

## 6. A view from the margins of history

Histories are as perfect as the Historian is wise, and is gifted with an eye and a soul! [...] The Art of History [is to] distinguish well what does still reach to the surface, and is alive and frondent for us; and what reaches no longer to the surface, but moulders safe underground, never to send forth leaves or fruit for mankind any more: of the former we shall rejoice to hear; to hear of the latter will be an affliction to us; of the latter only Pedants and Dullards, and disastrous malefactors to the world, will find good to speak. By wise memory and by wise oblivion: it lies all there! Without oblivion, there is no remembrance possible. When both oblivion and memory are wise, when the general soul of man is clear, melodious, true, there may come a modern *Iliad* as memorial of the Past (Carlyle 1845: I/9).

### 6.1 Introduction

Gance's desire for factual credence is highly visible in *NAPOLÉON*, but his numerous historical citations have often been seen as 'a misguided attempt to invoke the mantle of authority' (Abel 1984: 432). Indeed, Gance later thought his fundamental 'error' in *NAPOLÉON* was 'the abuse of documentation': 'I lost popular appeal in trying to be accurate and searching for authentic detail. The power of *LA ROUE* and *J'ACCUSE* resides in the absence of the authenticated' (1928d). Yet these 'unauthenticated' elements of *NAPOLÉON* were often the first targets of those wishing to reduce the film's immense length. This was particularly the case with the fictional Fleuri family: the scenes involving Tristan, Violine, and Marcellin have suffered the most from deliberate excision and derisive critical consideration. After attending an early preview screening, Jean Arroy urged Gance to cut the majority of material involving the Fleuris (Brownlow [1983] 2004: 135). Gance followed this advice in preparing his film for the Opéra but later reinstated their scenes in the longer Apollo prints. Given the choice between these two divergent editions (and numerous other incomplete prints), modern restorers have often disregarded the Fleuris during the process of reconstruction.

Despite the best efforts of editors and Bonaparte's stubborn blindness to them, the Fleuris remain embedded in the textual substance of *NAPOLÉON* – perennially struggling to make their presence known. These characters demonstrate the playful interaction of humour and pathos, of fact and

fiction, which is so crucial to understanding Gance's film as a whole. Their relationship with Bonaparte forms an important link between the 'great man' and the forgotten figures of history, as well as the connection between characters and audience. In Marco Ferro's terms, Gance balances the lofty perspective of epic history with the 'counterweight' of an everyday history 'seen from below' (1977: 73). It is this relationship between the 'great' and the 'little' within NAPOLÉON that I will explore in this chapter.

## 6.2 Oblivion and remembrance

For all that my study has thus far concentrated on grandiloquent conceptions of world destiny, it is essential to note Romantic writers' concerns with the neglected levels of factual detail underpinning human history. Hugo fills an entire chapter of *Les Misérables* with a vast list of seemingly unimportant information relating to France in the year his narrative is set; he titles this section of the book simply: 'The Year 1817'. Even to readers in 1862, this epic jumble of fragmentary evidence was utterly obscure. Hugo was making a deliberate point by interrupting his narrative for a chapter of pure 'history':

History neglects all these minutiae: it cannot do otherwise; infinity would engulf it. Nevertheless, these details, which are incorrectly termed little (there being neither little facts in humanity nor little leaves in vegetation), are useful. It is the physiognomy of the years that makes up the face of the century (1862: I/292).

These ideas about the importance of 'insignificant' aspects of the past are as concerned with human beings as with abstract details. Though his work often vindicated the role of the 'great man' in history, Carlyle admitted that the 'worthiest' individual act is often 'the least spoken of' by historians and that 'it lies in the nature of events to be so' (1833: 586-7). Like Carlyle, Gance seeks to acknowledge the 'worthy' unknown figures of the past in NAPOLÉON – the Fleuri family is exemplary of this desire. The importance of these characters is obvious from Gance's 1923 outline for his six-film Napoleonic cycle. The Fleuris' story is designed to humanize the grandiose narrative and to cement a relationship between audiences and the inhabitants of the past:

While portraying great and recognized truths, I am also introducing a forceful human element into my film [...] which will perhaps make an

even greater appeal to the heart than the revealed truths will make to the mind [...]

[From their] humble positions [...] two pairs of the most vigilant, attentive, and devoted eyes watch every phase of the great tragedy. [Tristan and Violine] will also serve as connecting links throughout [...] the various events of the Empire, which might otherwise be rather confusing to the spectator (Gance 1923a).

Throughout the six films, Tristan and Violine were to honour Bonaparte with an admiration whose 'strength and nobility' were 'to touch the deepest chords in the audiences' hearts' (ibid.). Having met the child Bonaparte at Brienne, Tristan develops a 'profound spirit of love and sacrifice' for his idol as an adult. Unbeknownst to him, however, Violine falls romantically in love with Bonaparte when she meets him in Paris. So deep is her infatuation that she attempts suicide after Bonaparte's marriage in March 1796 – only to be rescued by the wife of her beloved. Whilst Violine becomes Joséphine's maid in Paris, Tristan becomes Bonaparte's valet during the campaign in Italy. As a servant, Tristan is shy and stammers hopelessly when addressing his master; however, at night he goes out in disguise to perform daring raids on the Austrian army. Always vanishing before his identity can be revealed, Tristan's heroic alter ego becomes known as the 'Phantom Grenadier'. He is eventually joined in Italy by Violine, whose romantic obsession with Bonaparte is discovered by her mistress. Just as Joséphine promises not to reveal Violine's secret after her dismissal, so Violine now promises not to reveal that Tristan is the Phantom Grenadier.

Gance planned for these two figures to follow in the footsteps of Bonaparte's career, but always at a distance. Tristan is of too lowly a status to attend his hero's imperial coronation in December 1804; instead, he watches a recreation-in-miniature of the ceremony – 'weeping for joy' as he beholds the marionettes on their decorative stage (ibid.). As the Phantom Grenadier, Tristan goes on to earn the prestigious *Légion d'Honneur* at the Battle of Austerlitz in December 1805, but he daren't come forward to claim his medal – 'Fate seems to be against him' ever earning recognition. When Bonaparte divorces Joséphine in 1810 and marries the Austrian princess Marie-Louise, Violine is left distraught – her infatuation is 'slowly killing her' (ibid.). The 'turning wheel of war' once more drags both Fleuris into Bonaparte's final military campaigns. During the invasion of Russia in 1812, Violine's emotional and physical health declines. In what was to be 'one of the most moving passages of the film', she dies of exhaustion during the disastrous winter retreat: 'her hopeless love finally fulfilled what had long

been inevitable'. She wishes to see Bonaparte, so Tristan dresses as the Emperor and pretends to be her idol, 'giving Violine the vision she craves'. Bonaparte happens to pass by and 'his eagle glance falls on the figure of his double'; he is initially angry, but when he sees the emotion on Tristan's face and the valet explains the situation, he realizes Violine's devotion. He takes her hands and 'kisses them reverentially', allowing the girl to die happy (ibid.).

At the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815, Tristan appears as the Phantom Grenadier in daylight. Advancing with the elite Imperial Guard at the climax of the battle, he is wounded in their last stand; his identity is finally revealed and Bonaparte decorates him in the dying moments of the battle. Tristan then accompanies Bonaparte into exile on St Helena, where the two men become close friends. In May 1821, Tristan dresses in his old uniform for the last time – it is 'the supreme moment' of 'the dying eagle'. Knowing that Bonaparte is moments from death, Tristan breaks free of the British guards and rushes towards the island's highest cliff. Crying out 'Long live the Emperor!', he throws himself into the sea at the very moment Bonaparte passes away (ibid.).

When Gance began writing the full screenplay of his first episodes in 1924, he devoted more time to a third member of the Fleuri family: Tristan's son, Marcellin. An important variation on the 1923 outline, this child was to provide a further level of emotional engagement with audiences. In one draft of the screenplay dealing with the climax of the Italian campaign in November 1796, Bonaparte's victory at Arcole is offset by the death of Marcellin, who is killed during the battle. A miraculous military success would be poignantly undercut by Tristan and Violine mourning the loss of this small child (1924c).

Clear from his plans of 1923 and 1924 is that Gance wanted to devote as large a proportion of the narrative to the Fleuris' lives as to the biography of Bonaparte. When he cast the role of Tristan in 1924, he chose a figure who was very popular with contemporary audiences: Nicolas Koline. This highly experienced actor had built his career on the stage at the Moscow Art Theatre and earned the approval of its legendary founder, Konstantin Stanislavski (V.R. 1923: 9). Leaving Russia during the country's bloody Civil War, Koline arrived in Paris and began working in the film industry alongside other émigrés, such as Viacheslav Tourjansky, Alexander Volkoff, and Ivan Mosjoukine. Though capable of dramatic characterizations, his most common part was that of a confidant/sidekick to the lead character; his ability to imbue comedy with pathos in such roles had earned Koline comparisons with Charlie Chaplin in the French press (Brownlow [1983] 2004: 39). Prior

to *NAPOLÉON*, Gance had earmarked the Russian to play Sancho Panza alongside the American actor Frank Keenan as Don Quixote in a cinematic adaptation of Miguel de Cervantes' famous novel (1924h). Tristan's low social rank and marginalized relationship with the lead character would be an extension of such a part as well as of the actor's earlier roles.

Gance initially wanted to recruit the famous American actress Lillian Gish for the 'splendid part' of *Violine* (1925b), but when this proved impossible he sought another foreign star. The English actress Mabel Poulton had entered the film industry on the basis of her resemblance to Gish, playing Gish's character in a live prologue to screenings of D.W. Griffith's *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* (1919) in London. After meeting her in Paris, Gance felt that Poulton's 'virginal eyes' were perfect for *Violine*; however, no sooner had he made his choice than his producers demanded the part should be played by a French actress (Brownlow 1994: 28). As a result of this confusion, *Violine* was still uncast when the production of *NAPOLÉON* moved to Corsica in the spring of 1925. Among those present on location was Suzanne Charpentier, who had been cast as Bonaparte's sister Eliza. When she was replaced in this minor role by Yvette Dieudonné (wife of Albert), Charpentier was sent back to Paris and discovered that Gance now wanted her to play the major part of *Violine*. Though he had been seeking a famous face for this role, he settled on an entirely unknown actress – Charpentier only turned eighteen in July 1925 and had never before appeared on screen. The director was clearly captivated by her beauty and would treat 'his Lillian Gish' with exquisite soft-focus photography (Brownlow [1983] 2004: 79–80). Indeed, Gance 'rechristened' Charpentier as Annabella in honour of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Annabel Lee' – one of the filmmaker's favourite poems (Kaplan 1994: 26).

Gance's idolization repeated his fixation with the English actress Ivy Close, whom he had cast as Norma in *LA ROUE*. This character inadvertently inspires the love of her adoptive father and brother – a situation later mimicked outside the film's narrative when Gance proposed to Close. Included in Blaise Cendrars's documentary *AUTOUR DE LA ROUE* (1923) is footage shot by Gance of Close as Norma; three shots linked by dissolves bring her face ever closer to the viewer, blurring the boundaries between fictional and authorial fascination. In *NAPOLÉON*, the main character of Bonaparte is unaware of the peripheral *Violine* – only the camera pays attention to Annabella's beauty. The actress's namesake in 'Annabel Lee' is killed by a wind that 'came out of the cloud by night' and gives her a deathly chill (1849: 2), just as *Violine* would be destined for a wintery demise. The narrator of Poe's poem also boasts that nothing can ever 'dissever' his soul from that of Annabel (*ibid.*); whilst this narrative denies any voice to the woman on

whom it fixates, Violine's tragedy is to be the focus of the audience's attention and excluded from that of her beloved (discussed further in chapter 7).

### 6.3 Parallel lives

As witnesses of historical and fictional events in *NAPOLÉON*, the Fleuris have the ability 'to move at will through time and space, obeying no other logic than fantasy and coincidence' (King 1984a: 153). Swapping between various ancillary jobs over the course of *NAPOLÉON*, Tristan appears as a scullion, a street cleaner, an innkeeper, a prison guard, a book clerk, a waiter, and a soldier. The low-level nature of his employment brings him into regular contact with the minutiae of historical events and figures as well as with the documentation that attempts to record and control them. This improbable access to disparate narrative events replicates the privileged position of the film's spectators; by using the Fleuris as witnesses in this way, Gance carefully emphasizes the tension between the desire to participate and the reality of distanced observation. The Fleuris' interaction with the central 'great man' involves a mixture of intimacy and isolation: whilst constantly running into Bonaparte, they never manage to communicate their existence or their love to him.

Tristan's first appearance in the film is at Brienne College, but the rest of his family are not introduced until we have met the adult Bonaparte. Whilst close-ups of every Fleuri feature in the single-frame montage of the Cordeliers sequence, no evidence survives of their appearance in the preceding scenes. Also missing are the subsequent scenes in which Tristan and Violine find themselves as Bonaparte's neighbours in an impoverished district of Paris. This excised material unfortunately contains the first meeting of Violine and Bonaparte as well as the establishment of their sharing the latter's lowly social status. By the time we meet the Fleuris again at Toulon in September 1793, over a year has passed since the aforementioned scenes: whilst they still make a meagre living as servants, Bonaparte is now a lieutenant and will soon make his reputation.

Tristan, Violine, and Marcellin have been displaced by the events of war and now run an inn on the outskirts of Toulon. In Gance's screenplay, there are a number of striking scenes which he later cut from the film. Before we are introduced to the military aspect of the siege, we were to see Violine contemplating 'the soul of Joan of Arc [...] within her' (Gance 1927b: 240). This famous medieval warrior and martyr had been invoked during the 'Insurrection of women' in October 1789, when thousands of French

women marched on Versailles to demand more food. The press compared these modern heroines of the Revolution with both Pallas Athene and the 'Maid of Orléans' (Carlyle 1837: I/356-7). Joan was hailed as a 'true saint in faith and in destiny' in the nineteenth century (Guizot 1873-6: II/331) and would achieve beatification in 1909 and canonization in 1920. In *NAPOLÉON*, Violine evokes Joan's legacy in response to the crisis of war facing France. Her flower-strewn bedroom is covered with images of 'heroic subjects', and she even has a 'crusader's sword' in a secret hiding place. Violine goes outside to pray, where she re-embodies Joan (Figure 30):

A beautiful pastoral scene at dusk. An atmosphere of intense, profound poetry arising from the gloaming, nature, the people, and the surroundings. Hundreds of sheep are passing in the same direction. An old shepherd is sleeping. Near him, Violine is fervently praying on her knees, her hands clasped, her face raised towards a huge oak tree, through which filters light from the setting sun. A bird on a branch is silhouetted in the foreground [...] Her expression is one of infinite purity and the fixed gaze of her eyes is extraordinary. Nothing moves. Only her prayer rises like incense, almost visible, so deeply does Violine feel it in her soul (Gance 1927b: 147).

Tristan approaches and sees Violine's collection of books detailing the divine mission of Joan as well as her clothing and appearance. Tristan looks at one of the illustrations, 'Joan of Arc at Domrémy' (the site of her first heavenly visitation). Praying beneath an oak, distaff by her side, sheep gathered nearby, Violine exactly resembles the image. Tristan is profoundly moved; he calls to Violine and they embrace: 'They embody the tragedy of France'. 'At all costs someone *must* save France, Papa!' she exclaims. Tristan asks if she has 'heard the voices' that Joan claimed relayed God's word to her in 1424. 'No, they haven't come yet', she replies, sadly. As they leave, both see a 'white apparition', but it is just a sheet drying between two trees. Like the pastoral scenes on Corsica, this sequence was to form a link between mythical nature and national feeling. Patriotic sentiments are pastoralized and universalized through the evocative natural setting – Violine prays before a divine nature, not simply before a nationalist icon.

Gance may have abandoned these scenes for their potentially mawkish symbolism, for the first extant scenes involving the Fleuris at Toulon are characterized by comedy that satirizes martial solemnity. Their inn functions as the meeting place of the officers of the besieging French army. When General Carreaux enters, he is preceded by a swarm of lackeys who



Fig. 30: A lost scene from *NAPOLÉON*: Violine as Joan of Arc

clear a path for their pompous commander by hurling any intervening furniture or patrons out of the way. With his bulky form, exaggerated strut, and overly plumed hat, Carteaux resembles a flightless bird whose lethargic movements will doom him to extinction. Whilst this gamy officer sits down at the only table deemed worthy of his presence, we see Tristan burst through the kitchen doorway – his wig is comically askew and his expression is somewhere between bafflement and enthusiasm. When he serves his guests, Tristan negotiates the field of debris left by Carteaux's



staff at high speed, desperately trying to keep stable his tray of drinks. Koline's ability to disguise his own perfectly rehearsed balance, poise, and timing as clumsy improvisation is brilliant throughout this scene – and crucial to our sympathy for this well-meaning character who cannot help his own clownishness.

Now Bonaparte appears in the doorway, his form outlined in striking silhouette as he pauses on the threshold before striding confidently into the inn. As if to emphasize the officer's emblematic entrance, Gance cuts to the only figures who yet recognize his importance: the Fleuris. Bonaparte's assertive appearance is a counterbalance to Tristan's own entrance into the frame earlier in the scene, and the contrast between orderliness and confusion underpins the rest of the sequence (and the wider context of the Toulon campaign itself). Bonaparte reports to General Carteaux and reveals his radical plans for the storming of the English positions. Carteaux's arrogant dismissal of the young man's ideas is interrupted by shellfire; whilst Bonaparte keeps perfectly calm, the general and his staff flee the inn.

Bonaparte is left alone and sits down at a table to study his maps. The whole Fleuri family are now left to attend him: Violine shyly keeps her distance, but Tristan and Marcellin approach the young officer. Determined to remind him of their first encounter, Tristan stammers that he was at Brienne. Without acknowledging the content of his words at all, Bonaparte replies bluntly: 'Bread, olives, and silence!' Tristan looks taken aback but dutifully obeys this command. Returning with a plate of food, he places it on Bonaparte's map, but (thanks to the bombardment) the table has a missing plank in its centre and the plate falls straight through onto the floor. Tristan fearfully starts back – instinctively saluting as Bonaparte rises in irritation and walks away. Whilst he paces the room, lost in thought, Marcellin puts on Bonaparte's discarded hat and takes up his sword. Mimicking the adult with marvellous accuracy, the child shadows Bonaparte up and down the room – delightfully replicating Bonaparte's ponderous gait and thoughtfully clasped hands behind his back. Having tried to tidy up the mess, Tristan now spots his son's actions and quickly lifts him out of the officer's path – returning the hat and sword to the table. As Bonaparte reaches the bench and sits down once more, father and son hurriedly break off their routine to salute. The officer, absorbed in his calculations, is oblivious to their comic turn.

Though Tristan is far keener to approach Bonaparte, the officer is hardly any less rude towards him than the self-absorbed Carteaux. The scene is a testament to the way in which Bonaparte will increasingly communicate to others through brusque commands rather than through an exchange

of conversation. His words 'Bread, olives, and silence' are echoed in a later scene at Toulon when he demands 'calm, order, silence' from the other officers. Bonaparte's coldness towards Tristan is part of the military orderliness that characterizes him as a military leader. By devoting so much time to his unsympathetic treatment of the sympathetic Fleuris, Gance reveals Bonaparte's growing distance from ordinary human contact.

Aside from its humorous play on Bonaparte's iconography, Gance's scene at the Toulon inn also foreshadows the repeated attempts of Marcellin and Tristan to don uniform and enact military heroics. In a scene set at Toulon called 'The mobilization of Tristan Fleuri' (now missing from prints), Tristan's hopes of a glorious military career are dashed:

A gendarme delivers an envelope to Tristan. He calls *Violine* and *Marcellin*, who run to his side. He trembles with joy. He doesn't dare open it. He eyes it greedily, and as he does so he sees:

The letter. Superimposed, a tiny general, *Tristan Fleuri*, capering absurdly. His bliss. His hands are shaking too much he can't open the envelope; he asks *Violine* to do it, who reads in astonishment: 'Citizen *Tristan Fleuri* is appointed cook to the armies of the Republic and...'

*Fleuri*. Expression like *Don Quixote's* on realizing that *Mambrino's* helmet was a barber's basin, and two tears well up in his poor eyes. He is too despondent to speak (Gance 1927b: 170-1).

*Marcellin* emerges from his room 'dragging a long sabre'. He stamps his foot in indignation at the news and then leaves. *Tristan* breaks down in tears and *Violine* tries to comfort him. Such a poignant tension between comedy and tragedy is typical of *Tristan's* increasingly desperate attempts to aid his country and his hero.

*Marcellin* also tries to involve himself with the army at Toulon. He is present in one of Bonaparte's inspection parades, where he stands in line wearing a grenadier's bearskin. Passing along the line, Bonaparte sees the child's tiny face peeking out from under this huge hat. He stops and lifts up the bearskin, thumping it down again so that the boy's whole head disappears. 'Too short!' Bonaparte bellows. He marches away, leaving *Marcellin* to cry in humiliation as the other soldiers laugh. Later, on the night of the battle, *Marcellin* has become a drummer and stands with his older comrades in the midst of a flooded mire. He asks *Moustache* (*Henry Krauss*): 'How old was the little drummer boy *Viala* when he died?' 'Thirteen', the older man replies. After counting on his fingers, *Marcellin* gleefully announces: 'What luck! I've still got six years to live!' This bleakly ironic humour undercuts the

naïve enthusiasm of his participation in war and foreshadows the child's death at Arcole, as planned in the 1924 draft screenplay.

During the battle of Toulon, Tristan and Violine remain more detached from the fighting. They help load muskets in their inn, and from their window overlooking the town Tristan links the fighting back to the snowball fight he witnessed at Brienne. This joyful recollection of childhood innocence is interrupted by the savage fighting coming ever closer to the Fleuris' distanced observation – finally, reality (in the form of armed men) spills through the window frame and transforms the spectacle into nightmarish proximity. Though the surviving montage does not show how or where the Fleuris move in/around the battlefield, we later see Marcellin trying to take part in the fighting. In a flooded field, he hides under a drum and frightens two English soldiers by moving eerily through the morass; when a drunken officer then comes and sits down on top of his instrument, Marcellin pricks the man's backside with a bayonet. Such humorous touches provide a stark contrast to the increasingly vicious scenes of hand-to-hand fighting. Tristan manages to extricate Marcellin, and he and Violine appear at the climax of the battle to witness Bonaparte's bravery. On the fringes of this momentous occasion, the Fleuris endow the officer's actions with historical value. Long before General Dugommier announces Bonaparte to be 'the victor of Toulon', it is Violine who prophesizes: 'I believe *that* man will save France!'

#### 6.4 Documentation and survival

The scenes at Toulon demonstrate the ways in which the Fleuris both observe and interact with the history around them, and these ideas are developed in the subsequent scenes set during the Terror. Among the missing scenes after the fall of Toulon, Violine narrowly escapes being executed along with hundreds of other civilians (detailed in chapter 4). Having been saved from an unwanted involvement in the events they witness, the Fleuris next appear in Paris – yet again negotiating the perils of participation.

At Les Carmes prison in 1794, Tristan appears as a prison guard who announces 'the roll call for the condemned'. His presence gives the scene an added level of emotional irony: the words of this gentle character spell imminent death, and he gulps back tears as he pronounces the name of each victim. Tristan subsequently appears as a clerk in charge of copying out the lists of the condemned. The strange underworld of this documentation room is a gloomily lit space where Tristan and his co-worker La Bussière



Fig. 31: Green-Eye oversees the listing of condemned names

(Jean d'Yd) go about their morbid task (Figure 31). Tristan's companion is a historical figure whose life and deeds exist somewhere between fact and fiction. His actions during the Terror were entirely forgotten until 1802, when two journalists mentioned his story in a history of the French theatre (Etienne/Martainville 1802: III/146-8). After growing interest from the press, La Bussière published his own account in 1803. According to this, he hid the files of prisoners due to be executed and later disposed of them by soaking the papers in water, rolling up the remains into balls, and jettisoning these pellets into the river Seine. In this way, he claimed to have made 1153 files disappear (La Bussière 1803: 3-4).

In *NAPOLÉON*, Jean d'Yd's character uses a more visually striking method. A title announces: 'Fortunately, La Bussière is on the lookout, this strange character who, out of humanity appointed himself an eater of documents.' We see him find the dossier on Joséphine de Beauharnais. Relaying our own curiosity about what La Bussière is about to do, Tristan watches with mounting interest as his friend carefully tears up the paper and feeds the strips into his mouth. Whilst La Bussière laboriously chews and swallows this documentation, he lowers his head below a pile of files on his desk and checks to see if the ferocious Green-Eye is watching. Tristan tries to

mimic this method on his own dossiers but bites off too large a chunk – he chokes on its cardboard sleeve and has to spit out the remains. He smooths out the chewed corner on his desk and continues to copy down the details, whispering to his neighbour: 'You're lucky you can digest them. I just can't manage it.' Tristan's despondency quickly changes to eagerness when he sees Bonaparte's file: 'Eat this one as well', he pleads. La Bussière motions that his throat is too dry, so Tristan starts tearing up the file and furtively slipping pieces under his collar, whilst busily chewing others. This brilliant scene has a delightful sense of comic absurdity, one sharpened by the horrific circumstances in which it is set. The actions of these two characters are interrupted at the height of their hilarity by the arrival of Saint-Just and the threat of discovery.

This sequence was lengthier in early drafts of Gance's screenplay but also more verbal. Violine arrives in the documents room and asks La Bussière what he is eating. 'An old man of 92', he replies. Violine turns to her father: 'And you, Papa?' Tristan ecstatically exclaims: 'I've rolled a young girl of seventeen up into little balls!' (Gance 1924i) In a later revision, Gance changed these lines; here, La Bussière first replies: 'An old man of 92 and a beautiful woman called Joséphine, aged 30.' Tristan then says: 'I've rolled up Napoléon into little balls!' Later, La Bussière comments on Tristan's grumbling stomach: 'Your old man's giving you trouble! Drink something!' (Gance 1924j) Though these individual lines are wonderfully funny, Gance wisely chose to concentrate on the possibilities of visual humour in the realized film.

After the fall of Robespierre, the soldiers who ransack the documents room scatter the files across the floor. For once, Tristan's habit of going unnoticed serves him well: he hides under his desk and covers himself in a big pile of documentation. Like the semi-mythical deeds of La Bussière, Tristan manages to get (quite literally) lost in the paperwork. As befits characters whose lives have been written into (or out of) existence by curious historians or authors, Gance's scene suggests that individuals can be preserved or destroyed through their presence on paper. Hugo famously declared: 'A name is a Me' (1862: X/158). In the original French, this phonetic pun ('Un nom'/'Un homme': a man/a name) suggests the signifier of identity is the owner's protection from oblivion: to be anonymous is to cease to exist. In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the numerous images of crumbling inscriptions point to the *ananke* of physical decay and the irreparable loss of human identity. Similarly, the narrator of Hugo's 1829 novel *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné* is a nameless victim counting down the days to his execution. He is a symbol of the numberless individuals killed by the state, and this

incomplete manuscript forms the only surviving evidence of his existence. Similarly, the document room of *NAPOLÉON* is a site where human life is reduced to lists of names awaiting erasure.

This idea of decay was a wider concern of Romantic literature. Carlyle took up the issue of documentary disintegration in the introduction to his edition of Oliver Cromwell's letters and speeches. Reflecting on the fate of physical evidence, he relates how he was shown a pile of 50,000 pamphlets from the English Civil War that lay rotting in the British Museum:

But alas [...] what is it, all this [...] inarticulate rubbish-continents, in its ghastly dim twilight, with its haggard wrecks and pale shadows; what is it, but the common Kingdom of Death? This is what we call Death, this mouldering dumb wilderness of things once alive. Behold here the final evanescence of Formed human things; they had form, but they are changing into sheer formlessness; – ancient human speech itself has sunk into unintelligible mauling. This is the collapse, – the etiolation of human features into mouldy blank; dissolution; progress towards utter silence and disappearance; disastrous ever-deepening Dusk of Gods and Men! (Carlyle 1845: I/11).

Ironically, the consumption of documents in *NAPOLÉON* is an act of conservation. Tristan eats the evidence and saves lives by removing names from the nightmarish bureaucracy of the Terror. Gance's resurrection of La Bussière is also an act of salvation from obscurity. After a benefit performance of *Hamlet* in his honour in 1803, La Bussière was given a large sum of money by Joséphine as thanks for having 'eaten' her condemnation and thus saved her from the guillotine (Masson 1898: 233). However, despite this show of generosity, La Bussière ended his days penniless and partially paralysed, dying in a madhouse in 1808 – 'entirely forgotten even by those for whom he had most risked his life' (Michaud 1843-65: XXII/328).

Elsewhere in Gance's films, the secrets, confessions, and identities conveyed and revealed in various pieces of paperwork often serve as key narrative devices. In *LA DIXIÈME SYMPHONIE*, Eve wants to destroy a document that is being used to blackmail her so that she can overcome her past and start a new life. In the 1919 *J'ACCUSE*, Diaz's final gesture is to destroy the book of his own poetry once he has lost all connection to his pre-war identity. (Even the opening image of *J'ACCUSE* spells out the film's title in blood-dripping letters across a torn piece of paper.) In *LA ROUE*, Sif's secret adoption of Norma is possible only when he finds and destroys the charred fragment of documentary evidence revealing Norma's former

life. This is echoed when his son Elie later uses family documentation to confront Sisif about Norma's adoption. Finally, a hidden love letter from Elie to Norma triggers his fatal confrontation with his romantic rival de Hersan. Whether through secrecy or revelation, paper evidence often determines the protagonists' fates.

Though such issues are notably demonstrated in the scenes with Tristan and La Bussière, there are other comic variations on the theme of inscription and documentation in *NAPOLÉON*. At the start of the Cordeliers sequences, for example, we see two guards on duty outside the door to the Three Gods' room. The standing figure has all the appearance of a brutal *sans-culotte* militiaman. Yet the first thing the camera makes us observe, with an iris for emphasis, is the spelling mistake of the huge tattoo the guard has on his chest. The slogan reads: 'Mort au tirans' ('Death to tirants' [sic]). This guard and his companion are also the focus of another visual joke when de Lisle teaches *La Marseillaise* to the crowd. As the words of the song are handed out on large sheets of paper, the two guards bicker over which way up to hold their sheet – neither knows how to read and so cannot begin to decipher the words on the page. Such moments show the power of Gance's historical imagination to bring a large crowd scene to life through the use of inventive and delightfully humanizing details. Though neither the guards nor the Fleuris have their names recorded in any factual history of the Revolution, they form part of the single, unitive burst of communal spirit that forms the climax of this sequence. In the most positive example of individual selflessness, their anonymity is transformed through cinema into a shared identity – just as La Bussière forms part of Gance's collective resurrection.

### 6.5 Forlorn recognition

Though all the Fleuris survive the political sea change after the Terror, they are still in the lowly positions they have possessed since the start of the film. The focus on their subsequent appearances is the tragic inability to bridge the divide between their lives and that of Bonaparte, for whom they show an enduring love.

A particularly noteworthy incident that captures the isolation of Tristan from his hero occurs after Bonaparte has saved Paris from the Royalist 'Vendémiaire Uprising' of October 1795. A swelling crowd of well-wishers has trapped Bonaparte in his garret, from where he acknowledges the mass of people below by waving from his window. Tristan is amongst

the cheering crowd that has gathered outside. However, by the time we see the joyful Tristan looking reverently upwards, the figure accepting thanks is no longer the real Bonaparte. The general has escaped the crowds with the help of a look-alike, who now stands at the window dressed in his uniform. Tristan is unknowingly sidelined by his idol, and remains blissfully unaware that the man he is looking at is a fake. Once safely outside, the disguised Bonaparte asks a member of the throng what's happening; the man replies: 'I've got two peasants here that don't know General Bonaparte has saved France!' Nearby, a street vendor tries to sell Bonaparte his own image in the form of a doll – the same item that *Violine* buys and will use to 'marry' his shadow later in the film (see chapter 7). This sequence playfully comments on the emergence of a popular Napoleonic iconography, just as Tristan's appearance develops the sense of distance between individual members of the crowd and Bonaparte himself. Tristan remains looking up at the mere image of his idol; *Violine* will marry herself to Bonaparte's silhouette, cast by another representation of the real man. Whilst the perspective of the *Fleuris* is blinded by love, our own viewpoint as spectators possesses more clarity. These characters explore a spectator's relationship to (and dislocation from) the 'great man' at the centre of the historical narrative.

In Gance's screenplay, Tristan is among the defenders of Paris against the Royalist insurrectionists of Vendémiaire; in the realized film, these scenes were cut – but we do later see the character as a volunteer soldier. Both scripted and realized scenes allow Tristan to influence the course of events, though only by accident. As Bonaparte rides along the streets of Paris, being feted by the crowds, Pozzo di Borgo and Salicetti are observing him from an upstairs window. Pozzo tries to take a shot at Bonaparte, but Tristan is stationed at ground level and is so occupied with trying to catch sight of his hero that he accidentally fires his gun straight upwards. His shot breaks the window above him and injures Pozzo. Both Pozzo and Salicetti try to escape but are captured by a mob and then released by Bonaparte. Tristan is never acknowledged by the man he has saved and seems ignorant of what his own action has done. An intertitle then escalates this sense of confusion by denying historical awareness of the whole scene: 'The large majority of Parisians remained totally ignorant of this event'. Like *Violine's* abandoned attempt to assassinate Robespierre, Gance arranges his narrative so that the fictional *Fleuris* can only influence events that are themselves fictionalized. Tristan's various acts of support for Bonaparte can never be stamped with the 'Historical' credentials that mark the titles of so many contemporary events in the film. His help is thus rendered historically





Fig. 32: Tristan tentatively comforts the young Bonaparte

impotent but personally charged: the warmth of the coat he brings the child Bonaparte at Brienne is a beautifully transient act of kindness whose meaning is liable to be absent from any historical account (Figure 32). As Hugo observed: 'many great deeds are done in the small struggles [...] Noble and mysterious triumphs that no eye sees and no fame rewards, and no fanfare salutes [...] Obscure heroes are sometimes greater than illustrious ones' (1862: VI/266-7).

In the film's last scenes, both Marcellin and Tristan succeed in joining Bonaparte's Army of Italy. Whilst the general's officers show insubordination and the morale of the starving, ill-equipped rank-and-file is at rock bottom, Tristan remains entirely optimistic. Just before Bonaparte arrives, Tristan harangues his cynical comrades for doubting the ability of their new commander. As Tristan strides around among the hunched-over soldiers, they slowly rip apart his tatty uniform until he is down to his shirt; gesturing with one hand and desperately clutching his breeches with the other, he finishes his speech by falling over into a tent. He may have donned the uniform denied him in earlier scenes, but it is a fragile façade that quickly unravels to reveal the tatty undergarments of his lowly identity beneath. In the Opéra version of *NAPOLÉON*, this is our last glimpse of Tristan: neither

he nor any of the Fleuri family reappears in the film. However, the (longer) Apollo edition contains further scenes with Marcellin and Tristan that offer them one last encounter with Bonaparte.

The entire Army is lined up for a general inspection. Tristan excitedly boasts to his comrades: 'I know the general. I shall go and speak to him.' As Bonaparte and his staff approach on horseback, Tristan steps out of rank and announces: 'Tristan Fleuri, General. I was at Brienne'. Bonaparte remains silent for a moment, then responds: 'One pace forward... March!' The entire rank steps forward and Tristan is subsumed back into the line; Bonaparte then gallops away. Devastated, Tristan nearly faints with shock and has to be held up by his neighbours. The scene is brutal in its treatment of this loveable character; having been encouraged to identify with the Fleuris throughout the film, the audience is liable to feel almost as shocked as Tristan. Switching to another section of the inspection line, we see a tall grenadier wearing a floor-length greatcoat suddenly shrink to half his height. It is revealed to be Marcellin, who has fallen through the drum on which he was standing to disguise himself as an adult. Bonaparte passes, lifting the bearskin from Marcellin's head and then tossing it onto the ground before riding off. As with the similar scene at Toulon, the child is left sobbing after being emasculated by Bonaparte. Tristan arrives and picks up Marcellin in his drum with an expression of comic bafflement.

Amusing and poignant, this last look of pained confusion on Tristan's face is a neat summary of his relationship with Bonaparte. Gance's film ends with Bonaparte having abandoned the entire Fleuri family. Their pursuit of recognition and of love endures throughout *NAPOLÉON*, yet Bonaparte is destined to sacrifice human intimacy for the sake of national duty. The Fleuris are emblematic of the increasing distance between people and leader: Bonaparte is becoming Napoléon, the figure upon whom Germaine de Staël believed 'no emotion of the heart could act' (1818: II/197). The Italian campaign marks a crucial moment at the start of Bonaparte's rise to power. The love letters seen at the end of *NAPOLÉON* offer a 'last glimpse' of the man behind the icon:

Henceforward Napoléon will be, in his every deed and word, supremely conscious of the ages; he will deliberately assume and hold a pose for posterity. He will never again reveal himself, his secret inner self, as he will never again wholly open his heart, never again enter into unre-served, intimate communion with any other living creature (Mossiker 1965: 19-20).

## 6.6 Summary

The Fleuris are representative of forgotten figures in history's vast drama: inhabitants (in Carlyle's terms) of the 'dark untenanted places of the past' (1830: 414). These characters provide an alternative perspective on Bonaparte – exemplified by the numerous scenes in which they are framed as witnesses: Tristan looks on from the kitchen window at the snowball fight of Brienne; Tristan and Violine see the Battle of Toulon from the window of their inn; Violine and Marcellin observe the events of Thermidor from the gallery of the Convention; Violine watches Bonaparte depart for the Italian campaign from her bedroom window.

Whilst the Fleuris have rightly been seen as 'points of identification, centres of humorous and sentimental interest' that 'bind the action of NAPOLÉON together' (King 1984a: 154), the complexity of their role has been consistently underestimated. Norman King argues that the Fleuris' 'naïve enthusiasm and devotion' encourages audiences to be less questioning, effectively limiting our interpretive freedom:

[They] help to resolve what might be a troublesome contradiction, by providing the foundation of [Bonaparte's] power [...] It is their instinctive recognition that Bonaparte is serving the interests of the people by reconciling freedom and order that legitimates his actions (ibid.: 155).

Yet this interpretation cannot be reconciled with the details of the film itself. Bonaparte's incorruptibility is not as clear-cut as King suggests, nor do the Fleuris offer simplistic legitimation of his authority. Gance deliberately emphasizes 'troublesome' contradictions by interrogating Bonaparte's messianic status and exploring the deeply ambiguous nature of his relationship to the adoring Fleuris. The great man may fire the enthusiasm of crowds and control huge bodies of men, but he neglects those characters with whom the audience most strongly identifies: it is the Fleuris that suffer most noticeably from Bonaparte's rise to power.

Gance was hardly more kind to these characters in later versions of his Napoleonic narrative. There is no mention of the Fleuris in the 1927–8 screenplay for *SAINTE-HÉLÈNE*, suggesting they had been written out of his plans. Koline does appear as Tristan in Gance's 1935 film *NAPOLÉON BONAPARTE*, set in March 1815, though Violine and Marcellin are entirely absent. Tristan has been blinded at the Battle of Marengo in June 1800 – ironically, the man who always observed events without ever being noticed can no longer see. In his subsequent negligence of Tristan, Violine, and

Marcellin, Gance followed those editors who were keen to excise these intriguing characters from the original 1927 film. If *NAPOLÉON* does want audiences 'to be like [the Fleuris]' (ibid.: 163), then it demands that we reflect on our spectatorship – and consider the importance of characters so often marginalized in appreciations of the film. Their battle to claim recognition is central to the narrative of *NAPOLÉON*, just as their presence is crucial to the film's textual coherence.