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"The Imperative of Translation: Germaine de Staël on Culture, Interpretation, and Politics"

In: Yvonne Huetter–Almerigi and Robert Sinclair (Eds.) (2026). *Pragmatism, Metaphysics and Method—Essays for Bjørn Ramberg* (pp. 349–371). Nordic Studies in Pragmatism 5. Helsinki: Nordic Pragmatism Network.

ISSN-L 1799-3954
ISSN 1799-3954
ISBN 978-952-67497-4-7

Nordic Pragmatism Network,
Helsinki 2026

www.nordprag.org

The Imperative of Translation: Germaine de Staël on Culture, Interpretation, and Politics

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I have written this paper for Bjørn (Ramberg)—and yet it is about nineteenth-century philosophy, a far cry from the majority of his published work. However, since I started working with Bjørn as a doctoral student—it must have been around 1996/97 and I fondly remember his curious and gentle, yet intellectually rigorous approach to dissertation advising—our joint efforts have been, mostly, on European philosophy. Shortly after my dissertation defense, we co-authored an overview article on hermeneutics. Many years later we co-taught a class on nineteenth-century philosophy. I know for sure that I have learned a lot from Bjørn, philosophically and in human terms. My work on Germaine de Staël's theory of translation and interpretation is a continuation of a project that started in and through conversation with Bjørn.

* * *

The relationship between interpretation and translation has been a topic of philosophical discussion at least since romantic hermeneutics (Schleiermacher, the Schlegel brothers, and others), but was further expounded, in the twentieth century, by thinkers of a Continental as well as an Anglophone disposition (Benjamin, Szondi, Gadamer, Derrida, Ricœur, Irigaray, Kristeva, Davidson, and Rorty). Among the early contributors to this discourse is the French-Swiss philosopher Germaine de Staël, whose life and

cultural contributions were a living exercise in cultural transmission, and whose prominence in international politics was closely connected to her role in forging connections between cultures and languages and bridging political and philosophical paradigms.

In discussing Staël's philosophy of translation, my point of departure will be her late "The Spirit of Translation" (1816), but also earlier works such as the magisterial *The Influence of Literature upon Society* (1800, henceforth: *Literature*) and *Germany* (1810/1813). These works, immensely popular at the time, were rapidly translated into a host of different languages and influenced British and Italian romanticism, Russian thought and politics, and the transcendentalist, feminist, and abolitionist movements in the US (mostly in the Boston area, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Lydia Maria Child, and others [see Wellek, 1981, 217; Mueller-Vollmer, 1991 and 2003]). In this way, Staël's philosophy—*on* translation; *in* translation—left traces all the way to contemporary pragmatist thought.

Throughout her work, Staël emphasizes that the translator needs to maintain the foreign aspects of the text or speech translated. However, she does not focus only on the foreignness or individuality of literary *style*, but also on the "foreignness" of the *ideas* conveyed.[1] She emphasizes how translations can enrich a given horizon of language and culture, but also stresses the political importance of translation, especially (but not only) with respect to international collaboration.

In the scholarship, attention has been paid to Staël's notion of international politics (Sluga, 2015; Sluga, 2021; Fontana, 2015), on the one hand, and her notion of cultural mediation, on the other (e.g., Mueller-Vollmer, 1991 and 2003; Gurwirth, Goldberger, and Szmurlo, 1991). Less attention has been paid to the ways in which her international strategizing is intertwined with—or, stronger still: informed by—her philosophy of culture and art. It is the goal of this article to offer such a perspective and to do so by pitching Staël's philosophy of translation as a bridge between her philosophy of culture and her contribution to international relations.

I first turn to Staël's argument in her 1816 essay on translation (Section One), then look at how the topics of translation and interpretation structure key Staël'ian works such as *Literature* (Section Two) and *Germany* (Section Three). I conclude by reflecting on the merits of Staël's position and on how, in her case, her philosophical commitments translate into and

[1] Staël's point is not that style and ideas are completely distinguished, but that they present different lenses through which a text can be approached.

are indistinguishable from her larger life choices as a nineteenth-century woman of extraordinary philosophical and political talent.[2]

1. Thinking About Translation

The last text Staël published before her death at age 51, "Essay on Translation," first emerged in Italian translation. It was written in the wake of the Napoleonic warfare and Staël's influential contribution to the Congress of Vienna and the restructuring of the maps of modern Europe. While exiled by Napoleon for a period of more than ten years (commencing in 1803), Staël had spent time in Germany, but also in St. Petersburg and Stockholm, forging bonds between Tsar Alexander and Prince Bernadotte and working to strengthen the allegiance against Napoleon's Grand Armée.[3] She was described at the time as " 'the conscience' of an outraged Europe, and as the person who had the most influence over both the Tsar and Bernadotte" (Carl Gustaf von Brinkmann, quoted from Sluga, 2015, 147). As a key strategist in the anti-Napoleonic camp, she helped to secure, among other things, the transfer of Norway from pro-Napoleonic Denmark to Sweden (Fairweather, 2005, 411–15).

In the prime of her cultural, political, and intellectual influence, Staël's work was translated and reviewed across Europe, Russia, and the US. The essay on translation is part of the philosophical legacy that Staël, weakened by illness, consciously left behind. At this point, she had already produced a thorough survey of German culture and systematically analyzed and discussed the need for cultural transfer and international collaboration. From the beginning to the end of her philosophical-political career, cultural transfer stood forth as one of her philosophical leitmotifs.

From her 1800 study of literature onwards, Staël participated in the debate about the relationship between ancient and modern cultures. In line with Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, and Hegel—but having developed

[2] Along with the author and date-style references inserted in the main text, the following abbreviations are used for frequently cited works by Germaine de Staël: SW = *Selected Writings*; ŒJ = *Œuvres de jeunesse;* L= *The Influence of Literature on Society*; DLL = *De la littérature*; G = *Germany;* DLA = *De l'Allemagne*; CPE = *Considerations of the Principal Events of the French Revolution*; CRF = *Considérations sur la Révolution française*; ST = "The Spirit of Translation"; T = "De l'Esprit des Traductions"; C = *Corinne, or Italy*; Co = *Corinne ou l'Italie*. Texts are cited with page references to the English translations, followed by references to the French originals. Full references are listed in the bibliography.

[3] Staël describes this period in *Ten Years of Exile.* Translated by Doris Beik. Introduction: Peter Gay (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972); *Dix années d'exil.* Edited by Simone Balayé and M. Bonifacio (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

her position before and/or independently of these philosophers—she saw ancient cultures as characterized by immediacy and modern cultures as reflective and searching for an explicit, philosophical legitimation of their *raison d'être*, a legitimation that could no longer be linked to a glorious past. Staël's essay on translation explicitly addresses the condition of literature in modernity or, more appropriate to her language, in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Europe.

In the 1816 essay on translation, Staël focuses on how texts and expressions from other cultures serve to keep open one's own horizon of understanding. As she argues, "if each modern nation were reduced to its own riches, it would always be poor" (ST 279; T 294). Without impulses from the outside, a culture will stagnate. Moreover, the very power of imagination—which, along with reason, makes up the faculties of the mind[4]—needs to be stimulated by foreign ideas and expressions. "In order to preserve a country's literature from banality," she argues, "there is no more effective means than translating foreign poets" (ST 280; T 194).

Staël illustrates her point by way of a familiar example: that of modern French literature. At the time, French classicism, with its insistence on ahistorical and transcultural aesthetic norms, served as an ideal for literatures across Europe. In her reasoning, a one-sided celebration of classicism had led to a dismissal of non-classicist literatures and drama. It is illustrative that Shakespeare's work, today an unquestioned pillar of the Western canon, was dismissed by Voltaire, before being rehabilitated through, partially, the works of Lessing, Herder, Schlegel, and others (for a discussion of this point, see Gjesdal, 2013 and 2018). Moreover, when foreign texts were translated—into French, but also into German, Danish, and a host of other languages—they were often translated in the style of classism, making it possible not only to stage Shakespearean drama in French (!) in Germany, but also to present his drama in neo-classical, alexandrine verse form (Bernofsky, 2005).

Staël is critical of this kind of monolithic cultural transposition. As she puts it:

> to draw a real profit from translation one should *not* follow the French, who give their own color to everything they translate. Even if in doing so one were to change everything one touches

[4] As Staël writes in her 1795 "Essay on Fictions": "Man has only two distinct faculties: reason and imagination. All the others, even feeling, are simply results or combinations of these two. The realm of fiction, like that of the imagination, is therefore vast. Fictions do not find obstacles in passions: they make use of them" (SW 61; ŒJ 131–32).

> to gold, it would still be impossible to derive any nourishment or new food for thought; although the finery might be slightly different, one would always see the same face again."
>
> ST 163; T 294, emphasis added

A translation that simply adds *quantitatively* to the existing literature (more texts, same style and set of ideas) is not worthwhile. Such a practice of translation will not challenge the already existing ways of thinking and expression—it will not add a *qualitatively* new dimension, be it at the level of thoughts or style (for Staël, thought and style are closely related, albeit not identical).

As Staël argues, the kind of literature that expands our thoughts and practices can bring the author glory—a term that is present in her work from the 1790s onwards. Imitation, she makes it clear, does not produce glory (ST 163; T 294). This, moreover, is not a matter of the recognition (or lack of such) bestowed on an artist, writer, or politician: One may well be celebrated without one's work reaching the level of glory. "Glory" refers to paradigm-making expressions and actions, that is, expressions and actions that disclose novel human possibilities. Acts and expressions deserving of "glory" are those that set a new standard and benefit a larger group, culture, or even humanity.

Translated texts that introduce new kinds of thinking and new modes of expression will help humankind aspire towards the universal (ST 163; T 294). At stake, in other words, is an expansion of one's horizon through the engagement with others. In Staël's mind, this is a matter of individual as well as cultural edification. This is an aspect of her thought that will later resound in the works of Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, and, by way of the influence of transcendentalism, in Cavell, Rorty (edification), and other 20th-century American thinkers (for a history of the related, but not identical, concept of perfectibility, see Passmore, 1979).

As Staël sees it, cultural edification is an ongoing effort, on behalf of an individual or culture (both levels are needed), to leave behind limiting attitudes; it is a striving towards a perspective that is free of bias and prejudice. The point is not that translations of foreign literatures can or will *guarantee* such a process, but that the ongoing introduction of new ideas and modes of expressions is a necessary aspect of the effort to keep expanding a cultural horizon.[5]

[5] It should be noted that this will, inevitably, be a process in which a culture that is open to translations will tend to facilitate open mindsets, which, in turn, will facilitate more

From this point of view, the linguistic richness of modern Europe is a boon. The acolytes of the neo-classicist French taste, Napoleon included, had not learned to appreciate this.

In the context of translation, however, Staël's focus is more precise. She is worried that French grammar and style is rigid in a way that makes it harder to produce translations that retain the "foreignness" of the original text. As she puts it, "the modern languages contain so much diversity that French poetry cannot gracefully yield to Latin's rule" (ST 164; T 295). English, by contrast, is deemed more flexible—grammatically and stylistically. Yet the English have not, she argues, been sufficiently eager to expand their literature with "precise and natural" translations (ST 164, T 295).

In her essay, Staël discusses modern translations of Homer—a key example in the romantic literature on translation and interpretation. According to Staël, Homer's work is expressive of a particular worldview. At stake is not primarily the work of an individual author and their inner, imaginative, emotional, and psychological state, but of a particular culture reaching its most adequate articulation: the *Iliad* "is the image of human society at a certain stage of civilization, proof that it bears the imprint of its time and even more than that of its author" (ST 164; T 295). If the German classicist and poet German Johann Heinrich Voss has produced the "most accurate" translation of Homer, this does not mean that he, with his work, has fully managed to transport the Greek mindset into a modern German hue. As Staël makes it clear in a passage that deserves to be quoted in full:

> Voss's translation is recognized as the most exact translation in existence in any language. He used the rhythm of the ancients, and it is said that his German hexameter almost follows the Greek hexameter word for word. Such a translation effectively provides a precise knowledge of the ancient poem; but is it certain that the charm of the original poem, accessible neither through rules nor through erudition, has been thoroughly translated into the German language? The number of syllables has been retained, but the harmony of sounds has not remained the same. When German poetry follows, step by step, the traces of the Greek original, it both loses its natural

translations, and so on. What we here encounter is but a translation-oriented version of the hermeneutic circle.

> charm and fails to acquire the beauty of the musical language that was accompanied on the lyre. ST 165; T 295

It is worth noting how Staël's argument at this point differs from, say, Schiller's. Schiller is interested in the divide between what he calls naïve and sentimental poetry. The naïve poet, as he puts it, "merely follows simple nature and feeling, limiting himself solely to imitation of reality" (Schiller, 2005, 204; 1962, 440). The sentimental or modern poet, by contrast, "*reflects* on the impression the objects make upon him and only on the basis of that reflection is the emotion founded, into which he is transported and into which he transports us" (Schiller, 2005, 204; 1962, 441). For Staël, by contrast, the problem is not simply a matter of premodern versus modern literatures, but of different languages and the translatability between them, even within—*especially within*—modernity. Not only is there, vertically, a hermeneutically productive historical and linguistic distance between Homer and the modern world. There is also, horizontally, a *linguistic* divide between ancient and modern languages *and* between contemporary cultures. Linguistic differences cannot be reduced to historical ones. Further, Staël defines modern literature as intrinsically pluralistic, hence also in need of the synergy (the stimulation of the imagination) created by translation. The diversity of languages is, in her view, an opportunity—it is part of the fabric from which human reason can extract resources and nourishment in its quest for progress. Hence, Staël's emphasis on the uniqueness of a language—of a language being expressive of a worldview or horizon—is not an argument against translation. Quite the contrary. Nor is it a critique of Voss's approach to translation. The point, rather, is that *even* for a translator as capable as Voss, it will be challenging to stretch the boundaries of his own language and the limits it sets. In Staël's judgment, the much-praised Voss translation moves towards accuracy and sacrifices the naturalness of the German—and precisely this naturalness is what is needed in order to convey the tone and ideas that distinguishes the Homeric Greek. With respect to its methodology, Voss' translation is contrasted with Vicenzo Monti's translation of the *Illiad* into Italian. Monti's translation, Staël argues,

> [h]as both pomp and simplicity: the most ordinary practices of daily life such as clothes or dinners are enhanced by the natural dignity of Monti's expressions, and the most solemn events are made accessible to us through the realism of his scenes and the fluency of his style. ST 165; T 296

As such, the Italian translator offers an example to be emulated—one that conveys into Italian the rich fabric of Homer's Greek prose (ST 165; T 296). This is not about Monti following rules or reaching a new level of accuracy (here Voss remains superior), but about bringing to life a distinct Homerian tone that does justice to the epos. For, as Staël argues:

> Translating a poet is not like taking a compass and measuring the dimensions of the building. It is making a different instrument vibrate with the same breath of life as the one we normally hear. A translation should provide as much pleasure as the original, not just duplicate its features. ST 282; T 296

Broadening her scope beyond Homer, Staël advises that neo-classicism—German, French, Italian, or otherwise—be left behind. She advocates a new romantic literature, as developed, above all, in England and Germany (and propagated in her own *Germany* six years earlier).[6] A turn towards this new literature allows readers to expand their mindsets, rather than lingering over the image of a past long gone. The point, as Staël puts it (again with a reference to Italy), is "*not* to borrow but to *learn* (connaître), and *not* to imitate but *to achieve emancipation* from those conventional forms that persist, in literature as in society, and prevent the expression of any natural truth" (ST 166; T 296, translation modified). This applies to novels and poems, but even more so to theater—"truly the executive branch of literature" (ST 166; T 296), and an artform to which Staël, in the context of *Germany*, dedicates 13 out of a total of 85 chapters. As an artform, drama merges the private and the public, the cultural and the political. Thus, it achieves, in her reading, what modern literature at its best can do: broadening the horizon of human understanding and action by stimulating the faculty of imagination. Staël advises the Italians:

> Some countries are militaristic; others are political. Italy's reputation should be based on its literature and its art; otherwise, that country will fall into a sort of apathy from which even the sun might not be able to wake it.
>
> ST 167, T 297, translation modified

[6] While a full discussion of Staël's understanding of romanticism is beyond the scope of this article, I would like to draw attention to her emphasis on its political dimension and its orientation towards tolerance, a multiplicity of voices, etc.

Hence, when Staël publishes her advice to the Italians—whose culture she had lavishly praised in her novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807)[7]—translation emerges as a hermeneutic-cultural as well as political tool.

While Staël's late essay highlights her interest in the philosophy of translation, the topics of cultural mediation, translation, and the relationship between literature and politics had been central to her earlier work.[8] To understand the full scope of Staël's approach to translation and cultural mediation, we need to consider her previous work in this field.

2. Literature, Politics, and Cultural Translation

"The Spirit of Translation" is the last work Staël finished and published before her death. Her interest in translation, though, developed much earlier and also informs her celebrated *Literature*. When Staël started working on *Literature*, she already had a significant philosophical contribution to her name: *Treatise on the Influence of the Passions*. Moreover, she had written political treatises, plays, and short stories, among them a triplet of novellas that, when published in 1795, was accompanied by the programmatic "Essay on Fictions," in which she emphasizes the relevance and importance of political and philosophical literature.[9] Needless to say, the essay gave further credence to the novellas, which dealt with controversial topics such as slavery, misogyny, and domestic violence.[10] If women, at the time, were told to dabble in literature rather than committing themselves to philosophy and politics, Staël deliberately undermined this way

[7] Moreover, the eponymous protagonist of *Corinne* serves as a mediator between languages and cultures and consciously reflects on cultural differences and the need for cultural transmission.

[8] In this respect, Staël's theory anticipates Schleiermacher's approach in his celebrated 1813 *Akademievortrag* on translation (published a few years later, i.e., around the same time as Staël's essay). For an English translation of Schleiermacher's essay, see Venuti, 2022, 51–72.

[9] "Essay on Fictions" was translated into German by Goethe and published by Schiller. In this context, the essay was divorced from the novellas, i.e., the call for a political and moral literature was separated from the treatment of topics such as enslavement and domestic violence. For a discussion of Staël's notion of political literature, see Gjesdal, 2025.

[10] In emphasizing Staël's early turn to political literature and relating it back to her abolitionism and addressing of domestic violence, I deviate from Isbell (1994), for whom her notion of political literature is primarily a matter of fostering German national sentiments in the defense against Napoleon's troops.

of thinking by emphasizing that literature itself can be both philosophical and political.[11]

Five years later, Staël, in *Literature*, takes this kind of thinking one step further. Here, she is particularly interested in how modern literature (broadly conceived and, as such, including philosophy) can provide a space for intellectual freedom and critique and thus stand up against tyranny. Moreover, on a more general basis, literature and cultural expressions serve to keep thought alive and put prejudices and biases under scrutiny: "The cultivation and improvement of Literature are the best means by which you can effectually combat the obstinacy of inveterate prejudices" (L I 56; DLL 30). From this point of view, literature contributes to, but also demands, a certain kind of freedom. It must be ascribed with political power. As she puts it, "before the eyes of [the most potent monarchs], political and religious philosophy would rise up in the shape of the most formidable insurrection" (L I 58; DLL 31).[12]

While *Literature*—especially in its references to political fanaticism, tyranny, and misogyny—draws on Staël's earlier contributions to moral psychology, this is the first work in which we see her develop her characteristic historical-systematic methodology, a methodology that she might have encountered in the works of Johann Gottfried Herder, but that would later be associated with G. W. F. Hegel (a philosopher Staël does not discuss or reference in her work). Decades before the publication of Hegel's lectures on fine art, Staël provides a survey of the historical development of literature. Her ambition, as she puts it, is to "consider philosophically the gradual development of the human faculties, as it displays itself in the distinguished works that have afforded delight or instruction to mankind, from the age of Homer down to the present time" (L I 31; DLL 15). However, while Staël's method is historically informed, she still develops a systematic argument about literature, art, and education in culture. She develops, in short, a historical, bottom-up approach to systematic philosophy. Moreover, a short decade after the publication of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, she questions the notion of the purity of aesthetic

[11] Among the later thinkers that were troubled by Staël's gesture—and by the very existence of an intellectual woman of her caliber—is Nietzsche, who writes: "It was for women's own good, when Napoleon gave the all-too-eloquent Madame de Staël to understand: *mulier taceat in politicis*!" (Nietzsche, 2002; 2016, section 232).

[12] Earlier, in *A Treatise*, Staël had advocated for the importance of study and literature when it comes to overcoming impassionate behavior such as fanaticism which, on her books, is associated with one-dimensional politics and a blind and naïve following of a leader (Gjesdal 2023).

judgment (and thus follows Kant's own openness towards art that, at the expense of the pure aesthetic judgment, entails a moral dimension; see Guyer, 1990). She argues:

> Literary criticism (la critique littéraire) is not unfrequently [...] a sort of treatise on morality. By yielding merely to the impulse and guidance of their talents, eminent writers might discover everything that is heroic in self-devotion, and all that is affecting in the sacrifices we make of our interests or passions. By studying the art of moving the affections, we explore the recesses and discover the secrets of Virtue (la vertu).
>
> L I 37; DLL 19

Staël's approach to literature can be exemplified by way of her assessment of ancient literature and drama (see e.g., L I 108, 121; DLL 65, 73–74). In this context, she is surprisingly critical, mixing hermeneutic charity with her assessment of the works discussed. That is, what she argues against is not so much the virtues of ancient literature per se, but the relative absence or subservient role of women in ancient literature (a point that Wellek [1981, 221–22] will not forgive her). As an aesthetician, she objects to the modern imitation of ancient ideals, seeing ancient literature as belonging to its time and region, not as providing a universal standard that exemplifies good drama and literature *überhaupt*. The ancient cultures are, for her, forever gone. It is in this spirit that Staël advocates for a genuinely *modern* literature. It is within modern literature that translation, in her view, plays a particularly important role. Yet the power of (modern) literature is threatened by (at least) three kinds of forces and circumstances.

Firstly, literature, as a realm of imaginative, free, and even playful expression, is censored politically by rulers who fear its power. As Staël puts it, "[w]e have seen many tyrants who were ostentatious in their protection of the sciences and the arts: but all of them have dreaded the natural enemies of protection itself—men who think and philosophize" (L I 59; DLL 31–32). This is so because, as she sees it, "[i]ndependent philosophy [...] alone, can arraign before the tribunal of reason all the opinions and institutions of mankind" (L I 61; DLL 33). Yet to cultivate genuine liberty, both literature and philosophy are needed—liberty, for Staël, only thrives in a society in which multiple voices sharpen each other in debates and through eloquent articulations of new perspectives.

Secondly, literature is threatened, from within, by the prejudices of its culture. One example of such blindness is the exclusion of women

in ancient as well as modern literatures, that is, the exclusion of a good half of the population and their experiences and expressions.[13] She also analyzes the particular ways in which women writers are taken down, especially in France, by a public that refuses to take them seriously and afford them the recognition they deserve for their works (L II 150–167; DLL 324–335; see also Gjesdal, 2024). In this context, Staël connects provincialism and misogyny or, at a more general level, attitudes that we today would describe as prejudices and implicit bias (see for example C 14.1: 224–25; Co 346).

Third and finally, Staël sees literature, especially the literature of her own period and culture (i.e., that of revolutionary and post-revolutionary France), as threatened by an unhealthy sovereignty complex. Convinced of their cultural superiority, modern French writers have failed to look abroad and thus also failed to absorb and make use of the resources and possibilities of the romantic spirit, as it developed in the northern cultures of England and, even more so, Germany. What is more, Staël (like Herder before her; see Gjesdal, 2024), ascribes some of the greatness of modern German culture to the way in which German writers are oriented towards other literatures, e.g., Elizabethan drama. She finds a similarly productive orientation towards translation and cultural transfer in Spanish drama, quoting its synergy with Arab literature (L 253–54; DLL 166).

What is at stake, for Staël, is not simply the development of a particular kind of literature. For her, rather, the issue—and this is a point that the American transcendentalists would happily adopt (Muller-Vollmer 2003; Fuller 2024)—is the education of humanity towards a less insular, more broad-minded outlook. Staël speaks of this as the education of human nature (L I 73–76; DLL 270–273), i.e., not just of an individual or of a particular culture, but of humankind as such. As humans, we are distinguished by the possibility for individual and collective self-improvement. This places on us a particular kind of responsibility or ethics of edification. With an argument that (again) flies in the face of Kant's idea of the autonomy of the pure aesthetic judgment, Staël reasons that literature is more than a source of aesthetic pleasure and edification: in a modern world, it is essential to the kind of liberty that facilitates a republican mindset. As she puts

[13] In her own work, Staël seeks to counter such tendencies. In an early dramatic work as well as a later work such as *Reflection on Suicide* (1813), she holds up the example of famous women, for example that of Lady Grey, who meets her death with calm and composure. Her novel features the pensive Delphine and the larger-than-life Corinne, creating nothing short of a Corinne-fever in Europe and the US, with Margaret Fuller at one point presenting herself as a Yankee Corinne.

it: "It is no longer an art merely; it is a power; it is become a weapon to the human mind, which hitherto it had only instructed and amused" (L II 77; DLL 273).

For Staël, republicanism—whose promise was made clear throughout the initial phases of the French revolution, but whose realization was quickly coopted, first, by the terror and later by Napoleonic rule—is the political form that both facilitates *and*, to an equal measure, depends on the possibility for such edification. Again, in Staël's words: "a spirit of republicanism requires a revolution in the character of literature" (L II 112; DLL 296). The republican spirit depends on the existence of a wide range of voices and develops through an ongoing dialogue between different points of view. As such, a young republic such as France would do well to welcome foreign literatures. This is not only a matter of aesthetic appreciation, but also, Staël argues, a question of keeping alive the republican spirit. For as she sees it:

> the advancement of Literature, that is to say, the ulterior perfection of the art of thinking and of expressing one's thoughts, is necessary to the establishment and to the conservation of Liberty. L I 53; DLL 28

This is the point at which Staël develops her view, later to be fleshed out in "The Spirit of Translation," of the tension between soft and hard diplomacy; between cultural mediation and cooperation, on the one hand, and domination, militarism, and warfare, on the other. As she puts it:

> the enemies of liberty, it is true, may be overpowered in battle: but, in order to make the principles of that liberty take root and flourish in a country, the military spirit must be done away; thought and reasoning must be called in. L I 62; DLL 34

In a similar spirit—that of avoiding domination—she advises Jefferson, in their correspondence (1816), to abandon slavery in the South so that, as she puts it, there is at least one republic of reason in the world.

In the areas of modern aesthetics and hermeneutics, it is hard to think of a philosopher who ascribes to translation and cultural mediation a more crucial role than Staël does (as for translation studies readers, she is included in Robinson, 2014; but strangely not in Venuti, 2022). For her, translation is not external to modern literature—it is *not* a process that is undertaken independently or in addition to a well-functioning literary

and philosophical culture. Translation is *imperative* to a thriving modern literature; it characterizes the situation of modern literature *as* modern.[14] In this context, it is worth noting that her early work, such as her abolitionist novella "Mirza," does not feature this point but presents the Senegalese protagonist by highlighting her knowledge of French literature and culture (see Gjesdal, 2025).

3. Germany

The circumstances surrounding the publication of Staël's large-spanning study *Germany* are unusually dramatic. Staël's work was written in exile, substantial chunks of which were spent in Germany. She had started working on the book in 1808, when Napoleon defeated the Prussians at the Battle of Jena. It was finished two years later. However, Napoleon ordered his troops to destroy the book (the first two volumes and the print plates for the third). The book was eventually published in French in London in 1813, just as the news about the German victory against the French in Leipzig reached the city (Isbell, 1994, 12). The first the edition of 1 500 copies sold out in three days (Isbell, 1994, 2). An English translation followed quickly, sold out, and there was a call for a second edition only six weeks later (ibid.). In this sense, *Germany* not only comes with its own translation history and the work played an important role across the German-speaking lands (helping to forge a cultural and intellectual identity), but also sparked international interest in German philosophy and spurred a generation of American academics (e.g., George Ticknor, George Bancroft, and others) to seek out German universities and intellectual culture (Mueller-Vollmer, 2003, 112, 128).

In the secondary literature, *Germany* has sometimes been read as a piece of nationalist propaganda, i.e., as part of Staël's political resistance against Napoleon and an effort to muster a German uprising. Along such lines, it has been argued that Staël's fame can be explained by the very cosmopolitanism she helped destroy (Isbell, 1994, 4). It cannot be denied that Staël, with her work, sought to provoke German resistance by instilling sentiments of patriotism and enthusiasm. Yet the book is more than that. For in this work, Staël further develops her view of cultural diversity

[14] Hence, whereas a later philosopher such as Hegel defines literary modernity as reflective and focused on the self-understanding of the individual and its place in the social world, Staël, by contrast, sees modern literature as reflective of a spirit of pluralism and cultural mediation.

and openness, arguing that other European nations should take an interest in the then-overlooked cultural productions of the German-language areas. She also insists that German literature and philosophy is distinguished by its openness towards other ways of thinking, i.e., its inherent cosmopolitanism.

At the time, Germany, as a nation state, did not exist and Staël's first job was to "invent it" (Isbell, 1994, 6). Yet her understanding of German culture is comprehensive. In her discussions, she includes a fair share of Danish-German culture (including the poets Jens Baggesen and Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger, and the sculpturer Bertel Thorvaldsen). She also discusses English literature. And she, further developing her line of reasoning from *On Literature*, discusses French prejudices against German culture and thought.

Staël was familiar with German philosophy and culture. In Paris, she had socialized with, among others, Wilhelm von Humboldt from the early 1790s onwards and she had read Kant, especially *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (the first reference to his work is in *Literature* [L II 199; DL 357]; for her later engagement with Kant, see Vigus, 2008 and 2018). In the years between 1789 and 1812, she made several trips to the German lands (her longest stays were in the years between 1803 and 1807 [Isbell, 1994,10]). Hence, rather than reading *Germany* as a piece of "propaganda," it serves, in my view, as a treatise in which Staël takes a stance on what she sees as the most significant, yet underappreciated philosophical movements of the day, those of idealism and romanticism, and, in so doing, further strengthens the kind of cosmopolitanism and *Bildung* that she had advocated from early on and would sum up a few years later in her essay on translation.

In *Germany*, Staël situates German-language culture and thought within a framework of geography, nature, and ways of life. Methodologically, she thus draws on and further develops her historical-systematic approach. She also refines her philosophy of history. As she now argues, the *Bildung* of humanity goes through four different phases, the last of which, commencing with the Reformation, is characterized by love of liberty:

> [...] the philosophical progress of the human race should be divided into four different periods: the heroic times, which gave birth to civilization; patriotism, which constituted the glory of antiquity; chivalry, which was the military religion

> of Europe, and the love of liberty, the history of which dates its origin from the epoch of the Reformation.
>
> G I 48; DLA 117

In her view, the French revolution built on and furthered the desire for liberty, but did not fully realize it. With Napoleon, France turned into an empire, governed by internal tyranny and external warfare. Hence the goal of her study is threefold: first to have her fellow French appreciate a culture and a philosophy that they have tended to look down on; second, to have the German-speaking parts of Europe appreciate the uniqueness of their own culture, possibly also gaining the kind of self-esteem and appreciation needed to resist Napoleon's military advances; third, to instigate the love of freedom and liberty that she sees as central to modern society.

In approaching the German language areas, Staël makes clear that a language and a form of life are closely intertwined. As she puts it:

> In studying the spirit and character of a language, we learn the philosophical history of the opinions, manners and habits of nations; and the modifications which language undergoes must throw considerable light on the progress of thought.
>
> G I 90; DLA 158

What characterizes the German language areas, as she sees it, is that they, in spite of a shared language, have not been governed by one standard or taste. Hence, within the German speaking areas, a wide range of expressive forms live side by side—quite different from the centralized taste of the French. In Staël's portrait, the German-language culture is:

> an empire without one common centre of intelligence and of public spirit; it did not form a compact nation, and the bond of union was wanting to its separate members. This division of Germany, fatal to its political force, was nevertheless favorable to all the efforts of genius and imagination. In matters of literary and metaphysical opinion, there was a sort of gentle and peaceful anarchy, which allowed every man the complete development of his own individual manner of perception.
>
> G I 32; DLA 102

As opposed to France, where a dominant taste reigns large, in Germany "most writers and reasoners sit down to work in solitude or surrounded only by a little circle over which they reign" (G I 32; DLA 101).

Maybe because the German language areas were not yet unified, writers and thinkers tended to look abroad. While this is, in Staël's view, generally to be perceived as a strength, the admiration of the foreign should not go so far as to threaten the sense of one's own culture. In a passage that clearly betrays her politics of identity building, she puts it as follows:

> In literature, as in politics, the Germans have too much respect for foreigners, and not enough of national prejudices [préjugés nationaux]. G I 33; DLA 102

Picking up the fight for German-language culture that was already launched, internally, by, among others, Lessing and Herder (whose contributions are discussed in *Germany*), Staël is baffled to see how Francophile (or even French-language) culture is dominant across the German areas. She is less than generous in describing this tendency and how it leads to a misdirected obsession with gossip from the neighboring country:

> In many northern countries, people still repeat anecdotes of the court of Louis the Fourteenth. Foreigners, who imitate the French, relate the quarrels of Mademoiselle de Fontanges and Madame de Montespan, with a prolixity of detail, which would be tedious even in recording a transaction of yesterday. G I 74; DLA 114

At stake is what Staël calls an "erudition of the boudoir" (G I 74; DLA 114). As she elaborates:

> What damage [mal] would not this spirit of imitation do among the Germans! Their superiority consists in independent spirit, love of solitude, and individual originality. The French are powerful only *en masse*. G I 87, translation modified; DLA 156

It is important to see how Staël distinguishes between passive imitation of other cultures (which she is against) and active borrowing or emulation (which she appreciates). Hence, in her discussion of contemporary German philosophy, she starts out with lengthy presentations of British and French thought, then introduces, after four chapters, *la philosophie allemande*. The point, in other words, is not that German philosophy is

ur-German or that it only develops its own resources. Rather, she admires (a point we also find in Kant, Herder, and others), its willingness to synthesize French and British thinking, hence establishing a new philosophical platform—the one that enabled idealism and romanticism, which Staël perceives as distinctly modern movements.

As opposed to British empiricism and French materialism, the idealist and romantic frames of mind have room for an educational philosophy, one in which individual and cultural *Bildung* support and mutually enhance each other. Moreover, this is related to a view of the self as temporally developing and as defined by an ethical responsibility to productively relate to itself and to others—"others" including both other human beings and nature—or, in its most comprehensive form, what Staël (borrowing from Friedrich Schleiermacher) calls *the universe* (e.g., G II 291; DLA 717).

It is important that, for Staël (in line with Schleiermacher [see Gjesdal, 2024]), the understanding of the universe itself, in all its diversity, is beyond the epistemic scope of an individual human being. As she puts it, evidencing a metaphysical bend that she, at this point, shares with the German philosophers she covers:

> Every man may find, in some different wonder of the universe [de l'univers], that which most powerfully addresses his soul. One admires the Divinity in the character of a father, another in the innocence of a child, a third in the heavenly aspect of Raphael's virgins,—in music, in poetry, in nature, it matters not in what: for all are animated by a religious principle, the genius of the world, and of every human being.
>
> G II 291; DLA 717

Earlier in her work, Staël had traced this insight back to Leibniz (G II 150; DLA 591), whom she characterizes as a German Bacon or Descartes, i.e., as the philosopher who led German thought into its mature, modern phase—the phase in which it can achieve results that the French philosophers, as she saw it, have failed to arrive at.

In *Germany*, Staël's critique of French culture is as important as her praise of the Germans. Not only is French philosophy deemed too materialist and the French, culturally speaking, seen as being powerful only *en masse*. But also, she observes that in France, one is interested in people, in Germany in books (G I 95; DLA 165). She complains about a French tendency to dismiss alternative points of view and contrasts this with the sit-

uation in Weimar, where the conversation is "constantly excited" (G I 104, translation modified; DLA 174). By keeping alive a will to conversation, the Germans have created an independent republic of letters (G I 96; DLA 166). While the French fail to appreciate German culture because it does not meet the "one" golden standard (G I 145; DLA 211), this is, for Staël, precisely what makes it fertile ground for the "republican" literature that she had praised already ten years earlier.

As Staël argues in *Germany*, the republican spirit is led back to the cultural diversity of the German lands. It is also led back to an educational system that prioritizes the study of foreign languages and the humanities. As she observes:

> The study of languages, which, in Germany, constitutes the basis of education, is much more favorable to the evolution of the faculties, in the early age, than mathematics, or the physical sciences. G I 119; DLA 189

In a similar spirit, Staël praises Herder for his mediation of Spanish and Portuguese poetry, and for his reappreciation of the ballad (G II 86; DLA 523). She also admires the German interest in non-Western cultures, especially in Indian art and thought. Hence, German philosophy, in Staël's (admittedly idealizing) picture exemplifies the ethics of hospitality that she advocates. As she sums up her credo:

> Different nations ought to serve as guides to each other, and all would do wrong to deprive themselves of the information they may mutually receive and impart [...] We should do well then, in all foreign countries, to welcome foreign thoughts and foreign sentiments, for hospitality of this sort makes the fortune of him who exercises it. G II 99; DLA 541

In this sense, Staël develops her philosophy of translation and cultural transfer not only in the late, theoretical essay, but also in and through her active, hermeneutic work.[15]

4. Concluding Thoughts

Staël's philosophy of literature and translation show how culture necessarily develops in dialogue with others. A culture that is closed off

[15] Staël thus furthers the kind of spirit—the insistence on the need to let "imagination go visiting," that Arendt later associates with Kant's political philosophy (see Arendt, 1982, 43).

around itself will necessarily stagnate. However, there is also a political aspect to Staël's approach: her emphasis on the importance of translation, cultural mediation, and exchange of ideas are key factors in her republicanism, but also in her advocacy of soft diplomacy (for her politics, see Schroeder, 1994; Sluga, 2015).

Through her international contacts, discussions, correspondence, and strategizing, Staël not only theorized but also lived out her ideal of cultural transmission.[16] Her approach to translation highlights two different, yet closely related aspects of her philosophy: her commitment, on the one hand, to individual edification and, on the other, to cultural development and universality. In each case, the development at stake is driven through a hermeneutic engagement with a plurality of different perspectives, hence also as something that cannot be deduced or a priori postulated, but that we, as finite human beings, can only approximate through collaboration, interaction, and an awareness of the limiting *and* enabling aspects of our being situated within a particular culture and a particular historical horizon.

[16] Throughout Staël's life, her philosophy, politics, and friendships were closely related. In pre-revolutionary Paris, she entertained a friend group that included Wilhelm von Humboldt, Thomas Jefferson, Marquise de Lafayette, Thomas Paine, and Governor Morris. Her guests at the family estate at Coppet in Switzerland included Benjamin Constant, her longtime lover, the historian and economist Jean de Sismondi, the philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt and his wife Caroline, August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, the German geographer Carl Ritter, the poet and thinker Friedrich Tieck, the poet Zacharias Werner, the Danish-German writer Friedrike Brun and her daughter Ida, as well as the Danish poet Oehlenschläger. Lady Hamilton came from England, ditto for Lord Byron whom, residing nearby, would row across the lake to dine and converse with the Madame. Her international outlook was retained—*contra* Napoleon's intentions, it was indeed strengthened—when the exile forced her out not only of Paris and France, but also of Switzerland. In Germany, she met with Schiller, Goethe, Jakobi, Schelling, Fichte, Wieland, and others. During her stay in St. Petersburg, she recited from the finished, but yet unpublished *Germany*, thus using her study of life and thought in the German lands to muster support for her anti-Napoleonic alliance. In Stockholm, where she resided from the end of 1812 until the summer of 1813, her salon was described as a veritable *café politique* (Sluga, 2015, 147). After Napoleon's defeat and her return to Paris, her salon was key to the follow-up of the Congress of Vienna through the Treaty of Paris, which included a stance on the colonies, on abolitionism (though slavery was not abandoned until 1848), and a commitment to pan-European collaboration. Through her friendship, then extended correspondence with John Quincy Adams, Albert Gallatin, and Thomas Jefferson, she ensured that her political thoughts and solutions were disseminated beyond France and Europe (Mueller-Vollmer, 2003).

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