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Mme de Staël and Fanny Burney

(A talk to the Burney Society
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ANNETTE KOBAK

Hello. And thank you to the Burney Society and to Jean Bowden for inviting me to this numinous and beautiful place, Juniper Hall, to talk about one of the people who helped make it so—Mme de Staël. She herself always felt—with the rose-tinted glasses of retrospect—that her stay here was an idyll outside her otherwise tumultuous life—the “sweet and delightful abandon” of Juniper Hall, she called it. (Too much sweet and delightful abandon for Fanny Burney, as we shall see!) I don’t know if anyone has talked about Mme de Staël here since she left—at just this time of year—in 1793, that horrifically revolutionary year in France. I’m sure they have. But I’m equally sure that Mme de Staël would be delighted to know that 207 years after she was here, in the futuristic year 2000, she is still being celebrated. The judgement of the future mattered to her, and it was that in many ways to which she was consciously playing.

The newsletter mentions that I’m talking about Mme de Staël—also known more recently as Germaine and plain “Staël,” and I shall switch randomly between the three—and Fanny Burney. I hope you’ll not feel I’m here under false pretences if I talk mainly about Mme de Staël—with cameo appearances, as it were, by Fanny. But perhaps first I could signal some basic similarities (there were to be such fundamental differences) and some basic facts. Fanny Burney was born in 1752, and Staël in 1766, so Fanny was fourteen years older than Germaine. Fanny died in 1840, at eighty-eight. Mme de Staël died in

1817, at fifty-two. (To many this may seem a justified reaping of the rewards of their very different styles of life!) Both girls were raised in brilliant social and literary circles. Both had exceptional, kind and encouraging fathers (up to a point, as we shall see). Both became extremely famous in their own time as women novelists. (Both had characters in their major novels with similar names—Mme de Staël's Lord Nelville in *Corinne* was surely a homage to Fanny's Lord Orville.) Both published their first book anonymously. Right, so much for similarities—you can be the judge of the rest.

To an unprecedented degree, Mme de Staël lived her life in the public eye. She was born into fame, since her father was the extraordinarily celebrated Minister of Finance to Louis XVI, but also her life was documented not only by herself—particularly in her 10,000-odd letters, sometimes written to people in the next room!—but also by the people she was close to from early childhood, many of whom were major figures of their time. She features in—I would guess—more memoirs and letters than any other person of her period. She also had a quite staggeringly eventful life, especially for a woman, so I hope that those of you who are connoisseurs and scholars of the period will forgive me for what's going to be a broad brush account, simply to get all the major events in. Even then, I should warn you that this is going to take an hour or so, so please do wander off if you get bored! I hope there'll be time for questions afterwards. I particularly hope I'll be able to answer them.

Even Mme de Staël's birth, in April 1766, is vividly described—by her mother. She writes to a friend two months after the birth: "all the revolting details of childbirth had been hidden so carefully from me that I was not only appalled but taken completely by surprise; and I can't help thinking that most women are given a very presumptuous sermon about marriage. If they knew what was in store for them I'm sure they wouldn't voluntarily go to the altar at all." Suzanne had had no idea of what was entailed physically in marriage when she married, let alone what would happen in childbirth. And the new vogue of men delivering babies, and seeing all this! "My terrified imagination was still far from conceiving of the truth; for three days and two nights I was in the torments of the damned; death was at my bedside and had for its satellites a species of person far more terrifying than the furies, invented specially to make modesty tremble and to revolt nature;

the word *accoucheur* still makes me shiver with horror.” This was a suitably dramatic entrance for Anne Louise Germaine Necker, the future *Mme de Staël*. Although she and her mother would fall out later on, they were very alike, and shared a penchant for melodrama—and a tendency towards rather existential depressions, which Suzanne would refer to in her diaries—evocatively—as “the claw of the tiger.” Perhaps not surprisingly in the circumstances, Suzanne didn’t have any more children. Whether she and her husband Jacques had any more sex we don’t know—why should we?—though the highly idealized version of their marriage that would become in feature of public life in Paris later on might suggest they didn’t.

The world Germaine Necker was precipitated into was thrilling: pre-revolutionary France, a time of which Talleyrand, the arch-intriguer, arch-diplomat, arch-survivor—indeed archbishop!—who may have been *Mme de Staël*’s first lover after her marriage—said “Anyone who hasn’t lived in the years before 1789 doesn’t know what the sweetness of living is all about.” The milieu she was born into was exciting but also highly charged—and aggravated by her mother’s attempt to bring her up according to Rousseau’s “noble savage” child-rearing theories in his *Emile*, published four years before, and simultaneously—tying herself in impossible knots from the start—to rear her in a Parisian salon. Suzanne doggedly tried to follow Rousseau’s advice in breastfeeding her daughter herself, and managed for a bit, but she wrote that “after having overcome the pains and suffering of this for four months I saw my little girl getting weaker by the day.” This kind of counterproductive maternal attention would unfortunately prove typical. Rousseau himself, of course, had given away his five children as foundlings at birth, as his rival Voltaire gleefully revealed, yet in spite of this his voice struck the keynote of the age. That note was to do with liberty, and the individual—a new note which had started to come in with the Enlightenment, as the individual began to be unmoored from the strict hierarchies and dogmas of religion or society, began to look around and ask “Who am I?” and “What rules do I invent for my life?” and “Where are we collectively going now that we seem to be responsible for our own futures, instead of leaving them in the hands of the gods and their representatives on earth, the kings?” (I mention this because this is *Mme de Stael*’s intellectual inheritance, and these are questions that her books address with such verve.)

Also—the newly proliferating printed word was spreading this self-scrutiny—and scrutiny of others—like wildfire. Journals and pamphlets—many of them scurrilous and libellous—reflected back the key figures of the day in just as much sleazy and slanderous detail as our tabloids today—what was alleged about Marie-Antoinette was grosser and more shocking even than anything published about the current younger royals (she was completely “debauched,” had sex with women as well as men, taught her young son the Dauphin to masturbate, and committed incest with him). Pamphlets and books began to build up a new group of readers—a group which cut across many of the previous social boundaries. And those readers began to be invested with a voice: and that voice was public opinion. It was, effectively, this new phenomenon, public opinion, which would send Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette to the guillotine.

It was forged in the salons—and later the clubs and cafés—of Paris, and it was fed through to Germaine—as was the whole Enlightenment project—like mother’s milk every Friday in Suzanne Necker’s famous salon, where Diderot, d’Alembert and scores of others philosophes and writers would meet every week, reinventing the world in the light of reason instead of superstition, and cataloguing as many aspects of it as they could in the famous Encyclopedia. And Germaine listened, agog. Here she is as an eleven-year-old, described by a girlhood friend: “you had to see how Mlle Necker listened! Her looks followed the movements of whoever was speaking and seemed to anticipate their ideas. Her face was so expressive that even though she didn’t open her mouth she seemed to be speaking in her turn. She understood everything, even political subjects—already beginning to be one of the main topics of conversations [this was 1777]. People amused themselves by teasing her, embarrassing her, provoking this little imagination which was clearly already showing itself so brilliant. The most outstanding minds were the ones which most enjoyed trying to engage her in talk.” This could have silenced her for life, but did the opposite, she thrived on it and she became a virtuoso conversationalist. Conversation was the very air she breathed, as she’d write later: “conversation is a way of people acting on each other, of giving quick, reciprocal pleasure, a way of speaking as soon as you think, of enjoying your own self in that very instant, of being applauded without any work, of bringing out every shade of meaning by accent, gesture, look, altogether of producing deliberately a kind of electricity that makes

sparks fly, relieving some of their excess of high spirits, and jolting others out of a painful apathy." Germaine, of course, was one of those whose excess of high spirits needed the safety valve of conversation—as Napoleon instinctively knew, which is why he would silence her.

Conversation was Germaine's own particular gift of the gods. Neither of her Swiss parents had it. Her father—the Swiss banker Jacques Necker—didn't have it, in spite of his self-made fortune and excellent mind. His manner was plodding and pompous, and he would tend to nod off in the salon, sucking his thumb. Germaine's mother Suzanne didn't have the knack of conversation either but longed for it. Hers was a rags to riches story: she was the only child of a Protestant pastor from a village near Geneva, who'd been rescued from genteel poverty as a governess by her marriage to Jacques. But she'd become rigid and artificial when transplanted to sophisticated Paris, trying too hard to clamp down on her natural ebullience, which wits thought provincial. The waspish young Englishman William Beckford gives a malicious caricature of the Neckers when he visited their salon, seeing Necker as a maître d'hôtel, just needing a "napkin under the arm" and Suzanne as "pedantic and domineering," like a "précieuse ridicule." Yet Suzanne had a very good intellect. Unusually, she'd been tutored at home in the classics, geometry and physics by her pastor father, and she'd been spirited in her youth, with many suitors, including the young Gibbon—well, young fogey really. He was one of the wave of English visitors who came over to the continent after the Treaty of Paris in 1763, many on the Grand Tour. (Over 40,000 English came through Calais alone at this time.) After a convoluted romance with her, he ratted on an engagement to her, at the same time as she'd been orphaned. It was from this unpromising script that Necker rescued her, set her up grandly in Paris—so grandly that the year before Germaine's birth she'd had the gratifying experience of flaunting her success to Gibbon and showing him what he'd missed. "My feminine vanity never had a more total triumph" she wrote to a friend, he was "the constant witness to my husband's adoration of me." They did adore each other, and she was eternally grateful to him, devoting the rest of her life to furthering his career and happiness. But the price she had to pay for stifling her real, live self is vividly symbolized by an obsession she developed from then with not being buried alive—a fate she went to elaborate lengths to try to prevent.

Anyway, the salon was part of helping Jacques' career. At first the great men came partly because bankers were a rising breed whose influence could keep literary men out of prison when censorship was still in the wings. (Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau all had spells in prisons or their books banned.) The French salons were a unique climate, uniquely favourable to women—it didn't happen in England in the same way at all—where women managed to bring the intellectual action onto their home ground and even set the rules of engagement. They were a public stage in private territory where men and women could study each other, and flirt, and make the sentimental life a central part of their existence. Women acquired information, sophistication, influence and confidence. It seems to me to account for the fact that even today French women are much more equal and at ease in conversation around a dinner table than their English counterparts (and they never had the bizarre idea of men retiring to drink port). Mme de Staël herself wrote of the salons "In no country and at no other time was the art of conversation in all its forms so remarkable as in the first years of the revolution. Women in England are used to keeping quiet when men are there, whenever it's a question of politics; women in France were leading nearly all the conversation in their own homes." Of course, admittedly, we're talking as yet of a privileged—though increasingly bourgeois—class.

Well, to compound this hothouse environment for Germaine as she grew up her father's star was rising meteorically. From humble beginnings, he had co-founded a bank which became the second most influential in France. When Germaine was seven, he published a book on the public finances just as they were getting dire under Louis XV, which earned him public popularity, and a reputation for disinterested patriotism—especially as the king had to appeal to his bank for money. Then when Germaine was ten, Louis XVI asked him to be Finance Minister: a totally unprecedented position of power for a Protestant, foreign, non-aristocrat. (He was the only commoner out of thirty-six ministers serving under Louis XVI; and there were only 150,000 Protestants out of an estimated total population of some 25 million—they didn't even have proper civil status until 1788.) Necker was swept to that power by public opinion, and he never forgot the lesson. There were dissenting voices—Voltaire remarked acidly that he was the only man to have written amusingly on famine—but on the whole Necker's popularity grew as that of the old regime waned—which of course

didn't endear him to Louis XVI, who would always be in two minds about him—vividly illustrated by the fact that he sacked and recalled him three times in thirteen years of office. In the years preceding the revolution, though, he became the man of the hour, his picture on mugs and ornaments right alongside the king's. For Germaine as a child, it compounded a claustrophobic situation, as her parents' general tendency towards idealizing each other was reinforced by the climate of the times—and especially as her mother taught her at home—in rather tense and intense fashion—for thirteen years. Luckily, though, her subconscious was healthy and gave her a “nervous breakdown” when she was thirteen: an exit route. It was the first instance of her taking the liberty she needed, and her enlightened doctor recommended fresh air and no books—which was what Rousseau had always said in the first place.

However when Germaine was fifteen Necker published his famous *Compte Rendu* of the finances of France, a runaway best seller which revealed the state of France's finances to the world for the first time, selling over 100,000 copies. By throwing light on public finances, Necker was not only acting in pure Enlightenment spirit, but following his banker's instincts: the role of public confidence was vital in financial affairs (especially loans), and that confidence was maintained—he saw across the channel in his much-admired England—by regular governmental accounting. It was a short step to seeing public opinion as something that would validate any action in the public arena. Public opinion was, he wrote, “a tribunal before which all men who attract attention are obliged to appear, an invisible power that without treasury, guard, or army, gives its laws to the city, the court, and even the palaces of kings.”—even the palaces of kings? Now, this from the king's finance minister was very strong stuff. It was democracy, it was on the brink of republicanism. How could he get away with? Well, he couldn't, Louis sacked him on publication—for the second time—but this dismissal only increased his popularity in Paris, because almost in spite of himself he had become the symbol of a new open kind of government which people were yearning for. He went off to Switzerland to write, and was a kind of de Gaulle in waiting for the next seven years. It was now that he bought the *château* of Coppet on the shores of lake Geneva which would form such a part of his daughter's future life.

He wrote, but although he was a kind and loving father he couldn't bear the idea of his wife or daughter writing. It was of course very typical of the age—and long thereafter. He stopped Suzanne writing altogether by saying that he didn't like the idea of women writing because it meant that he might come in and want to talk and they'd be thinking about something other than him. Germaine had written from very early on—plays, romances, word-portraits—but she, too, had to write out of sight. He managed to masculinize the activity and thus make it unseemly by teasing her when she wrote, calling her “Monsieur of the sainted writing-desk.” And she didn't even have a writing-desk. It was a way of saying the writing unsexed her, and indeed Mme de Staël's mind and thinking were always called “virile” or “masculine” whenever people were saying she was intelligent. Germaine had so internalized his views that she agreed with him—writing, when she was nineteen, and still living at home, “My father's right. How little women are made to follow the same career as men! To challenge them, to excite a jealousy in them so different from that which love inspires in them! A woman shouldn't have anything of her own, and should find her only pleasures in the one she loves.” Well. So she only wrote when he wasn't around—and only got a desk after he'd died—by which time she was thirty-six and an extremely well-known writer. Even then, interestingly, she preferred her portable green morocco writing-desk which she would carry around with her everywhere and write on at the drop of a hat—which gave not only her letters but all her writings a brilliant spontaneity. I don't know what her father thought of her having a desk more or less bolted onto her! (And how, it strikes me, she'd have loved the laptop computer!) It wasn't until she wrote her second “bestselling” novel—*Corinne*—in 1807 that she could say to her cousin Albertine “I'd really like a big table, it seems to me I've got the right to it now.”

Now she was also, as she grew into young adulthood, heiress to the biggest self-made fortune in France—though her looks and high spirits and voluble intelligence counted against her in the marriage stakes. “Opinionated” was and still is one of those putdown words society used about such people, and she had opinions. She was also a Protestant—and there was a shortage of homegrown Protestants in Catholic France, so the Neckers looked abroad. Their gaze fell on Pitt the younger—at twenty-five, chief minister of England, but Germaine didn't want to leave Paris, and said so. At twenty, she finally agreed to

a compromise: to marry the 37-year-old Swedish diplomat, M. de Staël, who'd been pitching to marry her ever since she was twelve. He'd been swamped by debt all that time, and he wanted to marry her purely for her money: as someone nicely put it, "the purity of his motive was absolute." (Their marriage contract was signed by Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette.) The marriage soon turned into one of convenience, though, as she realized that she'd married a man she couldn't love or respect, and as he rather balefully realized he was falling in unrequited love with his own wife. They lived apart for much of the time, even though they had a daughter, who died when she was two. Germaine treated him like a slightly irritating old family member. The fact that she was financing his life and his debts gave her, perhaps, more than usual leeway to lead her own life.

She took it by falling in love for the first time in 1788, when she was twenty-more, with one of the leading liberals—the suave womanizer Louis de Narbonne. "He slept soundly" it was said of him "under any roof, smiling." Alas, that wasn't at all what Germaine wanted of him. She wanted him under her roof, preferably agonizing, for love of her. Taking Narbonne as a lover was the big romantic gamble of her life. It was quickly public knowledge, and she felt confident at first at putting herself out on a limb, at incurring the wrath and shock of her mother, for this—wasn't it?—was the love of her life, her destiny. But Narbonne became the first of many who would not shape up to this role, finding it rather demanding. In her own heart and mind, she really did want, and passionately believed in, one all-consuming, all-faithful love of her life. It's just that she found herself believing it again and again. Over a dozen times, in all. With Narbonne, it was her first experience of what she would see as a pattern, that the more you needed a man, the more he would cool. Partly to counter this disappointment, she wrote her first substantial book *Letters on Rousseau*. There was a sense in which at each disappointment in love, she had to raise the stakes of her serious public reputation, by writing, in order to make sure that her private life didn't dominate not only how she was judged by others, but her own view of herself. In the process, she would become one of the first women for whom published work became a central part of her sense of identity. Who knows which way the vicious circle worked—that the "woman of genius," whom she was to write about in *Corinne*, subconsciously ensured that she didn't find a conventional contented marriage, so that she could write; or that

genius in a woman was something men couldn't cope with. There was a kind of brinkmanship—brinkwomanship—in it, too, in challenging her resources by putting herself in precarious positions. As Mme de Staël said to her daughter Albertine much later, advising her against this high-octane course “The liveliness of my affections and opinions has led me into dangerous waters from which no-one but me could extricate myself.” Or, as she also wrote, another way perhaps of putting the same thing “I don't think that since the world began you can name a distinguished mind which hasn't found life inferior to their desires or feelings.” From now on she would find herself in the eye of historical and personal storms which would test her resources to their limit.

In her book on Rousseau, Germaine writes of his own first book: “It was at the age of 40 that Rousseau composed his first work; his heart and mind had to be calm enough for him to devote himself to work. . . . he didn't know how to live and reflect on life at the same time.”

I think the most remarkable thing about Germaine's life from now on is that she did manage to do just that—live at full throttle and reflect on life at the same time.

A quick zoom now through the tumultuous revolutionary years. Just before the revolution her salon became a rallying point for the moderates/liberals, including Lafayette and Condorcet, as well as her lover, Count Louis de Narbonne (rumoured to be natural son of Louis XV and his own daughter), her former lover Talleyrand, and Thomas Jefferson, who would soon become the third president of the USA, and who had written its Declaration of Independence. Inspired by America's example, they were all working towards a new constitution for France—along the English lines of a constitutional monarchy.

But meanwhile the revolutionary tide was growing. Germaine was closely involved in the events leading up to the revolution: she was there as her father gave a key speech at the famous opening of the Estates-General in April 1789, saw him suddenly dismissed by the king for the third time, and saw how the people of Paris, incensed by his dismissal, took to the streets, joined by the troops, and stormed the Bastille in the famous attack of July 14th. The king panicked, recognizing that public opinion was now a volatile and dangerous beast in its own right, and recalled Necker. So he and Suzanne, with

Germaine in the carriage, drove back into Paris through astonishing scenes of public adulation. For Mme de Staël, it was a peak moment, when history, her love of liberty and of her father, together with her liking for glory and heightened emotion, all coincided. She later wrote "I believe that nothing like it ever happened to a man who was not the sovereign of his country. Alas! it was I most of all I who was rejoicing in his popularity, and I who was intoxicated by it." (Her "Alas" was in rueful recognition of the dangers of elation.) From now on Necker's star would wane as his uncharismatic personality fell short of the role fate had cast him in, and as increasingly radical—and violent—figureheads began to appear: Mirabeau, Marat, Danton, Robespierre. Just before his dismissal Necker had done another unprecedented thing—he'd lent the Treasury two and half million francs of his own money—half his fortune—to help the beleaguered finances of France. (It did in fact help keep Paris from famine.) The king had signed a bond for its return—the king who would shortly be beheaded.

All through this Germaine was conducting her passionate love affair with Narbonne, who had become Minister of War—partly through Germaine's championing of him—and she had a son by him. The gutter press of the time had a field day, depicting her as an "intriguer" and "nymphomaniac," but she was buoyed up by her love and by the excitement of being at the heart of political action, and early on took a policy decision to ignore calumny—and never to return an insult. As one commentator put it "the amount of abuse she was able to take was truly impressive." Necker then resigned—himself this time—and retired to Coppet to muse on the folly of mankind and kings. Germaine stayed in Paris, where the mood was turning uglier, as by September 1792 the revolution turned into Terror. Many of her friends who were liberal aristocrats, as Narbonne was, were threatened, and the night before the September massacres, six months pregnant with Narbonne's second child, she went through the streets on foot to rescue as many of them as she could and take them back to the diplomatic immunity of the Swedish embassy. She saved some fifteen lives in this way. She had worked out a plan to save the lives of the king and queen, but they'd refused it. She was hauled in front of Robespierre herself, but released. She went to Coppet to await her baby.

It was from here that she arranged for her friends—and particularly Narbonne—to escape to England, and it was at this point

that she arranged for Juniper Hall to be rented by them, paying for its rent on all their behalf. (She also cleared Narbonne's huge debts at the time.) So eager was she to rejoin Narbonne, that only eight weeks after the birth of her son she made a hazardous journey across France to Paris, and thence to Boulogne. The day after Mme de Staël arrived at Juniper Hall, the 21st February, Louis XVI was executed; and the next month, while she was still in England, England declared war on France. Her position as technically an enemy alien in a country at war with her own was very delicate.

These disasters were made worse for her by the fact that Narbonne's feelings were distinctly cooling—after five years now of their love affair—and he wasn't after all shaping up to be the love of her life she so badly needed him to be. It was now of course that she was introduced to the Burney family, through the Francophile Susan Phillips (who'd spent two years studying in Paris), and who lived in Mickleham nearby. Since the lively and colourful group of émigrés were the talk of the neighbourhood—and since Fanny was the most well-known woman writer in England, and Staël had just published her first book, it was natural that Susan should introduce them. At first both Fanny and Mme de Staël were captivated. (Fanny was forty by now and Mme de Staël twenty-six—although she said she was twenty-five.) Fanny wrote to Dr Burney in early February “Mme de Staël, daughter of M. Necker, is now heading the colony of French nobles which has settled near Mickleham. She is one of the first women I have ever met with for abilities and extraordinary intellect.” For her part, Mme de Staël called Fanny “the foremost woman in England”—gushing a little in her efforts to please Fanny—just as she tried to turn her first-ever letter in English, which was to Fanny, into an elegantly crafted compliment to her (in spite of rather charmingly halting English): “When I learned to read english, she wrote, “I begun by Milton to know all or renounce at all in once. I follow the same system in writing my first english letter to Miss Burney; after such an enterprize, nothing can affright me. I feel for her so tender a friendship that it melts my admiration; inspires my heart with hopes of her indulgence, and impresses me with the idea that in a tongue even unknown I could express sentiments so deeply felt.” As, alas, quite often, Mme de Staël's ardour was not reciprocated: Dr Burney, in a letter which a French biographer of Mme de Staël cites as a model of “what is traditionally called English hypocrisy” writes: “I am not surprised at your account of the captivating powers of Mme de Staël. It

corresponds with all I had heard about her and with the opinion I formed of her intellectual and literary powers in reading her charming little "Apologie de Rousseau". But as nothing human is allowed to be perfect, she has not escaped censure. Her house was the centre of revolutionists previous to the 10th of August, after her father's departure, and she has been accused of partiality to M. de Narbonne [!]. But perhaps all may be Jacobinical malignity. However unfavourable stories of her have been brought hither, and the Burkes and Mrs Ord have repeated them to me. But you know that M. Necker's administration and the conduct of the nobles who first joined in the violent measures that subverted the ancient establishments by the abolition of nobility and the ruin of the Church, during the first National Assembly, are held in greater horror by aristocrats than even the members of the present Convention. I know this will make you feel uncomfortable," he writes, and ends by suggesting she find some excuses not to go to visit her.

Fanny, seeing through innocent eyes, replied of the accusation over Narbonne that "their commerce is that of a pure but exalted and most elegant friendship. She loves him even tenderly, but so openly, so simply, so unaffectedly, and with such utter freedom from all coquetry, that if they were two men, or two women, their affection could not, I think, be more obviously undesigning. She is very plain, he is very handsome; her intellectual endowments" she wrote guilelessly "must be her with him her sole attraction." However she adds "I would nevertheless give the world to avoid being a guest under her roof, now that I have heard even the shadow of such a rumour." And this she did—indeed for the rest of her life her relations with Mme de Staël would be dominated by her making ever more convoluted excuses to avoid her. Even Mme de Staël, who was inclined not to acknowledge any hostility towards her, couldn't fail to notice Fanny's cooling off, and when told that it was on the basis of Dr Burney and others' reservations, she objected to Susan that Fanny "behaved like a girl of fourteen," adding "Do you mean to say that in this country a woman is treated as a minor all her life?"

The rift between Fanny and Mme de Staël is an individual example of a culture clash between England and France which surfaces intriguingly at various points in history—and of course Dr Burney's and Fanny's friendship with Burke will have played a big role in their

keeping anyone French associated with revolution at arm's length. As Duff Cooper put it later "It was as if *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* were transported in the landscape of *Sense & Sensibility*."

Partly to distract herself from the news from France, Narbonne's lack of ardour, and these snubs, Mme de Staël found the time and energy once again to reflect on all the action—while she was in the middle of it—in a book called *On the Influence of the Passions upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations*. Her usual vivid and engaged style has a self-justifying note, as she began to feel the mirror of others' views of her—the "tabloids" of the day, people like Fanny Burney, or—worse for her because internalized, her mother—reflecting a picture at odds with how she wanted to think of herself. She writes of herself "Condemned to celebrity, without being known, I feel the need to be judged by my writings." That would be something of a leitmotif for her now.

At the end of May Mme de Staël returned, no longer via Paris, but via Belgium and Germany, to Coppet. Narbonne of course stayed, and witnessed Fanny's marriage to his closest friend, General d'Arblay. (It has even been rumoured that he stayed because of Susan, for whom he had developed a great attachment.) That summer Robespierre came to power, and the guillotine began to fall: in just over a month—1,270 people were individually beheaded—some of them her friends, as the Terror began. Germaine wrote to Gibbon, saying: "Men are going mad; most heads are not organized to cope with all these shocks." She also wrote a brave anonymous pamphlet pleading for the queen's life; only to see the Queen, too, guillotined. Mme de Staël wrote to her husband "Aren't you confounded by the constant pact between success and crimes?" It was a cry from the heart—I don't think you can overestimate the shock the Terror and the continually falling guillotine produced on all those around. One observer wrote at the time "one can no longer go out without seeing the guillotine or those being taken to it; our children are getting cruel and it is to be feared that pregnant women will bring forth children with marks on their necks or still as statues because of the distressing sights they are subjected to in our streets." The shock had an additional edge of horror, even guilt, for all those, like Germaine, who had encouraged the revolutionary project without ever imagining that death and anarchy could be the result, let alone the death of the monarch. From now on, Germaine suffered from insomnia, and

began to take opium for it, prescribed by the doctor—one of the cure-alls, like bleeding or leeches, which were used at the time and which very often made the patient worse. (The joke ran: Doctor, your patient has died. Doctor: ah! but he died cured!— il est mort guéri.) In March the next year, her mother died, blaming Germaine on her deathbed. Her death, she said, was due to “your guilty and public liaison”—with Narbonne. In July Robespierre was himself toppled and guillotined and the Terror was brought to an end.

Germaine was saved a little from the full impact of these events by meeting in September that year the brilliant, quirky, nervy writer Benjamin Constant who would greatly affect her writing and thought. They became lovers, and had a tormented, though intellectually enormously fruitful, relationship on and off for eight years or so. Inspired by him, she wrote such works as *Reflections on Peace*, from which Charles Fox borrowed in his anti-war speech to Parliament in 1794, and *Essay on Fictions*, which so impressed Goethe that he translated it into German. The same year, 1795, she gave birth to a daughter by Constant, Albertine. She was still married; Eric de Staël was a complacent husband, and busy with a longstanding affair of his own with an elderly actress.

Constant would later write the extraordinary short novel *Adolphe* based partly on his love affair with Mme de Staël, and which would assure his fame to posterity (taken up particularly by the existentialists). Here's a picture of one of his central characters, undoubtedly based on Mme de Staël: she made “an initially displeasing effect, but when she spoke and became animated, she became irresistibly seductive. Her mind [was] the most wide-ranging of any woman ever, and perhaps of any man . . . But there was a certain indefinable charm in her gaiety, a sort of childlike quality of bonhomie which captivated you, establishing momentarily between her and those who listened to her a complete intimacy, which suspended all reserve, all guardedness, all those secret restrictions and invisible barriers which nature has set up between men and which even friendship never completely puts paid to.”

After the revolution, came the Directory, and then, crowned with glory after his Italian and Egyptian campaigns, Napoleon came to power.

The end of the century was full of apocalyptic nervousness—especially after the revolution—fin de siècle mal de siècle—and some

thought the world would come to an end. Many thought a comet would hit the earth and destroy it. (It was only recently that the volcanic origins of earth had been discovered, as had the remains of the former strongholds Pompeii or Herculaneum, which gave pause for thought on the impermanency of societies.) The new century was perceived as a turning point, to have got through it without extinction a bonus, and both Mme de Staël and Napoleon capitalized on it. (They shared sense of drama.) Crowned with glory from his Italian and Egyptian campaigns, Napoleon had made himself First Consul on Christmas Day 1799. Relishing the symbolism, he then had the new Tribune meet on the first day of the first month of the new century. Now, Constant had been appointed to the Tribune and on the 5th January gave a speech against Napoleon's increasingly despotic power. That evening, Mme de Staël had her first experience of social ostracism, when she found that three quarters of the people who had been coming to her salon had cried off. A few days later she went to a gathering where she was cold-shouldered by the assembled company. It was an utterly traumatic event for her, which she recreates twice in her later novel *Delphine*, saying "this was the first time that I saw society as a sort of hostile power threatening me with its weapons if I provoked it anew" and "I felt stares on all sides . . . I found myself alone in the middle of the circle, not like a queen being shown respect but like an outlaw whose approach would be deadly." Society was reacting that way because, like a pack, it was sensing that the power now lay with Napoleon. Mme de Staël had every reason to fear both for herself and for France. In some ways, she didn't yet fear enough.

Her offering to the new century was the first of her major works, *On Literature*, which became an instant bestseller. It was very provoking to Napoleon—an extremely ambitious sweeping survey of the relationship of literature to both political and geographic climate from the Greeks onwards. Implicitly, she was also firing a warning shot across Napoleon's bows. "The art of writing" she wrote "is also an weapon . . . Intellect does not attain its full force until it attacks power." She hadn't yet experienced how power could whip such independence of thought back into line, but she was about to. Napoleon orchestrated vicious attacks in the press on her and Constant. Playing on her sensitivity to her looks, one of them ran "It is not your fault if you are ugly, but it is your fault if you are an intriguer." From then on, until his downfall fifteen years later, Mme de Staël's life would be lived out in the shadow of

Napoleon's power to exact revenge. We mustn't forget how it must have been to be living through it—not knowing, as we do, that Napoleon came to a sticky end—whilst his empire was swallowing up country after country, including Mme de Staël's own refuge, Switzerland. To find yourself the personal enemy of such a man was alarming enough, but the fact that she continued to keep her voice raised in favour of freedom in those circumstances—though it got worn down—was brave indeed. Especially so since her father's two millions were still locked in the Treasury funds, and at the mercy of the government of the day.

It's worth thinking, too, for a moment about the scale of her literary achievement. There were considerable barriers to a woman writing a serious work of literature at the time. They didn't have the formal education of the men—Germaine was lucky in having a cultured mother prepared to teach her and not being sent off to convent like most catholic girls until they were sixteen, only to be married off to a much older man. (One of the arguments against educating them was it would show them how rotten their lot was.) Then: women themselves had internalized all the arguments against their writing. Even the revolutionary Mme Roland spent her last days in prison before being guillotined writing vehemently against women authors—seemingly unaware of the paradox that she was writing to do so! “I saw very early on that a woman lost far more than she gained by becoming an author. Men didn't like it at all and her own sex criticized her. If the works are bad, people ridicule her, and rightly so. If they're good, people say someone else wrote them.” Stendhal later urbanely advised: “A woman must never write anything but posthumous works . . . for a woman under fifty to get into print is submitting her happiness to the most terrible of lotteries; if she has the good fortune to have a love, she'll begin by losing him.” Ridicule was—sometimes still is—a weapon particularly keenly felt by women in the public eye. Mme de Staël herself wrote in *On Literature* that in monarchies women have to fear ridicule, in republics, hatred. In the same book she writes a chapter on “Women writing.” The book was written, remember, without a proper desk, because her father was still alive—but at the age of thirty-four she has otherwise thrown off her secondhand views and is thinking for herself. Looking forward to a time when serious attention will be given to the education of women, she notes how “their qualities are often held against them, and their faults serve them well; . . . men forgive them more readily for failing in their

duties than for attracting attention to themselves through distinction or talent.” When a woman publishes a book, Mme de Staël says, she puts herself more at the mercy of public opinion than a man, because she needs its approval more, and its perverse inclination, seeing that, is to give her less. Something else is at play, too: men, she says, don’t like to see their women “running the risks of public judgement, or even of giving the public the right to speak of them all the time.” (Germaine’s cousin Albertine, who wrote her first biography, observed astutely that men would nurse a grudge against independent women as a group “the moment they can say: they don’t need us any longer.”)

It was in part her own need to be thought well of, as well as an innate generosity, which prompted her to send a fulsome card to Fanny, who, as Mme d’Arblay, had arrived in Paris to stay in 1801 (she and her husband would be there on and off now for fourteen years of course). Fanny was appalled at Mme de Staël’s overtures. “How it is possible, when even the common civility of a card for her card is unreturned, that she can have brought herself thus to descend from her proud heights to solicit a renewal of an acquaintance broken so abruptly in England, & so palpably shunned in France” she wrote to her father in April 1802. She added that she had heard “histories of her returning, personally, good for evil, that would do honour to any character living.” So Fanny carefully crafted in French a reply which is indeed a model of hypocrisy (as she admits): “Mme d’Arblay cannot fail to be other than infinitely flattered by the extreme kindness of mme la comtesse de Stael” it begins. As she writes to her father “Cooler than this it was not easy to write, & the ne peut qu’être is a tournure that is far enough from flattering. I hope, however, it will prepare her for the frozen kind of intercourse which alone can have place between us.” And it did, for frozen intercourse was the only kind Fanny and Mme de Staël would have, as they played, as Kate Chisholm aptly puts it her wonderful biography of Fanny Burney, an absurd cat-and-mouse game for the rest of the time they were in Paris together—and they never met again.

Well, until 1802 Mme de Staël and Napoleon had a sort of armed truce, but meanwhile his power was growing. Her next book, *Delphine*, was written as a sort of coded challenge to his power, under

the guise of a romantic novel—it was published four months after he'd made himself Consul for life. A newspaper article ran "The whole of Paris is behind closed doors reading Mme de Staël's new novel." Napoleon showed his fury by exiling her to forty leagues from Paris, sacking Benjamin Constant from the Tribune, and telling her "Advise her not to even try to stand in my path, whatever that path may be: if she does, I shall break her, I shall crush her . . . With her, it's all emotional metaphysics, a malfunction of the mind. I cannot stand that woman." He exiled her now from France. Germaine's response was: "He's afraid of me, and that constitutes my pride, my joy and my terror."

She had reason for fear. Her husband had died, and when two years later in 1804 her father died, she was unprotected against one of the most powerful men in history, who now crowned himself emperor.

Yet in exiling her, Napoleon made her, causing her to travel and gather an intellectual constituency abroad. She went to Germany, and met Goethe and Schiller in Weimar, and August Schlegel in Berlin, and gathered material for her other major work *On Germany*. Schiller called her "the most combative, the most gesticulative" person he'd ever met, but also "the most cultivated & the most gifted." Goethe and she had many conversations, and he wrote later "It's thanks to these conversations with us that her book *On Germany* was born, a work which has had a powerful effect. The rampart of those antiquated prejudices which separate us from France has been breached by her. At least, we can hear and understand each other." *On Germany* identified and gave a name to the new spirit growing in Germany, the spirit which would dominate European literature for the next century: Romanticism.

It also once again attacked absolute power and those who abuse it, who are shown to bequeath nothing but dust. Napoleon—animated quite a bit by thwarted literary ambitions of his own—had this book pulped just before publication in 1810. He wrote to Mme de Staël's daughter Albertine "Surely, Madame, you don't think we have spent eighteen years waging war on the Germans just so that a person as famous as your mother should publish a book without mentioning us?"

Germaine now installed herself back at Coppet, with an increasing retinue of lovers, former lovers and friends. Napoleon—rightly enough—saw Coppet as a "veritable arsenal against me." She travelled to Italy, and published her most famous novel, *Corinne*, as a

result of these travels. But she was profoundly weary of her exile “don’t treat the idea of exile lightly,” she said to a friend “Ovid died of it.” She wrote to her close friend, the celebrated beauty Juliette Récamier “I agree with you about my lack of prudence; and life, which is more severe than you are, punishes me cruelly for it. But still perhaps it’s part of an generous nature to be imprudent in youth. At the moment, I haven’t got that excuse any more (she was forty-one). I’m wise, but it’s too late.” (This recalls Evelina’s reflection “Alas... that my reflections should always be too later to serve me! dearly, indeed, do I purchase experience!’)

Above all, Mme de Staël longed to be back in Paris. Her now grownup eldest son Auguste tried to mediate with Napoleon on her behalf, saying Mme de Staël would promise to confine herself to literature if she could return. “Tell your mother my mind is made up. As long as I live she will never set foot in Paris again. Besides, you can make politics by talking literature, morality, fine arts, anything you like. Women should stick to knitting.’

In 1810 Germaine met the last love of her life—a very young soldier, John Rocca, only twenty-three years old, and wounded in the Spanish war, who fell passionately in love with her. She was now forty-four. The two exchanged a solemn promise to marry. All this time Napoleon’s police had been spying at Coppet, and reporting back daily on conversations there. He now began to exile any French friend of hers—like Mme Récamier—who went to visit her in Coppet, and for Mme de Staël this was the last straw—that her friends should have to suffer. Pausing only to have her last child (she was forty-six when she had him!) by Rocca, she fled Coppet in May 1813. She left in a carriage with her daughter and a fan in hand, as if going for short drive, but was heading for Germany and Russia and eventually England. Joined later by her sons, Schlegel and two servants, she went through Austria, Bohemia and Poland aiming for St Petersburg, though having to make a huge detour via Kiev and Moscow since Napoleon was launching—by chance—his invasion of Russia some two days behind them. “I experienced that kind of nightmare that grips you sometimes at night, when you think you’re carrying on walking and yet you never get any further.”

Still, she found the time and energy to keenly observe it all and write about Russia, and was one of the last visitors from Europe to

describe Moscow as it looked before the inhabitants defied Napoleon by setting fire to it. Now, she talked with Tsar Alexander I and exercised real (and so far underestimated) influence in formulating a plan to topple Napoleon by an alliance of Russia, Sweden and England under the Swedish king Bernadotte. She went on to Stockholm to discuss this with Bernadotte, and then went on to England, hitting Regency London in the summer of 1813, where she stayed for nearly eleven months and was feted as never before in her life for being the one prominent individual to stand up to Napoleon. She might have quietly enjoyed a certain revenge in being received in company which had shunned her on her previous visit, to Juniper Hall. She met Southey and Coleridge and Byron—who was very taken with Mme de Staël's beautiful and charming daughter Albertine (Proust's Albertine in *A la recherche . . .* is named after her). Shortly after news came through of Napoleon's first major defeat at Leipzig, Mme de Staël negotiated with the publishers John Murray to publish *On Germany* in English. The book was received with great acclaim. Byron read it "again & again"—although he baited her for making her virtuous characters duller than her villains. She thoroughly enjoyed the irony of being reproved for immorality by Byron. (In turn she lightly reproved Sir Humphry Davy for complaining that England was losing its sense of civic liberties, saying "And you count as nothing the freedom to say all that, and moreover in front of the servants!") She was, though, a gift to Regency wags, with her very lowcut dresses for a woman her age, and the ambiguous, beautiful young Rocca in attendance.

When the Allies finally invaded France, and Napoleon abdicated in April 1814—and she was free at long long last to return to Paris, she saw it as no personal victory, because it so grieved her to see France humiliated and occupied. Yet these were to be quietly satisfying years: matured by the battering life had dealt her, as well as by her successes, she found herself rich in friends and influence. Tsar Alexander I, Talleyrand and Wellington, amongst many others, met frequently in her house. She and her eldest son took up the cause of the abolition of Negro slavery, and although she regretted seeing the Bourbons in charge again, she took great interest in Louis XVIII's new constitutional Charter.

Then, in March 1815, the bizarre news began to come through: Napoleon had escaped Elba, landed at Golfe Juan and was rapidly

advancing on capital. Louis XVIII and the government fled ignominiously. Staël didn't blame Napoleon personally: "he did what was natural for him to do, to try and regain his throne. . . his voyage from Cannes to Paris was one the most audacious conceptions in history," but she did blame the government for complacency. (Indeed, Napoleon later said to Benjamin Constant "I wanted to rule the world. Who wouldn't have in my place?") She decided to leave again for Coppet. Then, one hundred days later, came Waterloo, and Napoleon's second abdication. She wrote (in a typically strong and insightful phrase) that one of the results of the absolute power which had toppled Napoleon was that "by degrees, people didn't dare tell him the truth about anything. He ended up not knowing that it was cold in Moscow, in November, because no-one amongst his courtisans was Roman enough to dare to tell him something so simple." Meanwhile the Bourbons were back. At least, at long last, they did restore Necker's two millions he'd lent France twenty-four years before—enabling her at last to see her daughter Albertine happily settled in the kind of marriage she'd longed for all her life—a *mariage d'inclination*, a love match as opposed to an arranged marriage. (Mme de Staël had said with a fine womanly wit and irony: "When the time comes, I'll know how to force my daughter to make a love match"—*je saurai la forcer à faire un mariage d'inclination.*)

1816 was the Indian summer of Coppet, and of Mme de Staël's life. It was her fiftieth year—(what a half century she'd lived through!). Byron, fleeing scandal in England, was on the opposite shore of the lake, as were Shelley and Mary Shelley—writing *Frankenstein*. Byron would sail or—possibly—swim across to Coppet, and said "she has made Coppet as agreeable as society and talent can make any place on earth." In the autumn, now that her daughter was married, Mme de Staël finally married Rocca. Six days after the marriage, she set off with him to Paris, where her salon was full of the liberals who would eventually overthrow the Bourbons: her new son-in-law amongst them. A friend of hers wrote in February 1817: "Mme de Staël has reached the fulfilment of her dreams: her house is the most brilliant of all Paris and is as influential as she wishes to make it; she has no rivals. Her wealth is great. Her daughter is charming. Rocca is passably well. But her health is very poor."

A few days later, she had cerebral stroke and was paralysed. "I'm on my back," she wrote, "just like a tortoise, but with much more imagination than that animal... It is a real punishment from heaven when the most active person becomes so to speak petrified." The medicines she was given—including purée of crushed woodlice—probably helped kill her. But then, as the doctors would have said "She died cured." (!) She'd anticipated her death: "You mustn't mourn my death much," she said "I'm convinced that I had a character which would never have allowed me to be happy. I don't know if it's the world or my temperament that's to blame, but it's certain that I've always felt a sort of gulf between my way of seeing things and society's that would always sooner or later cause me grief." Yet she was thinking of the future, too. To one visitor, an American, she said "You are the vanguard of the human race. You are the world's future." Her last words were to the writer Chateaubriand, who, with her children, Juliette Récamier and Wellington, was a constant visitor to her bedside. She said "I've always been the same, vivacious and sad, I have loved God, my father and liberty." The date she died, she might have noted with both pleasure and irony, was the 14th July, anniversary of that pre-eminent date of liberty in the French calendar. Bonaparte outlived her, in his own, steadily decaying exile on St Helena, and re-read some her books there. His views on her mellowed. He wrote now that she was "a woman of very great talent, very distinguished and very brilliant: she'll last." He also said: "There are only two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run the sword is always conquered by the mind." Even from beyond the grave her voice was arguing just this: two books of her books were published posthumously, one about her years of exile, and the other a long book of political memoirs on the French revolution, which has proved immensely valuable for historians.

I think the last word should go to Mme de Staël, from that book, *Considérations sur la révolution française*. Like so much of what she wrote, it still applies today: "You can't study too much the first symptoms of tyranny, because, when it grows to a certain point, it isn't possible to stop it any more. Bonaparte himself said quite rightly that he was brilliant at knowing how to play the instrument of power . . . and how to give the nation the goal of war and not liberty. But you can't achieve great power without turning the spirit of the times to your advantage: that's why Bonaparte studied the spirit of his so well... Anything with any beauty, he turned to ridicule, except for force, and

the maxim his reign proclaimed was: Shame on the vanquished .” “So, likewise, one is tempted to direct just one single insult to the disciples of his doctrine: And yet you didn’t succeed! “It was the only insult she allowed herself.