves fascinates me, and I summarize some of my findings here.⁹²

Although Neau had to fight his own individual battle against deprivation and despair, particularly when he was in solitary confinement, he had a very real sense of being surrounded and upheld by a community who either shared his experience on a daily basis, or were involved with him from afar. The Protestant galley slaves encouraged each other by word and deed, sharing what little they had; the literate among them, including Neau, also wrote letters of encouragement and consolation, which they circulated clandestinely among themselves. But they were also in contact with the outside world, as I said earlier, and they had a network of supporters throughout Reformed Europe. Certain individuals in the Huguenot Refuge, pastors and some exceptional women, also seem to have adopted a galley slave much as we would today adopt a prisoner of conscience, to whom they wrote and sent money

⁹⁰ *HA*, p.114, 148, 150–151, 165, 171, 194; Tournier, *Galères*, t.2, p.311–313; see above n.62.

⁹¹ *HA*, p.151–153.

⁹² For a more extensive treatment of this subject, R. Whelan, 'From the other side of silence: Huguenot life-writing, a dialogic art of narrating the self', in *Narrating the self in early modern Europe*, ed. B. Tribout and R. Whelan, (Oxford, 2007), p.139–159, which may be accessed on Google Books; R. Whelan, 'Représentation de soi, représentation de l'autre dans les récits des galériens pour la foi', *Bulletin de l'Institut d'histoire de la Réformation*, 29 (2007–2008), p.51–70; R. Whelan, 'Résistance et spiritualité dans les témoignages des galériens pour la foi', *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire du protestantisme français*, 156 (2010), p.231–246; R. Whelan, 'Turning to gold: the role of the witness in French Protestant galley slave narratives', *Seventeenth-century French studies*, 32 (2010), p.3–18.

when they could. It is clear from the way Neau responds to the letters that managed to get through to him from Jean Morin, his pastor, that the sense of connection the letters gave to a world beyond the galleys was vital to the Protestant slaves. Obviously, they welcomed the practical support that came with the letters; but they treasured above all their correspondents' religious reflections on their plight, because such reflection encouraged them in their resolve to resist the pressure to convert. As Neau remarked to Jean Morin on 7 October 1697, 'You can see from what I have written, that I line up under the standard of the true Christian militia, as you were kind enough to recommend me to do, for which I am a thousand times obliged to you. I am convinced that, in his gentleness and clemency, my God will answer the prayers that your love prompts you to say for me, in public and in private, so that my love and perseverance will be made perfect'.⁹³ In sum, the interaction of the galley slaves with each other and with their correspondents helped them to reframe an ignominious experience in terms that inspired them with confidence, hope, and the determination to endure, because they felt loved and honoured, both by those who supported them and, ultimately, by God.

The generation of Protestants sent to the galleys at the time of the Revocation had had the benefit of a religious education delivered by the preaching and catechizing of their pastors, week by week in their churches before they were razed to the ground in 1685. In captivity, they appropriated that teaching in a more personal way, instructing each other and, as in Neau's case, reading the Bible for themselves. The Bible provided Neau with a reservoir of symbolic narratives that became for him a set of matrices for his own experience. He sang out his pain, his grief, and his anger at the top of his voice, using the words of David the psalmist, and pouring out the psalmist's imprecations on those who made his life unbearable on the galleys and in prison. He identified with the apostle Paul, also imprisoned for his faith, introjecting the apostle's experience until it became his own, speaking the apostle's words probably from memory to give himself courage, and thereby making the apostle's words his own. For example, in November 1696, over four years into his captivity, he made the following remark in a letter to Jean Morin, 'that is why I laugh off everything they do to me, by means of the power of grace, which shows the strength of its admirable power in my infirmities' — the

⁹³ *HA*, p.170–171: 'Vous voyez par là que je me range sous l'étendard de la vraie milice chrétienne, comme vous avez la bonté de me le prescrire, dont je vous suis mille fois obligé, et je suis persuadé que la douceur et la clémence de mon Dieu, accomplira les prières que votre charité lui présente pour moi, en public, et en particulier; pour la perfection de ma charité, et de ma persévérance'; see also *HA*, p.174, 178, 179.

second part of the sentence is an allusion to a verse in one of the Pauline epistles.⁹⁴ And, of course, like all early modern Christians, Neau viewed his own sufferings as a participation in the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, whom he felt called to follow and to imitate even unto death. For galley slaves like Neau, Scripture was a space of creativity, where interaction with the stories of others made for a life-giving reinterpretation of their own story of degradation. At one point in Peter Høeg's novel *The quiet girl*, the central character makes the following comment: 'That's the remarkable thing about words. The mere sound of them activates part of the reality they name'.⁹⁵ The Bible provided Neau with a language that made it possible for him to name his traumatic experience and in that way to avoid psychological disintegration. By making the words of Scripture his own, he activated part of the reality he believed they named; and by this act of creative appropriation, he invested a fate that was almost unspeakable with a transcendent meaningfulness.

The way Neau was able to reframe his experience in religious terms turned the galleys and particularly solitary confinement into a space of encounter with the divine. Although often overwhelmed by the deprivation he had to endure, Neau came to accept it as coming from a God who was concerned for his salvation. In one of his letters, he described his captivity as a burden laid upon him by God, and adapted the words of the Jesus of the gospels to his own plight, observing that 'his yoke is easy and his burden light, because he makes it easy and pleasant'.⁹⁶ We may be inclined to view such an attitude as masochistic or even fatalistic, but for early modern Christians such notions of God were at the heart of their psychological resilience. They thought of God as regal and distant, as a sovereign Lord and a just judge, who commanded and was to be obeyed, even in the extreme circumstances of the galleys. But they also believed that God was merciful and loving, intimately present to them, bestowing on them the power to act as God ordained. Captivity was, Neau believed, an opportunity for conversion from his old ways, when he followed the desires and passions of the flesh, to a new and better life lived in the presence of God.⁹⁷ He was sustained

⁹⁴ *HA*, p.158: 'C'est pourquoi je me ris de tout ce qu'on me fait, par le moyen de la puissance de la grâce, qui fait voir sa vertu d'une puissance admirable dans mes infirmités'; the allusion is to 2 Corinthians 12.9.

⁹⁵ P. Høeg, *The quiet girl (Den stille pige)*, (London, 2008), p.394.

⁹⁶ Matthew 11.29; *HA*, p.83: 'son joug est aisé, et son fardeau léger; parce que lui-même le rend facile et agréable', a sentiment that Neau repeats in one of the prayers he composed in captivity, see *HA*, p.90.

⁹⁷ *HA*, p.155, 176; this is a *lietmotiv* in the letters of the galley slaves, who believed their sufferings were a call to conversion, to a more genuine faith, free of the snares of the world.

in this painful process of transformation by what appear to have been mystical transports. Picking up on a theme from one of Morin's letters, Neau wrote of his sensation of being held in the compassionate gaze of the Creator of all things: 'God knows our sobbing and our tears. He watches over all our struggles (as you say so ably) and is attentive to every movement within our souls. He will be our judge and will reward our actions. My trust, my hope and my refuge are in his sovereign goodness'.⁹⁸ To this God, whose merciful yet regal gaze sustained him, Neau spoke, using the intimate form 'tu' ('thou'), he prayed, sang psalms and hymns, making the walls of his prison resonate with sound, peopling his solitary confinement with a loving presence. It is as if the Scriptures allowed Neau to dwell in a parallel universe, a symbolic world, which empowered him to invest the trauma of his daily existence with another, more hopeful meaning.

Finally, by grounding himself in what he experienced as an encounter with the divine, Neau was able to reinterpret his confinement in ways that were paradoxically life-giving. As a man used to the open seas, he was only too conscious of his insalubrious confinement, yet his intense spiritual life made him feel that his prison was a place of freedom.⁹⁹ He suffered bitterly from light deprivation in his dungeon in the Château d'If, but had an awareness of another light, which he called the light of grace, shining on his soul, or inner self.¹⁰⁰ Although he was often reduced to bitter tears by what he suffered, he nonetheless spoke of the joy that took possession of him in his shackles.¹⁰¹ And shackled as he was on the galleys and later in prison, he had, at another level, the sensation of walking in the way of salvation, of ascending towards God in order to contemplate God's infinite compassion.¹⁰² Paradoxically, then, the galleys and the dungeon are invested with meanings that are at one and the same time both radically negative and radically positive,¹⁰³ because Neau was convinced that, by freeing him from all worldly distractions, his imprisonment had brought about an encounter with divine love.¹⁰⁴ His

⁹⁸ *HA*, p.180 (mistakenly numbered 130): 'Nos sanglots, et nos larmes lui sont connus. Il est, comme vous le dites très bien, le spectateur de tous nos combats, et il considère attentivement tous les mouvements de nos âmes. Il sera le juge et le rémunérateur de nos actions. Ma confiance, mon espérance, et mon refuge est en sa souveraine bonté'.

⁹⁹ *HA*, p.102.

¹⁰⁰ *HA*, p.100, 109–110, see also p.118.

¹⁰¹ *HA*, p.32, 132, 143.

¹⁰² *HA*, p.32, 100, 118, 131.

¹⁰³ M. Bergamo, *L'anatomie de l'âme, de François de Sales à Fénelon*, tr. M. Bonneval (Grenoble, 1994), p.17, observes a similar attitude in Roman Catholic writers in the same period.

¹⁰⁴ *HA*, p.147.

ability to acknowledge his awful living conditions yet not let those conditions have the last word; his capacity to hold contradictions together would generally be interpreted by modern psychoanalytic schools as a sign of psychological health and even maturity.¹⁰⁵ Therein, I believe, lay the secret of his resilience.¹⁰⁶

The new man returns to the new world

Shortly after his arrival in New York on 27 September 1699, Élie Neau wrote to Benedict Calandrini in Geneva with the news of the general rejoicing that had greeted him on his return, and to share his own joy added: 'All that remains to me now is to devote my whole life to the service of the glorious king of the universe'.¹⁰⁷ Initially, what that seems to have meant for Neau was picking up the pieces of his personal and professional life and getting involved in his church community, the French Reformed Church, which was located in Petticoat Lane near Bowling Green in New York, where he became one of the elders.¹⁰⁸ His attitude was consistent with the affirmation of ordinary life in the Reformed tradition, which rejected the notion of special vocations, affirming instead the validity of every human calling, provided it was lived worshipfully, to the glory of God.¹⁰⁹ While Neau does not appear to have taken to the seas again, he did become involved in commerce and trade.¹¹⁰ At that time, New York City had a diversified economy and an ethnically diverse population, which opened up commercial opportunities for someone like Neau, who was not only famous but who also had family contacts and obvious entrepreneurial skills. Between 1703 and 1709, Neau moved from the fifth decile for tax purposes, that is to say the middle tax band, to the ninth, that is to say, the second from the top, which means he rose quickly, to rank among the most well to do

¹⁰⁵ S. Izzard, 'Holding contradictions together: an object-relational view of healthy spirituality', *Contact* 140 (2003), p.2–8.

¹⁰⁶ On this see R. Whelan, 'Galérien brisé ou heureux athlète? Représentation de la ruine de soi et discours religieux dans les "Mémoires" d'Élie Neau', in *Défaite et ruyne de soi à l'âge moderne*, ed. M. Barral-Barron, M.-C. Lagrée, M. Lemoine (Paris, 2012), forthcoming.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Tournier, *Histoire*, p.34: 'A présent, il ne me reste qu'à me consacrer toute ma vie au service du glorieux monarque de l'univers'.

¹⁰⁸ S. Cohen, 'Elias Neau, instructor to New York slaves', *New York historical society quarterly* 55 (1971), p.12. I am grateful to T. Zuber, my dear godson, who located a copy of this article and sent it to me from New York.

¹⁰⁹ C. Taylor, *Sources of the self. The making of the modern identity* (Cambridge, 1992, 2nd ed.), p.13, 23, 185, 215–227

¹¹⁰ *CSP, Colonial Series, America and West Indies (1699)*, p.763.

merchants in the city.¹¹¹ Yet, all the while, other concerns nagged at him, arising directly out of his own experience on the galleys.

In the 18th century, New York emerged as the most important northern slave colony in British America: slaves were needed to work the land in New York county and were put to labour on the city's wharves and in commercial firms. While black slaves made up no more than 2% of the population of Massachusetts after 1690, they comprised approximately 15% of New York county and as much as 20% of the city's population. According to Jon Butler, the Huguenot refugees who settled in New York county acquired slaves early and had a greater proportion of slaves than other white New Yorkers. In New York City alone 50% of Huguenot households had a minimum of two slaves in 1703, as compared to 44% of English and 37% percent of Dutch households.¹¹² In Neau's own household there was one black slave, and he almost certainly availed himself of slave labour in his commercial activities, as he undoubtedly also had when he lived in the Caribbean. Yet something had changed as a result of his own experience of slavery, causing him to take notice of the black men, women and children, who had been enslaved by the white settlers of New York, and whom he encountered on a daily basis.

On 22 August 1700, Neau became the lay correspondent for New York for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), based in London.¹¹³ The Society's first effort in England was to set up charity schools with the object of teaching poor children 'to read, write, and to repeat and understand the Church [of England] catechism'.¹¹⁴ On 18 October 1700, John Chamberlayne, secretary of the SPCK, wrote to Neau on behalf of the Society, inviting him to found a charity school in New York.¹¹⁵ Neau replied in June the following year, joyfully accepting the Society's invitation, as far as his commercial activities would permit him to do so, but observing that the country was so poor it would be difficult to set up schools.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, a new charter was granted on 16 June 1701 to found the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG).¹¹⁷ On 10 July 1703, the SPG received a letter from Neau, proposing that a catechist be appointed for 'the great number of

¹¹¹ Butler, p.182.

¹¹² Butler, p.150–151.

¹¹³ *A chapter in English church history, being the minutes of the Society for Promoting Christian knowledge for the years 1698–1704*, ed. E. McClure (London, 1888), p.78.

¹¹⁴ *Chapter in English church history*, p. iv–v.

¹¹⁵ The letter is quoted in full in *Chapter in English church history*, p.82–84.

¹¹⁶ *Chapter in English church history*, p.347–348.

¹¹⁷ Cohen, p.13; Butler, p.168.

slaves who are without God, and of whose souls there is no manner of care taken'.¹¹⁸ The Society prevailed on Neau, and on 24 August 1704 he was licensed by Lord Cornbury, the governor-general of New York, to catechize the city's 'children, Indians, negroes, and other persons', on a stipend of £50 *per annum*. The SPG later confirmed his appointment, on 12 April 1705, once Neau had conformed to the Church of England, as the Society required him to do.¹¹⁹ Neau hesitated to leave the French Reformed Church for personal reasons; he was an elder of the church and had a network of associates, friends and family there. However, he had no theological objections to conformity, rather the contrary, stipulating his willingness to conform 'through a principle of conscience and hearty approbation of the English liturgy', some of which he had learned by heart during his captivity.¹²⁰ After a period of reflection, he resigned from the office of elder at the French Church and joined Trinity Church of England, becoming a vestryman on 10 April 1705.¹²¹ Neau's transfer to Trinity Church appears to have caused some resentment among the Huguenot refugees in New York, because they were under pressure during those years to conform to the Church of England. Consequently, according to Jon Butler, few of the members of the French Reformed Church were to send their slaves to Neau for instruction.¹²²

Neau was undeterred, however. At first, he went house to house, working at night because the black slaves were busy during the day,¹²³ when his efforts met with success, he set up a school in an upper storey of his home. Although William Vesey (1674–1746), the rector of Trinity Church, had been opposed to Neau's appointment, he initially supported his catechetical work, urging parishioners, from the pulpit, to send their slaves to his school for instruction.¹²⁴ On 3 October 1705, Neau reported

¹¹⁸ Quoted by Cohen, p.13.

¹¹⁹ Cohen, p.14; Butler, p.168; on Cornbury, appointed governor-general of the colony of New York in 1702, see P. U. Bonomi, 'Hyde, Edward, third earl of Clarendon (1661–1723)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/41053>, accessed 1 March 2011].

¹²⁰ Quoted in *Classified digest of the records of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1701–1892*, compiled by C.F. Pascoe, ed. by H.W. Tucker (London, 1893), p.64.

¹²¹ Butler, p.168; Tournier, *Histoire*, p.38–39.

¹²² Butler, p.168.

¹²³ *Classified digest*, p.64.

¹²⁴ W. Vesey to archbishop of Canterbury, 26 October 1704, American Papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, vol.13, fol.86–88, Lambeth Palace Library. I am grateful to O. Stanwood for this reference; F.J. Klingberg, *Anglican humanitarianism in colonial New York* (New York, 1971. 1st ed. 1941), p.125.

to the SPG that he had over 40 attending, but irregularly, on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday nights, with a small number seeking baptism at Trinity Church, usually without their owners' knowledge. In summer 1707, he announced that numbers had 'mightily augmented' to 100; in August 1708 some 200 slaves had enrolled.¹²⁵ In that upper room, Neau reported, he endeavoured 'as much as possible to give them an idea altogether spiritual of a Being infinitely perfect', and caused his pupils 'to pray and sing psalms, reading every time each verse to them'.¹²⁶ He also distributed catechisms, which he requested from the SPG, preferring the ones that carried the alphabet, so that the slaves could learn to read at home.¹²⁷ However, he met with hostility in a colony that had vested interests in maintaining slavery, and whose European settlers were opposed to catechizing the slaves, because they feared that baptism would lead to emancipation.¹²⁸ In a bid to deflect the opposition, Neau successfully petitioned the New York Assembly, causing the legislators to issue a decree in 1706 which stipulated that baptism 'shall not be any cause or reason for the freeing them' (that is, the slaves).¹²⁹ Nonetheless, according to Neau, slave owners in the colony continued to wish him ill,¹³⁰ especially after the New York slave revolt in 1712.

One night in April 1712, about two dozen slaves gathered by agreement in an orchard where they had previously hidden weapons; they set fire to an outhouse, and when white settlers came to quench the blaze, a fight broke out in which nine whites were killed and seven injured. The instigators of the revolt were rounded up, prosecuted and 21 were executed, including one pupil from Neau's school, while another of his pupils, who had been arrested, was exonerated. According to John Sharpe, chaplain of Fort George, the revolt 'opened the mouths of many against Negroes being made Christian', although the majority of those implicated had actually been prohibited by their owners from attending catechism.¹³¹ Neau was a convenient scapegoat for the anxiety and anger of the white settlers, who got up a petition to have his school closed, but the governor-general of New York and New Jersey, Robert Hunter

¹²⁵ Klinberg, p.125–126, 128, 130, 132; Cohen, p.17–18.

¹²⁶ Quoted by Cohen, p.18.

¹²⁷ Klinberg, p.128, 138.

¹²⁸ G.R. Hodges, 'The emergence of a new black religious identity in New York City and east New Jersey', 1624–1807', in *Mighty change, tall within. Black identity in the Hudson Valley*, ed. M.B. Young Armstead (Albany, 2003), p.18–19.

¹²⁹ Quoted by Hodges, p.18; see Cohen, p.17; Butler, p.167.

¹³⁰ Hodges, p.18–19; Klinberg, p.127.

¹³¹ Quoted by Klinberg, p.133.

(1666–1734), put a stop to it.¹³² After the revolt, Hunter publicly supported Neau by visiting his school in the company of his wife; he also recommended that New York clergy encourage their congregants, from the pulpit, to send their slaves to the school.¹³³ However, the numbers attending were never again comparable to the days before the revolt. Although, the SPG wrote in support of Neau, as did some of the New York clergy, William Vesey, who had opposed Neau's appointment in 1704, now felt free to work openly against him.¹³⁴ In 1718, Vesey succeeded in having Neau dismissed from his charge, on grounds that he had continued to engage in trade while acting as a catechist for the SPG. But when Hunter and other members of the New York clergy sent testimonials to London supporting Neau, he was reinstated the following year.¹³⁵ Despite feeling discouraged by the lukewarm support he received,¹³⁶ Neau continued to attract pupils to his school, reporting to the Society in June 1721 that his 'school was numerous', and listing a small number of slaves who had been baptized by Vesey at Christmas and Whitsun.¹³⁷ On the 24 November 1722, William Huddleston wrote to the Society with the news that Élie Neau had died in early September 1722, and he listed the bequests Neau had made in his will to the French Reformed Church, Trinity Church, William Vesey, and other New York clergy — Neau's wife and children having predeceased him.¹³⁸ Neau is buried in the graveyard of Trinity Church.

The story of Élie Neau's extraordinary voyage makes it clear, I hope, why the life of this humble seafarer captured the imagination of 18th-century Protestants, whether in the old world or the new, and why his story continues to fascinate in our own time. To his contemporaries and fellow-believers, who celebrated his release from the galleys, he was a Protestant hero, a man of outstanding piety, and a martyr in every respect but death. This is also why Neau's story appealed half a century later both to his translator, the pietist Johann Christian Jacobi, and to Richard

¹³² Klingberg, p.133; on Hunter, see M. L. Lustig, 'Hunter, Robert (1666–1734)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14228>, accessed 2 March 2011].

¹³³ Klinberg, p.134; Cohen, p.21–22; Hodges, p.19.

¹³⁴ Klinberg, p.136; Cohen, p.22; Hodges, p.20.

¹³⁵ Klinberg, p.136; Cohen, p.23.

¹³⁶ E. Neau to bishop Robinson, 28 February 1718/19, Fulham Papers, vol.6, fol.181–182, Lambeth Palace Library. I am grateful to B. Julien for this reference.

¹³⁷ Klinberg, p.138.

¹³⁸ Klinberg, p.139; Suzanne Paré died on 25 September 1720; Huddleston was the Society schoolmaster appointed in March 1718 to replace Neau; he ran a charity school in Trinity Church.

Thomas Bateman, the abridger of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* — as the image of Neau in the dungeon (see Figure 18b) printed in Jacobi's translation reveals. It is an idealised representation of the martyr in solitary confinement, with his arms raised in prayer, wearing the traditional heretic's mitre on his head (decorated with a satanic figure).¹³⁹ To the Episcopal Church in the United States in our own time, Neau is a holy man, a Christ-like figure whose commitment to educating African slaves fulfils the gospel saying: 'in as much as you do it to the least of my children, you do it to me'.¹⁴⁰ While it is virtually impossible to remain unaffected by the story of this extraordinary ordinary man, or by his courage, resilience, and humanity, I would like to draw a more nuanced conclusion.

The story of Élie Neau's extraordinary voyage points, I believe, to the ambiguity of every human life. We may admire Neau for the choices he made, but can we be sure, even retrospectively, that he made the right choices? He himself was tormented in captivity when he remembered his wife and children at home in New York City, deprived of his protection, support and love.¹⁴¹ Neau could have followed the example of the vast majority of Huguenots in the 1680s, abjuring for form's sake in order to be released from prison, and then planned his escape back to British America, probably via England. However, it is clear from a letter dated 14 September 1696, which Neau wrote from captivity to his sister Rachel who had abjured (as had his parents), that such an action would have broken him and made his life unbearable. In his view, the highest good in a human life was spiritual, even if this required an attitude of detachment towards those whom he loved or to his own physical and material well-being.¹⁴² While this essentially Stoic attitude was

¹³⁹ J. Foxe, *The book of martyrs* (1747–1748), vol.2, the illustration is between pages 64–65. The idealisation continues in the way the martyr is pictured in clean, well-maintained clothes, and though thin, not suffering from malnutrition. The detritus on the floor, his unkempt hair and beard, together with his bare feet, are the only signs of deprivation, given that light is filtering through the door of the cell.

¹⁴⁰ Matthew 25.40–45; Collect for 7 September: 'Blessed God, whose Son Jesus calmed the waves and knelt to serve his disciples, we give thee honor for the witness of the Huguenot Elie Naud, remembered as Mystic of the Galleys and Servant of Slaves; praying that, with him, we may proclaim Christ in suffering and joy alike, and call others to join us in ministry to those littlest and least, following Jesus who came not to be ministered to but to minister; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, to whom be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen', from *Holy, Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (New York, 2010), see <http://liturgyandmusic.wordpress.com/2010/09/07/september-7-elie-naud-huguenot-witness-to-the-faith-1722/> accessed 2 March 2011.

¹⁴¹ HA, p.35, 65, 85, 133.

¹⁴² HA, p.135–144.



*Elias Neau in the Dungeon,
as described in Page 46.*

Figure 18b The image of Elie's captivity published by Johann Christian Jacobi in 1749.

undoubtedly one of the secrets of his exceptional resilience in captivity, the spiritual disengagement from the body and the sensible world on which it is based may also have served to limit his interaction with the black slaves he catechized in New York City.¹⁴³ In this respect, his activities as a catechist actually point up the ambiguity of the notion of holiness as it is applied to his life, or indeed to any deeply flawed human life. Although he was undoubtedly concerned for the spiritual welfare of the black slaves he catechized, he did not question the political system that oppressed them, indeed he was instrumental in having a law passed that protected that system, and he also profited from it and from the labour of black slaves in his commercial activities. This is a reminder, if any is needed, that people who are deemed holy are always holy in their own time and place, because they are enmeshed in the political economy of that time and place. Yet, within those limitations, Neau provided a space where the spiritual equality of black slaves and white colonists was implicitly recognized, and where the slaves learned valuable literacy skills, which may have contributed in the long run to their emancipation.¹⁴⁴ And he did this in the face of the hostility and opposition of some of the white colonists in New York City, who were unsettled by his actions, and fearful of any change that threatened the *status quo*. Once again, his ability to remain detached from circumstances that could have destroyed him served him well, as he pursued what he believed was a higher calling; in this instance care for the souls of black slaves. Nonetheless, a tragic irony remains in Élie Neau's story and that of the Huguenots who settled in the New World. They went to the colonies in search of a new start, seeking both religious freedom and economic opportunity. But they bore with them the structures of the old world, reproducing in the land of promise the blindness to the dignity of the strange 'other' from which they themselves had suffered in the land of their birth.

¹⁴³ On Stoic and Christian attitudes of detachment, see Taylor, p.125–126, 137, 147–153, 218–220; for a critique of the spirituality of detachment, see J.M. Soskice, *The kindness of God. Metaphor, gender, and religious language* (Oxford, 2007), p.9–26.

¹⁴⁴ On this see Klinberg, p.122; Cohen, p.8; Hodges, p.20.