CHAPTER 6

Imaginary Europe
De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales, 1800

> Un républicain écrit, combat ou gouverne selon les circonstances et les dangers de sa patrie.
>
> Staël, *CA* [1798], 274[1]

> Ah! qu'on étoit heureux il y a dix années.
>
> Staël, *DL* [1800], 420

Our final revolutionary chapter concerns Staël's *De la littérature*, published in 1800 as Bonaparte consolidated power. The death of a republic is a serious business; when Staël published *De la littérature*, she had spent the previous decade growing older alongside the French Revolution – absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, Jacobin republic, Directorial republic. But those days were over. The coup of 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799) had ended the Directoire and ushered in the Consulat, with Napoleon Bonaparte as first consul. Napoleon's star was on the rise. The then-unknown François-René de Chateaubriand, with his nose for opportunism, sensed the moment perfectly in his review of Staël's opus, which he signed two years prematurely as by "L'auteur du *Génie du christianisme*" (*GC* 1280). This was not the most obvious time for an ex-minister for war, as Staël arguably was, to become a literary historian. Why then did Staël choose this juncture to write and publish her 400-page tractatus?[2]

Though we could descend into the weeds of Staël's many literary details, a path oft-traveled since the book's first publication, we would there risk succumbing to a range of propagandist forces – compelling forces to which her text has been subject since it came out in April 1800, and some of which seem worth noting, both those Staël's field of play imposed on her and those she imposed on herself. To begin with: Genevan, liberal, female, and Protestant, Staël has faced two centuries of critics eager to sideline or indeed privatize her achievements, presenting them as tangential to the

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public shaping of what it means to be French. The lines of history have been drawn and redrawing them is uphill work. The term *Pre-Romantic*, for instance, remains common – Axel Blaeschke is at ease with it in his 1998 edition (*DL* xxvi, xxx) – though it is the product of a nationalist teleology that ignores both the shape of Europe and the nature of Europe's Romantic movements. Furthermore, Staël, who faced pressure throughout her career – not least as Bonaparte seized power – to conform to a variety of outside norms, found it necessary, I argue, to throw a sop to Cerberus, to toe the line. *De la littérature* in its standard, amputated title does just that – though only the myopic would downplay the second half of Staël's rubric, which reads *considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*.[3]

As we consider Staël's contributions to civilization, with high points spanning three decades and under governments from Old Regime to Restoration – the *Lettres sur Rousseau*, *Corinne ou l'Italie*, *De l'Allemagne*, the *Considérations sur la Révolution française* – it is worth taking a moment to assess what those contributions are. We may come to see where *De la littérature* fits within her corpus and thereby redraw its place in history. Perhaps the first thing to say is that Staël's works fit uneasily into genre categories, and in that they may be more typical of the eighteenth century than the nineteenth, when academic specialization began to make categories less fluid. Above all, Staël routinely combines art and politics and public and private spheres to make her arguments. The *Lettres sur Rousseau* is an *éloge* but also a manifesto; *Corinne ou l'Italie* is a novel but also a travel guide; *De l'Allemagne* is a treatise on everything from Immanuel Kant or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to love in marriage; and the *Considérations sur la Révolution française* is both a history of the Revolution and an homage to Staël's father. Staël's works can challenge readers but her contributions remain undeniable: to the critic's enterprise; to women writers in the following century, from Margaret Fuller to George Eliot; to emergent nationalism, Romanticism, and the very idea of Europe; to credit theory and revolutionary historiography. One wonders where *De la littérature*'s place is in this story. Is it simply the precursor to a Romanticism *De l'Allemagne* does better?

De la littérature is a cluttered text – unlike, say, Nicolas de Condorcet's equally perfectibilist, 200-page *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, from 1795 – and this clutter continues to impact its reception. If the book is now largely unread, what is our remedy? If it is a manifesto, how do we reveal that? Is it a sort of bomb stranded by the march of history, or does it remain topical? Does it look forward or backward when all is said and done? I argue that Staël's book was

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published to save the Revolution's legacy, with the Republic already lost, and that such a project matters today as it did in 1800. It may be worth focusing a moment on Staël's 1796 *De l'influence des passions*, which dips into moral philosophy to argue that men's failings, not their ideas – their passions, not their intellect – had produced the Terror. Her project there is to save both the Revolution and the Enlightenment from which it sprang from fanatics on left and right – a project the young American republic could safely ignore but which in France the career of Robespierre made urgent. After Robespierre's fall, Staël aims to separate progress from Jacobins and royalists alike, and, after Brumaire in 1799, from the ongoing reaction – which was to culminate, with Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, in Klemens von Metternich, Louis XVIII, and generations of returning monarchs. In short, Staël is not a career literary historian in 1800 as the Republic ends and has no interest in becoming one: "C'est mal connoître mon ouvrage que de supposer que j'avois pour but de faire une poétique" (*DL* 2). She spent her career *engagée*, and this year is no exception.[4]

Just as Staël is a moral philosopher when circumstance dictates, so she turns to literature when it suits her, as she did in 1795 with her short *Essai sur les fictions*. In a sense, the germ of *De la littérature* lies in that essay's distinction of three successive types of fiction: epic, verse romance, and prose romance or novel (*RMD* 132), to which she now adds a *Nord–Midi* distinction destined for repetition at Coppet (Charles-Victor de Bonstetten, Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi) and beyond. But sources and parallels, from Voltaire, Jean-François Marmontel, Paul Henri Mallet, even Montesquieu or Condorcet, to Chateaubriand and Jean François de La Harpe, no more define this text than the bricks that make a house define the Great Wall of China. There are reasons for the book's immediate and immediately contested success, with its second edition by November 1800, and those reasons owe little to its building materials.[5]

Progress and *Perfectibilité*

> [L]'impulsion des siècles renverse tout ce qui veut lutter pour le passé contre l'avenir.
>
> Staël, *DL* [1800], 254

> Il est impossible de condamner la pensée à revenir sur ses pas, avec l'espérance de moins et les regrets de plus.
>
> Staël, *DL* [1800], 288

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De la littérature does something *De l'Allemagne* does not. *De l'Allemagne* is largely an ahistorical survey, like her *Corinne ou l'Italie* or Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*. *De la littérature* on the other hand provides a philosophy of history, like Anne Robert Jacques Turgot's 1751 *Tableau philosophique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, like his disciple Condorcet's *Esquisse*, like various German treatises – Johann Gottfried von Herder's 1774 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1780 *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, Friedrich Schiller's 1795–1796 *Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung* – or, for that matter, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's and the two Schlegels' public lectures after 1800. Staël turns to the past here as a predictor of the future. As Wilhelm von Humboldt noted in 1798, when Staël abandoned *Des circonstances actuelles* to focus on *De la littérature*, "She is busy with a work on the fates of literature in the next century." This forward gaze is why Staël's take on the Middle Ages differs so markedly from that of, say, Louis de Bonald or Chateaubriand, or Novalis, Metternich, or Friedrich Schlegel for that matter. Where absolutist reaction across Europe sought to address the Bastille's fall by turning back the clock, Staël like Sismondi or the exiled and imprisoned Italian Romantics rejects this atavistic – indeed, Luddite – urge and instead regards the Middle Ages as one more step in progress between the vanished days of Greece or Rome and a modern, liberated Europe.[6]

Belief in progress is why Staël chooses in *De la littérature* to review at length the dead weight of the past. She sees in it, much as Hegel or Marx later would, a predictor of the future, rendered possible by the statistical approach to sociology that Condorcet championed (*DL* 365–367). It is also a reason why her text generated such controversy in Consular France. The broad outlines of Staël's claims in 1800 are familiar: for instance, in distinction to Condorcet, that the advent of Christianity improved public morals and the status of the oppressed, notably women and slaves (138–139); that Northern nations like England or Germany are more bound to freedom than Southern ones (180); and that the age of Louis XIV was no pinnacle in art (264). These various bricks coalesce into a universal dialectic. In Europe's future, Staël predicts progress, not retreat; happiness, not misery; freedom and autonomy, not hegemony and despotism. She further argues that this will make for better art. Interestingly, Staël in her fictions – *Mirza*, *Delphine*, *Corinne ou l'Italie* – perceives this dialectic as applicable to the nation, not the individual, who often suffers for no good reason. Women are central to that story and Staël's 1800 text has earned an article on the topic.[7]

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In her second edition (September 1800), Staël remarks on her novelty in applying Condorcet's theory of perfectibility to the arts rather than the sciences (9). One may ask if her contribution to thought is quite so limited as she suggests. I maintain that it is not. Staël's vision takes up themes she worked on over three decades; her scope is broader than his, since Condorcet, focused on technology and science, lacks her grounding in European data; her embrace of all society, not just the hard sciences, radically alters the equation. However, her debt is significant, and this may be one reason she largely abandons historicism in her later works. Staël had mixed feelings about the Girondin Condorcet – they knew each other – and furthermore, her thoughts on progress may have seemed too close to his. But Staël lived her life turned resolutely toward the future. It seems incontestable that progress and its opposite, retreat, shaped her vision of European and world events, and it is fitting that her final and posthumous book in 1818 should be devoted to the Revolution that she, like the ill-fated marquis de Condorcet, believed in, and that, like Condorcet, she had witnessed firsthand and at some personal risk.[8]

Staël is again novel in presenting literature as connected to society – as she notes in her preface to her second edition (2) – but seemingly not without precedent. Two centuries of critics have chosen to cite Bonald in 1802 calling literature "l'expression de la société," and Bonald had in fact suggested the idea in an unread text from 1796 (c). But Staël in 1800 may be unprecedented in seeing this relation as reciprocal: Society shapes art and is shaped by it in turn. Bonald, Condorcet, and Chateaubriand broadly lack Staël's claim in 1795–1802, and the claim splits the Groupe de Coppet over the next decade, with Staël and Sismondi saying yes, literature shapes society, Prosper de Barante arguing it does not, and Benjamin Constant undecided. The position is fundamental to Staël's thought and anchored in her understanding of the term *literature*, which for her includes philosophy and indeed all forms of writing beyond Condorcet's hard sciences. Staël in 1800 is not especially good at this method, but then she had just invented it. It is apt that she refers here to *l'esprit général du siècle* a decade before Hegel's *Zeitgeist* (121).[9]

Translation and Europe

> Si par quelques malheurs invincibles, la France étoit un jour destinée à perdre pour jamais tout espoir de liberté, c'est en Allemagne que se concentreroit le foyer des lumières.
>
> Staël, *DL* [1800], 252

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Let us turn from time to space in our analysis. Staël, who launched the word *nationalité* in *Corinne ou l'Italie* (*Corinne* 360), devoted her last two decades to constructing a new Europe of nations, stretching from Lisbon to Moscow and opposed in every element to Napoleon's dead European hegemony – an imaginary Europe, if you will, a project still in progress today. In 1810's *De l'Allemagne*, Staël comments on the French temptation to put a *grande muraille de la Chine* around the country to prevent any outside idea from entering (*DA* I 23). That remark was censored before the book was pulped. In 1816, Staël gave identity to Italian Romanticism with her article on translation for the *Biblioteca italiana*. In *De la littérature*, Staël already declares for nonclassical art, ranging from Ossian, her counterweight to Homer, to Shakespeare's tragedies and Goethe's *Werther* (*DL* 177–183; 189–205; 239–242). Staël is not the first in France to praise these "barbarians," but unlike her precursors, she builds a European system out of it: valuing Rome's republican writers over the Greeks and over imperial authors like Horace or Ovid (105–108, 114–115); preferring the Renaissance Italians to medieval or modern writers – Dante, Vittorio Alfieri – a choice that upset Italian readers; dismissing Spain and Portugal as despotic and obscurantist; praising Germany, which earned German thanks; praising England in particular for the virtuous discourse its freedom foments (lxv–lxviii). What Staël embarks on is a *translatio studii* much as the Middle Ages understood it, or as Thomas Mann did when he declared from exile, "Wo ich bin, ist deutsche Kultur." Already in 1800, Staël is looking beyond French borders to find a future for French thought. The duc de Rovigo succinctly gave Napoleon's answer to her European views in 1810: "Votre dernier ouvrage n'est point français" (*DA* I 6).[10]

We might retrace this theme in Staël's text: Its European argument is a slap in the face to Bonapartist France. Staël's focus, though, stays on Europe alone – so what happens to the rest of the planet? This complex question is again largely shaped by propagandist forces. True, Staël's knowledge of non-European literatures did not match her grasp of Europe, but she could have mentioned, say, Persian or Chinese texts and chose not to. In point of fact, Bonaparte had just returned in triumph, in French eyes, from Egypt; his victory over Austria at Marengo, opening the Italian peninsula, dates from June 14. Europe lay spread before him. Staël takes up the gauntlet and seizes Europe before Bonaparte can. And she roams freely around the continent, from Greece and Rome to Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Denmark – even England, which he will never reach. In every literature, Staël sees the mark of national identity. This is a domain of autonomy and freedom, and its horizons differ by an order of

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magnitude from those the Consulat found suitable for the French public. It is no wonder the book inspired immediate and vehement reaction.

Staël had Europe thrust upon her. Her early career was French – shaped by Versailles and Revolution – from the *Lettres sur Rousseau* to *De l'influence des passions*. Even *Des circonstances actuelles* continues this focus on French events. That manuscript's abandonment after 1798, and *De la littérature*'s emergence, then mark a significant break; Staël's apparent retreat from politics into literature opens the doors of Europe. A chess player might call this move *reculer pour mieux sauter*. Staël's Genevan heritage, and her repeated experience of exile at the hands of the French, shaped her thinking, just as her 1803 exile led her on to Germany and *De l'Allemagne*. She puts it succinctly in the *Dix années d'exil*: "Je passais donc ma vie à étudier la carte de l'Europe pour m'enfuir, comme Napoléon l'étudie pour s'en rendre maître" (*DxA* 210). But the pressures excluding Staël from France were not limited to successive governmental exiles; they shaped her public reception early, as they have shaped two subsequent centuries of criticism and diminishment. Staël clearly saw this burden as an opportunity – not perhaps one wished for but one embraced. Such repurposing is common enough among history's exiled thinkers and artists.[11]

Staël over time comes to elaborate her exiled space outside Napoleon's France as the true France, her vision of Europe as the true Europe, and her own person – not that of Bonaparte – as the true voice of the French nation. Discussing the man in her *Dix années d'exil*, Staël refers to "la longue lutte qu'il a établie entre sa toute-puissance et ma faiblesse" (*DxA* 218). Victor Hugo said much the same a half-century later, from self-imposed exile on Guernsey. This is a remarkably bold choice by the exiled Staël and one that may have been unprecedented. Certainly, the possibility is worth a look. It will of course, and very quickly, become a much-imitated Romantic position, in the careers of Adam Mickiewicz or Byron, for instance.

Virtue and the Good

> Après dix ans de révolution, qui s'émeut encore pour la vertu, la délicatesse, ou même la bonté?
>
> Staël, *DL* [1800], 402

> [L]es amis de la liberté marchent au milieu de la nation, la tête baissée, rougissant des crimes des uns et calomniés par les préjugés des autres.
>
> Staël, *DL* [1800], 253

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The year 1800 was a watershed year both for France and for Staël's Groupe de Coppet, and it seems worthwhile to retrace events in a little detail. The 19 Brumaire had seen Bonaparte's grenadiers expel the Council of Five Hundred from their chamber at bayonet-point (*CRF* 359–360). On January 5, Constant's speech defending the Tribunat emptied Staël's salon and was met by attacks in the press; the minister Joseph Fouché advised her to leave Paris. On the 17th, the Consulat tightened press censorship. In April, *De la littérature* appeared, met again by hullabaloo, notably an attack by Louis de Fontanes in the *Mercure de France*, and in May, Staël reviewed Joseph Marie de Gérando's new book in the *Bibliothèque française*, further aligning herself with the liberal *idéologues* (*CSt* 7, 17–31). On May 20, Bonaparte met her father Jacques Necker in Geneva, with mixed results. June was Marengo. In July–August, Staël returned to Coppet to prepare her second edition; in October, Necker's *Cours de morale religieuse* was met at once with an attack by Fontanes. Finally, in November 1800, Staël's second edition appeared, to more press controversy – including Chateaubriand's *Lettre au citoyen Fontanes*, again in the *Mercure de France*, which argues somewhat acidly that Staël "a bien l'air de ne pas aimer le gouvernement actuel, et de regretter les jours d'une plus grande liberté" (*GC* 1265). His *Atala* appeared in April 1801 and Staël, who admired it, set out to help remove Chateaubriand from the list of émigrés. As she said of Madame de Genlis, "[S]i [elle] y dit du mal de moi, moi je dis du bien d'elle dans une note de mon ouvrage: notre correspondance se sera croisée." Meanwhile, the *querelle de la perfectibilité* that Staël's book had launched lasted long enough for Pierre-Louis Roederer in the *Journal de Paris* to call for a ceasefire some three years later, on September 4, 1803.[12]

We have situated *De la littérature* in its own propagandist terms and amid the field it inherited. It is a resolutely modern and European text, published as Bonaparte advances into Italy and shaped in good measure by his redrawing of France and the map of Europe. For Staël is not an idle writer; all she writes has a reason for existence, and that reason is not decorative. What is truth, in 1800? What is virtue or the pursuit of the good? Out of Staël's survey of literature emerges a republican model for engaged writing offered to Consular France and Europe. Beethoven thus dedicated his *Eroica* Symphony to Bonaparte in early 1804, then learned the man had crowned himself emperor. He published the score in 1806 under the title *Sinfonia Eroica, composta per festeggiare il sovvenire di un grande Uomo* (Heroic Symphony, composed to celebrate the memory of a great man) because Bonaparte was dead to him.[13]

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Staël's gaps matter. Her debts to others and her elisions matter, as do her moments of weak argumentation, her factual inaccuracies. But that granular focus risks missing the big picture. To apply the *critique des beautés* Staël calls for in 1800 (*DL* 188) – before Chateaubriand – what she is building matters more than any incidental detail; it is worth that cost. It is a means to engage with the new Europe then emerging from the wreckage of French revolutionary hopes. There was no more pressing task facing this French author and *femme d'État*.

Staël in 1800 is also a rather good neoclassical dramatist but not yet a literary critic to match the insights of, say, August Wilhelm Schlegel, whose company surely helped her envision *De l'Allemagne* ten years later. It made her not smarter – she was always that – but truer to her sources. In 1800, her perfectibilist thesis deforms her history at every turn: For instance, she insists that the Periclean Greeks were children, dismissing Aeschylus and Sophocles as inferior to the French; their comic authors – Aristophanes – she calls tasteless, a far cry from Schlegel's vision of the arabesque; and Thucydides she calls void of insight into characters and institutions (*DL* 62–69; 75–77; 86). She concludes that "les Grecs, tout étonnans qu'ils sont, laissent peu de regrets" (89). Her fine experiments in theater – stepping outside neoclassicism – come after *De la littérature*. Indeed, Staël's whole vision of sociocriticism is somewhat crude in 1800. But this is hardly surprising, since she has just invented the genre. And she has an agenda to execute.

That agenda has consequences. Staël argues, for instance, that progress made the Romans more sensitive than the Greeks, despite noting the lack of any textual evidence for her claim. On the other hand, she neatly observes how different Cicero and Virgil are, though separated only by the brief interval between republic and empire (104, 111). In all, it is a mixed bag, as her English chapters neatly illustrate. Staël here opines that "[i]l ne faut chercher dans un peuple, comme dans un homme, que son trait caractéristique" (180); she argues somewhat circularly that "les pays libres sont et doivent être sérieux" and calls *Paradise Lost* "presque entièrement tiré de la Genèse" (212–215). She claims, despite Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, that there are no English memoirists (231), and remarks that "[l]'Angleterre est le pays du monde où les femmes sont le plus véritablement aimées" (223), a claim she reassesses in *Corinne ou l'Italie*. Yet as Staël moves from the ancient world toward the modern one, her sociocritical insights gain in freshness, cogency, and pertinence: on Christianity; on differences between French and English literature; on which aesthetic principles – grace, taste, wit – can survive a republican revolution. Her crisp and rather Romantic German chapter, published prior to her

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Weimar visit, merits an article of its own, while book II further explores the shape of literary effort in a future republic, setting aside monarchy, revolution, and despotism. As Staël puts it, "La nation s'anéantit lorsqu'elle n'est composée que des adorateurs d'un seul homme" (267).

Staël's chapter architecture lays out her overarching vision. Her book has twenty-nine chapters, preceded by a *discours preliminaire* describing literature in relation to virtue, glory, liberty, and happiness. This may suggest her 1796 *De l'influence des passions*, but it also echoes Thomas Jefferson's talk of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" under a different revolution. Four chapters on Greece, and three on Rome, precede a chapter on the invasion of Northern peoples and Christianity and one on the spirit of modern literature. Italy and Spain split a chapter, before two on Northern literature and its alleged defects, four on Shakespeare and the British, one on Germany, and three on the French seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That is book I: Staël's survey of ancient and modern literature. Book II concerns the current state of Enlightenment in France and its future progress, with chapters on taste, emulation, women writers, fictions, philosophy, style, and eloquence. In short, Staël lays out a three-part European history – classical, medieval, and modern – followed by a nine-chapter vision of where writing can go from here. For comparison, A. W. Schlegel in his Vienna lectures gives two pages to the future, after hundreds on the past. Staël's narrative is designed to draw on the past to prognosticate – and indeed, to shape what history has in store, for Europe and France alike.[14]

Staël has read quite a bit in 1800, and it shows, notably in discussing recent British literature. Yet her agenda limits her ability to prune her document. The story goes that Ernest Hemingway could write *The Old Man and the Sea* because he knew enough about deep-sea fishing to leave almost everything out; and it may seem sophomoric to load a text with all we have read. Condorcet's *Esquisse* in its clear lines shows by contrast how Staël's extra data can clog her argument; but in return, her predictions gain quasi-scientific weight – thus her repeated claims: "Ce n'est point une vaine théorie, c'est l'observation des faits qui conduit à ce résultat" (43); "Mes conjectures sur l'avenir seront le résultat de mes observations sur le passé" (286). Forecasting the future is never easy. Like Condorcet in hiding from the Terror, Staël values Boethian consolation (39), but she is also and perhaps above all focused on persuasion, on changing the shape of Europe. She is a fighter. To do this without an army, she needs weight. And it may be that, in the end, her series of choices was proven right – that it was Staël's vision of Europe, not that of the restless emperor who sent her into exile, that triumphed.

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