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Germaine de Staël's Representation of Germany: A Source of French Spiritualism (1800-1815)

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Abstract

This paper is an investigation into the gestation period of French spiritualism which triumphed in Victor Cousin's teaching. We deal with the question of Madame de Staël's influence and in particular her ideas on German culture and German idealism. We show that these ideas, born in part from the dialogue with Charles de Villers, were fruitful when they crossed paths with the latest philosophy of Maine de Biran. It was in this context that Victor Cousin had the idea of moving towards German idealism.

Keywords: Romanticism, Cultural Transfer, German Idealism, French Spiritualism, Germaine de Staël, Victor Cousin, Charles de Villers, Maine de Biran

Introduction

We know that French spiritualism in the nineteenth century dates back to Victor Cousin. From Cousin's point of view, spiritualism distinguishes between two irreducible realities, one material, the other spiritual, and its aim is to teach the spirituality of the soul: "It is a philosophy which is a natural ally of all good causes [...] and it gradually leads human societies to the true republic, that dream of all generous souls, which nowadays in Europe can only be realized by the constitutional monarchy."¹ Its method of investigation is subjective, based on inner observation and the certainties that the intimate sense provides us with: rational principles, applied to facts of consciousness, allow us to access the knowledge of realities located outside the consciousness. Interior observation allows, thanks to rational induction, to reach the certainty of the existence of a substantial I, of nature and of God. From 1830 onwards, Cousin's philosophy gradually became the official doctrine. Under Louis-Philippe's regime, Cousin proposes to the bourgeoisie a philosophy that does not irritate religion, while satisfying the need for free examination. He quickly became president of the jury of Agrégation, a member of the Conseil supérieur de l'instruction publique and a member of the Académie française: it was a real ideological takeover of power within the State. Cousin had both the power to recruit and train student philosophers, to appoint teachers in colleges and faculties and to control the progress of their careers.²

¹"Cette philosophie est l'alliée naturelle de toutes les bonnes causes [...] elle conduit peu à peu les sociétés humaines à la vraie république, ce rêve de toutes les âmes généreuses, que de nos jours en Europe peut seule réaliser la monarchie constitutionnelle," Victor Cousin, *Du vrai, du beau et du bien* (Paris : Didier, 1853), V (translation mine).

²See Patrice Vermeren, *Victor Cousin : Le jeu de la philosophie et de l'Etat* (Paris : L'Harmattan) 1995.

Cousin's legacy in the social sciences and humanities is a well-documented issue³; what is less known are the sources of his thinking. In general, the influence of Royer-Collard, the introducer of Scottish philosophy in France, is widely acknowledged. But the scholars have not investigated in detail the role played by a powerful woman of letters: the Baroness Germaine de Staël-Holstein.

First we must briefly reconstruct the context that preceded the advent of spiritualism, i.e. the years of the Consulate and the Empire. In the early years of the Consulate, the thermidorian reaction began to produce its effects in the intellectual field. Eighteenth-century materialism was blamed for the moral deregulation that had made the worst excesses of the revolution possible. The liberal and anti-jacobine bourgeoisie did not question the principles of the revolution, stemming from Voltaire and Rousseau, it condemned the excesses and crimes for which it blamed the sensualists and materialists, even the Encyclopédistes, all of whom were accused of having undermined the foundations of morality and religion. In reaction against Helvetius and Holbach (not to mention even more sulphurous authors), a new philosophy was being sought, a moral philosophy in which religious sentiment would have its place.

From that point of view, it was urgent to rebuild the philosophy because it had been a field of ruins since the end of the Revolution. What was in ruins, in reality, was metaphysics, demolished by the Encyclopédistes, who accepted the idea that we must renounce reasoning about causes that remain unknown to us. In the first years of the nineteenth century, the criticism of metaphysical illusions was pursued by ideologists, who applied the Condillacian method of the analysis of ideas. The aim was to treat ideas objectively, like any natural phenomenon, which Destutt de Tracy expressed in a provocative formula: “ideology is a branch of zoology.” Tracy, who has learned from Newton, declared that “in good philosophy one should never make any supposition”⁴. In the same way, Cabanis stated that “it is high time to finally feel the emptiness of a philosophy that does not really give an account of anything, precisely because, in a single word, it imagines itself giving an account of everything.”⁵ Cabanis, on the other hand, asserted that thought is the result of “secretions” in the brain, analogous to the liver’s secretion of bile.⁶

Finally, the call for a rebirth of ideas also resonated as a critique of French society under the Consulate. The upper classes were throwing themselves headlong into practical fields, applied sciences, finance and industry. In society, people were no longer interested in anything but wealth and material enjoyment, they were turning away from general ideas. This recurring observation was based on the orientation of the institutions created since the Convention: special schools for the training of engineers and high-level practitioners, health schools, the Ecole Centrale de Travaux Publics (currently Ecole Polytechnique), the Museum of Natural History, the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers. Faced with this institutionalization of science, which seemed to lock man into a prosaic universe, the romantic perspective of a re-enchantment of the world through poetry, communion with nature and the intuition of the divine, was emerging.

Destroying anti-religious prejudice and awakening through picturesque or pathetic pictures the religiosity asleep in the depths of hearts was precisely what Chateaubriand had just attempted in *Le Génie du Christianisme* (*The Genius of Christianity*), but the restoration of Catholicism was an impracticable path for a whole section of the liberal, heir to the Enlightenment and partly Calvinist current. Another solution was to turn to Germany, perceived as a hotbed of idealism and spirituality. New ideas had emerged there, which had been heard about by diplomats, former emigrants and other peddlers.⁷ The picture, popularized by Madame de Staël, of a metaphysician, idealistic and dreamy

³See John I. Brooks, *The Eclectic Legacy : Academic Philosophy and the Human Sciences in Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark : University of Delaware Press) 1998.

⁴Antoine Destutt de Tracy, *Projet d'éléments d'idéologie* (Paris : an IX-1801), 40 (personal translation throughout the rest of the article).

⁵“[I] serait bien temps de sentir enfin le vide d'une philosophie qui ne rend véritablement raison de rien, précisément parce que, d'un seul mot, elle s'imagine rendre raison de tout, ” Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme* (Paris : Crapart, Caille et Ravier, an X-1802), 359.

⁶Cabanis, *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme*, 152.

⁷See Werner Greiling, “Die Deutsch-Franzosen, Agenten des französisch-deutschen Kulturtransfers um 1800”, in Gerhard R. Kaiser und Olaf Müller (eds), *Germaine de Staël und ihr erstes deutsches Publikum. Literaturpolitik und Kulturtransfer um 1800* (Heidelberg : Winter 2008) : 45–59.

Germany, will then constitute an attractive model for a French philosophy in search of identity. I argue that it is difficult to understand the French spiritualism if we do not take into account this cultural transfer.

In the present article, I examine the gradual maturation of spiritualist ideas before Cousin, and the special role played in this period by the representation of Germany, applying the approach of cultural transfer founded by Michel Espagne, Michael Werner, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, Kurt Müller-Volmer,⁸ which permit us to understand the impact of national representations on the history of philosophy, even if, of course, the philosophical stakes go beyond these circulations of ideas. I begin with the case of Charles de Villers, who sought sooner than others in Germany a new model of philosophy opposed to materialism. Villers had a real Germanic culture and understood the importance of Kant in the philosophical landscape. In section 2, I explore the relationship between Germaine de Staël and Villers and their respective views on french philosophy of experience and german idealism. In section 3 and 4, I expound Madame de Staël's vision of Germany and her account of German philosophers. In the last section, I study the mediations through which the Staelian valorization of Germany has penetrated academic philosophy. Initially, the Idéologues, who are the continuators of 18th century French philosophy, had tried to prevent the resurgence of idealism, but a few years later the situation changed favorably, as Staël's ideas met Biran's thought. This melting took place around 1815, at the beginning of the Restoration. The year 1815 is therefore the term of our investigation.

1. CHARLES DE VILLERS AND IDEALISM

Around 1800, the case of Charles de Villers was emblematic of the valorization of German philosophy as an antidote to French “frivolity”. Villers wanted to build a bridge between French and German culture, which were like two peaks separated by an abyss. In order to do this, he first had to, as he explained, take stock of the main currents that were imposing themselves in France. The dominant trend in French culture had become sensuality, while among the Germans, ideality reigned: “Persiflage, lightness, dissipation became familiar to some, gravity and recollection to others.”⁹ In order to understand how this had come about, Villers looked back at the situation in the 18th century. Elegance of style in literature and usefulness in science were the only reference values. In this context, we clung to Locke's philosophy, which explained how a variety of particular kinds of ideas arise from sensation and reflection. This philosophy was not a metaphysics, it kept man in the salutary field of experience and observation “without discovering the nature of that field.”¹⁰

With Condillac – whose followers (the Idéologues) populate the moral and political sciences section of the Institute – a step was taken: reflection lost its autonomy and it was the transformed sensation that became idea, understanding, attention, reflection, etc. The school of Condillac reduced all questions of metaphysics to questions of words and thus reduced philosophy to a philosophy of language.¹¹ The Encyclopédistes were losing the sense of philosophy, whose name was everywhere and reality nowhere. They fought against religion without always distinguishing between religion and religiosity, positive dogma and natural doctrine, and, rejecting excesses with the same excess, they fell into atheism. If “some wanted to be deists by speculation, all were atheists by the fact”.¹² Primitivists

⁸Michel Espagne et Michael Werner, *Transferts, les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand, XVIII et XIXe siècle* (Paris : éd. Recherche sur les civilisations, 1988). Michel Espagne, *En deçà du Rhin : L'Allemagne des philosophes français au XIXe siècle* (Paris : Cerf, 2004). Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, “La perception de l'autre : jalons pour une critique littéraire interculturelle”, *Tangence*, 51 (1996) : 51-66 ; “Les transferts culturels : théorie, méthodes d'approche, questionnements”, Pascal Gin, Nicolas Goyer, Walter Moser (eds), *Transfert : exploration d'un champ conceptuel* (Ottawa : Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2014) : 25–48. Kurt Müller-Vollmer, *Transatlantic Crossings and Transformations : German-American Cultural Transfer from the 18th to the End of the 19th Century* (Frankfurt am Main, Bern, Wien : Peter Lang, 2015).

⁹“Le persiflage, la légèreté, la dissipation sont devenus familiers aux uns, la gravité et le recueillement aux autres,” Villers, *Philosophie de Kant, ou Principes fondamentaux de la philosophie transcendante* (Metz : 1801), XLIX.

¹⁰Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 149.

¹¹Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 173.

¹²Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 157.

like Diderot “proposed the absurdity of a horde of Caribbean people to civilize us”.¹³ Parallel to sensualism, with Helvétius and his fellows a mechanistic conception of man and a morality of self-interest developed which stripped man of all shame and modesty.¹⁴

Villers wanted to make Kant known in France with the avowed aim of moralizing French society by giving it the spirit of seriousness it needed. “It is now important to uproot those pernicious and ungodly opinions that promote crime or at least do not effectively oppose it [...] We must be brought back to respect for ourselves, to sense of dignity, to fear of conscience, to indelible duties”.¹⁵ Villers went on to say that the old state religion could not be rehabilitated, but that it was possible to offer a refuge to religiosity and morality “in the precise forms of a pure and learned philosophy”¹⁶ which was obviously that of Kant. We degrade ourselves in materialism and in “the coarse precept of self-love”, that is why we need German philosophy which proposes “a doctrine more human, more divine, if you like”, because “during the years of our civil discord, this doctrine has been cultivated, debated, purified, made more methodical by some wise men of Northern Europe”, therefore “it is time to unveil it and present it as a remedy for the evils caused by contrary maxims.”¹⁷

In Villers' anti-materialist rhetoric, the moral and gnosological meanings of the word “materialism” are closely related. In short, materialism is the doctrine that brings everything back to the external meaning and it is in this sense that it tends to reduce man to the rank of an animal. On the contrary, idealism or spiritualism trusts in the internal sense (Plato, Malebranche, Berkeley).¹⁸ Villers explains that there are several degrees of idealism. There is a natural idealism, because “the whole of our knowledge being born and developed within us, this whole is a pure ideal, of which we nevertheless make something real without our knowledge.”¹⁹ Idealism can also rise to “transcendent metaphysics,” but Kant rejects this as illusory: speculative reason deludes itself when it expects everything of its own accord and is irritated by perceptions that hinder its development, like a dove in flight complaining about the resistance of the air that sustains it.²⁰ Villers approves of the critical idealism that avoids the mistakes of the old idealism. He also approves, by allusion, of the “bold” and “consequent”²¹ idealism of the “famous Fichte”²² who develops this fundamental proposition according to which “we have the feeling of nothing outside of us, and we are conscious only of our own feeling.”²³

2. THE PHILOSOPHICAL OPINIONS OF MADAME DE STAËL

Now we head to Madame de Staël, whose interest in Germany owes much to Villers. On August 1, 1802, she wrote to him to express all the good she thought of his work.²⁴ “I believe with you that the human spirit which seems to travel from one country to another is at this moment in Germany. I study German carefully, confident that only there will I find new thoughts and deep

¹³Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 378.

¹⁴Helvétius is sometimes regarded as the father of utilitarianism, for he asserted that human beings are motivated only by the desire to maximize their own pleasure and minimize their pain.

¹⁵“Il importe maintenant de déraciner ces opinions pernicieuses et impies qui favorisent le crime ou qui du moins ne s’y opposent pas avec efficacité [...]. Il faut ramener l’homme au respect de lui-même, au sentiment de sa dignité, à la crainte de sa conscience, à ses ineffaçables devoirs.” Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 166.

¹⁶Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 168.

¹⁷“[I] est temps de la dévoiler et de la présenter comme un remède aux maux causés par des maximes contraires,” Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, LXVI-LXVII.

¹⁸Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 319.

¹⁹Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 245.

²⁰Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 247–248.

²¹Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 85.

²²Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 417.

²³Villers, *Philosophie de Kant*, 417.

²⁴Germaine de Staël, *Correspondance* (Paris : J.-J. Pauvert, 1978), IV, 538-541, and Madame de Staël, Charles de Villers, Benjamin Constant, *Correspondance*, ed. Kurt Kloocke (Frankfurt am Main : Peter Lang, 1993), 19–20. Mme de Staël had also read Villers' opponent, W. R. Boddmer, author of a book published in Switzerland in 1802 (*Le vulgaire et le métaphysicien ou doutes et vue critique sur l'école empirique : The vulgar and the metaphysician or doubts and critical view on the empirical school*).

feelings.”²⁵ She argued about Kant, she writes, “with all those in France who claim to know metaphysics”. Her hypothesis is as follows: Locke and Kant are reconcilable. Locke analyzes the origin of ideas and Kant shows the faculty that transforms them. She subscribes to the condemnation of the morality of interest derived from sensualism. However, to avoid an amalgam that would benefit the opponents of philosophy, she wants us to distinguish several currents in the 18th century: on the one hand Diderot and Helvetius, on the other Montesquieu, Rousseau (whose anti-materialist arguments were in all the memories) and Voltaire (whose merit was to propagate the Enlightenment and make philosophy fashionable). Madame de Staël is a daughter of the Age of Enlightenment and does not want to deny her intellectual training. She is also more lenient than her correspondent towards Condillac. According to her Condillac reasoned well about the object that was his, ideas derived from sensations, but he did not question the faculty that transforms ideas. Villers replied to her on October 1, 1802. The conciliation between Locke and Kant seemed to him difficult to envisage. So he abandons this rapprochement to Degérando:²⁶ “it is worthy of his debonair and conciliatory spirit.”²⁷ This pointed remark amuses his correspondent, who is seduced by so lively mind. The rivalry between Villers and Gerando symbolises a faultline between the defenders of the philosophy of experience, who are convinced that this is the right way forward,²⁸ and the admirers of Germany who are watching as observers the decline of a dying French culture.

Mme de Staël had learned about the German spirit through her conversations with Villers and Benjamin Constant. She had also contact with Wilhelm von Humboldt, who frequented her literary salon during his Parisian sojourn. But she really discovered the philosophical and literary Germany through two sojourns. Having become undesirable in France for political reasons, she decided to go to Germany. In October 1803, she left accompanied by Benjamin Constant. She stopped off in Metz where Villers gave her a crash course on Kant. In Weimar, she visited Schiller, Wieland and Goethe. In Berlin, she went to see Fichte, Ancillon and Spalding. She met August Wilhelm Schlegel, whom she took back to Coppet Castle to make him the tutor of her children and her cicerone. At the same time, she took advice from Henry Crabb Robinson, a good connoisseur of Schelling and Kant, and Jacobi, who gave her explanations about Kant, Fichte and Schelling. At the end of 1807, she made a second journey, this time in Vienna, in order to find a military school for her son Albert. She stopped in Munich, where she had the pleasure of seeing Jacobi again, who had become president of the Royal Bavarian Academy. She got to know Schelling, who told her how "eagerly" he wanted to meet her. On these study journeys, she observes, inquires, takes notes for a book : *De l'Allemagne*. The very first edition dates from 1810, but the book, immediately printed, was destroyed by Napoleon's personal decision. Mme de Staël, having several copies, sheltered the manuscript and the proofs in her possession. *De l'Allemagne* was published in London in 1813 and in France in 1814. In this book that became a bestseller, we find a romantic representation of German culture and personal judgements on the new philosophical school.

3. CULTURE AND NATIONAL CHARACTER OF GERMANY

What is striking, when one reads his book, is the idealized representation of a metaphysical Germany. In every respect “Germans are stronger in theory than in practice”. In Germany, she asserts, thought and action seem to be separate. This is in contrast to France, where “abstract truths have almost

²⁵“Je crois avec vous que l'esprit humain qui semble voyager d'un pays à l'autre est en ce moment en Allemagne. J'étudie l'allemand avec soin, sûre que c'est là seulement que je trouverai des pensées nouvelles et des sentiments profonds,” Letter to Villers, 1 August 1802.

²⁶Joseph-Marie de Gérando (1772-1842) or Degérando (during the Revolution). Degérando draws a very complete picture of German philosophy in his *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie relativement aux principes des connaissances humaines* (Paris : Henrichs, 1804, 3 vols.). Close to the Idéologues during the Consulate, he entered the Institute in 1804 and had a fine career in the imperial administration.

²⁷Villers to Staël, *Correspondance*, ed. K. Kloocke, 24.

²⁸François Azouvi and Dominique Bourel evoke the “concordatory philosophy” that Degérando tries to impose, as an eclectic and conciliatory line that would succeed where Kant failed (*De Königsberg à Paris : la réception de Kant en France, 1788-1804*, Paris : Vrin, 1991, 259). Jean Bonnet adopts this interpretation as his own (*Dékantations : fonctions idéologiques du kantisme dans le XIXe siècle français*, Bern : Peter Lang, 2011, 34).

never been dealt with except in relation to practice.”²⁹ For Mme de Staël, the practical concerns dear to French philosophers since the 18th century are respectable, but they nevertheless rank second in the hierarchy of values, because “in the scale of thought, the dignity of the human species is more important than its happiness.” She praised German universities, where languages and grammar are studied, while French education is more oriented towards mathematics, which addresses the mechanical workings of our intelligence and leaves aside unprovable truths, such as the primitive truths “that sentiment and genius grasp”.³⁰

The novelist emphasises the availability of German writers to the feeling of infinity, that positive infinity that shakes man and not the infinity of mathematicians, which is a negative notion.³¹ Germans are also open to mysticism, sometimes too much besides. Staël detects a profound coherence in the trends that are developing within German culture. In particular, she perceives a common structure between mysticism and idealism: “One places the reality of things in this world in thought, and the other places the whole reality of things in heaven in feeling.” She speaks of a “trend towards spiritualism” common to the peoples of the North and which existed before the introduction of Christianity. This remark takes place in the characteristic pattern of oppositions between the North and the South inherited from Montesquieu and applied to literature. “The Greeks had faith in external wonders; the Germanic nations believe in miracles of the soul. All their poems are filled with forebodings, omens, and prophecies of the heart; and while the Greeks united with nature through pleasures, the people of the North ascended to the Creator through religious feelings.”³²

Germany is the country of thought: “there is such a tendency towards reflection in Germany that the German nation can be regarded as the metaphysical nation par excellence.”³³ The Germans believe they are called in all things to the role of “contemplators”.³⁴ German genius is characterized by “a great depth of ideas,” “the grace that comes from the imagination”, “a sometimes fantastic sensitivity (sensibilité).”³⁵ German writers are the “best-educated and most meditative men in Europe.”³⁶ This profound trend in German culture is obviously very favourable to philosophy: in Germany “philosophical genius goes further than anywhere else.”³⁷ Mme de Staël thus encourages, if not the importation of a model, which seems to her undesirable, at least an interest in the philosophy that is developing in Germany: “The Germans are like the scouts of the army of the human spirit; they try new roads, they try unknown means; how could one not be curious to know what they say, on returning from their excursions into infinity?”³⁸ The Germanic influence could invigorate philosophy as it has already done for literature, even without its knowledge.³⁹ However, Mme de Staël is too imbued with the philosophy of the Enlightenment to fully adhere to German thought. Unlike Villers, who writes as an apologist, she always retains the external gaze that allows critical distance. She condemns the vices of present-day French society, but she does not at all share the general depreciation of French culture found in some members of its entourage. Not all comparisons turn to the advantage of the Germans, and Mme de Staël does not hesitate to mention their faults: they lack subtlety of spirit, they even lack energy and character, despite their rough

²⁹Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, Simone Balayé eds (Paris : Garnier-Flammation, 1968), II, 80.

³⁰Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, I, 140.

³¹Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 238.

³²“Les Grecs avaient foi aux merveilles extérieures ; les nations germaniques croient aux miracles de l'âme. Toutes leurs poésies sont remplies de pressentiments, de présages, de prophéties du cœur ; et tandis que les Grecs s'unissaient à la nature par les plaisirs, les habitants du Nord s'élevaient jusqu'au Créateur par les sentiments religieux,” Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 93.

³³“Il y a en Allemagne une telle tendance vers la réflexion que la nation allemande peut être considérée comme la nation métaphysique par excellence,” Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 141.

³⁴Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 163.

³⁵Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, I, 191

³⁶Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, I, 48.

³⁷Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, I, 136.

³⁸“Les Allemands sont comme les éclaireurs de l'armée de l'esprit humain ; ils essaient des routes nouvelles, ils tentent des moyens inconnus ; comment ne serait-on pas curieux de savoir ce qu'ils disent, au retour de leurs excursions dans l'infini ?” Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, I, 166.

³⁹Staël claims that Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Chateaubriand are “of the Germanic school”, because “they draw their talent only from the depths of their soul.” See *De l'Allemagne*, I, 162.

manners; they have only a tactician vision of war; their love of freedom is not very developed; their philosophers are more gifted in conception than in execution and clarity of expression, they mix metaphysics and poetry; etc. But the image that she gave of philosophical Germany was nevertheless likely to exert in France a power of attraction that was as strong as it was lasting.

4. GERMAINE DE STAËL AND THE GERMAN PHILOSOPHERS

Without claiming to be a philosopher, Mme de Staël personally defends an anti-materialist point of view: “The will is completely independent of physical faculties: it is in the purely intellectual action of this will that consciousness consists, and consciousness is and must be freed from bodily organization.”⁴⁰ According to her, an anti-materialist philosophy must have as its horizon the “moral perfection of man”⁴¹: everything, according to her, must converge in this direction. Thus, she condemned materialism and sensualism for their disastrous effects: the theory of the passivity of the soul led insensitively to the negation of the mysteries of the world and of everything that could go beyond the limits of perception; the result in France was the “frivolity”⁴² or “frivolity of spirit”⁴³ that Villers already denounced and which seemed to him to go well with the taste for business. On the contrary, what characterizes German philosophy, particularly the New School, is the link established between morality and metaphysics and a general inspiration which consists in considering “feeling (*le sentiment*) as a fact, as the primitive fact of the soul.”⁴⁴

The reference to sentiment, which is the central axis around which all of Staël's philosophical convictions are organized, echoes Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is always present in the background of his judgments on philosophers. Rousseau is indeed a reference, for it had sufficed for him, in order to refute the philosophers' arguments against the activity of the soul and against freedom, to appeal (as before Malebranche and Fénelon did) to the inner feeling whose reality cannot be questioned: “So I am not just a sensitive and passive being, but an active and intelligent one, and no matter what philosophy says, I dare to claim the honour of thinking.”⁴⁵ Mme de Staël widens the domain of this inner feeling: the feeling not only attests to our own existence, it connects us to cosmic and supraterrrestrial dimensions. Feeling does indeed draw from our interiority, but in depth. And it is because it comes from the depths that the emotion produced is not only a superficial reaction but a shaking of our whole being.

This indication will help us to approach his interpretation of Kant. First of all, it is remarkable that she represents Kant's philosophy as compatible with the philosophy of experience: “He believes that experience would be nothing but chaos without the laws of understanding, but that the laws of understanding are only concerned with the elements given by experience.”⁴⁶ For Mme de Staël, this conciliation of “experimental philosophy” with “idealistic philosophy” is very important because it provides a possibility of communication between Germanic and French thought.

The other interesting aspect of her interpretation is the Rousseauist prism of his reading of Kant.⁴⁷ According to her, Kant, far from considering the power of feeling as an illusion, assigns to it “the first rank in human nature.”⁴⁸ The feeling gives us the certainty of our freedom. Kant refutes the morality of interest by putting “a sublime theory” in the place of “this hypocritical fallacy” or

⁴⁰“La volonté est tout à fait indépendante des facultés physiques : c’est dans l’action purement intellectuelle de cette volonté que consiste la conscience, et la conscience est et doit être affranchie de l’organisation corporelle,” Germaine de Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, II, 171.

⁴¹Germaine de Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, II, 91.

⁴²Germaine de Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, II, 114.

⁴³Germaine de Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, II, 231.

⁴⁴Germaine de Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, II, 91.

⁴⁵“Je ne suis donc pas simplement un être sensitif et passif, mais un être actif et intelligent et, quoi qu’en dise la philosophie, j’oserai prétendre à l’honneur de penser,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard*, ed. B. Bernardi (Paris : Flammarion, 1996), 59.

⁴⁶Germaine de Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, II, 132.

⁴⁷See Jean Bonnet, *Dékantations*, 45-56, and Laurent Fedi, *Kant : une passion française, 1795-1940* (Hildesheim : Olms Verlag, 2018), 17–69.

⁴⁸Germaine de Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, II, 135.

“this perverse doctrine”.⁴⁹ “One never tires of admiring Kant's writings in which the supreme law of duty is enshrined.”⁵⁰ Kant raises moral dignity by refusing to separate reason and feeling and by making the soul “a single seat where all faculties are in agreement with each other.”⁵¹ Mme de Staël calls for “a philosophy of belief, of enthusiasm; a philosophy that confirms by reason what sentiment reveals to us.”⁵² The quotation can be found in the presentation on Kantism but the terms used are more reminiscent of Rousseau.

Staël has very favorable judgments on the thought of his friend Jacobi who, even before Kant, had already refuted the “philosophy of sensations” and the morality of interest. Jacobi objected to Kant, blaming him for not relying enough on religion. Mme de Staël takes up this reproach against Kant. According to her, Kant saw in conscience only “a judge” and not “a divine voice,” he wanted to base morality on duty but “to know what duty is, one must appeal to one's conscience and to religion.”⁵³ Jacobi, she stresses, is the first modern German philosopher to base our intellectual nature on religious feeling.⁵⁴ However, Mme de Staël is worried at the consequences that a morality that brackets formal rules and justifies decisions by reference to personal conscience alone could have on the behaviour of the ordinary man. This is more or less her only reservation about Jacobi's thought.

Regarding Fichte and Schelling, Mme de Staël characterized their systems by breaking with the dualism of soul and nature and organizing their conception around a single principle, either the self or nature, which, according to her, does not make the universe more comprehensible.⁵⁵ Mme de Staël admires post-Kantian idealism without approving its radicalism.

Fichte gives idealism a scientific rigor and makes the activity of the soul the whole universe. This system takes as its basis the self and considers the outside world as a limit to our existence. According to an anecdote brought by Ancillon,⁵⁶ Mme de Staël is said to have asked Fichte, when they met, to sum up his system in a few minutes and she exclaimed that such a system reminded her of the story of the Baron of Münchhausen who tried to jump over a river by pulling on his sleeve.⁵⁷ But in her account she shows more benevolence. She remembers that Fichte distinguishes between what is transitory and what is lasting in the self: “there are continuous changes in us, due to the external circumstances of our lives, and yet we still have a sense of our identity.”⁵⁸ Fichte's system, she explains, is not without flaws. It misses the charm of nature and love. It loses “contact with real things.” This idealism is the extreme opposite of materialism, but it exalts the soul so much that it detaches it from nature and undermines the feeling “that is the true beauty of existence.”⁵⁹ However, Mme de Staël finds two qualities in him: his rigorous morality, which makes the self-responsible for the acts of his will, and his intellectual exigency, which accustoms us to seek thought “deep within ourselves.” She fully subscribes to this quotation: “It is necessary to understand what is

⁴⁹Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 135.

⁵⁰Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 198.

⁵¹Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 139.

⁵²Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 138.

⁵³Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 202.

⁵⁴Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 144.

⁵⁵Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 146.

⁵⁶See Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël* (Paris : Fayard, 2010), 228.

⁵⁷Another image, no less picturesque, can be found in Degérando: “The Kantians are accustomed to compare the philosophers who, before them, wanted to lay the foundation of human knowledge to those Indians who, to give the land a foothold, made it rest on a turtle. Jacobi ingeniously replied that Kant had indeed had the merit of asking for a new support and the art of placing a second tortoise under the first for this purpose. But his disciples soon felt the inadequacy of this resource, and they came to the point of placing a third tortoise under the other two” ; “Les Kantiens ont coutume de comparer les philosophes qui, avant eux, ont voulu fixer le fondement des connaissances humaines à ces Indiens qui, pour donner un point d'appui à la terre, la font reposer sur une tortue. Jacobi a répliqué ingénieusement que Kant a eu en effet le mérite de demander un nouvel appui et l'art de placer à cette fin une seconde tortue sous la première. Mais ses disciples ont bientôt senti l'insuffisance de cette ressource, et ils sont venus à l'envi placer une troisième tortue sous les deux autres,” *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie*, Paris : Heinrichs, 1804, II, 270.

⁵⁸“Il s'opère des changements continuels en nous, par les circonstances extérieures de notre vie, et néanmoins nous avons toujours le sentiment de notre identité,” Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 147.

⁵⁹Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 148.

incomprehensible,”⁶⁰ which means for her the legitimate aspiration to “feel and recognize what must remain inaccessible to analysis” –a barely concealed critique of the Idéologues and other anti-metaphysicians.

Schelling is credited with being more aware of nature and less abstract than Fichte, but like him he rejects dualism. He seeks the principle of unity in nature, which brings him closer to Spinoza, but instead of bringing the soul back to matter, he elevates matter to the soul, producing a theory that is “very idealistic in substance, and even more so in form.”⁶¹ Schelling places the principle of the organized universe in a ternary game of powers that he finds in the physical sciences and the arts. Schelling's school develops a theory of immortality according to which personal death is a passage into the great whole of eternal creation. Mme de Staël is more than reserved about “that abstract immortality that would strip us of our best memories.”⁶² More generally, it is pantheism that is criticized: by divinizing nature, one only postpones the difficulties without resolving them, “and one does not approach the infinite in this way either.”⁶³

An examination of Staël's judgments on German philosophy shows that it is indeed on German idealism, referred to as “the new school,”⁶⁴ that she wants to attract the attention of her compatriots. The “idealistic philosophers” distinguish themselves by relating everything “to the home of the soul,” “considering the world itself as governed by laws whose type is in us.”⁶⁵ Mme de Staël notes that alongside “intellectual idealism”, which makes the soul the centre of everything, there is what she calls “physical idealism”, which has “life” as its principle.⁶⁶ Mme de Staël classifies the “physicist philosophers”: Schelling, Ritter, Bader, Steffens, in this current. The interest she shows in these authors reflects her desire to broaden scientific reflection to areas of investigation that go beyond the empirical sphere. She calls for a method which, without abandoning the experimental method, “would embrace the universe as a whole and would not disregard the nocturnal side of nature.”⁶⁷

The intellectual revolution that began thirty years earlier cast out materialism and its “fatal consequences.” As enlightened Protestant, disciple of the Savoyard Vicar, Mme de Staël saw with interest the emergence, under the influence of Kantian ideas, of a new conception of religion, free from dogma and which did not reject any cult, but made celestial things “the dominant principle of existence.”

5. GERMAINE DE STAËL AND MAINE DE BIRAN: A CONVERGENCE OF VIEWS

Staël's ideas about Germany and German idealism were influential in philosophy because they started resonating, after 1810, with doctrines that sought the direction of a spiritualist impulse.

The reaction against Condillac's sensualism was always a lively issue but was renewed with the philosophy of Maine de Biran. The Idéologues had wanted to bury metaphysics by taking the qualification of primary science in the sense of a science of the origin of ideas. But Biran had taken this science in a new direction by identifying in the voluntary pressure on muscles an inner force reflected in one's own actions, an active force given in inner experience or insight, but impossible to transcribe without distortion into an outer representation. To express this part of the sensation activated by the will, Biran had used the rare term “hyperorganic”, thus avoiding the adjective “spiritual” proscribed by the Ideologues while making it quite clear that “I” discover myself as

⁶⁰Staël does not indicate the source. The quotation is found in a letter to Jacobi of March 31, 1804 (where it means that only the genesis of the incomprehensible is comprehensible) and in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804 (where it means that the incomprehensible is the foundation of knowledge, given the distinction that must be made between the concept, which is the representative element of knowledge, and the act of posing the concept, which is the non-representative element). See Fichte, *WL*, 1804, II (Hamburg : Meiner, 1986), 37.

⁶¹Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 149.

⁶²Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 150.

⁶³Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 151.

⁶⁴Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 157 : “Germans of the new school penetrate with the torch of genius into the interior of the soul.”

⁶⁵Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 156.

⁶⁶Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 169.

⁶⁷Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II, p. 173.

something more than the play of my organs. In 1804, this dissident of ideology took the path of the anti-materialists.

In fact, this agreement did not explicitly commit the German metaphysicists. In her early work, Biran was quite critical of them. He criticizes them for getting lost in thought and not giving physiology the attention it deserves. Biran is trained as an experimentalist French philosopher and rejects the excesses of idealism that lead to an ethereal philosophy. He wrote to Tracy in 1804: "Though we use the language of the metaphysicians, we will not be dragged with them into this bottomless and shoresless sea. We are held at anchor by the return to the physiological conditions necessary for exercise and the origin of all faculties..."⁶⁸ We can point out that such a middle way was also appropriate with Mme de Staël, who belongs to the same generation (born the same year as him).

But Biran then evolves towards a philosophy increasingly welcoming to religion. The experience of voluntary motor effort was that of solidarity between a hyperorganic subject and organic resistance. In pursuing his search for a practical morality giving access to a happy life, Biran discovered the need for a certain liberation of the soul from the body. Since union is manifested in my ability to move my body and to feel myself as an active force, separation would be manifested by "the passivity of the self under the influence of a transcendent force that would detach it from the body."⁶⁹ Biran is thinking about rethinking his psychology in an anthropology that takes into consideration "the whole man." Within this framework, he adds a floor to the previous building by distinguishing three lives: animal life, human life, and life of the spirit. Animal life is that essentially passive and unconscious life that takes place away from the self. Human life is defined by the presence of the "I", that is one with the consciousness of the self. Finally, the life of the spirit is characterized by those states of rapture, inspiration, and revelation that do not come from voluntary activity and therefore testify to a certain passivity; but while the passivity of the first life was due to psychophysiological mechanisms situated below the "I", this one depends on a superior influence that raises the person above himself as in a state of grace. Biran does not lose sight of the scientific requirement, but he widens the field of his examination to higher states of spiritual life, which, although rare, are nonetheless part of the experience.

At the same time as he embarked on this intellectual adventure, which was also a spiritual adventure, Biran was reading *De l'Allemagne*. It was the end of 1814 or the beginning of 1815. In June 1815, he reread the third volume which contains the third part – "Philosophy and Morals" (*La philosophie et la morale*) – and the fourth – "Religion and Enthusiasm" (*La religion et l'enthousiasme*). The impression he gets from this reading is that of a fundamental convergence with his own ideas. He notes in his diary that it would be a mistake to follow those who want to exonerate Condillac from all responsibility for materialism, for concentrating everything in the sensation that has its cause "outside the soul" inevitably leads to a theory of the "enslaved soul" that is ruinous for free will. He credits Staël for having seen this dualism of activity and passivity and he concludes like her: "It is the contempt of all religion that made us what we are today."⁷⁰ In addition for him, as for Mme de Staël, religion is "a feeling of the soul rather than a belief of the spirit."⁷¹

Biran does not just read Mme de Staël, he frequents her salon and even seems to have become familiar with his political conversations.⁷² At the beginning of the Restoration, he gathered a philosophical society, where Degérando, Ampère, Stapfer, Guizot, Royer-Collard and a "young professor", Victor Cousin, who was appointed to the Faculty of Letters in Paris in December 1815,

⁶⁸"Quoique nous employions le langage des métaphysiciens, nous ne serons point entraînés avec eux dans cette mer sans fonds ni rives. Nous sommes retenus à l'ancre par le retour sur les conditions physiologiques nécessaires à l'exercice et à l'origine de toute faculté..." Maine de Biran, *Correspondance philosophique : 1766-1804*, Œuvres XIII/2, A. Robinet & N. Bruyère ed. (Paris : Vrin, 1996), 398.

⁶⁹Henri Gouhier, *Maine de Biran par lui-même* (Paris : Seuil, 1970), 138.

⁷⁰"C'est le mépris de toute religion qui nous a fait ce que nous sommes aujourd'hui," Maine de Biran, *Journal*, I (Neuchâtel : Editions de la Baconnière, 1947), 85-86 (June 5, 1815). See also III, 152.

⁷¹Maine de Biran, *Journal*, I, January 21, 1815.

⁷²Maine de Biran, *Journal*, I, 232, 244, II, 10, 14, 16. He went to see her again on February 6, 1817. She died suddenly of a paralysis attack on July 14 of the same year.

met for discussions.⁷³ Cousin learns about German philosophers through the “shiny clouds (*brillants nuages*) of Madame Staël's book.”⁷⁴ He relied on Mme de Staël's connections to organise his first stay in Germany, during the summer of 1817. This immersion in German philosophy diverted him from the Scottish philosophy taught by his predecessor Royer-Collard. He made a second sojourn the following year, then returned to Germany again, where, accused of carbonarism, he was arrested on the orders of the French authorities. On his return to France, Cousin proclaimed the victory of spiritualism over sensualism, the existence of a French philosophy with its own identity, and the importance of Franco-German exchanges in the transformation of the intellectual landscape.

CONCLUSION

Cousin would perhaps not have oriented himself so much towards German authors without the influence of Madame de Staël, who spread in circles of initiates. Unlike Villers, Madame de Staël wanted to combine the idealism of the Germans with the philosophy of experience. We find the same attempt at conciliation in Cousin, who himself described his doctrine as “eclecticism”, the eclecticism consisting in preserving the part of truth contained in each system. But the example of Cousin's spiritualism also shows this: each new stage of a cultural transfer introduces a change of direction. Thus Cousin is more critical of German philosophy than his predecessors. If he emphasises the Hegelian ternary philosophy of history, on the other hand he distances himself from Kant and Schelling. Kant's philosophy appears to him as a subjective idealism; and he reproaches Schelling for proceeding from ontology to psychology when only the reverse is valid. In any case, a turnaround takes place in France after 1871, as the representation of a dreamy and metaphysical Germany is followed by the frightening picture of a Prussianized and militarized Germany. But in the meantime Cousin had died and French spiritualism was completely renewed.

⁷³See G. E. Gwynne, *Madame de Staël et la révolution française. Politique, philosophie, littérature* (Paris : Nizet, 1969), part 3, ch. 4.

⁷⁴Victor Cousin, *Fragments et souvenirs* (Paris : Didier, 1857), 58.

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