

Napoleon in the Wilderness:  
*The Transmogrification of a Picture by Max Ernst*

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*Ignominie*

“I am in the habit of covering twenty leagues on horseback every day: on this miniscule rock at the end of the earth, what can I do there? The climate is too scorching for me...No, I will not go to Saint Helena.”<sup>1</sup> It is said that Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) went into a fit of rage when he was informed on July 31st, 1815, that England would not be granting him asylum, but rather exiling him to an island of just forty-six square miles in the middle of the South Atlantic. The story of the disempowered emperor’s outburst is just one of many already in circulation during Napoleon’s lifetime. Supporters, critics, and not least of all, Napoleon himself, contributed, through text and image, to his glorification as well as his damnation. A consistent component of this *legende napoléonienne* is the last leg of Napoleon’s journey into exile. Just one year after Napoleon’s death the English naval officer and surgeon William Warden, who had accompanied Napoleon with a group of loyalists into forced exile, published his *Letters Written on Board His Majesty’s Ship the Northumberland and at St. Helena*. Soon thereafter Napoleon’s *Memorial de Sainte Helene* appeared in eight volumes, which the exile had dictated to the Comte de Las Cases on St. Helena. Both accounts provide detailed descriptions of the former ruler’s journey to the other end of the world, of the regimented life on board, of the legendary folding cot on which Napoleon slept during the journey, of the nautical conversations with the crew of the *Northumberland*, and of crossing the equator. The loneliness and inactivity on the monotonous journey was a sobering foretaste of the last phase of his life; “nothing interrupted the uniformity of our moments; each day passed in slow detail.”<sup>2</sup> Like so many others in the history of exile and displacement, Napoleon too had to confront the question: “Was he lazy enough not to give himself up to death, but instead to suffer the ignominy of his exile.” Still, the banished one reassured

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his concerned companions, “True heroism consists in being superior to the evils of life.”<sup>3</sup> In contemporary reports one can also read that Napoleon considered going into exile in the U.S. like his brother Joseph Bonaparte.<sup>4</sup> However, the hope that the country would grant him asylum foundered when he was denied the necessary documents. Instead, the English government delivered the message that so outraged him: “The island of Saint Helena has been chosen as his future residence.”<sup>5</sup>

On October 14, 1815, after seventy days at sea, the *Northumberland* and its famous passenger reached the distant island 4,500 miles from the French mainland, just fifteen minutes after the predicted time of arrival. “Nothing can show more the advances in navigation than this sort of marvel by which from so far away we have, at a determined hour, attacked and found a single point in space.”<sup>6</sup> According to the British *Observer*, which published an extensive report on Saint Helena on October 29th, the island was an ideal place for its temperamental inhabitant because of its volcanic origin:

It is not our purpose here to record his political offences. But if nature in her wrath shall have furnished this rugged but interesting abode for a head that could never rest before; if some volcanic explosion of her physical elements has given birth (as is generally supposed) to an island destined to receive this production of a moral volcano in the French Revolution, as great as history has ever recorded, may he only remain as quiet from the repetition of ill as those elements that have left this spot!<sup>7</sup>

The representation of the disempowered emperor on the cliffs above the bay of Jamestown, gazing in lonely meditation over the vast ocean, would become emblematic of Napoleon’s exile in countless paintings, graphic works and caricatures (Fig. 1). Las Cases, who in his *Memorial* describes how the *Northumberland* dropped anchor off of Saint Helena, provides a mythic interpretation of this *imaginaire romantique*: “It is there where the first link of the chain will pin the modern Prometheus to his rock.”<sup>8</sup>

#### *Travailleurs de la mer*

Just forty years later another prominent figure, Victor Hugo (1802-1885), was forced to leave France. Although the writer was still avowing allegiance to the royalist ideal during the Restoration under Charles X, by 1848 he had been elected as a republican to the Assemblée constituante and the Assemblée législative. In December 1851 he publically opposed the coup d’état of Louis Bonaparte—or *Napoleon, le Petit*, as the writer derided the new emperor in his pamphlet of the same name—but by August 1852 Hugo felt compelled to go into exile on the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey. In this self-imposed solitude Hugo experienced



Fig. 1. Pierre-Eugène Aubert, *Napoleon on St. Helena*, 1840, intaglio print

a period of unusually creative productivity. To a large degree this was due to the focus on his experience as an exile in his poetic and political writings, in the autobiographical *Contemplations* (1856) and the novel *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866), among others. In pictorial form he also thematized his fate in several drawings. In 1858 he produced a sepia drawing in which a sailing ship battles the high seas through a perilous weather front. Not only did the writer sign the work and provide the time and place of its inception—*Guernesey, 1858*—he also inscribed its title, centered and in capital letters, *EXIL* (Fig. 2). The ocean was Hugo’s exile. Cut off from the world, the writer searched for the means through which he might spark the interest of his absent audience for his work and his life. To this end, photography, whose potential Hugo recognized early on and strategically implemented, was meant to enhance the authenticity of his publications. In fact, the romantic photographs which he took of himself with his son Charles and the journalist and photographer Auguste Vacquerie in the wild nature of Guernesey are more well-known today than the aforementioned writings. Most likely these were the first photographs of an expatriate ever taken. In them Hugo portrays himself as the lonely poet and demiurge in exile, a visionary gazing from the Rocher des Proscrits over the ocean toward a home geographically and politically so very far away: “Here I am, on my own doing. By wanting to stand alone, I shall remain an outcast” (Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> As in the photographs, the depictions of untamed nature, the sea and the cliffs occupy much space in his texts. Thus he dedicates the novel *Les Travailleurs de la mer* “to the rock of hospitality and liberty, to that corner of old Norman land where the noble little people of the sea live, to the island of Guernesey, severe and sweet, my



Fig. 2. Victor Hugo, *EXIL*, 1858, pen and brush, ink on paper, 23.7×18.8 cm. Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo

present asylum, my probable tomb.”<sup>10</sup> To capture the beauty and the wildness of the landscape in words he develops a highly poetic, romantic, even surrealistic language. The preamble *L’Archipel de la Manche*, in which an entire chapter is dedicated to *Les Rochers*, reads like an homage to the two islands:

In the granite. Nothing more strange. Enormous stone toads are there, emerged from the water no doubt to breathe; giant nuns who scurry along, leaning towards the horizon; the petrified folds of their veils have the shape of the wind in flight; kings in plutonian crowns meditate on massive thrones where foam is not spared; some beings buried in the stone raise up their hands, you see the fingers of the open hands. All this is the shapeless coast. Approach. There is nothing more there.<sup>11</sup>

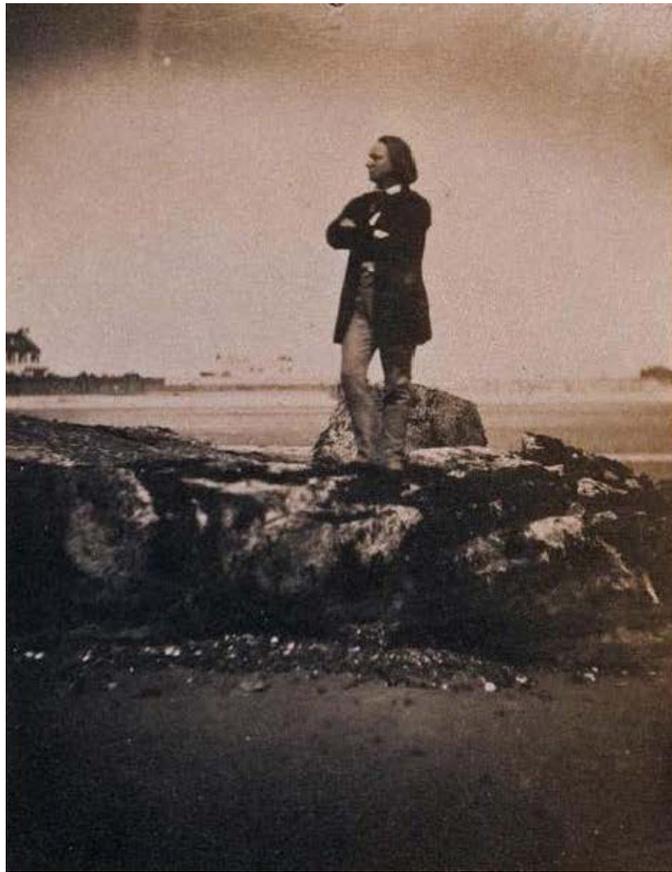


Fig. 3. Victor Hugo among the rocks on Jersey, 1853, photograph

The report of his friend Vacquerie is significantly more prosaic is about the arrival on Jersey, which reminds him of the fate of a great historical figure: “The appearance of Jersey. This charming island...it appears to us in the shape of a pile of arid and burnt stone; we look vainly for [even] the leaf of a tree; Saint Helier furiously reassembles Saint Helena [emphasis added].”<sup>12</sup>

### *Transmogrification*

As is well known, Max Ernst (1891-1976) did not travel by ship into his transatlantic exile. Instead he was able to flee on a last minute flight to the U.S. thanks to the director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Alfred H. Barr, Jr.; the head of the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) in Marseille, Varian Fry; as well as his new lover, patron and future, albeit short-term, spouse, Peggy Guggenheim. Following his internment in the Camp de Milles and arrest by the Gestapo, Ernst came to the decision to leave Europe. When he informed Barr through his son Jimmy about his plans to emigrate and asked for his help, Barr

responded immediately. On November 12, 1940 Ingrid Warburg-Spinelli of the American immigration office sent an affidavit of support signed by Barr and Kenneth Macpherson for Max and his Jewish wife Luise “Lou” Straus-Ernst (from whom Ernst had been divorced since 1926).<sup>13</sup> A week later Fry and his right-hand man Daniel Benedicte contacted Ernst, who had retreated to Saint-Martin d’Ardeche, and asked “if we can be of use.”<sup>14</sup> The artist was relieved that Barr had forwarded his request to the ERC, “to be allowed to immigrate to the United States.”<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Peggy Guggenheim, who was in Grenoble arranging the shipment of her art collection to the U.S., declared that she was willing to “to pay passages Breton, Brauner, Ernst.”<sup>16</sup> However, bringing the artist to the U.S. by ship, as originally planned, would require a great deal of conspiratorial and diplomatic work to obtain the necessary documents. On January 14, 1941, Benedicte wired Ernst that the American “authorization to deliver you” had been received and that the “passage from Lisbon to New York” had been paid.<sup>17</sup> Benedicte instructed him to begin the process of acquiring a transit pass and to visit the American Consulate General and the ERC in Marseille. A short time later, he received the news that the Portuguese transit papers for “Lou” and him had also arrived and that he should now request a Spanish visa application as soon as possible.<sup>18</sup> The artist soon thereafter announced his arrival in Marseille to Fry via a postcard of Duchamp’s Ampoule containing 50 c.c. of Parisian Air (1937). There he planned to see Breton and his surrealist friends again in the Villa Air-Bel. Once the confirmation of the transfer from Lisbon to New York via Martinique had been received, Ernst was finally able to leave the waiting room for exiles. In his Biographical Notes he writes of the French “sympathetic stationmaster” who allowed him to escape with his pictures on the “wrong train” across the French-Spanish border.<sup>19</sup> On May 5<sup>th</sup> the Unitarian Service Committee reported Ernst’s arrival in Lisbon to Fry.<sup>20</sup>

In the Portuguese capital Ernst’s private life underwent some turbulent changes. Under unclear circumstances, Ernst had left “Lou” behind in Marseille, despite the fact that the ERC, on the initiative of their son Jimmy, had organized visas and boat tickets for both of them. Ernst was then unexpectedly reunited in Lisbon with his former lover Leonora Carrington, whom he had not seen since his internment in the Camp des Milles two years earlier and who was now waiting for her passage into freedom accompanied by the Mexican writer Renato Leduc. At the same time the attractive and wealthy Peggy Guggenheim entered the stage, fell in love with the German *beau* and offered—in exchange for a few artworks—to pay for his flight to New York. On May 9<sup>th</sup> Ernst writes from the Francfort Hotel Plaza Rossio in Lisbon: “I myself am flying am June 20<sup>th</sup> on a clipper.”<sup>21</sup> But once again his journey was delayed. On June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1941, Ernst received transit visas for Trinidad and the Bermuda Islands from the British customs office only after Roland Penrose had vouched for him. Together Peggy and Max flew to the United States in a Pan

Am Boeing B-314, a so-called “Dixie Clipper,” with layovers in Trinidad and the Bermuda Islands. On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1941 they landed at La Guardia’s Marine Air Terminal where Gordon Onslow Ford and Ernst’s son Jimmy were waiting for them. Because of his German passport the artist was immediately arrested as an “enemy alien” by American immigration officials and held for three days on Ellis Island. With characteristic irony, Ernst remarks in his *Biographical Notes* how he was able to enjoy the view that so impressed all emigrants when their ship finally arrived in New York: “Beautiful view of the Statue of Liberty.”<sup>22</sup> A short time later Leonora Carrington also arrived in the American metropolis on the *Exeter*. “I don’t ever recall seeing such a strange mixture of desolation and euphoria in my father’s face as when he returned from his first meeting with Leonora in New York,” Jimmy recalled.<sup>23</sup> When Peggy had witnessed enough of the interactions between these two former lovers, she took Max on a trip to her sister Hazel McKinley’s home in Santa Monica, California, where he completed old paintings that he had brought with him from Europe and began work on new ones.

In *Napoleon in the Wilderness* (Fig. 4), a work largely neglected by researchers until today, the painter comes to terms with a long wait, a dramatic journey, his arrival on foreign soil, and his love affairs.<sup>24</sup> According to an interview Ernst gave in 1946, this was the first painting he finished in Santa Monica that had been initiated in France. The claim that he rotated the work 180° upon his arrival and, by turning the original on its head, arrived at a new solution to the composition, not only describes metaphorically his artistic rebirth on the other side of the Atlantic, but also marks a caesura in his life.<sup>25</sup> Against the backdrop of this existential turning point it becomes clear how *Napoleon in the Wilderness*—at once Ernst’s last European and first American work—reflects the most recent experience of escape and exile as well as the unhappy relationship with Leonora Carrington. The two-fold loss of homeland and of lover resonates in the painting. It is within this context that Sabine Eckmann emphasizes Ernst’s personal mythology, by means of which the artist compensates for “geopolitical displacement” through the “thematization of a retreat into the private realm.”<sup>26</sup>

Two amorphous figures, between which a bizarre stele reaches upward, dominate the animated landscape. They are located on a cliff before a glassy sea; the low horizon and the azure blue sky intensify the impression of nature’s vastness and the seclusion its two inhabitants. Despite possessing the facial features of a horse, the figure on the left is easily identifiable as Napoleon, with characteristic pose, headdress and diminutive body size. His bulging eyes are on level with the exposed genitals of his oversized female counterpart, whose red costume is overgrown with corals and shells. Who could this mysterious Galatea be? With her statuesque appearance and her drapery that exposes more than it veils, she is reminiscent of the Venus de Milo. With her right hand the colossal figure raises a vegetal, saxophone-like wind instrument to her lips; a bat-like monster is nestled in the instrument’s bell.



Fig. 4. Max Ernst (1891-1976) © ARS, NY. *Napoleon in the Wilderness*, 1941, Oil on canvas, 46.3×38 cm. Purchase and Exchange. (12.1942) The Museum of Modern Art. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

Is Napoleon's muse perhaps an allegory for jazz-loving America? Is she a chimera like the one the artist describes in his visual poem *First Memorable Conversation with the Chimera* of 1942?<sup>27</sup> Or is this Ernst's "Bride of the Wind," the former lover Leonora Carrington, while he himself, as the figure of Napoleon, represents the absent

lover?<sup>28</sup> In her rust-red costume the female figure evokes the work *Bird Superior, Portrait of Max Ernst* which Carrington painted in 1939, in which she depicts her then lover in a red fur coat in a similarly unreal landscape.<sup>29</sup>

Like so many of the works of Max Ernst, *Napoleon in the Wilderness* remains an enigmatic one, despite the fact that the artist reveals its purported pictorial clue to us: when he visited the National Gallery in Washington D.C. shortly after finishing the painting, he came across Piero de Cosimo's *Allegory* (circa 1500) to which his painting does, in fact, bear an uncanny resemblance in both composition and iconography. Take, for example, the winged, allegorical figure that holds the reins of the agitated stallion and is thus interpreted as the personification of chasteness, and the swimming siren in the foreground that beckons with her song.<sup>30</sup> Ernst's turbulent relationships with women are also given a unique interpretation in an idiosyncratic photograph by Lee Miller, which depicts Ernst in 1946 with his third wife Dorothea Tanning in the red rock desert along Sedona's Oak Creek (see McAra, Fig. 7). Its motivic affinity to *Napoleon in the Wilderness*, produced five years earlier, is obvious. In Miller's photograph the balance of power between the sexes seems to have been reversed: Ernst appears as the overpowering figure under whose dominance Tanning takes on Lilliputian dimensions. As if the twin of the tongued monster nestled in the bell of the wind instrument, a creature emerges from the sea in the distance of Ernst's painting. It reminds us of the chimera described by Hugo in his *Travailleurs de la mer*. Through violently surreal images the writer confronts the reader with his own fears:

At certain moments one would be tempted to think that the un-graspable that floats in our dreams finds in the possibility of things magnets for whom these lineaments take themselves, and from these obscure fixations of dreams there emerge beings. The unknown takes control of the marvelous and uses it to create the monstrous.

One should be careful when facing such a kraken in the sea—for that is precisely what Hugo, with the precision of a marine biologist, subsequently describes.<sup>31</sup>

A possible interpretation of the phallic stalagmite in the center of the picture also appears. Is it a totem pole and thus a reference to the Native American culture that had fascinated Ernst since his trip through Arizona and New Mexico with Peggy, her daughter Pegeen, and his son Jimmy in August/September of 1941? It is there where the “powerful red-ochre of the earth” magically attracted him and he discovered “rock formations that reminded him of the most disparate things.”<sup>32</sup> Is it a symbol for humanity, martyred by the war, persecution, and the Holocaust? Is it a miniature version of the *Colonne de la Grande Armée* erected by Napoleon in 1804 as a reminder of the planned invasion of England? Or is it an allusion to the pillar of salt into which Lot's wife ossified when, also fleeing (!), she looked back, since in 1941 Ernst paints *Lot's Daughter* (private collection). As with the painting's two hybrid

figures, the stele is also osmotically melded to the amorphous landscape of rock and coral, which the painter created with his idiosyncratic decalomania technique. When viewing the “bewildering transmogrifications” described by Henry Miller in the special issue of the magazine *View* dedicated to the work of Max Ernst,<sup>33</sup> Hugo’s fantastical descriptions of grottos again come to mind, with their bizarre rock formations overgrown with algae and mussels.<sup>34</sup>

It is a reasonable assumption that Ernst viewed Victor Hugo as a kindred spirit during the creation of this work, for there existed an aesthetic and—especially in the case of Ernst—a technical affinity between surrealist art and Hugo’s literary and graphic art, his creative process, and his understanding of nature.<sup>35</sup> “Hugo is a surrealist when he’s not being a dolt”; with these words André Breton declared Hugo one of the movement’s progenitors in the first “Manifeste du surréalisme.” In the thirties and forties his fate also made him a politically symbolic figure. The literary periodical *Europe* published a special issue on Hugo in 1935 in which André Chamson opens his essay “Hugo de l’exil” with the programmatic sentence, “I think about the exiled Hugo. This is not a consideration out of time.” At the same time Chamson reminds us of a semantic level; it is a consequence of this very same oppressive reality that an artist in exile cannot be silenced when he makes the natural environment around him speak: “This taking possession of the elementary powers—the sea, the sky, what the eye sees... is its true revenge.”<sup>36</sup> We know that Breton read the book *Hugo et les illumines de son temps* published in 1942, in which the author Auguste Viatte compared Hugo’s exile with that of Napoleon—“He will transfigure Guernsey right up to turning it into another Saint Helena”—and investigated “the metaphysical activity of the exiled man.”<sup>37</sup> Quite possibly, Ernst was also familiar with Viatte’s book; in any case, he was aware of the iconography whereby Napoleon looks out over the endless ocean from his cliff on Saint Helena.<sup>38</sup>

We can thus confidently compare Napoleon’s fate with that of the artist who portrays himself as a “foreigner” while the unreal and inhospitable landscape appears as the “synonym for the exile, for the foreign land,” as Julia Drost suggests.<sup>39</sup> Ernst, in fact, experienced life in the wilderness of the American Southwest as a special form of exile, where he could exchange “the moral loneliness of the cities with the real loneliness of the landscape of Arizona.”<sup>40</sup> In the aforementioned interview from 1946 the artist went on to explain that the painting however emerged under the influence of the most recent history: “I had just come from Europe and dictators. The final painting is possibly an unconscious expression of my feelings at the time; for its central figure is not a triumphal Napoleon, but a Napoleon in the wilderness on St. Helena in exile and defeat.”<sup>41</sup> This kind of historical interpretation of the painting is convincing when one realizes that the charismatic statesman and general received sustained attention at the outbreak of the Second World War from the American public and historiography. Comparisons between him and the contemporary despot Adolf Hitler were made repeatedly.<sup>42</sup> The surrealist critic

Nicolas Calas, who also emigrated, linked this discussion directly to the work *Napoleon in the Wilderness* when he first published an image of the painting in the magazine *Art News* and made reference to an article in the *New York Times* which compared Napoleon to Hitler.<sup>43</sup>

### *Transplantation*

The significance this small-format painting (measuring only 46.3×38 cm.) might have had for Ernst can be deduced through its prominent provenance and reception. Shortly after its completion it became part of Peggy Guggenheim's collection; apparently it was among the works that the artist used to pay his benefactress for his ticket into freedom. However, it stayed there for just a short time. On July 29, 1942 it was presented in the exhibition "New Acquisitions and Loans by Picasso, Van Gogh, Ernst and others" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>44</sup> But how did it find its way from a private collection into the museum? The transfer was, indeed, quite unusual, for Guggenheim exchanged it for the Suprematist work *Untitled* (circa 1916) by Kasimir Malevich on July, 1942, after lengthy negotiations with Barr. The museum director had obtained the Malevich in 1935 on a trip through Germany while preparing the exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art" with Alexander Dorner in Hanover. He smuggled it out of Germany rolled up in an umbrella. Initially this work was to be traded for Ernst's still life *The Harmonious Breakfast*, but Barr then made the deal with *Napoleon in the Wilderness*.<sup>45</sup> Did Peggy part with the painting because she recognized her own personal chimera Leonora in the female figure? After her breakup with Ernst she did, in fact, sell off a few works such as *The Stolen Mirror* (1941) that made reference to their private relationship. Prior to this Ernst had showed the painting in his solo exhibition at the Valentine Gallery in March/April, 1942; James Thrall Soby saw it there and recommended its acquisition to "Chick" Austin, the director of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, "for \$700, \$800, tops."<sup>46</sup> The following spring it was shown together with *Europe after the Rain II* at the Institute of Modern Art in Boston as part of the exhibition "Europe in America"; the show's catalogue picks up on Ernst's unique depiction of nature.<sup>47</sup>

The success story of *Napoleon in the Wilderness* exemplifies the presence of exiled surrealist artists in American exhibitions, museums and private collections.<sup>48</sup> Here one should mention, in addition to Peggy Guggenheim's gallery Art of the Century, the efforts of Alfred Barr, Jr. at MoMA as well as the gallery owners Julien Levy and Pierre Matisse. As a result of their efforts a provocative debate began in the media on the impact of exile on both the arriving and the native artists. The self-awareness of the emigrants was confronted on the other side of the ocean with the perceptions of otherness from those receiving them. Leading the way in the discussion surrounding the transplanted talents was the article "School of Paris comes to U.S." in the journal *Decision* edited by Klaus Mann, in which Sidney Janis



Fig. 5. *The MAXES Confront the ERNSTS*, photomontage in Sidney Janis, "School of Paris comes to the U.S.," *Decision* (November/December, 1941)

lists all of the exiled artists living in New York at the end of 1941 who are profiting from the "impetus they have gained from their new environment." In the article he highlights Fernand Léger, Piet Mondrian, Roberto Matta and Ernst. He also includes the photomontage *The MAXES Confront the ERNSTS* (Fig. 5) in which we see the artist in his New York atelier in front of his pictures, among them *Napoleon in the Wilderness* on an easel.<sup>49</sup> Ernst, who upon his arrival traveled through the southern states before deciding to move to New York and who, in his own words, tried "to assimilate," was invoked in many articles as a prime example of an exiled artist.<sup>50</sup> For the author of the article "Transplanted Talent" in *Art Digest* it was of national interest to observe "the effect of the émigrés on our native stock of artists." At the same time one should analyze how Ernst might, for example, "react to his matter-of-fact, sane new environment."<sup>51</sup> Similarly H. Felix Kraus investigates such mutual influence in a 1942 article about "French Moderns in America," asking "how they will influence their new surroundings, and how these surroundings will influence them."<sup>52</sup> *Napoleon in the Wilderness*, "a painting that had been visible inside him and which the California sun brought out," was reproduced in this article as well. Also taking part in the discussion on the integration, acculturation and impact of exiled artists were those directly effected. In 1946 James Johnson Sweeney published

interviews with “Eleven Europeans in America.” Ernst’s opening statement is in his typical, self-confident style: “For me it does not matter whether I work in the United States or in Europe.” When one recalls his remarks on *Napoleon in the Wilderness*, in which he himself refers to the European dictatorships, this assertion comes across as the lip service of a defiant artist who claims to create his art unaffected by cathartic moments in life and history.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly nationalistic tones resonated within the essential question in the debate—to what extent the new arrivals influenced the American art scene. When Pierre Matisse organized the exhibition “Artists in Exile” in March of 1942, James Thrall Soby, in his contribution to the exhibition catalogue, pondered whether the presence of the European avant-garde in the U.S. led to a “new internationalism in art” or whether xenophobic circles would now insist on bringing “rigid standards of nationalism to the arts.”<sup>54</sup> Considering twelve sought after artists in American exile, the magazine *Fortune*’s critics reflected on the exodus of European intellectuals to the U.S. and asked whether “Europe’s transplanted culture will flourish here with a vigor of its own, or languish for lack of acceptance, or hybridize with American culture, or simply perish from the earth.”<sup>55</sup> In any case, one had to consider this moment to be a historical caesura: “This is a transplantation of a whole culture from one continent to another.” The discussion of the *transplanted talents* attests to the fact that the historical participants in the debate were already reflecting on the impact of the exiled artists on their own works and on the works of others—long before transnational cultural exchange, acculturation and otherness had become foci of exile-research, long before Vilém Flusser questioned the freedom of the migrant and described exile as aesthetic inspiration, and long before R.B. Kitaj formulated his “First Manifest of Diasporism.”

An emperor, a writer and a painter—although their stories played out in completely different epochs and under completely disparate circumstances, they are united by historical analogy. The trans-epochal cross-fading of their biographies visualizes how Napoleon, Victor Hugo and Max Ernst were forced into exile by the caesuras of history and by the new rulers in their native countries. They experienced this as a kind of wilderness, as *être d’ailleurs*, as being from elsewhere. Seen metaphorically, the crossing of water and the wild cliffs above the sea denotes the distance from, and also the longing for, the lost homeland; they symbolize dislocation as well as identification. Napoleon was permanently barred from all political activity, which left him with nothing to do but to write his memoirs. For Hugo and Ernst, the distance and wildness of their surroundings, equally concrete and emblematic, opened up the possibility for a new creative phase in their lives.

Napoleon was to leave Saint Helena once more. In the fall of 1840 his remains were brought back to France on the frigate *Belle Poule* and interred in the Dôme des Invalides. On September 5, 1870, after Léon Gambetta had proclaimed the beginning of the Third Republic, Victor Hugo returned to Paris after nineteen

years and one day in exile and published his *Discours de l'Exil*. Max Ernst and his wife Dorothea Tanning remained in the U.S. until 1953 before they returned—not to Germany, however, but to Paris.

Translated by David Blumberg

I would have failed in my search for Max Ernst in the wilderness without the help of Julia Drost. The present text is an expanded version of the essay: “Transplanted Talent. Max Ernst in the Wilderness,” in *Passagen des Exils / Passages of Exile*, eds. Burcu Dogramaci and Elizabeth Otto [*Exilforschung. Ein internationales Jahrbuch*, Vol. 35 (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2017), 211-229].

1 Cited in Georges Bordonove, *La vie quotidienne de Napoléon en route vers Saint-Hélène* (Paris: Hachette, 1977), 135. See Albert Benhamou, *L'autre Sainte-Hélène. La captivité, la maladie, la mort, et les médecins autour de Napoléon* (London: Hemel Hempstead: Albert Benhamou, 2010).

2 Emmanuel Las Cases, *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène, ou Journal où se trouve consigné, jour par jour, ce qu'a dit et fait Napoléon durant dix-huit mois*, Vol. I, (Paris: Depot du Memorial, 1823), 149.

3 William Warden, *Extraits de lettres écrites pendant la traversée de Spithead à Sainte-Hélène et durant quelques mois de séjour dans cette île* (Paris: Gide fils, 1817), 41.

4 See Warden, 43: “He was determined to go to America and establish himself on the banks of some great river where he expected a number of Bonapartists would soon join him.”

5 Las Cases, 74.

6 Las Cases, 298.

7 “A descriptive sketch of the Island of St. Helena,” in *The Observer*, October 29, 1815.

8 Las Cases, 299.

9 Quoted in Françoise Heilbrun and Danielle Molinari, eds., *Victor Hugo: Photographies de l'exil* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay and Maison de Victor Hugo, 1998), 55.

10 Victor Hugo, *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, Vol. I (Paris: Albert Lacroix et Cie, 1866), vi.

11 Hugo, 21.

12 Auguste Vacquerie, quoted in Heilbrun and Molinari, *Victor Hugo*, 47 (no source given).

13 See Eva Weissweiler, *Notre Dame de Dada Luise Straus. Das dramatische Leben der ersten Frau von Max Ernst* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2016).

14 Varian Fry and Daniel Benedicte to Max Ernst, November 19, 1940; Washington D. C., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The International Rescue Committee Collection, 1940–1945, #1991.242.

15 Max Ernst to Daniel Benedicte, November 25, 1940; Washington D. C., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The International Rescue Committee Collection, 1940–1945, #1991.242.

16 Telegram of the ERC New York to the ERC Marseille, January 14, 1941; Washington D. C., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The International Rescue Committee Collection, 1940–1945, #1991.242.

17 Daniel Benedicte to Max Ernst, January 14, 1941; Washington D. C., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The International Rescue Committee Collection, 1940–1945, #1991.242.

18 J. Gemahling to Max Ernst, January 25, 1941; Washington D. C., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The International Rescue Committee Collection, 1940–1945, #1991.242.

19 Max Ernst, “Biographische Notizen (Wahrheitsgewebe und Lügengewebe)” [1962]; quoted in Werner Spies, ed. *Max Ernst: Retrospektive* (Munich: Haus der Kunst / Nationalgalerie Berlin, 1979), 167.

20 Unitarian Service Committee Lissabon to the ERC Marseille, May 5, 1941; Washington D. C., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The International Rescue Committee Collection, 1940–

1945, #1991.242.

21 Werner Spies, ed., *Max Ernst, Leben und Werk* (Cologne: DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, 2005), 159.

22 Quoted in Ernst, “Biographische Notizen,” Werner Spies, ed. *Max Ernst: Retrospektive*, 168. For more on ship journeys into exile in the 1930s/40s see: Martin Schieder, “The transatlantic crossing by ship into exile during World War II. From heterotopic experience to aesthetic reflection,” Uwe Fleckner, ed., *Der Künstler in der Fremde. Migration – Reise – Exil* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 283–305; Martin Schieder, “Die Überfahrt als Daseinsmetapher. Auf dem *Navio de emigrantes* von Lasar Segall,” Burcu Dogramaci, ed., *Kunsttopographien globaler Migration: Orte und Räume transitorischer Kunsterfahrung (kritische berichte, 2/2015)*: 39–49.

23 Jimmy Ernst, *A Not-so-still Life. A Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s/Marek, 1984), 213–214.

24 See Werner Spies, Sigrid and Günter Metken, eds., *Max Ernst. Werke 1939-1953*, Vol. V, No. 2381 (Cologne: DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, 1987), 40.

25 Max Ernst in “Eleven Europeans in America,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, Vol. 13, No. 4/5 (1946): 16.

26 Sabine Eckmann, “Exil und Modernismus. Theoretische und methodische Überlegungen zum künstlerischen Exil der 1930er- und 1940er-Jahre,” in Burcu Dogramaci, ed., *Migration und künstlerische Produktion* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014), 23.

27 Max Ernst, “First Memorable Conversation with the Chimera,” *VVV*, No. 1 (June 1942), 17.

28 Two illustrations, that Ernst made in 1938 for Carrington’s *La maison de peur*, show Chimeras with a horseheads. In Ernst’s erotic *Préface ou Loplop présente la Mariée du vent* Loplop encounters the mythical creature, while in Carrington’s Novelle the horse appears as a metaphor for the absent lover.

29 See Karoline Hille, *Gefährliche Musen. Frauen um Max Ernst* (Berlin: Edition Ebersbach, 2007); <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/impressionist-modern-art-evening-sale-n09497/lot.4.html> (January 12, 2018).

30 See: Ernst, “Eleven Europeans in America,” 16; Gretchen A. Hirschauer, Farnham et al. eds., *Piero di Cosimo. The Poetry of Painting in Renaissance Florence* (Washington and Florence: National Gallery of Art / Galleria degli Uffizi, 2015), 154.

31 Hugo, 203: “A grayish form oscillates in the water; it’s fat like an arm and about half a yard long; This form resembles a chiffon, a closed umbrella that doesn’t have a handle. The wreck advances towards you bit by bit. Suddenly it opens, eight rays part brusquely around a face that has two eyes; these rays are alive; there is flamboyance in their undulation. It is a sort of wheel; opened up it is four or five feet in diameter.”

32 Ernst, “Biographische Notizen,” Spies, ed. *Max Ernst: Retrospektive*, 172. See Samantha Kavky, “Max Ernst in Arizona: Myth, Mimesis, and the Hysterical Landscape,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 57–58 (2010): 209–228.

33 Henry Miller, “Another Bright Messenger,” *View* (Max Ernst issue) 2nd series, no. 1 (April 1942), 17.

34 Hugo, 74: “Under this vegetation hidden and exposed all at once, the rarest jewels of the ocean’s jewel box, all kinds of mollusks, conchs, turban snails, tower snails, whelks, ostrich foot snails... This rock, in some cases a wall, in some cases an arch, in some cases the bow of a ship or a buttress, is in some cases crude and naked, then right by, it is tooled in the most natural and delicate carving ... The artiste and the abyss... It was the meeting of the savage and the silversmith, the formal and the shapeless architecture of chance.”

35 See Vincent Gille, ed., *La cime du rêve. Victor Hugo et le surréalisme* (Paris: Maison de Victor Hugo, 2013); Vincent Gille, “*Oui, soit. Victor Hugo et le surréalisme*,” in Julia Drost and Scarlett Reliquet, eds., *Le splendide XIXe siècle des surréalistes* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2014), 55–84, 72. See also André Breton, Manuscrit autographe signé, May 7, 1936: “Certain sketches by Victor Hugo, in the way they interest us, seem to bear witness to systematic research: there presides in the completely involuntary

mechanical data, a power of suggestion without equal that is entirely expected.” <http://www.andrebretton.fr/work/56600100596170> (January 12, 2018).

36 André Chamson, “Hugo de l’exil,” *Europe* 150/15 (June 1935), 88–92, *passim*.

37 Auguste Viatte, *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* (Paris: Montréal: Éd. de l’Arbre, 1942), 130 and 134.

38 Napoleon’s image appears as early as 1934 on the panel *Le Lion de Belfort* in the first notebook of Ernst’s collage-novel *Une Semaine de Bonté ou Les Sept éléments capitaux*. There it already symbolizes the incarnation of the dictator and the nascent danger of the Third Reich.

39 Julia Drost, “Europas neue Nomaden – Max Ernst zwischen Welterkundung und Vertreibung,” in Heinz Duchhardt, ed., *Jahrbuch für Europäische Geschichte*, Vol. XI (Munich: Institut für Europäische Geschichte, 2010), 139–159, (p. 152). In 1937, when the national socialist exhibition *Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art)* opened in Munich, Ernst had already painted the encoded self-portrait *Max Ernst in the Wilderness* (oil on cardboard, private collection) using his “Abklatschverfahren” (Decalcomanie).

40 Quoted in Jürgen Pech, “Max Ernst in America. The Years in Exile,” in Werner Spies, ed., *Max Ernst. Dream and Revolution* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Stockholm and Humlebaek: Moderna Museet and Modern Museet Louisiana, 2008), 161. See Max Ernst to Richard Oelze, November 30, no year given [1950], Kunsthalle Bremen, Richard Oelze-Archiv: “I am now living in Arizona, the Wild West, and like it very much there. It is the most magnificent landscape you could imagine, and the climate is wonderful. I will be staying here in Paris until spring (or summer) and will then return to the wilderness for a year.” Quoted in Renate Wiehager, “‘Ich bin Surrealist’ – Richard Oelze in Paris 1933 bis 1936,” in *Richard Oelze. Die Söhne des Jungesellen. Einzelgänger des Surrealismus*, ed. Christine Hopfengart (Stuttgart: Kunsthalle Bremen, 2000), 45.

41 Ernst in “Eleven Europeans in America,” 16.

42 See *Letters from the Corsican*. A series of communications from Napoleon Bonaparte to Adolf Hitler, New York 1940; Hans Kohn, *Revolutions and dictatorships. Essays in contemporary history* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941).

43 Nicolas Calas, “Incurable and Curable Romantics,” *Art News* (December 1–14, 1941), 26–28 and 39–40, *passim*: “While Napoleon remained a Classic with a Humanist background, Hitler is Romantic. But why, when France tried to conquer the world did she need to have as a leader a Classic-minded ruler, while Germany in the same situation looks toward a Romantic Führer?” Calas referred to the article *Napoleon and Hitler*, which appeared on March 23, 1941 in the *New York Times* and in which it was stated: “Historians have not failed to point out that the Napoleonic wars strikingly resemble that in which Hitler is now engaged,” at this point the painting was still located in the “Collection of the artist.”

44 From the MoMA’s press release on July 29, 1942: “Max Ernst, the German-born painter who worked for many years in France but is now established in this country. The painting, *Napoleon in the Wilderness*, was done in 1941 after the artist’s arrival here, and was included in the one-man show given Ernst by the Valentine Gallery this spring” (New York, Museum of Modern Art, Archive). The *New York Times* noted at that time: “The third acquisition is ‘Napoleon in the Wilderness,’ by Max Ernst, who was born in Germany, became prominently identified with the modern Ecole de Paris, and is now living in America. The present canvas was painted after Ernst’s arrival here. Napoleon is portrayed, from the neck up, as a donkey; and after that metamorphosis almost anything, one supposes, could happen in the wilderness.” Edward Alden Jewell, “Modern Museum opens new show,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 1942, 15.

45 See Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection* (Venice and New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1985), 476. In a photograph of the exhibition “Objects, Drawings, Photographs, Paintings, Sculpture, Collages, 1910-1942” in the Gallery Art of this Century one can see Malevich’s painting hanging, incorrectly rotated 180 degrees.

46 James Thrall Soby to A. Everett “Chick” Austin Jr., March 27, 1942, Wadsworth Atheneum

- Museum of Art in Hartford; I thank Oliver Tostmann for the reference; Exhibition Catalogue Max Ernst Vallentine Gallery, in Max Ernst number, *View*, 2nd series, no. 1 (April 1942), 18–19, No. 24.
- 47 Philip C. Johnson, “Europe in America: Berman,” exhibition brochure (Boston: The Institute of Modern Art, 1943), “Ernst in Napoleon in the Wilderness (no. 9) combines, with weird effect, spontaneous drawing of luxuriant nature with meticulous though dream-like, realism.”
- 48 Julia Drost, Fabrice Flahutez, Anne Helmreich and Martin Schieder, eds., *Networking Surrealism in the USA. Artists, Agents and the Market*, (Paris: Passagen Online, 2019).
- 49 Sidney Janis, “School of Paris comes to U.S.,” *Decision* Vol. II, No. 5-6 (November–December 1941): 85.
- 50 Ernst, “Biographische Notizen,” Spies, ed. *Max Ernst: Retrospektive*, 168.
- 51 Peyton Boswell, “Transplanted Talent,” *Art Digest* (November 1, 1942): 3.
- 52 H. Felix Kraus, “French Moderns in America,” *The Studio* (May 1942): 136.
- 53 Ernst in “Eleven Europeans in America,” 16.
- 54 James Thrall Soby, “Europe,” *Artists in Exile*, Exhibition Catalog, (New York: Pierre Matisse, 1942).
- 55 “The Great Flight of Culture. Twelve Artists in U.S. Exile,” *Fortune* (December 1941): 102.