

French Historians in the Nineteenth Century

French Historians in the Nineteenth Century:

Providence and History

By

F.L. van Holthoon

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To:
Francisca van Holthoon-Richards

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First I would like to thank the many people who read pieces of this work. Particularly my vote of thanks goes to Roger Emerson and Bruce Kuklick who almost instantly corrected my English when I sent them snippets of paper. More importantly they encouraged me to go on.

I started writing essays partly in Dutch, partly in English. When I got the opportunity to get my work published in England I translated the Dutch pieces and worked the whole into a book. My daughter Francisca, living in Devon, eliminated the clumsiness from what I had written and corrected my English with a lot of empathy for what I wanted to say. To her this book is dedicated. In the process this book has also become hers.

I also want to pay tribute to the memory of Vincenzo Merolle who died in February of 2018. He was a strange man with a great capacity for making enemies as well as friends. To me he showed his generosity. Over the years I wrote many essays on the Enlightenment for his *European Journal*. He saw to it that the collection of essays was published by Logos Verlag in Berlin. In November I sent him a piece on Tocqueville (chapter ten in this book) for his journal and then I did not hear from him again. Later, much later, I found out that he had died in February 2018. We had already made plans for getting another collection published, this time on nineteenth-century French historians. So Ultimately our plan comes true in a different way.

In the end of course I have to thank my wife who keeps a close watch on what I write and makes it her own.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1. This Study

This book consists of a collection of essays. It is the outcome of my method of reading historians from the past. Sitting behind my desk I try to follow the historian in the creative process. How did he or she do it and why? The method involves a lot of reading, especially since historians in the nineteenth century did not believe in short stories. Lord Acton wrote that the study of history is a matter of induction on a large scale. And how can it be different? If you want to learn about a historian, you have to read his work. So, I started to write an appraisal of each historian I wanted to study. The risk of this method is that the collection of essays shows little or no coherence. I have tried to limit this risk by grouping my authors and writing surveys to introduce their work. Guizot, Thierry, Thiers and Mme de Staël are arranged under the label of *doctrinaire* liberalism. Strictly speaking, neither de Staël nor Thiers are *doctrinaires*, but they share with Guizot and Thierry the ambition to put the revolution at rest and create a stable regime. My second survey starts with the revolution of 1848 and serves to introduce the work of Mme d'Agoult, alias Daniel Stern, who wrote a masterly account of that revolution. Michelet was connected to the revolution, because Guizot dismissed him in 1848 as professor at the *Collège de France* and as he refused to take the oath of office when Napoleon III became Emperor, he also lost his job at the national archives. So after 1848 he became a private citizen who earned his living by writing his *Histoire de France*. That almost by itself became a political statement though Michelet was the least political of his colleagues. Tocqueville wrote his *Ancien Régime* in the shadow of the revolution and Taine followed in his footsteps. He started writing his *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine* after France's defeat in 1870. It became a gloomy assessment of what went wrong in France since the first revolution of 1789. He followed Tocqueville in describing the dire consequences of centralization in France and how Napoleon I had exploited the legacy of

the *Ancien Régime* by strengthening the grip of central government on French affairs.

After 1880 there is a shift in the way scholars look at the past. The shift is gradual but persistent. Ernest Renan and Fustel de Coulanges did not accept the Republic as the natural outcome of French history. On the other hand they prepared the road for a new style of writing history. Jean Jaurès was *hors catégorie*. In a life of agitation and political dealings he wrote, together with a number of distinguished socialists, a socialist history of nineteenth-century France. They produced twelve solid quarto volumes and though it is a conventional narrative history it has two distinguishing marks. It was the first history that gave a complete story of the nineteenth century and secondly the socialist historians treated the social question at large. Jaurès' common sense and his impassioned intellect made his contributions particularly valuable. His "Balance of the Nineteenth Century" helped me to write my Epilogue.

Freedom was the ideal which the historians I wrote about shared. For them it meant first of all the freedom of expression. All had the notion that their freedom was limited by *la force des choses*. As children of romanticism they wanted their freedom to be without restraint, they *knew* it was not. They were not clear about what restrained them beyond the ordinary rules of law and what pushed them in a certain direction. Guizot had a vision of the march of civilisation and Tocqueville introduced the levelling process ("l'égalité des conditions") in his two books on the American Republic, but they did not go beyond these two powerful concepts. Daniel Stern, Jean Jaurès and his collaborators had a clear vision of the social question and so they knew about the impact of industrial change that was taking place during their lifetime. It was Marx and Engels who saw it for what it was: a revolution.

2. An Uneasy Century

Taking the nineteenth century, not as a chronological construct, but as the period between the French Revolution of 1789 and the outbreak of World War One in 1914, the century appears to us familiar and strange at the same time. We acknowledge the invention of modern techniques and organizations as grateful descendants, but we don't share the obsession with conventions and manners of our ancestors which they used to distinguish civilized beings and barbarians.

The European bourgeoisie aspired to a world they could control, yet they created one they could not. Change manifested itself in two ways. The French Revolution created the template for the revolutions to come: a

complete overhaul of society. In practice the idea led to bloodshed, a lot of noise, and few permanent results. Even the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 which introduced a drastic reorganization of the economy eventually led to Glasnost under Gorbatschov and a return to doing business during the regime of the Czar.

The other agent of change, the Industrial Revolution, transformed the lives of subsequent generations drastically and totally. These changes can be described under three headings:

- a. Communities changed into societies while relations became more business like. Birthrights came to count for less when personal achievements became more important. The society of orders turned into a meritocracy.
- b. Formally the common man and his needs were ignored; in the nineteenth century he got face and power, first as a consumer then eventually as a voter. The bourgeoisie made a tremendous effort to educate and school the masses. And it was a singular achievement of governments and private initiatives that by 1914 Europeans had become literate.¹
- c. In the world of ideas change was dramatic. Technical means had enhanced the mobility of individuals, but the beacons which were supposed to direct human beings were disappearing. The utility of Christian prescription was becoming problematic. A change of conditions made the teaching of the churches not only hard to believe, but it became irrelevant for those who had to cope with these new conditions. Church officials being sticklers for doctrinal niceties made matters worse. In some ways it was impossible to adapt Christian tradition to modernity. The study of history is a good example. Bossuet's *Histoire Universelle* was a last attempt to let history develop from the biblical story. However, you cannot fit Chinese civilisation into the story of Bedouin peoples in the Middle East.

We witness a tremendous effort in the nineteenth century to reinvigorate Christian faith and Pope Leo XIII gave impetus to a Catholic social movement with his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891). At the same time the number of those who left the Church or never saw it from the inside, except as tourists, was growing.

¹ F.L. van Holthoon, "Literacy, Modernization, the Intellectual Community and Civil Society in the Western World", *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*, (Cambridge 2009: Cambridge University Press), D.R. Olson & N. Torrance eds, 4.

Nineteenth-century scholars made great efforts to explore classical antiquity. Homer and Thucydides were popular authors because they satisfied the thirst for a heroic destiny. Athens according to Thucydides had to fight Sparta or lose the power over Greece. The defeat of Athens enhanced the tragic proportions of the story. The carnage of World War One reduced the need for heroism. War had become an obsolete instrument of power, so it seemed. Classical studies were no longer considered instructive and the Greeks and Romans who formerly set us an example, were becoming representatives of a foreign culture, exciting to study but no longer models to obey.

Eric Heller studied a number of German thinkers from Goethe via Nietzsche and Burckhardt to Karl Kraus. He called his study *The Disinherited Mind*². That title sums up the story of classical scholars in the nineteenth century. They lost their subject as part of a usable past.

The nineteenth century is an uneasy experience to the modern observer, because issues and ideas are difficult to determine. At the surface they seem comprehensible, but the feeling remains that we have missed the essence. Our experience becomes ambivalent and that ambivalence acts as a Janus face. Our ambivalence can aptly be determined by two terms: *culture* and *civilisation*. Arthur Weber introduced the two terms and according to his definition *culture* is the domain of our aspirations to reach an elevated truth while *civilisation* represents our business relations and the technical science related to doing business. *Culture* finds its expression in art, music and literature while *civilisation* means the world of economic affairs. The warm emotions of *culture* clash with the world of cold rationality, i.e. with *civilisation*. I use the word clash on purpose. For so many of the cultural expressions in the nineteenth century have a distinct anti-modernist flavour. It is as if people wanted to ignore the unpleasant reality of the world they constructed themselves and which came to be called the world of the Industrial Revolution.

For present-day historians the nineteenth century is an uneasy experience, because in retrospect they cannot fail to notice the impact of that revolution. At the same time they have to conclude that, as in my case, French historians did not grasp the significance of these effects, if they noticed them at all. The dilemma the modern observer faces is that it is not enough to describe their world in their own terms because we must

² E. Heller, *The Disinherited Mind*, (New York 1959: Meridian)

observe the drastic changes that were going on behind the scenes. The reader may judge whether I have solved this dilemma with some modicum of success.

3. A Change of Perspective

Macaulay, Ranke and Guizot studied the past in order to learn where they stood themselves. They did not predict, they merely wanted to know whether they were on the right track. Ranke spoke for them when he described the task of the historian as “bloss sagen wie es eigentlich gewesen”. That dictum is less innocent than it sounds. For what is the meaning of “eigentlich” and how can “bloss sagen” help us to understand historical truth? The dictum is part of Ranke’s objection to any philosophy of history. Fabricating theories is unhelpful in seeking to understand the past, describing the essentials of it is the task of the historian. That message appealed to most nineteenth-century historians and made them averse to abstract theories. What these historians hoped for was that they remained on the right track of destiny and that the study of history would help them to stay on it. Ranke was a devout Christian, but his conception of providence was a secular one. Man had to make his own destiny while God was looking on.

Giambattista Vico, an eighteenth-century scholar in Naples, gave a definition of providence that appealed to nineteenth-century liberals and since Michelet translated his work into French he was widely read. Vico defined providence as the outcome of history. God did not interfere in the course of events, but inspired men to find their own way.³ It was the vagueness of this prediction of the future which appealed to those who were seeking to define a secular version of providence. Orthodox Christians knew that the future was controlled by God and that they only had to obey God’s commands. Their obedience left little room for an interpretation of the past in other than God’s terms as prescribed by dogma and a literal interpretation of the bible.

German nineteenth-century historiography created the Walhalla for the study of history and German historians were universally admired.

³ G. Vico, *The First New Science* [the first of three versions], (Cambridge 2002: Cambridge University Press), L. Pompa transl. & ed., 288: “An ideal eternal history, described on the basis of the idea of Providence, in accordance with which the particular histories of all nations proceed through time in their rise, progress, state [of perfection], decline and end.” The reference to natural law means that though natural law is of divine origin its actual formulation of jurisprudence is manmade.

France was a good second and surprisingly enough Britain had but few first class historians. Studying French historians I discovered that we present-day historians have a different way of looking at the past from our nineteenth-century ancestors. We look back at a world which is foreign to us and which we have to reconstruct before we can understand it. My French historians looked back in order to understand their own world and find the thread which would lead to the future.

In France it was around 1880 that a change of perspective started to take place. In Britain the change was gradual and barely noticeable. In a country where the study of history was foremost a hobby it was only towards the end of the century that this became a profession at which point the change of perspective became visible. In Germany the perspective of providence lived on, largely because national unity as the outcome of providence remained problematic. National unity did not bring the desired fusion of *Geist* and *Macht*. Only after World War Two German scholars adopted the by then European outlook on history, but after 1945 German historiography had lost its special and privileged position in Western culture.

Charles-Olivier Carbonell describes the change of perspective as a “mutation idéologique”, but he makes no attempt to point out the ideological nature of the change and ideology is not the first term which comes to mind when contemplating the change of perspective. For Carbonell, Gabriel Monod was the star of this new historiography, which is a rather curious conclusion, for the stars were Ernest Lavisse and Charles Seignobos. They organized the study of history as an accepted profession and they designed the programs for training history teachers in the schools.

A few years before World War One Lavisse published his *Histoire de France* which he wrote in collaboration with a number of other historians. Reading this work we realize that the history of France had come of age. Lavisse’s *Histoire* establishes France as a nation which had always been there. This is by no means a truism. Defined by its geography and the administration of the kings France had been there since the Middle Ages, but when we read Eugen Weber’s *From Peasants into Frenchmen* France did not exist in terms of one people, one nation, not even in the middle of the nineteenth century. Town and country were separate realities. The majority of French people did not even speak French, or they spoke a patois that their compatriots in the North or in Paris did not understand. However, schooling, recruitment for the army, the railways and generally the forces of modernization contributed to creating the one and indivisible French nation. When Lavisse published his *Histoire* the

process was almost complete though the traumatic experience of World War One had to create the rock bottom notion that France *was* a nation. There was another less complicated notion which contributed to the shift of perspective. Guizot and the *doctrinaires* struggled with the legacy of the revolution. Lavisse and Seignobos accepted the Third Republic as the natural outcome of that legacy. At last it had become possible to look at the French monarchy as something of the past.

PART ONE

CHAPTER TWO

UNDER THE WINGS OF *DOCTRINAIRE LIBERALISM*

The five historians whose work I shall discuss in part one have in common that they were seeking an antidote for the revolutionary spirit that was threatening to spoil the attempt to create a stable regime in France.

Mme de Staël was a powerhouse of emotions and ideas. To describe her as a feminist does not do justice to her personality. For her there was no glass ceiling and if there were, she would crash through it with aplomb.

Guizot was not popular because of his *raideur*, but notwithstanding his severe mien he was in need of intimacy and heartfelt relationships. A widower of two wives, he started frequenting the salon of Dorothee de Lieven from the late thirties. A Protestant, he was an outsider in French society. After all, the Protestants only got civil rights during the Revolution. His father was a victim of the guillotine and after his gruelling execution his mother took Guizot to Geneva. During the early years of Napoleon's regime he studied law in Paris where he quickly made his career as a civil servant and a politician.

Thierry was his protégé and Thierry's ode to Louis Philippe at the same time was meant for Guizot. Guizot was generous with his help to aspiring scholars. He assisted Michelet through his career, though perhaps in this case his help was not a good example of his generosity, for he fired him from his post in the *Collège de France* during his final days in office. Paris was the natural centre for all the historians whose work I have described. Except for Michelet and Fustel de Coulanges they were born in provincial France, but Paris became their intellectual home from where they wrote about the rest of France.

Mme de Staël and Thiers did not belong to the group of *doctrinaire* liberals. Germaine de Staël inherited her father's admiration for the British constitution which might explain why she was at odds with *doctrinaire* liberals who made a conscious attempt to invent their own brand of liberalism. Thiers coined the famous *doctrinaire* slogan "le roi

règne mais il ne gouverne pas”. But he was too much of a pragmatist to believe in a policy of principle.

It was Royer Collard, minister under Louis XVIII, who became the leader of the *doctrinaires* and Guizot was his successor. Royer Collard regarded himself as the conscience of the nation. He passionately believed in personal freedom, but also advocated law and order as the only possible outcome of authority. Barante, one of his paladins, wrote about him that he accepted equality for the law and some form of representation to challenge authority as the two essential achievements of the Revolution. However, he was averse to democracy in any form. “La Restauration avait été pour lui une patrie”.⁴ With the arrival of Louis Philippe to the throne the restoration of monarchy was complete, according to Royer Collard.

In a fine essay on the subject Ernst Kossmann wrote that Royer Collard could not completely reject the doctrine of popular sovereignty, whereas Guizot could. “For him sovereignty of the people was simply nonsense.”⁵ According to Guizot the highest authority in the land belongs to the rule of law. Kingship was the stabilizing factor in the land. The king was a sort of fly-wheel in the system. Ministers should take decisions and the King should seal these decisions with royal authority. The third item in Guizot’s program was that parliament should be a meeting of reasonable and creative delegates chosen by those who were reasonable and creative themselves. Kossmann regards it as a paradox that the *doctrinaires* wanted to use parliament as an instrument for promoting progress while the very idea of change made them nervous.⁶ This is true but Kossmann ignores one aspect of Guizot’s vision of change. Constructive plans for change should come from the able and the creative in society. That was the guarantee against the promotion of undesirable ends.

How can we reconcile Guizot’s vision of progress with his inflexible behaviour in the years leading up to 1848? With Rosanvallon’s study in hand I hope to be able to solve this riddle.⁷

⁴ M. De Barante, *M. Royer Collard, Ses Discourses et ses Ecrits*, (Paris 1863: Didier), 447-463.

⁵ E.H. Kossmann, “De Doctrinairen Tijdens de Restauratie”, *Politieke Theorie en Geschiedenis, Verspreide Opstellen en Voordrachten*, (Amsterdam 1987: Bert Bakker), 280 my transl.

⁶ E.H. Kossmann, “De Doctrinairen”, 304.

⁷ P. Rosanvallon, *Le Moment Guizot*, (Paris 1985: Gallimard).

CHAPTER THREE

GERMAINE DE STAËL (1766-1817) ON NAPOLEON

1. Introduction

Napoleon was right: Mme de Staël was a threat to his regime. She knew every prominent person in Europe from the princes to the writers and she exposed him for what he was: an ill-mannered upstart. At the end of her book *de l'Allemagne* she writes:

An active intellect, an impetuous scholarship would make you master of the world, but you would only leave behind the traces of a terrible sandstorm, like arid waves in the desert.⁸

Enthusiasm, that fateful word that displeased Voltaire and Hume, inspires a people to great deeds. Such was the case in Germany, but not in France where Napoleon led the French to misery and ruin. That at least was the implication of what she wrote. In a note she added that the French authorities were not happy with her remark and that is correct. The forms of her type ready to be printed were broken up and her book first appeared in London, but in French.

Her passionate love affairs tended to turn her lovers into her vassals. She herself was the victim of monumental egocentricity and that precluded that her lovers became her companions. Her notorious love affair with Benjamin Constant is proof of this. Even when her love, but certainly his, was spent, she was not prepared to give him up. If she needed his company he was summoned to Coppet, her country house. In a

⁸ Mme de Staël, *de l'Allemagne*, (Paris 1960: Hachette, Les Grands Ecrivains de la France) t. 5, J. de Pange ed., 230. [Une intelligence active, une impétuosité savante vous rendroient les maîtres du monde; mais vous n'y laisseriez que la trace des torrents de sable, terribles comme les flots, arides comme le désert!]. Mme de Staël made an allusion to Napoleon which, as she tells, much displeased the authorities.

desperate attempt to free himself from her clutches he married. To no avail, when summoned he came.

She had five children by four men. With her husband, Erich Magnus de Staël, she had a daughter Gustavine, who died at the age of three. She had two sons, Albert and Auguste, with Louis de Narbonne, Louis XVI's minister of defense in the last days of his reign and she had another daughter, Albertine, with Benjamin Constant.⁹ Albertine married Victor de Broglie and her genes did not predict that she would be faithful to her husband. Her sense of humour she definitely inherited from her mother. Herold, who wrote the best recent book on Germaine de Staël, remarks that Albertine took after her grandmother Suzanne Necker-Curchod.¹⁰ Germaine would not have liked Herold's remark, because she disliked her mother and her mother disapproved of her behaviour. Afterwards Germaine had innumerable love affairs, all with younger men. How "carnal" they were is hard to determine, but to Germaine it was the way to show the magic of her conversation. Prosper de Barante – later an influential conservative liberal and historian – was one of them and his father did everything to get Prosper out of her clutches, finally with success. At the age of fortysix she gave birth to a son again. She married the father John Rocca, a young officer who soon afterwards died of tuberculosis. She took good care of her children and saw to it that they got a proper education and schooling.

With her mother we can say that there was much to disapprove of, but what a magnetic personality. Everyone – and that included princes, dukes, poets and writers - she met appreciated her writings, her correspondence and her conversation. Some like Goethe kept a certain distance to her, because Germaine lacked discretion and her personality was too expansive for them. Only one man was not impressed by her brilliance: Napoleon. He thought her ugly, meddlesome and dangerous. That he regarded her as a threat was an homage to the only liberal during his regime. In 1802 Napoleon banished her from Paris and later he accused

⁹ Some people held her for a child of Erich Magnus, who occasionally visited his wife at Coppet, because Benjamin was supposed to be sterile. We shall never know, though Albertine had the reddish hair of Benjamin. Maybe they all were Ernst Magnus' children – both he and Germaine pretended this to be the case – and when she bore a son which could not possibly have been Magnus' son, she married his father Rocca. So at least she liked the pretence of marriage. Germaine in her language mixed love with friendship. This makes it difficult to determine the borderline.

¹⁰ J.Ch. Herold, *Mistress to an Age, a Life of Madame de Staël*, (London 1958: Hamish Hamilton), 462.

her that she had set up the Germans against his regime. She had turned the obedient Germans into Wilhelm Tells.

Let me mention also two of her closest women friends. Julie de Récamier was the sex idol of revolutionary Paris who kept men so effectively at a distance that she possibly died a virgin.¹¹ Napoleon invited her to be his official mistress, and when she refused he characteristically banished her from Paris. The other friend was the Grand Duchess Luise von Sachsen-Weimar whom Germaine met on her tour in Germany. Byron (not one of her lovers) remarked: "She thinks like a man, but also she feels like a woman."¹² This remark rings true, but in the main Germaine maintained her position regardless of her sex. With her, mind and heart went together. In her business affairs she was always to the point. She was not without physical courage and saved some of her friends (among them Talleyrand) from the Terror. On the issue of state and civil society she was clear and persistent. And her *Considérations sur les Principaux Evénements de la Révolution* is an important legacy for French liberalism. Germaine was not a historian, she made history, but her remarks on Napoleon in her *Considérations* are worth mentioning and even have a timeless virtue.

2. Biography

Let me add some further biographical details to her story. Born in Paris in 1766 this child of Swiss parents considered Paris rather than France as her home. Her father Jacques Necker had made his fortune as a banker. For a while it seemed that he could save the French monarchy from bankruptcy, but this turned out to be an impossible assignment. The existing tax system made any solution short of a drastic reform of the political system, fruitless. Dismissed as a minister in 1781 he made a comeback, but to no avail and he left France jeered by the people who had regarded him as their saviour. He had loaned France two million francs to prevent immediate bankruptcy. His daughter eventually got it back in 1816, without interest.

Necker was an honest man who adored and spoiled his daughter. Her mother did not. Suzanne Curchod had been engaged to Edward Gibbon, the author of the *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, but he broke off the engagement when his father forbade him to marry her. She saw herself as a child of the Enlightenment and she

¹¹ She was married to the banker de Récamier, but their marriage never seems to have been consummated.

¹² J.Ch. Herold, *Mistress to an Age*, 463.

educated her daughter accordingly. Germaine worshipped her father and disliked her mother, but the solid education she got from her mother enabled her to translate the apolitical program of the Enlightened into the political liberalism of the nineteenth century. Emotionally she was a product of the Romantic age, but analysing problems she became level headed in her conclusions. Common sense prevailed, except in her personal life.

As was the practice her parents arranged a marriage with Baron Ernst Magnus von Staël-Holstein, the Swedish *Chargé d'affaires* who later became ambassador. That was an unfortunate choice. The man was a wastrel and a *non valeur*. Germaine became unfaithful to him shortly after their wedding. Adultery was not uncommon in her circle; what was unusual was that she also went her own way and monitored her husband from a distance. Ernst Magnus died in the company of his wife at an inn on his way to Coppet, the Swiss country house of the Neckers.

After having been banished from Paris by Napoleon she became the centre of resistance against his regime and she had already started to take part in the politics of revolutionary France. Talleyrand and Narbonne were not only her lovers, but also her allies in the attempt to create moderation in the Revolution. What she had in mind was to create a constitutional and liberal France and she pursued this aim until her untimely death in 1817.

Albert Sorel writes: “Elle visait de gouverner l’Etat de son salon.”¹³ And indeed the *salons* of nineteenth-century Paris had a political function which the eighteenth-century ones lacked. Later, when Napoleon sent her into exile this political function became less obvious but nonetheless she managed to galvanise the silent opposition of Princes and writers. Her political message was simple. As long as the political regime guaranteed a moderate policy of accommodation domestically and in foreign affairs, she was neither republican nor monarchist. That policy was discussed in her Parisian salon and later at her country house at Coppet.

In 1814, when the allies defeated Napoleon and banished him to Elba she tried to make Count Bernadotte king of France. From her point of view a revolutionary general was the logical choice to become king, but the allies could not agree less. They wanted a restoration of the Ancient Regime and so Louis, Count of Provence, became King Louis XVIII. He decreed a Constitution as his version of the *droit divin*. Bernadotte became King of Sweden.

¹³ A. Sorel, *Mme de Staël* (Paris 1907: Hachette).

Germaine died before the Restoration got under way. At fifty-one she was in the prime of her life and it would have been interesting to be able to assess her influence during the reign of the Bourbon Kings, Louis and Charles. She was buried in the mausoleum at Coppet next to her parents.

3. Her Writings

What follows is a brief overview of her writings. The first was her *Lettres sur Jean-Jacques* (1789). She adopted transparency of emotions which Jean Starobinski called a major theme in Rousseau's outlook on life, with great favour, though she gave it a more robust interpretation than Rousseau. When the Terror ended in 1794 she wrote *Réflexions sur la paix intérieure*, which is a plea for peace and tolerance among monarchists and republicans. Her treatise *des Passions* (1796) gives us a lucid picture of what happens when passions are out of control as they were during the Revolution. In *de la Littérature Considérée dans ses Rapports avec les Institutions Sociales* (1802) she maintained that literature has a role to play in promoting perfectibility in all its aspects. This ideal may be regarded as the first challenge to Napoleon. *Dix Années d'Exil* appeared in 1812. She writes that Napoleon is not French, and certainly not as French as she is. She will reiterate this phrase in her *Considérations* which I will discuss later. The impressive part of *Dix Années* is that she creates the impression that she mobilized public opinion in Europe against Napoleon's tyranny. *De l'Allemagne* (1813) is a counterpart to *Dix Années* in the sense that at this point in time Germany was more civilised than imperial France.

Germaine settled her fame with two novels. In *Delphine* she complained that it is all very well to say that marriage is designed for love, but what if your husband is not receptive to it? In *Corinne* true love is not attainable, because of practical and mundane obstacles. The novels are not to my taste, but her contemporaries loved them. Let me tell you the plot of *Corinne* to illustrate her style as a novelist.

Corinne's readings, as a poetess, make her popular in Rome as she dealt with culture and beauty.¹⁴ She has many admirers, but she manages to keep them at bay with great tact until she meets the Scottish Lord Nelvil. It is love at first sight from both of them. What that means is never explained, it is simply announced as a fact which adds a mechanical aspect to the story. When Oswald (Lord Nelvil) learns of his late father's plans for him to marry Lucile, the daughter of Lord Edgermont, he returns

¹⁴ Germaine de Staël used to organize performances at Coppet.

to Scotland where his father's intentions are confirmed by another friend of his father. It turns out that Corinne is Lucile's half sister. Her Italian mother was Lord Edgermont's first wife and because of his experience his father objected to a foreigner in the family.

Oswald obeys his father's last wishes and marries Lucile. Corinne (who had travelled to Scotland) witnesses their marriage and then returns to Italy. When the couple visits Italy on their honeymoon Corinne, as behoves the story, dies from the misery of love. Mme de Staël ends her story with:

They [Oswald and Lucile] returned together to England, Lord Nelvil set the example of a domestic life that was the most regular and pure.

Does Oswald regret his betrayal of Corinne and is he content "with a common destiny after what he has lost? I don't know; I do not want to blame or absolve him."¹⁵ That concluding sentence is not without a touch of malice. Is marital bliss incompatible with love? According to Germaine it was, for love requires the complete union of souls.

No one today, I guess, will read *Corinne* for pleasure, but the novel harbours some sublime sentences like this one:

[My stepmother, Lady Edgermont, did not like me], it was not sufficient for her that I led a similar life as she did, it was necessary that I was motivated in the same way as she was.¹⁶

Mme de Staël had a great admiration for the literature of the North, but she judged it according to the rules of the South. To Henry Crabb Robinson who had said to her that she would never be able to understand Goethe, she said:

Sir, I understand everything that merits to be understood: what I don't understand is not worth understanding.¹⁷

¹⁵ G. de Staël, *Corinne*, (Paris 1864), 504. [Ils retournèrent ensemble en Angleterre, Lord Nelvil donne l'exemple de la vie domestique la plus régulière et la plus pure.] [un sort commun après qu'il a perdu? Je l'ignore; je ne veux à cet égard ni le blâmer ni l'absoudre.] my transl.

¹⁶ G. de Staël, *Corinne*, 306. [il ne lui suffisait pas que je menasse la même vie qu'elle, il fallait encore que ce fût par les mêmes motifs] my transl.

¹⁷ J.Ch. Herold, *Mistress of an Age*, 189.

Did she understand Goethe? In *de l'Allemagne* she writes an elaborate report on Goethe's *Faust* and after translating large chunks of the book she concludes:

The piece on Faust, however, is not a good model. Be it that it could be considered as the work of a deranged spirit or of the satiety of reason, it is to be desired that these productions are not repeatable. However, when a genius such as Goethe frees himself of all restraints his host of ideas is so great that these transcend and reverse in all ways the limits of arts.¹⁸

So, according to Germaine, Goethe's genius saves a badly constructed book. It turns out that she did not understand Goethe. Faust for her remains the puppet show it originally was. That Goethe wanted to create the tragic hero of modern science was lost on her. *De l'Allemagne* is a competent though patchy record of her travels in Germany. Fichte is praised as the modern philosopher of Germany, of Hegel she had apparently never heard. Chamisso came to visit her at Coppet and she knew of the ultimate romantic poet Novalis. However, German Romanticism was a closed book for her. She remained indifferent to the existential despair of the German poets who felt that they lived in a world of estrangement.

Her book on Germany ends with a glorification of enthusiasm, which for her is the positive force which leads to love and happiness. Her romanticism was subject to her common sense. Germaine's universe had no room for *Angst*.

4. Considérations sur les Principaux Evénements de la Révolution Française

In her *Considérations* which appeared shortly after her death in 1818 and which had been edited by her son-in-law Victor de Broglie, Mme de Staël described the events of the French Revolution until the fall of Napoleon in 1815. Much of the book is a defence of her father's political views as explained in his *Dernières Vues de Politique et Finances*. The

¹⁸ Mme de Staël, *de l'Allemagne*, (Paris 1959: Hachette, Les Grands Ecrivains de la France, J. de Pange ed., t.3, 127. [La pièce de Faust cependant n'est certes pas un bon modèle. Soit qu'elle puisse considérée comme l'oeuvre du délire de l'esprit ou de la satiété de la raison, il est à désirer que de telles productions ne se renouvellent pas; mais quand un génie tel que celui de Goethe s'affranchit de toutes les entraves, la foule de ses pensées est si grande, que de toutes parts elles dépassent et renversent les bornes de l'art.] my transl.

French, he argued, could have spared themselves much misery if they had adopted the British constitutional system. And even now, he writes from Coppet, it is not too late. Napoleon can give his regime the much needed stability by adopting the system of two chambers. Needless to say Napoleon was not amused by Necker's unsolicited advice. The Emperor reacted by holding Necker's daughter responsible for his ideas. Any effective representation of the French was unwelcome to the wilful Emperor.

Germaine was as naïve as her father. Constitutions remained just paper tigers until 1875 when the majority of the French had accepted the Republic and the coming of the Third Republic triggered the beginning of a consensus that a democratic republic suited the French best. The constitution of 1791 which established a limited monarchy was perfectly reasonable, but the Convention needed only a year to put it aside. There were three more constitutions until the establishment of the Empire in 1804. However father and daughter were right in the sense that without rules that made for a stable government the revolutionary spirit could not be put at rest.

As soon as Mme de Staël started to write about Napoleon she became clearheaded. The man, she writes, terrifies me, because he has no heart.

Such a creature without anyone like it, could not feel nor stir any sympathy, he was hardly a man.¹⁹

She describes him as a monumental egoist, who uses people, but does not appreciate friendship. In her view he has no regard for the welfare of the French and she writes again: I am more French than he is. His inheritance is terrible:

Because of all the inheritance of this terrible power, nothing remains for mankind but the fatal knowledge of some more secrets of the art of tyranny.²⁰

¹⁹ Baronne de Staël-Holstein, *Considérations sur les Principaux Evénements de la Révolution Française*, (Brussels/Amsterdam 1818), V. de Broglie et Baron de Staël eds vol.2., 176-177.[Un tel être n'ayant pas de pareil, ne pouvoit ni ressentir ni faire éprouver aucune sympathie; c'étoit plus au moins qu'un homme.] my transl.

²⁰ Baronne de Staël, *Considérations*, 375. [Car, de tout l'héritage de sa terrible puissance, il ne reste au genre humain que de connaissance funeste de quelques secrets de plus dans l'art de la tyrannie.] my transl.

Some of her critics sneered that her negative portrayal of the Emperor was caused by unrequited love. I don't think she ever had the illusion that she could turn Napoleon into her lover and subject. What she had in mind was even more ambitious. She hoped that the Emperor would establish a truly liberal regime. What dismayed her was that Napoleon was not receptive to any form of generosity.

It is fair to say that Napoleon established order in France that is to say for others, not for him. The *Code Napoléon* was a great achievement according to Mme de Staël, but he created loopholes in the legal system for himself. By means of *tribunaux extraordinaires* he could ignore the rules of the Code which exposes him as a modern tyrant. His ambitions were ruthless and without limits. Characteristic for the modern tyrant is that he interprets the rule of law according to his own conditions and that he improvises new rules when it suits him. Mme de Staël's description of Napoleon is reminiscent of later tyrants such as Hitler and Stalin.

In his great book on the debate for and against Napoleon Pieter Geyl gives place of honour to Mme de Staël's *Considérations*.²¹ Thiers in his book on the Consul and the Emperor distinguishes between the Consul who established order in France and the Emperor with limitless ambitions which ultimately led to his ruin. Mme de Staël's point is that Napoleon's character and his inbred disregard for others led to his ruin and that of France from the beginning of his career.

Her plea for a constitution after the British model came to the attention of Guizot and others. Curiously enough, French liberals did not want to follow the British model. The American Republic was of course another great example but Tocqueville, the great authority on that Republic, did not believe that this type of constitution could suit the French. Why this scepticism? Perhaps the French admirers of political Britain and the United States estimated that the feckless French needed a stronger bridle than representative democracy could provide. In that case their fear was unfounded. The French Republic which eventually took its place in French public life was stable and democratic. Mme de Staël's view was vindicated by history.

5. Mme de Staël's Influence

P. Geyl's description of Mme de Staël as someone who did not only write history but also made it is more than a rhetorical flourish. Of course she made history. Why would we otherwise still write about her today? She

²¹ P. Geyl, *Napoleon, For and Against*, (New Haven 1949: Yale University Press)