

When the Light of Reason Fails
De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus
et des nations, 1796

Le bonheur est une idée neuve en Europe.

Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, *Rapport à la Convention*, March 3, 1794¹

As we have seen, Staël was heavily involved in the Revolution, notably with her partner Louis de Narbonne; she responded to the Terror and its ending with three volumes of political *Reflections*, on the queen's trial, on peace, and on internal peace, the last printed but not published in 1795. Instead, she published *Zulma* and a collection of short fiction, then in 1796 this odd moral tract, *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*; then came four years of silence, followed by ten years' work in literature. If this is a watershed text, what does it mean, and why did she publish it? This chapter, the fourth to examine Staël's political role during the Revolution, aims to present her reasoning at the time.²

The chapter has two parts. First, I review Staël's use of her sources: her private life, France's public Revolution, and the texts of the moral philosophers. Cathartic for herself as a woman, Staël's book is also a public stand on the Terror and a manifesto for the French Republic's future. It draws on a startling range of texts, from Cicero and Seneca through René Descartes, Emilie du Châtelet, Michel de Montaigne – see her superb chapter, “Que personne à l'avance ne redoute assez le malheur” – to Adam Smith, Claude Adrien Helvétius, and Nicolas de Condorcet. These sources reveal above all what Staël does *not* do; she systematically transforms them, reading then flouting two millennia of passion theory to construct her own new moral vision.

Second, I review what Staël offers the French Republic: a way out of ping-pong coups d'état by grounding the Directoire in coalition and moral principle, precisely the vision of her partner Benjamin Constant's simultaneous brochures, on which we know she quietly collaborated. Her

This chapter is previously unpublished.

abstract categories thus often evoke topical groupings that his famous brochures make explicit; for instance, “crime” represents the Jacobin government, surviving by annulling elections, and “vengeance” the returning émigrés trying to overthrow it. It is interesting to see the woman here more abstract, the man more particular. Ironically, Staël’s 1796 text simultaneously offers its public an opposite conclusion, presenting Staël’s discourse as womanly and characterized precisely by its refusal to discuss the public stage even after the Terror. “Condamnée à la célébrité, sans pouvoir être connue,” she writes (*IP* 133); the text allows Staël to regender herself as female and private, thus answering the slanders of, say, Louis Legendre in the Convention and freeing her hands, as she returns from exile, to practice precisely the sort of politics her text leads us to believe she is abandoning. The publication is, in short, an astute move from a gifted propagandist. Staël may not have signed books for the next four years but she played a major role in French politics before the advent of Napoleon Bonaparte.³

Staël’s Sources

Perhaps the least studied and among the most slippery of Staël’s major texts, this treatise on passion tends to feature primarily in global overviews of Staël’s life and work, with their concomitant biographical pressures. Certainly, Staël began the text while with Narbonne in 1792, and Adolph Ribbing left her as she completed it in spring 1796; but the famous chapter on love is less than one-tenth of her volume. Experience gave her more than this: the passages on women in her chapters on vanity and friendship, with the former splendidly combining her knowledge of Versailles and the guillotine, as few could; the chapter on glory, with its bows to her father, Jacques Necker; the chapters on study and philosophy, which echo her correspondence with François de Pange, who died that summer. Staël’s mother had died in 1794; Charlotte Hogsett reads the whole treatise as passive-aggressive, with Staël taking her mother’s place, and Madame Necker is more present than it seems in this text, which routinely says *father* where the word *parents* might be expected. The personal is always political, but in this instance our domestic readings have a specific value. As Robert Mauzi argues, the near-universal dullness of the century’s treatises on passion depends on their preferring cliché to the pulse of the blood; within that corpus, the texts of Staël and of Madame du Châtelet stand apart.⁴

Staël had also seen the Revolution. Her grief, present at every step, is both private and public, like that of France in 1796. Arlette Michel notes

that Staël calls vanity, glory, and party spirit uniquely present in a time of revolution. If recent events illustrate these passions, passion alone explains what Staël calls “ce temps incommensurable” (*IP* 134). Vanity led orators to sacrifice phrases, then principles, then victims to applause from the galleries; ambition led people to trample to power over the nation's interests; party spirit led people to believe that the end justifies the means, guillotine and all; crime made it impossible for people to escape from a path with its own momentum. This is Simon Schama's French Revolution, more chic now than it has been, and it speaks to something fundamental. Men have rights, says Thomas Jefferson, to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”; Louis Antoine de Saint-Just calls happiness “une idée neuve en Europe.” How could that new dawn of hope and reason have led to the Terror? This is the beating heart of Staël's book. Once again, it sets her apart from two rival traditions, that of the émigrés who condemned the Revolution without appeal and that of its defenders, from the Jacobins still in power to her *idéologue* allies, who reiterated their faith in reason as if the Terror were a bad dream. Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis is still writing in 1802 that “le véritable bonheur est le partage exclusif de la véritable vertu,” like some *abbé* under Louis XV, while Condorcet, hiding from his pursuers in the rue Servandoni, wrote his famous sketch of reason's inevitable progress before taking poison in 1794.⁵

De l'influence des passions, Staël calls her book, *sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*. The late eighteenth century is fond of these deceptive titles, where novelty depends on the juxtaposition of familiar terms. Mauzi argues for seven strands of moral tradition in eighteenth-century France, and all seem present in Staël's text: an Epicurus debate, seeking *repos*; a Stoic tradition, seeking control of passion through reason; a Christian morality of charity, attacked by the *philosophes* and pushed by its apologists toward a hedonism of virtue; Cartesian *générosité*, reduced in essence to the pleasure of self-perfection; Nicolas Malebranche's easy path from worldly to spiritual pleasure, with ties to later talk of *mouvement de l'âme*; Lord Shaftesbury's esthetic idealism, linking the true, the good, and the beautiful, and both calling for the absolute and in favor of social affections; and finally John Locke's use of *intérêt* to escape anguished *inquiétude* or *ennui* – our two morbid forms of presence in the world – and thus protect the self. Utilitarianism will rewrite Locke. The catalog of Staël's library lists moral treatises from Aristotle to Adam Ferguson, including Jean Dusaulx's forgotten *De la passion du jeu*, for her chapter on the subject; a letter in early 1796 asks for Adam Smith and Marin Cureau de La Chambre, further traces of her research. What Staël then

does with her multiple sources is ignore them, constructing instead a new playing field for debate. By combining Aristotle, Aquinas, Cicero, Montaigne, Descartes, Locke, Jean de La Bruyère, David Hume, Adam Smith, and the *Encyclopédie*, we have most of Staël's list of passions; she adds crime and religion, and fuses her chapters into a three-part narrative, reviewing first the passions (half her book), then intermediate sentiments, then internal resources against passion. Staël's eleven passions, like Dante, spiral downward; they are glory, ambition, and vanity – three nonloving social affections – then love; then gambling, avarice, drunkenness – three private but not malicious passions – then envy and vengeance; then party spirit; and, finally, crime. Staël's rather Humean contention, that passions attach us to phenomena outside the control of the self, nicely fits her three-part structure and undermines the claim that passion is anchored in egotism. In brief, is passion external, or is it "the self in paroxysm," as Mauzi argues? Wilhelm von Humboldt, post-Kantian, especially liked this stress on the soul's moral autonomy; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe thought of translating this treatise too, after translating her *Essai sur les fictions* in 1795.⁶

Four of Staël's debts are particularly curious: to Helvétius, Adam Smith, Madame du Châtelet, and her father Necker. Often labeled a hardline materialist, Helvétius is a world apart from Julien Offray de La Mettrie, who calls love a nervous contraction of the penis. In 1796, Staël was close to the grandson of Helvétius, Adrien de Mun, and her partner Constant frequented his widow's salon. Helvétius's chapter in *De l'esprit*, "De la supériorité d'esprit des gens passionnés sur les gens sensés," is present here and throughout Staël's work – "Les passions sont en effet le feu céleste qui vivifie le monde moral" (257), he argues. The hero's "contrat tacite avec sa nation" (278) described by Helvétius seems in fact identical to the "beau traité" Staël's own hero proposes to humanity, of fame in return for suffering (*IP* 158).⁷

Staël asked for Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1796, and she names it in a late footnote as she discusses compassion (*IP* 294–295). Like Helvétius, this is a hidden link to *idéologue* materialism, since Smith's translator in 1795 was Condorcet's widow Sophie, who added eight *Lettres sur la sympathie* of her own. Scholars have missed Staël's long letter to Sophie Condorcet of May 20, 1795: "Il y a dans ces lettres une autorité de raison, une sensibilité vraie, mais dominée qui fait de vous une femme à part . . . Et comme j'ai la bonne nature de n'être point jalouse, je n'ai eu que du plaisir en pensant que je connaissais et que j'aimais une personne si rare." One year later, with a Saint-Just equally available, Staël's chapter on

party spirit calls Condorcet a perfect example of that evil (*IP* 221). Condorcet was already a hero; the Convention had ordered 3,000 copies of his *Esquisse*, one of which Staël owned, and that book's preface calls him "étranger aux passions." What then is Staël's problem? Not governmental struggles from 1792, since Condorcet's ties to the monarchist Narbonne were, unexpectedly, so strong that Robespierre liked to attack them together; and Staël had not seen him since. But Condorcet, like his mentor Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, detested Necker. In 1775, Condorcet had publicly attacked Necker over the grain trade, blaming him for Turgot's fall and leaving their mutual friends despairing that the *bon* Condorcet would lose his nickname. Necker publishes Guibert's reply to Condorcet in 1798. In 1782, Condorcet's victory over Bailly at the Académie had brought another feud, along with talk from Friedrich Melchior von Grimm of Condorcet's "infâmes libelles." Staël wrote her treatise at her father's house, and her dig at Condorcet may be a bow to Necker. Two years later, she lists Condorcet and Godwin among the inventors of political science (*CA* 281). This matters, because in 1795 Staël had claimed that "aucune science (exceptée la géométrie) n'est susceptible de cette métaphysique mathématicienne." That Bernoullian use of statistics seems precisely Condorcet's contribution to Staël's thought, and it is fundamental to *De l'influence des passions*. Indeed, this for Sergio Moravia is Staël's novelty here: her combination of sociology with moral philosophy.⁸

Mauzi calls Madame du Châtelet's *Traité sur le bonheur* unique in its beauty, though he does remark that Staël offers "la liquidation du problème des passions, tel que le siècle l'avait posé." Du Châtelet's text reappeared early in 1796, alongside Necker's *Le Bonheur des sots*, in a collection deserving more attention – since that collection also first published Denis Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* – and which we may usefully call a Madame Necker Festschrift. Assessing Staël's novelty requires care: Her chapter on gambling, less about money than excitement and the future, has been called revolutionary, but it follows Madame du Châtelet (84–85), as does Staël's praise of study, which du Châtelet calls crucial to women, "exclues, par leur état, de toute espèce de gloire" (81). Only study, du Châtelet writes, offers glory to "la moitié du monde" (81). An equal love is almost impossible, both claim, each adding that "il faut quitter la vie quand on la perd" (85). Du Châtelet remarks that "moins notre bonheur est dans la dépendance des autres, et plus il nous est aisé d'être heureux" (81) – Staël's whole thesis; and she shares the radical ambivalence that gives Staël's stoicism its Romantic charm, writing that "la vie ne vaudrait pas la peine d'être supportée, si l'absence de la douleur était

notre seul but” (77). In 1806, Staël’s friend Claude Hochet republishes du Châtelet’s text with a preface on her love for Voltaire, which parallels Staël’s own liaison with Constant.⁹

Necker’s *Le Bonheur des sots* startles in its cynicism – “Pour être heureux, il faut être un Sot” – and in its call to raise our children stupid: “parce que vous n’êtes heureux que par les suffrages des autres, vous vous croyez les bienfaiteurs de vos enfans quand vous leur inspirez ce sentiment.” You have simply made them dependent on others, Necker argues, which is again Staël’s thesis. Staël republishes his text in 1804, while her friend Pierre-Louis Roederer’s review of the volume in 1796, in the *Journal de Paris*, paved the way for Staël’s own treatise.¹⁰

What Staël Offers the French Republic

From Thermidor to Brumaire, 1794 to 1799, French governments consolidated power by coups d’état, but they also recognized the fragility of unaided force and looked to propaganda and solidarity to ground the young Republic. Thus, they published Condorcet’s *Esquisse* and reprinted Constant’s *De la force du gouvernement actuel* in the *Moniteur*. These methods sound opportunist, but the alternative, whether royalist or Jacobin, threatened pogroms and civil war. In 1795, the Republic annulled elections the royalists had won; it exiled Staël to Switzerland throughout 1796; and it founded the Institut and Ecole normale for the task of moral regeneration. Staël’s treatise from exile parallels her *idéologue* friends’ work at the Ecole normale, where she later calls Dominique-Joseph Garat’s courses a “modèle de perfection,” and in the Institut’s third section, that of moral and political sciences. Like the *idéologues*, Staël calls society – even the Terror – intelligible to science, thus opposing the émigré theses of Augustin Barruel and Joseph de Maistre; unlike the *idéologues*, she claims that to understand and govern society, we must allow a space for passion. Staël also breaks here with utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham, whom she strongly disliked; the science of economics is still reluctant to ascribe human behavior to any motive other than self-interest. Staël never wrote part two of her treatise, on how governments should deal with passion, but that is the focus of her long introduction, and it is implicit in much of the rest. We have reviewed her and Constant’s simultaneous work on the concept of negative liberty during this period, and Corrado Rosso and Biancamaria Fontana have provided good readings of her treatise in those terms. Perhaps the most striking absence in Staël’s highly politicized reading of the passions is any talk of the masses; she cites only writers

and politicians, addressing the governing elite. This will change in Staël's later discussions of the Revolution.¹¹

Staël's treatise is an effort to transform leaden contingency into abstract pattern. Robespierre, Necker, émigrés, and Jacobins slot into Linnaean categories, examples of passion in its timeless and universal truth. That may bother us today – as with any *idéologue* text – but it marks a noble urge to discern principles for the future, between guillotine and coups d'état. Hogsett calls this treatise unique in Staël's bid here to combine a male and female voice and attributes Staël's ensuing four-year silence to the difficulty that entails. Certainly, it is droll that Staël chose abstraction just as her partner Constant spoke to contingency in his pamphlets, and that this very abstraction allowed Staël to gender herself as female, private, and uninterested in politics. Her *avant-propos* thus piously hopes that the treatise will give some idea of her true activities; and here, a forgotten pamphlet by the émigré leader Antoine de Rivarol is worth a glance. Published in Paris in 1796, the pamphlet contains Rivarol's review of Staël's new publication. Rivarol calls *De l'influence des passions* famous "dans une grande partie de l'Europe," but after concluding simply, "je n'y entends rien," he turns instead to attacking Necker, "entre un passé sans excuse et un avenir sans Espoir." Staël, he concludes, "s'ouvrant une route nouvelle, a droit de commencer un nouvel ordre." Reading this text, in short, Rivarol sees politics not in Staël but in her father. Following Legendre's attack, Staël was exiled in 1795 as a political *intrigante*, and she had indeed been writing constitutions. After a year in Swiss exile engaged in moral philosophy, Staël returns to Paris as an *écrivaine* in 1797 and there resumes her politics.¹²