

H-France Review Vol. 9 (September 2009), No. 119

Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, Aurelian Craiutu, ed. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2008. vii + 755 pp. Introduction, notes, bibliography, index. \$30 (cl) ISBN-0-86597-731-3. \$14.50 (pb) ISBN 86597-732-1.

Review by Madelyn Gutwirth, West Chester University.

In 1818, the date of the posthumous publication of Germaine de Staël's *Considérations*, the 60,000 copies of the first edition sold out within a few days. Subsequent editions followed in the same year and then in 1820, and these were followed by editions in 1836, 1838, 1842, 1862 and 1881. Only then did it meet with 102 years of near-oblivion that did not end until Jacques Godechot's 1983 edition.[1] Marcel Gauchet has interrogated the origins of this curious and utter fall from favor of the *Considérations*. While it surely stands aslant of the "real" histories of the Revolution in both style and content, marking "the last plea of the Thermidorians," Gauchet nevertheless senses that this multi-faceted work has outlived that narrow focus in its engagement with the Revolution as a living force. He argues that it owes the discredit it has suffered principally to the low estate of the liberal politics it espoused pursuant to the failure of the government instituted in 1830.[2]

While Germaine de Staël composed this work from 1812 until the end of her life on July 14, 1817, her tempestuous life in politics was reaching its acme. Her enmity toward Napoleon not only had earned her exile from France, but had even driven her from her family's home at Coppet on Lake Geneva. *Considérations'* variety of modes is inflected by her ceaseless wandering among the various stops along her way.

Born in 1766 to the wealthy banker Jacques Necker, Louis XVI's most famous finance minister, Germaine Necker was a childhood prodigy. Shaped by the pedagogy of her learned *salonnière* mother, Suzanne Curchod, Germaine sat by her mother's knee in a salon frequented by Diderot, Marmontel and Buffon. Yet the Swiss Protestant Neckers would never achieve full integration into French society. Once married in 1786 to Eric-Magnus Staël-Hostelin, the Swedish ambassador to Paris, Germaine not only published a work on Rousseau [3] but also instituted, as ambassadress, her own salon which became a lively venue for political disputation as the Revolution began. Her father's dismissal in 1789 and his subsequent fall from public adulation seared themselves into her thinking and emotions.

Staël fled Paris for asylum in Coppet in 1792. Later, with her principal lover, Benjamin Constant, she returned from this first exile to post-Thermidor Paris where she reopened her salon. The couple militated for constitutional government during the Directory and lent support to the coup d'état of Fructidor, but were dismayed by the subsequent suppression of rights. In 1800 she published her celebrated *De la littérature*, which provoked a heated reaction both for and against the work. She and Constant were then viewed with disfavor by Bonaparte, who exiled Mme de Staël from Paris. Not overly daunted, she wrote her successful novels, *Delphine* (1804) and *Corinne, ou l'Italie* (1807), and traveled extensively in Italy and Germany, where she met Schiller and Goethe, gathering the materials and impressions that resulted in her *De l'Allemagne* (1810). Confronted with this work, the emperor

deemed it “un-French,” and she experienced what her *confrérie* of the Enlightenment repeatedly had to endure. The entire edition was pulped by the Emperor’s police, but fortunately, other proofs remained. In 1812 Staël managed to elude Napoleons’s spies. She escaped from semi-confinement in her Swiss chateau and traversed the Continent, reaching Moscow just ahead of Napoleon’s troops. Once more she fled, to Sweden and then to England, where *De l’Allemagne* was finally published to wide acclaim. As Napoleon’s reign receded, she returned to Paris at the Restoration where she resumed her political life (or what the Emperor called “plotting”), and worked on two final books, spirited replies to Bonaparte’s tyrannical government, the highly-polemical *Dix années d’exil* (1820), and the *Considérations*.

Aurelian Craiutu has edited and republished a slightly revised version (lightened of archaisms) of the 1820 English translation of Staël’s work. Characterizing Staël as “a thinker for our time,” Craiutu notes the filiation between Staël’s political thought and that of Necker, who had written several volumes on politics and finance as well as his own early *De la Révolution française* (1797). Craiutu cursorily relates some principal events of Staël’s life, although he neglects the flight across Europe, which I believe left its heavy imprint on her *Considérations*, especially in the form of the work’s obsession with English freedom and institutions. Craiutu points out that Staël’s study probably owed its impetus and title to negative portrayals of France’s Revolution in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections* (1790) and Joseph de Maistre’s 1794 *Considérations*. If initially intended as a defense of her father’s policies and philosophy of state, this work reached beyond that goal in its own defense and critique of the Revolution. Echoes of her work recurred, as Craiutu shows, in histories by Guizot and Tocqueville. The vicissitudes of *Considérations’* reputation have been tightly linked with the political fortunes of Bonapartism as well as Liberalism. While the former has lost a good deal of its charms, the latter may be enjoying something of a renaissance. Craiutu stresses the relevance of the American experience to Staël and her cohort. His edition, with its light documentation, is unlikely to replace Godechot’s exhaustive and searching presentation of the same work, as Craiutu himself acknowledges, but will certainly prove serviceable and illuminating for English-only scholars and students.

A few caveats regarding this edition are nevertheless called for. In Craiutu’s bibliography of Staël’s works, he fails to include the formidable *Correspondance générale* undertaken by Béatrice Jasinski, finished through volume VII, which covers half of 1812.[4] He also does not include, in this edition directed at an English-speaking public, Avriel Goldberger’s able translations of *Delphine*, *Corinne* and *Dix années d’exil*. [5] Although there is a decidedly autobiographical subtext to almost all of Staël’s texts, she never wrote an autobiography as Craiutu appears to claim. (viii) More seriously, Craiutu offers only the most fleeting reference to Staël’s *Des circonstances actuelles*, written in 1798 but unpublished until 1906, and reedited by L. Omacini in a critical edition in 1979.[6] A comparison between Staël’s positions in this earlier foray into political theory and this later work might certainly have enhanced a sense of her evolution as a thinker.

The early nineteenth century diction of this translation is generally pleasing, and historically apposite, but occasionally overly elaborate as compared with the French. I did, however, take umbrage at the use of “knowledge” throughout to translate “lumières.” “Knowledge” simply fails altogether to convey either the Kantian sense of the Enlightenment’s goal of informed individual judgment, or its aura of sublimity in achieving it.

Staël’s *Considerations* is divided into six parts in three volumes. She had revised the first two volumes by the time of her death, but not the third, and this becomes evident to the reader—repetitions and some loss of direction occasionally creep in there. Part one offers a brief overview of French history before launching into the extended defense of Jacques Necker. This step-by-step account of her father’s sometimes anguished, sometimes glorious career takes us from the accession of Louis XVI through the early days of the Revolution to Necker’s return after the Bastille’s fall. Here she begins the interrogation of constitutionalism that will thread its way through most of her pages by asking whether France had a constitution before the Revolution. Part one also features her celebrated eyewitness

account of the opening of the Estates-General. Parts two and three cover the years 1789 to 1799. Although away from France from 1792 to 1795, much of her response to this first period of the Revolution reflects direct experience. This is less the case with her treatment of the Constituent, which is nevertheless probing. Part two ends with the Constitution of 1791. Staël treats emigration, the trial of Louis XVI, the Terror and fanaticism as well as the Directory and its state of mind in part three. Part four is entirely devoted to Bonaparte's nature and career, and establishes a contrast with Necker as statesman, while part five deals with the Emperor's fall and the return of the Bourbons. The last section, as has been noted by several commentators, [7] might well be seen as a forerunner to *De l'Angleterre*, an overflowing uncritical celebration of English government, mores, social order, and religion, all of which she commends to her own nation as exemplary.

While Godechot corrected some of Staël's errors, he admitted they were few. He argued it was not a true history of the Revolution because it smacked too much of personal testimony or pamphleteering instead of being based on the perusal of "authentic" documents.[7] He did note some of her sources, but protested that she never pretended to be objective. This is an understatement. From the start of the book we are never in any doubt as to where she stands. Heart and soul, she is on the side of freedom of movement and of the word, assured by constitutional guarantees under limited monarchy buttressed by an aristocracy, in which religion (preferably of the Protestant variety) is freely practiced.

This is a text that means business. Germaine de Staël's voice here departs from that of her previous works. Having become something of a European personality in her tireless search for allies in her war against Napoleonic rule, her occasional diffidence has quite slipped away. Now she is sober, direct, sure. At times, she is a reasoning preacher, at others either a cool observer or a hot one. This text can descend, at any moment, into rant, meditation, eulogy, or analysis. Her subjects are people, ideas, passions, forces, and factions, the last of which she particularly despises. Occasionally she indulges in a maxim or a *mot*, but not often. She offers few metaphors or similes, so when they do appear they strike the reader with a certain degree of force. Her means are eclectic: scenes (her recollections of the entry of the Estates-General, or of the 5th and 6th of October), anecdotes (such as her arrest and arraignment before Robespierre at the Hôtel-de-Ville), and portraits (of Sieyès (203 and 438), Mirabeau (177), and of course, Bonaparte, passim). These and many others lend color and vivacity to the work, but they are complemented insistently by the sort of constitutional argument that her mother had instilled in her while a child by making her copy out excerpts of Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*.

Her three obsessive preoccupations in this fat, ambitious volume remain throughout: Necker, Bonaparte, and the French nation. Necker, the "*homme à principes*," serves as Bonaparte's opposite in every respect. This father with whom she identifies to the point that she herself almost disappears until parts five and six, represents for her goodness, charity, public service and wisdom in worldly affairs. She fervently espouses Necker's middle-class defense both of property and of a constitutional monarchy backed by an aristocracy that would insure continuity with the past. While she notes, without too strong a denial, his critics' wrath at Necker's indecisiveness, for her this is simply an index of his sage moderation.

As to Bonaparte, with whom she had sometimes been on less inimical terms before his authoritarianism had become so flagrant [9], her personal animus conjoined with her ideological differences with him fueled an almost disabling obsession. She relates a (perhaps rearranged) version here of her first encounter with him. (410) But intriguingly, her enmity is decidedly more nuanced than in the concurrent *Dix années d'exil*, which concentrates so largely on her own travails. Her analysis of his personality and policies comes across as sagacious and not unkind. However, her unalloyed anti-militarism and Napoleon's betrayal of representative government ultimately combine to insure that there could be no redemption in her book for his despoliation of France's Revolution.

As for the French nation, exile has transformed Staël into a Franco-European, and she looks upon her native land with a severe skepticism that can only have alienated many readers. She is both a fierce

patriot and a merciless critic. On the plus side, Staël claims that the Revolution was no “accident,” and was prepared by numerous occasions in its prehistory of attempts by the people—as under François I and Louis XIV—to wrest sovereignty from France’s rulers. But she also concludes that the French like to be moved and also to laugh at being moved; that they are too prone to ascribe great powers to immoral men; that their nobles have no belief in the people’s stake in the nation; that their great object is to think and speak like others so as to be sure of applause; that they are factious and have disdain for their enemies. Yet, throughout the work, her fervent concern is with French liberty, that the Revolution be retrieved from its Jacobin atrocities, and that France assume what she believes to be the greater moderation and more certain stability afforded any nation by the emulation of English constitutionalism and Protestantism’s moral order.

Upon its publication, *Considérations* was attacked from every side. The conservative Bonald wrote that he could imagine no European writer less called upon to write a history of the Revolution than Mme de Staël.[10] In phallogocratic style, he reduced her effort to a “novel written under the influence of domestic affections and political passions.”[11] The former Girondist Bailleul railed that hers was an act of accusation against the Revolution. For the ardent Bonapartist Stendhal, her work was “habitually *puerile* [and] marred by incredible ignorance.” He alternatively pillaged and mocked *ad feminam* (albeit somewhat respectfully) the *châtelaine* of Coppet.[12] A twenty-first century study has explored the gap between the relative rejection of *Considérations* by nineteenth century historians of the Revolution and the greater interest her text evoked among literary historians, [13] although another review of Staël’s reception over 150 years shows how grudgingly her works have been treated in literary textbooks over time.[14]

What will certainly strike modern readers is Staël’s elitism—her cult of great men, monarchism, nostalgia for the graces of the French aristocracy, and devotion to property. These tendencies reflect, however, the moment of the work’s composition, notably the return of the Bourbons to power. Staël was never one to be too far out of touch with the opinion of the moment. In any case, none of the Enlightenment philosophes were outright democrats where talent was concerned, though all, like Staël, were fervent advocates of education. The cult of the father, too, may give modern readers pause, but this filial piety, the intimate mirror-image of the great man cult so fundamental to her personality structure, was also, in part, dictated by the wide sentimentalist acceptability of that posture as compared with its underlying shadow, the longing for the great woman so bravely set forth in her *Corinne*.

An underlying lifelong struggle on the part of Germaine de Staël becomes more evident than ever in the *Considérations*. Jean Claude Bonnet theorizes in a psycho-analytic vein that she transgressed the ambient imperative of filial piety in her quasi-incestuous love of her father.[15] But this prevalent view neglects to account for her rebellious solecism in utterly rejecting her father’s idea of what a woman should be. Necker subscribed to Rousseau’s revulsion against the sight of a woman writing. After discouraging his wife’s literary aspirations to the point of near-extinction, he made such fun of Germaine’s on-the-run endless scribbling on a portable board, calling her “master holy desk,” that only when *Corinne* achieved celebrity did she feel entitled to a stationary desk.[16] Far greater struggle with the idea of the father shaped her evolution is evident than is usually acknowledged. Both her own aspirations and her devotion to Necker were entwined with the Revolution’s fortunes.

In 1798, as the Consulate was sinking, Staël wrote (with Constant) her *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la république en France*. [19] Here, as Gauchet and Omacini indicate, she showed herself distinctly more republican and certainly less monarchist than she would in the *Considérations*. Both works were addressed to their respective political conjunctures, but Gauchet links the earlier work to Constant, whereas he reads the latter as a “return” to Necker’s beliefs.

In view of Charles Nodier's observation in 1825 that "women's power seems to diminish in proportion to the rise of democracy," I would suggest that Staël's posture in *Considérations* does reflect a retreat both in love and fidelity to what she saw as Necker's noble vision of French freedom and order, and also an acknowledgment of her disappointed hopes for freedom for women.[17] In spite of that, her own celebrity and power having hugely grown over the previous twenty years, she felt enabled, especially in parts five and six of her opus, to voice her unassuaged confidence in the unfinished Revolution.

Staël's final words in the *Considérations* are a hymn to liberty, which was for her not a vague category, but an energetic engine for human self-realization. She held that "there is in a nation a certain stock of feeling, which should be managed like so much physical power." (212) This, perhaps, is why William M. Reddy sees in "her agenda [one] both ambitious and worthy of emulation. It challenges us to understand the history and the political implications of how people feel." [21] And how, I must add, these emotions inflect their political fortunes.

[1] Germaine de Staël, *Considérations sur la Révolution de France de Mme Staël*, Jacques Godechot, ed., (Paris: Tallandier, 1983), p. 31.

[2] Marcel Gauchet, "Mme Staël," in François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), p. 1029.

[3] *Lettres sur le caractère et les écrits de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 1788.

[4] *Correspondance générale de Madame de Staël* 7 vols., Béatrice Jasinski and Othenin d'Haussonville, eds., Vols. 1-6, (Paris: Pauvert, 1960-); Vol 7, (Paris: Klincksieck, 2009).

[5] *Corine or Italy*, translated by Avriel Goldberger, (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, N.J., 1987); *Delphine*, translated by Avriel Goldberger, (Northern Illinois University Press: De Kalb, Ill., 1995); *Ten Years of Exile*, translated by Avriel Goldberger, (Northern Illinois Press: De Kalb, Ill., 2000).

[6] Madame de Staël, *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution française et des principes qui doivent fonder la république en France*, J. Viénot, ed. (Paris: Fischbacher, 1906); For the 1979 edition, *ibid*, Lucia Omacini, ed. (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1979).

[7] Staël, *Considérations*, Godechot ed., (25). See also, Linda Orr, "Outspoken Women and the Rightful Daughter of the Revolution," in Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine, eds. *Rebel Daughters-Women and the French Revolution*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 131.

[8] Jacques Godechot, *Un jury pour la Révolution*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1974).

[9] See Paul Gautier, *Madame de Staël et Napoléon*, (Paris: Plon, 1903) and Henri Guillemin, *Madame de Staël et Napoléon, ou Germaine et le caïd ingrat*, (Paris: Plon, 1966).

[10] Louis de Bonald, *Observations sur l'ouvrage de Madame la baronne Staël ayant pour titre: Considérations sur le principaux événements de la Révolution française*, (Paris: Leclerc, 1818), p. 2, cited in Stéphanie Tribouillard, "Une croisade contre 'le talent du mal': Les contr-révolutionnaires lecteurs des *Considérations*," *Cahiers staëliens* 53 (2002), p. 2.

[11] Louis de Bonald, *Oeuvres*, (Paris: 1858), vol. xi, p. 392, cited by Frank P. Bowman, "La polémique sur les *Considérations sur la Révolution française*," in Étienne Hofmann and Anne-Lise Delacrétaz, eds., *Le Groupe de Coppet et la Révolution française*, (Lausanne: Institut Benjamin Constant, 1988), p. 127.

[12] Jacques-Charles Bailleul, *Examen critique de l'ouvrage posthume de Madame la Baronne Staël*, (Paris: A. Bailleul, 1818), and Stendhal, *Oeuvres complètes*, Victor del Litto and Ernest Abravanel, eds., (Geneva: Edito-Service, 1970), Vol. xxxix, p. 131. Cited in Bowman, "La polémique, pp. 226 and 236.

[13] Claire Gaspard, "Madame de Staël et les historiens de la Révolution," *Cahiers Staëliens*, 51(2000), pp. 7-19.

[14] And yet, a review of Staël's treatment in the literary textbooks of the last 150 years uncovers, despite favorable commentaries, how embattled this treatment has been. Béatrice Bomel-Rainelli, "Sentimentalité et intellectualité: le paradoxe Staël dans les manuels d'histoire littéraire," *Cahiers Staëliens*, 53(2002), pp. 105-128.

[15] Jean Claude Bonnet, "Le musée staëlien," *Littérature* 42(May 1981), pp. 4-19.

[16] Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: the Emergence of the Artist as Woman*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978,) pp. 38-42.

[17] Charles Nodier, "De l'influence des femmes dans un gouvernement représentatif," in J.-A. de Ségur ed., *Les Femmes, leur condition et leur influence dans l'ordre social...* (Paris: 1825, vol. iv, p. 228, cited in P. Rosanviallon, *Le Sacre du citoyen*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 178.

[18] William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling- A Framework for a History of the Emotions*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 145.

Madelyn Gutwirth
West Chester University
madgutwirth@comcast.net

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172