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The sciences have always owed their origin to some great spirit. Smith created political economy; Linnaeus, botany; Lavoisier, chemistry; and Madame de Staël has, in like manner, created the art of analyzing the spirit of nations and the springs which move them. Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 4 (December 1818), p. 278

Francis Jeffrey of the Edinburgh Review was arguably the most prestigious critic in the English-speaking world in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. In September 1818, he called Mme de Staël 'the most brilliant writer that has appeared in our days'. In the age of Wordsworth and Byron, Goethe and Chateaubriand, the remark may seem shocking to modern eyes. But that brief judgement can be better situated through the words of the novelist Fanny Burney, when she first read De l'Allemagne: ‘Such acuteness of thought, such vivacity of ideas, and such brilliancy of expression, I know not where I have met before. I often lay the book down to enjoy for a considerable time a single sentence. I have rarely, even in the course of my whole life, read anything with so glowing a fulness of applause.’

In Romantic Europe, Staël’s fame needed no introduction. And her works, now emerging from recent neglect, also directly touch our modern world: what do we mean, after all, by Romantic literature and civilisation? Literature itself is only a fraction of this vast panorama. Our entire society is shaped by Romantic beliefs, ranging from the bodice-rippers of Mills and Boon to the academies’ endless stream of original doctoral
theses – a supremely Romantic critical approach, quite alien to the physician’s job of acquiring a body of knowledge. Between these extremes of pleasure and would-be science lie the horizons of our Romantic age, from continued nationalism in the Balkans to heroes in the newspapers. Yet our understandable urge to trace the origins of our Romantic society is quickly faced with a bizarre anomaly: the radical divergence, in different countries and disciplines, between what each means by ‘Romantic’ preoccupations. This is nowhere more evident than when comparing the Germans who invented the term with their successors from Boston to St Petersburg.

German Romantic thought was already highly developed, and sold well at home, before 1800, the year Friedrich Schlegel set up his epochal Classical/Romantic distinction. In England, Wordsworth and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads date from 1798. Even in Italy and Russia, Leopardi and Pushkin were famous by 1820. Why then does France alone generally date Romanticism from as late as 1830, year of the ‘bataille d’Hernani’? These Romantic questions led me to De l’Allemagne. This, after all, was Europe and America’s introduction to the German revolution; published in 1813 by one of the most eminent writers then living, who counted Schiller, Goethe and Schlegel among her personal friends. Let us, then, look for a moment at the origins of Europe’s wide-ranging Romantic movements.

England, 1820. Dating the word ‘Romantic’ in its modern sense, the new OED cites not the Lyrical Ballads, but Byron’s rejected dedication to Goethe for Marino Falieri, 1820, not published until 1899. Byron knew Staël intimately; he spent 1816 rowing back and forth across Lake Geneva to dine with her. In 1815, seven years before Byron wrote, John Murray’s English translation of De l’Allemagne had sold 2,250 copies. This was a huge priipt run for a three-volume work, and it had a linchpin chapter expressly to define the term; his simultaneous first French edition of 1,500 sold out in three days, and he brought out a second six weeks later. Visibly it is time for the OED to revise their reference. At the birth of English Romanticism stands a foreigner, Mme de Staël, her pivotal role as yet uncredited by modern English historians.²
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Italy, 1818. Leopardi, father of Italian Romanticism, completes his early manifesto, *Discours d’un Italien sur la poésie romantique*. This text adapts his two rejected letters to Acerbi’s *Biblioteca italiana*, an extended reply to Stael’s *Sulla maniera e la utilità delle Traduzioni*, which opened Acerbi’s first issue. Leopardi here defines his new national agenda in reaction to Mme de Staël. In 1821, he admits that reading Staël first turned him toward philosophy. He ranks her with Descartes, Pascal and Rousseau among the greatest of modern philosophers.5

Russia, 1825. Reading Muchanov’s critique of Staël, Pushkin remarks, ‘Mme de Staël is ours, do not touch her!’ He is angry enough to publish an article honouring *this extraordinary woman*, citing a friend, he calls her ‘the first to render full justice to the Russian people’. Durylin goes on to discuss ‘the profound influence of Mme de Staël on Pushkin and all the liberal group of his period’.6

Boston, 1836. In the United States, Müller-Vollmer amply demonstrates that *De l’Allemagne* circumscribes, for early American writers and thinkers, ‘the orbit within which they would advance their own aesthetic program and create their own peculiar discourse’. He gives details on Thoreau and on Margaret Fuller, the Yankee Corinna; as further proof, he offers close analysis of Emerson’s famous 1836 essay *Nature*, the inaugural text of New England ‘Transcendentalism’, and its massive debt to Staël. He concludes, ‘it seems curious that the important role Staël played […] has escaped the attention of cultural and literary historians for so long’.5

Here in short are three fathers of their nations’ Romantic movements, Leopardi, Pushkin and Emerson, defining their new *nationality* in terms of Staël the foreigner. Indeed, she coined the word. Our opening motto underlines modern nationalism’s debts to this cosmopolitan, herself an early victim of the monster she helped create: who wants to date their nationalism from a foreign aristocrat?

Indeed, France itself has shown routine indifference to this Swiss Protestant: the last thirty years of doctorates on her come almost without exception from abroad. Yet Staël’s massive
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importance in French cultural history is impossible to dispute. Here too, despite some fundamental documentation, there is far more to be said: for instance, that *De l’Allemagne*, huge though it is, had twenty-five French editions alone in 1813–83, not counting foreign and pirate editions, or that ten of these were under Napoleon III. These chapters also give snapshots of her influence on any number of nineteenth-century French writers, a vast and barely touched terrain. Sainte-Beuve wrote a book’s worth of articles on her; Cousin and Guizot reflect her thought; Vinet and Faguet wrote on her, Renan and Carlyle found their vocation after reading *De l’Allemagne*. There are clear echoes of *De l’Allemagne* in writers from Balzac to Baudelaire. Even in Germany, where Friedrich Schlegel created Stael’s Classical/Romantic distinction, Goethe writes in 1814 that her book has ‘a wondrous effect’. As we line up the great names of Romantic Europe, we find Mme de Staël at their shoulder. This sort of European fame was unthinkable for Stendhal or Chateaubriand: Stael had access to it because of the very cosmopolitanism she helped destroy.⁶

Clearly Staël was not the first writer outside Germany to publish a ‘Romantic’ book. Her originality is this, and I have not seen it thus formulated before. She found scattered, local and half-formed agendas, from Wordsworth to Chateaubriand, still defined within the ambit of neoclassicism; she brought them a single name, Romanticism; a fuller sense of nationhood; a point by point description of the movement’s radical novelty, extending from religion to the sciences; and terms that allowed it to be adapted for use from Boston to Moscow. This global coherence was not the Germans’, it was her own. In brief: Staël took the German term ‘Romantic’ as a perfect label for her own global agenda, and sold this private agenda to Europe’s half-formed anti-Classical reactions. She thereby invented a European Romanticism, flying her colours or reacting to them: we ignore her at our peril. These unavoidable facts I leave to the attention of national historians, since her role in each of these countries merits a book in itself. Here, I can only clear a path, proving Staël’s European importance, and reviewing this sweeping agenda which helped shape the modern world.
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De l’Allemagne’s new Romanticism is propaganda. It is full of deliberate lies, and dangerously Revolutionary. Art equals politics in Staël’s manifesto, which explains an event unique in the annals of literary criticism: the book’s pulping by Napoleon’s troops in 1810. In Staël’s words, her text was transformed ‘en un carton parfaitement blanc sur lequel aucune trace de la raison humaine n’est restée’ (I 4/11). There were no such troops to disrupt the dandies at the 1830 bataille d’Hernani; Steinwachs in post-war East Germany calls Staël’s institution theory ‘the first and […] at the same time also the last attempt, to bind literature and society in a universal historical perspective’. It is that very universalism, that heritage of Enlightenment and Revolution, which puts Staël among the last of the philosophes.7

In fairness, Staël chose propaganda in 1810 because no choice was left her, as our epigraph remarks: ‘un républicain écrir, combat ou gouverne selon les circonstances et les dangers de sa patrie’ (CA 274). Europe belonged to Napoleon, a parody of internationalism; French borders stretched from Dubrovnik to the Baltic. For Staël to make her own conquest of Europe’s still-Classical public; to offer them a new world, in all its otherness; even to escape the Imperial Censor; lies would be necessary. Faced with Napoleon’s dead European hegemony, Staël uses her works, her only weapon, to assemble her own living Europe of the imagination. She creates a federation of organic national cultures, which does much to explain her European impact. De l’Allemagne is the coping-stone of her edifice, a breathtaking attempt to describe the entirety of a nation – from geography to metaphysics – and to fuse this encyclopaedic material into a single coherent block.

Napoleon shored up his conquests with a marriage of expediency, Catholic neoclassicism at home and the annihilation of nations abroad. Staël’s Romantic nationalism proudly defies them both. She thus offers a unique perspective on a unique and exhilarating moment in history. Disenfranchised leader of the Revolution, correspondent of Goethe, Byron and heads of state from Jefferson to Tsar Alexander I, Staël looks out from her Geneva exile over France’s vast European Empire, and asks for something better. Her contemporaries – Stendhal,
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Senancour, Chateaubriand – supported Napoleon or stood by in silence, like Stendhal watching Moscow burn. Hence, Mme de Chastenay: ‘Bonaparte had so persecuted her that people said that in Europe one had to count three Great Powers: England, Russia, and Mme de Staël.’ Chapter 2 assesses the real extent of Staël’s political influence: Wellington paid court to her in Paris in 1814, and Napoleon’s Minister of Police blamed her for Napoleon’s downfall.  

This book examines Staël’s universal Romantic agenda. Four chapters echo De l’Allemagne’s division into four great Parties, on the German nation and customs, literature and the arts, philosophy and ethics, and religion and enthusiasm. Staël’s 1,200-page manifesto has been reviewed in short articles since its 1813 publication, a method which has overlooked the immense propagandist synthesis at the heart of her undertaking: Romanticism sprang fully formed from Mme de Staël’s head. Such short articles are also self-generating: take any author Staël names, find a dozen similarities among her book’s 1,200 pages, and announce a new source for the woman’s ideas, a new contribution to Romantic history. As Karl Popper remarks, thus collecting echoes while ignoring differences is the opposite of scientific method, however much we dress our argument in jargon. These four chapters will attempt to apply scientific analysis in the Popperian sense to questions of where our European Romanticism originates, hoping to show by example that a truism taken for granted by the scientific community is indeed applicable to literary criticism as such. Only by thus recombining art, science and politics can we hope to reflect the immense scope of the Romantic revolution.

In 1810, what we so blithely call ‘Germany’ did not exist, and Staël’s first job was to invent it. Chapter 1 shows that two French authorities prohibited even discussing the Germans in 1810: Napoleon, who was crushing the nation, and Classical prejudice, which called the Germans dull and archaic. Napoleon thus writes to his brother Louis of his aim to ‘dепayer l’esprit allemand, ce qui est le premier but de ma politique’. Staël has been reproached since Heine for her idealised
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German nation – in 1916, they called her la prussolâtre. But an étude génétique shows that she utterly transforms her text between draft and print. In manuscript, she mentions a series of German problems, from political division to lack of taste; in print, she replaces these remarks with Romantic propaganda. Her text stresses the old Rhine border, months after Napoleon took French borders to the Baltic; it ignores Germany’s massive East/West socioeconomic distinctions, because in 1810, the stump of western Germany formed Napoleon’s puppet Rheinbund. Staël here creates a new object, a Romantic German nation-state, handed the torch of the future by an irresistible historical dialectic.9

Chapter 2 looks at the cutting edge of Europe’s Classical/Romantic battle, and two hundred years of debate about German and European Romantic traditions. It argues that Staël fundamentally distorts her alleged German mentors, for her own ends. She ignores the Berlin Romantics, and the novel which was the heart of their undertaking, but takes their word ‘Romantic’ as ideal propaganda for her own talk of the Weimar Classicists, who hated the term. Her own focus is on medieval national heroes and historical tragedy; a key early moment in the chequered history of French Romantic theatre. Indeed, every choice Staël makes helps shape the nineteenth century. She stands Goethe’s Faust on its head, to make the play less ridiculous for a neoclassical public, and thereby gives Europe an ennui-ridden hero who is damned instead of saved, as in Berlioz. Once again, draft truths – accurate translation from the German – yield to textual propaganda, finally crushing stories of Staël’s mistakes or ignorance as a reviewer: she chose to distort, and with good cause. In Don Karlos, a scene thus jumps five acts. Furthermore, her whole book also makes room for endless, veiled references to oppression and revolt. Legend claims that Napoleon saw himself in Staël’s portrait of Attila the Hun, and ordered the book’s pulping; her manuscripts prove that this high-risk allusion was deliberate.

Staël’s third section introduced Europe to German idealist philosophy, the bedrock of modern philosophical thought. She here mounts a global attack on the whole framework of Empire...
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France, which she calls purely external. She links empiricist claims that our minds are shaped from outside; ethical doctrines of self-interest and utility; Classicism's aesthetic facts; Catholic ritual; French salon society; and Napoleon's political tyranny. Facing them is a vast Romantic vision of the German inner self, stretching from climate to epistemology. When Stael simplifies German problems, which she does, or glosses over their philosophers' quarrels, she gains on two fronts – making awkward material less illegible to a reluctant Europe, and presenting a united front, not a bickering one, to stand against Napoleonic hegemony. These local effects coincide with Stael's broader propagandist aims, and draft truths again yield to Romantic propaganda. Kant and the Germans are strikingly distorted in the process, though I add proof that Kant owes his famous 'lying to a murderer' dilemma to Stael's own biography. As in literature, we can also pinpoint Stael's pivotal stand between German revolution and French tradition: her own pre-German texts, 1786–1800, repeatedly reveal ideas which later critics thought she took from Germany in 1810.

Chapter 4 looks at religion, resurgent throughout Romantic Europe after a period of relative neglect. This fourth section now gets little attention. But Stael's religion chapters again fight a double campaign, attacking the two reigning opinions in Napoleon's France: both the 'enlightened' atheism of the Ideologues – with whom Stael is often somewhat hastily linked – and the Catholic reaction of Chateaubriand, a reaction encouraged by Napoleon's 1802 Concordat with the Pope. Like Rousseau, Stael was Genevan and Calvinist; in 1799, she proposed making France a Protestant republic. De l'Allemagne offered French readers a way to bypass the divisive French rift between Catholicism and philosophy, by combining philosophy and religion in a fruitful new synthesis; a new Enlightenment. This synthesis echoed German and her own Swiss Protestant tradition. Stael here stands apart from a strong reciprocist current in French and German Romanticism, which glorified the Catholic Middle Ages: Renan and the Americans in particular drew on her framework later in the century. Furthermore, as we retrace Stael's intellectual biogra-
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...phy, texts and correspondence yet again prove Germany’s minor role in shaping Stael’s Romantic opinions; she was religious before the Bastille fell. Here, she finds German mystics to whom she attributes her unnamed Swiss friends’ ideas. The Romantic ‘Germany’ Stael here created was a lever of Archimedes, built by her to move the world.

Generations of critics have sought a mythic parent to link all Europe’s Romantic movements, and the vast spread of Romantic civilisation: here, explicitly, it stands. Janus-faced, Stael dominates the Romantic catastrophe. Behind lie France and the eighteenth century: the Versailles of her first literary successes; the Bastille, sacked three days after her father’s dismissal; French cultural and military hegemony, built on aristocratic cosmopolitanism, and on which Stael built her own European fame. Ahead lie the Romantic and bourgeois nineteenth century which bought twenty-five editions of her book, and the new Europe of nationalities which Stael and De l’Allemagne helped bring into the world.
CHAPTER I

Birth of a nation – Staël’s Romantic Germany in 1810

L’Allemagne ne peut attacher que ceux qui s’occupent des faits passés et des idées abstraites. Le présent et le réel appartiennent à la France; et, jusqu’à nouvel ordre, elle ne paraît pas disposée à s’y renoncer.

(Excerpt from Staël’s ‘De l’Allemagne’)

De l’Allemagne’s author made five trips to German lands: brief trips in 1789–93, two high-profile visits in 1803–7, and a month in 1812 on her way to London. Exiled by Napoleon in 1803, Staël chose German soil over Coppet, her home outside Geneva: ‘je voulais opposer l’accueil bienveillant des anciennes dynasties à l’impertinence de celle qui se préparait à subjuguer la France’ (DxA 63). She spent three weeks in Frankfurt, her only stay in western Germany, ten in Weimar where Schiller and Goethe staged their plays for her benefit, and six in Berlin. When her father died in April 1804, she rushed home to Coppet with A. W. Schlegel, prince of German Romantics, as her children’s new tutor; he stayed with her until 1817. In 1807, Staël again left her exile in Coppet for a tour of southern Germany: Munich (three weeks) and Vienna. She left Vienna five months later in May 1808 for a week in Prague and Bohemia, returning via Dresden, Weimar and Frankfurt. On 8 July, back in Coppet, she took out her old notes and began her book.1

Many French citizens were in German lands throughout this period. Roughly 50,000 emigrés had been in Hamburg since the Revolution, and the amnesties of 1799 still left 145,000 emigrés abroad. The Rhine’s left bank had been French since