CHAPTER 8

My Father, Myself
Staël and the *Manuscrits de M. Necker*

We turn now to Staël's long preface to her *Manuscrits de M. Necker.* Coming after the Jacobin Terror and the Directoire, this is not her first work written in exile, but it is a double memorial. Bonaparte exiled Staël after the *Delphine* imbroglio in October 1803; she left for Germany, returning to Lake Geneva on May 19, 1804 – the day after Napoleon Bonaparte declared himself emperor – to find her father dead. Yet Staël's pen brings strength and even hope amid despair: Writing this memoir, Staël's private grief as an orphan and an exile retraces her public lament for the Republic, just as Jacques Necker's virtue, errors, and death retrace France's hijacked Revolution. Catharsis and monument, for both author and public, Staël's text also rewrites the past in three key ways: First, it sidelines Napoleon; second, it redraws Necker and his place in history; and third, it redraws Staël herself as a dutiful daughter. This redrawn past will in turn reshape Staël's future.

At Staël's death, her partner Benjamin Constant called this memoir of her father his favorite Staël text; and since Necker was France's chief minister when the Bastille fell, the memoir seems ripe for study. It is startling, then, that a recent 2,700-item survey of Staël criticism lists one single review, from 1805, while in 2004, *Cahier staëlien* 55, which is dedicated to Necker, contains no real mention of his daughter's text. This chapter will address this blind spot, tackling three questions: where the text fits in our knowledge of Staël and Necker; what pressures are strong enough to render a major text like this invisible; and what our blindness has cost us.[1]

Napoleon and Necker

Napoleon protested his absence in *Corinne* and *De l'Allemagne*, but in fact he touches every text Staël wrote after 1800. Most men, Staël writes after

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the Concordat she hated, see religion only as "un instrument de puissance dans la main des hommes" (*Necker* 278). In the later *Considérations*, Staël pairs Necker and the Emperor in opposition; this time, she instead opposes Necker to Robespierre, leaning gently and propitiously toward the émigrés amid her divided public, as Necker might like. Thus, her long and highly charged review of the year 1789 stresses Necker's noble silence when a word would have aroused the Parisian mob. Staël shows this martyr to virtue sitting "à table avec un assez grand nombre de personnes" (271), a badge of civility, and finds him with his wife in exile still in their "habit de parure": people's émigrés. The culture of sensibility was aristocratic, and it here inoculates Necker against Jacobin contagion. When Necker asks like Robespierre "si la vertu est conciliable avec la politique," Staël adds a class-based shibboleth, "la conscience d'un honnête homme" (270). Indeed, the very premise of this text, celebrating a major public figure for resolutely private virtue, marks a sensibility-topos that was anathema to Jacobin morality, and which again functions routinely in émigré memoirs as a class distinction. Staël thus situates her work within the emergent revolutionary memoir tradition, still largely an émigré phenomenon in 1804, and Robespierre may thus outweigh Napoleon when Staël writes for instance of "une ambition sans mesure" (261). Napoleon is a newcomer to this story, and Staël treats him accordingly.

"I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him." Speaking of her father, Staël not only must consider the weight of the Revolution and France's new emperor, she also like Mark Anthony must answer a previous speaker. Necker's old friend Henri Meister wrote a controversial manuscript obituary for his and Friedrich Melchior von Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* in May, which deserves republication; he compares Necker for instance to an elephant, stressing his wit and kindness but insisting on his indecision as fatal to France in 1789. Staël tacitly answers a series of Meister's charges, a dialogue for those who know. Globally, she stresses Necker's luck in having his daughter understand him when even his wife does not – as proof, Staël quotes three pages of her mother's mistaken belief that Necker disliked finance (264). Necker had preferred his daughter's portrait of him to his wife's in 1785; he has one true judge, Staël implies, amid slander and ignorance, and Meister is not it. Staël admits Necker's significant weight (284); she denies the common charge that he felt no political regret: "Cette terreur du remords a été toute-puissante sur la vie de mon père" (273). She cannot deny his indecision, and this is painful: "Son esprit avait un défaut pour l'action, c'était d'être

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susceptible d'incertitude" (273). Staël can dismiss those who say Necker wanted the Revolution but not the charge that his weakness allowed it: "[I]l est impossible d'avoir du caractère pour un autre" (275), she writes, officially of Louis XVI, but her next paragraph is busy excusing her father: "[M]algré les ennemis qui le persécutaient, M. Necker fit encore quelque bien partiel." "Il ne faut pas," she continues, "qu'un tel spectacle décourage de la morale" (276). Alas, but it does. Wrenching meaning from her father's failure, Staël suggests that Necker like Cato of Utica means more to posterity as a martyr, but her search for public virtue that wins, which led her away from her father in 1790, will take her to Jean Bernadotte and Tsar Alexander in 1814. Scholars note Staël's unexplained distance from Meister after 1804; she also broke with Jean de Müller when he refused to write Necker's biography, then wrote it herself in the *Considérations*. Here, Staël inserts her rebuttals within a global frame, alongside realia like three uncollected letters by Catherine the Great, tut-tutting Necker's dismissal. Necker's life of virtue uncorrupted by power may seem saintly, but it is close to Plutarch: concrete public action guided by unfailing principle, exactly what Robespierre proclaimed. Staël's life of Necker in the *Considérations* deserves detailed comparison with this text, as she goes on to bite the bullet and address public success.

Resolutely private, Staël's review of the Revolution in 1804 just once admits civil division: "[I]l a toujours soutenu ces idées modérées qui irritent si vivement les hommes dont les idées extrêmes sont les armes et l'étendard" (270). She routinely notes the slanders Necker faced – "Lorsqu'il fut ministre d'Etat, on l'accusa d'orgueil"; "Quelques personnes ont trouvé ce dernier acte de générosité presque blâmable"; "On l'accusait d'avoir trahi les intérêts du peuple" (263, 276–277). She will also pause to prove "qu'il n'a pas eu un seul instant l'idée de faire une révolution en France" (269); but in so doing, Staël eschews left and right alike to focus on the alienness of virtue: "[P]our beaucoup de gens, il faut renoncer à ce qu'ils comprennent ce qu'on ne leur dit pas" (264). That resignation partly reflects Staël's elegiac tone, in this perhaps her most backward-facing text, but it also reflects a tactical decision. After noting that Necker's retirement "lui a concilié la vénération même de ses ennemis" (277), Staël quotes the Bible for his critics: "[I]ls ne savent pas le mal qu'ils font" (278). Necker's death allows Staël much talk of heaven (262) and shapes her closing words, "un cœur si noble et si tendre, on ne le reverra plus" (290); yet it also allows a curious appeal to "je ne sais quelle auréole d'avenir" (284). This old story, says Staël, thus bears witness to the future of France.

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Staël and Necker

For Staël to write about Necker in 1804 meant entering a highly charged field: Not only did the Revolution, Napoleon, and indeed their old friend Meister shape the divergent demands of Europe's warring publics, but Staël herself, exiled one year previously, was also an explosive token in public discourse. Staël the model daughter – this cliché inflects all we know of her, prompting scholars to bypass this book that is surely the high point of that tendency. Yet, bizarrely, we also know that Staël caused her parents great anxiety for years; it is a tribute to Staël the propagandist that we ignore that other knowledge. Staël the orphan reinvented herself as a model daughter for direct political gain; given her father's career, the device linked her simultaneously to domestic utopia and to French history. Staël's first major text, the *Lettres sur Rousseau* of 1788, linked Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Necker; Necker then recedes in her work for sixteen years before returning here, in *Corinne ou l'Italie*, and in the *Considérations.* In 1794, Staël's dying mother refused to see her, and her father republished his wife's *Réflexions sur le divorce* as Staël pondered marrying her lover. Staël also does some devious things to her absent father in this text, as we shall see; not only is this unread text entertaining but it also makes us rethink an image of Staël whose very sterility could have told us how overdue for revision it was.

It seems apposite, given that Necker wrote France's first public budget, to start with some statistics. In these 136 paragraphs, I count 74 uses of *Necker*, 131 of *mon père*. *Ma mère* and *Mme Necker* get 24 mentions, *M. de Staël* just 1; meanwhile, *me* has 123 mentions, and the word *je* has 237 – more than every mention of her father combined. Charlotte Hogsett notes in the *Considérations* how Staël's conditionals suggest what she might have done in her father's shoes; Staël is cruder here – she has simply colonized her father's biography.[2] A further detail: With *je*, verbs of feeling are most common, then *croire/penser*, then verbs of action, then *voir*, *publier*, *dire*, *ignorer*, *exister*. Action is a male preserve, but Staël combines female sentiment with Cartesian perception, cogitation, and discourse. This is her show, as the term *mon père* reflects – a deferential term that also confirms Staël's place in world events, and whose Christian and Catholic echoes are not fortuitous. Nor are these mentions evenly distributed. The last fifth of the book, after Madame Necker dies, sees 61 of Staël's 79 *mon/ma/mes* mentions: the trace of an odd erotic pattern, I might suggest, where 100 pages of self-censored austerity surrender when a death makes forbidden love possible.

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Staël's odd rivalry with her mother has already surfaced – "[L]a pensée de ma mère a dominé sa vie" (263), Staël writes, only to sideline her mother or condemn her actions: "[M]on père ne tarda pas à s'apercevoir de la faute que ma mère avait commise" (267). This portrayal of Staël's mother may have prompted her contrite later notice on Madame Necker in Louis-Gabriel Michaud's *Biographie universelle*. One fascinating passage shows Madame Necker's deathbed, to which Staël was not admitted. Staël, outside, elects to sing the aria of Antigone – daughter of the blind, incestuous Oedipus – from *Œdipe à Colone*, an amazing thing to play as her mother dies. "Mon père, en l'entendant, versa un torrent de pleurs; je fus obligée de m'arrêter, et je le vis pendant plusieurs heures, aux pieds de sa femme mourante" (281). Her father is "mon protecteur, mon père, mon frère, mon ami, celui que j'aurais choisi pour l'unique affection de la vie, si le sort ne m'avait pas jeté dans une autre génération" (285); she remembers him saying, "'Pourquoi ne suis-je pas ton frère?'" and adds, "[S]i l'on avait une nature vraiment profonde, de tels souvenirs tueraient à l'instant" (288). There is an odd sense that Staël is almost aware of what she means when writing, for instance, "[V]ous aurez votre père dans sa jeunesse pour compagnon de toute votre vie" (287); thus she chooses the word *volupté* as she recalls falling in the snow and anticipating her father's anger "contre mes gens, contre moi . . . Ah!" (286). A favorite scene will recur in the *Considérations*: As 200,000 Frenchmen acclaim Necker at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, Staël faints with pleasure; "Quand je revins à moi, je sentis que j'avais touché aux bornes du bonheur possible" (274). Staël adds that few women have thus heard the masses naming "l'objet de leur tendresse," directly echoing a passage on fainting with pleasure she had deleted from her *Lettres sur Rousseau* when critics read it as orgasm.

This odd tone seems due above all to private pressures: Throughout her life, Staël was less wife or mother than daughter. Yet it is also tactics. In the 1790s, Staël had tried praising Louis de Narbonne and Adolph Ribbing during their liaisons, but unlike them, the dead cannot betray or contradict. I examine in Chapter 16 Staël's distance from her father; perhaps its only traces here are Staël's remarks, "[I]l a montré la crainte que son dernier ouvrage ne m'eût nui" (289), referring to a long and painful episode in 1802, and "[L]es enfants cherchent alors le faible de leurs parents, non assurément pour le dévoiler" (281), suggesting that Staël sees weaknesses in her father that she will not reveal. The figure of Necker authorized Staël's woman's writing, both an aegis for criticism and a key to unlock the political arena; his death was a luxury that allowed her to reinvent him.

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Staël's first deletion is Necker's texts, odd since this memoir prefaces an anthology Staël is publishing: "C'est en écrivant la vie politique de mon père, que j'essayerai d'examiner le caractère et l'objet de ses écrits" (277). In fact, the later *Considérations* barely examines Necker's writings, whose dullness Staël apparently knew firsthand. She reviews his character in detail – his personal austerity and his indulgence for others (283), his "connaissance du cœur humain" (286), his wisdom: "Jamais personne n'est parvenu à le tromper sur rien" (267). To vary the tone, Staël notes in her father the weaknesses of greatness – "[J]e ne lui ai vu d'humeur que contre l'incapacité"; "Rien ne l'ennuyait autant que les idées générales, lorsqu'elles étaient communes" (284–286) – and uses self-accusation to highlight his virtue: "[J]e m'accusais quelquefois de ne pas savoir vivre comme lui dans la solitude" (285). Her fusion of Necker's public and private life and character structures her narrative. "Peu de temps après le mariage de mon père," Staël writes, "il fut nommé ministre" (263); readers of history, she argues, will always be grateful that there was a public figure "accessible à la générosité" (275). Necker, indeed, begins to resemble all Staël's Romantic heroes, from Rousseau to the Germans; Staël talks of "l'homme de génie, dont l'ardente pensée, dans la solitude, s'acharne sur le passé," and remarks on how "les éminentes distinctions causent un tel ravage dans le sein qui les recèle" (273).

The strangest thing Staël does to Necker, hinted at in her title's specifying "sa vie privée," is to change his sex. "J'ai vu son noble visage rougir" (263), Staël notes, remarking on his shyness, and the many virtues she celebrates in him are often traits seen as female: tact, sensitivity, modesty, tolerance, devotion. Where are courage, resolution, justice, those virtues of the statesman? Staël's plot of fame, slander, and dignity in defeat is thus oddly close to *Corinne*.

In short, Staël has assumed the male role in her father's story: "qu'ils s'en prennent à moi, à moi seule" (262), she writes to those who would besmirch his memory. Disclaimers mark this autonomy: Reviewing her father's support for Louis XVI, she notes that "il ne me convient en aucune manière de mêler mes opinions personnelles au récit que je fais" (270) and explains her father's call for her to leave Paris in 1789, "de peur qu'on ne voulût, à cause de lui, me rendre quelques hommages publics" (271). Staël may add, rather beautifully, "[J]e ne me reconnais plus moi-même, maintenant que la vie s'arrête à moi" (286), but ultimately, she determines the meaning both of Necker's past here and of his future: "[J]e renvoie à d'autres temps," she begins, "un travail qui pourrait réveiller les passions haineuses" (262) – and the text reiterates her plan to speak for her father again, as she indeed did.

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"*Nous sommes une famille*," said Necker, "*qui nous louons les uns les autres*" (289). Staël's text turns out to be more than that, tracing both her curious erotic conflicts about her father, her sharp awareness of the contested field of power his memory inhabits, and the many pragmatic decisions she took in consequence, not being a person to let her father's death go unmourned or unexploited when the future of France was at stake. This tells us something new about Necker's relations with his daughter; more than that, it tells us more about Staël and the supremely complex figure she is. A major and pivotal text is ready to reenter the Staël canon.

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