

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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De l'Allemagne (1813) Madame Germaine de Stael (1776-1817)

OVERVIEW

De L'Allemagne (On Germany) was published in 1813. (A first edition, published in 1810, had been destroyed by order of Napoleon.) This year marked decisive victories against Napoleon in Europe as well as the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, a fine juxtaposition bubbling up from the immanence of AI. (Did Jane Austin discuss the Battle of Leipzig over tea that day?) The book was to leave a strong mark on the conception and development of Romanticism in Europe. Of Mme de Stael's numerous texts, this one was arguably the most influential for European cultural self-understanding. Instead of Napoleonic Wars and Revolution, the educated Frenchman was now able to turn his attention to an Eastern neighbor, an enrichment of attention which has to the present date affected French overseas strategy and sensibility.

Everything converged to make a place in history for Mme. de Stael's trip to Germany and Germans. International considerations had from early in her life been dinner table talk for Germaine, whose father was essentially modern, a Minister of the Treasury for France, and whose mother was a notable saloniste, at whose table gathered many of France's leading intellectuals. (Germaine, fortunately for her, was always at her mother's side during the heat of argument.) To which must be added that de Stael's first husband was designated Swedish Ambassador to France, and that her later lovers brought to her pillow the accents of many a foreign clime.

The premises of Mme de Stael's account of Germany--there are four parts to her text: 'On Germany and German Customs,' 'On Literature and the arts,' 'On Philosophy and Morals,' 'Religion and Enthusiasm'—are built on the assumption that German cultural life is essentially 'modern,' which means 'Romantic,' full of expressive feeling, and has much more to offer the modern than have the worn themes of the classical tradition, with its reliance on cultural lawgivers like Aristotle and Horace. The corollary to these premises is that the deepest and most expressive of Germany's cultural resources is Christianity, the compassionate religion par excellence, and the widest gateway into Great Art. Mme de Stael was in these perceptions deeply influenced by Chateaubriand's *Le Génie du Christianisme* (1802). They were both joined, in the lyrical sponsorship of Christianity, by a common fascination with the Confessional, the Catholic sacrament in which the believer presents the priest with an account of his sins, in expectation of a penance the performance of which will free the individual from the weight of guilt.

GLIMPSES OF THREE TEXTS FROM De L'Allemagne.

1 On the influence of chivalry (Chapter 4)

For the moderns, writes de Stael, chivalry is as 'heroic times' were to the ancients, and thus the Christian Middle Ages serve as the launching pad for western civilization. This seminal idea springboards De Stael's break with the Greco Roman classical tradition, which of course had been the direction for culture in her own growing up, and of course of her homeland France, since the Renaissance. With chivalry, Germaine claims, come the spirits of loyalty, sacrifice, and of the cult of woman which coheres with the key Christian values of civilization. In Germany the Christian traditions of the Minnesaenger, the tradition of love singers, was still active. This love tradition, with Christianity, forms a precious repository within the Germany de Stael discovers. The French themselves knew nothing similar, if not the vestiges of Midi troubadours.

2 On classic and romantic poetry (Chapter. 11).

'The word romantic has recently been introduced into German, meaning a poetry whose origins derived from the troubadours and Christianity...' The underlying distinction here, is between classical—the ground level for French literature—and what De Stael calls romantic poetry, rooted as it is in Christian chivalry. Many characteristics of the ancient remain in German literature, trademarks of ancient literature and art: the creation of literature, as real firm objects in an objective world. The modern literatures welcome the world of self-awareness and self-consciousness. It is in fact this enriched blend of inwardness and emotion which marks the 'modern style' for de Stael.

3 On Taste (Chapter 14)

«Le bon goût en littérature est, à quelques égards, comme l'ordre sous le despotisme; il importe d'examiner à quel prix on l'achète.' 'Good taste in literature is like order under despotism; you must consider at what price you buy it.' De Stael works abundant changes on the French weakness, for too much refuge inside form, too much fear of Free Expression, the kind of manifestation of feelings that Goethe and Lessing can flaunt effectively on stage. De Stael, heir to the formal masterpieces of 17th century French drama, learns on this trip to rethink the powers of inner form, which conceal themselves inside the powers of a thoroughly prosaic dramatic text of Lessing or Goethe.

THEMES

- 1 Internal form is available in any art which is experienced from the inside out, as living process, great art works need not rely on rules..
- 2 Ancient art and literature derived their power from their lack of inner coercion; cf. Goethe's drama with its emotional form.
- 3 Christianity is the generative base for the great ascensional energy of world literature or art.
- 4 That in Christianity which is so generative is both its emotional openness (as in the Confessional) , its chivalric spirit, and its openness to learning.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 What evidence of Mme. de Stael's unusual childhood upbringing do you see in her text on the contemporary culture of the Germany of her day?
- 2 What fundamental characteristics of the 'Romantic' do you see in Mme. de Stael's view of the greatness of German culture and literature?
3. Why was the notion of the 'Romantic' such a critical breakthrough for literary critics and historians at Mme. de Stael's moment?
- 4 If the 'Romantic' was such a freeing notion for late 18th century literary culture, what was such a movement's complaint against the classical tradition?
- 5 What was Mme. de Stael's view of the Catholic confessional, and of its relevance to the factor of expression in literature and the arts?
- 6 Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and d'Alembert proclaimed themselves foes of Christianity, while liberals like Mme. de Stael and Chateaubriand adopted the opposite stance .What were the issues between these two camps, and how did those issues bear on literature and the arts?