

ANALYSING THE REVOLUTION

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Part 1 - Literature: A Key Work of the 1800s

LV: Marc-André Bernier, hello. You teach in the University of Québec in Trois-Rivières in Canada and you recently devoted a collection of articles to *De la littérature* by Germaine de Staël. Could you tell us how important this book is? Is it a key work of the turning point in the Enlightenment?

MAB: In the year of its publication in 1800, this book immediately represented a significant political and intellectual event. First of all, political because Madame de Staël defends the intellectual and philosophical heritage of the Enlightenment and, at the same time, the republican heritage of the Revolution in a context where her opposition to Napoleon Bonaparte is beginning to assert itself, after the coup d'état of the 18th Brumaire, that is to say in November 1799.

So, an intellectual event then, as several of his contemporaries immediately understood, starting with Chateaubriand. Indeed, this text represents a major contribution to the intellectual effort of an entire era which seeks to conceive the new world emerging after the Revolution. The complete title of the book is now as follows: *Literature Considered in its Relations with Social Institutions*. In this title, the important word is "relation". For Madame de Staël, cultural life has a relationship with all the historical phenomena that, over the centuries, have transformed societies, institutions and, more generally, mentalities.

So let us take the classic example of the difference between ancient and modern literature. In the Antiquity, Latin literature, written by Madame de Staël, would have remained absolutely foreign to the intimate dimension of emotional life. On the other hand, modern writers, especially English and German writers, writers like Richardson, Young and MacPherson and his bards seized *Ossian* or, in Germany, Goethe and Schiller, these writers would have sought above all to deepen the secrets of the human heart.

But why? According to Madame de Staël, modern literature inherits the general transformation of mentalities caused by the invasions of the peoples of the North and the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. However, these great historical phenomena have also revalued the status of women, considered as slaves by the Ancients, but promoted by the Moderns to the rank of companions thanks to which they have reached a greater delicacy of feeling. It is therefore necessary to understand the productions of the mind in the light of these millenary religious and moral, social and political resolutions.

This example clearly shows the importance of this book of literature in the birth of a literary history and beyond what we now call the human sciences. Chateaubriand, for example, will soon take up the scheme again by replacing perfectibility, we can come back to this, by Christianity, which according to him has developed the expression of love and melancholy, two values very dear to Madame de Staël.

Part 2 - A history based on theory and perfectibility

LV: You have just mentioned the originality of this approach, Marc-André, but what exactly distinguishes Germaine de Staël and the other critics of the time?

MAB: It should be recalled that in the 18th century, the conception of history was most often based on the idea of cyclical time, i.e. periods of progress alternating with periods of decline. Voltaire, for example, in his *Essai sur les mœurs*, fears that decline will follow the classical 17th century, which he considers to be the Great Century. At the end of the century, La Harpe considered that the Revolution, by ruining all moral and aesthetic religious values, made it impossible to produce masterpieces.

And that is why his *Cours de littérature*, which was held between 1799 and 1804, defended a return to classical aesthetics and great models. So in this context, Madame de Staël, on the other hand, applies the theory of "perfectibility", I mentioned the word earlier, to the evolution of literature; a theory defended a few years earlier by the philosopher Condorcet in the *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, which dates from 1794.

From this perspective, the history of the human mind is part of a process that has seen our knowledge gradually and above all irreversibly increase since the Antiquity to the present day. In *De la littérature*, Madame de Staël's investigation therefore follows step by step this slow but continuous march of the mind from the Antiquity to the French Revolution. Madame de Staël thus inscribes it in a dynamic time, in other words, in an evolution that gradually reduces ignorance and prejudices, fanaticism and superstition for the benefit of a better knowledge of the human heart. The painting that Madame de Staël offers is thus animated by a feeling of hope in a future necessarily better than the past, an idea that will, of course, be taken up with fervour in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Part 3 - A Response to the Denunciations of the Enlightenment

LV: So, you began by talking about the political dimension of the book. By turning to literature, does Germaine de Staël not respond indirectly to the denunciations of philosophers and the Enlightenment that flourish precisely at the moment when society aspires to return to order, that is, after Thermidor?

MAB: The hopes raised by the doctrine of perfectibility that I have just mentioned come up against the recent experience, in 1800, of revolutionary terror, an experience that Madame de Staël herself describes as, and I quote, "a monstrous phenomenon" that has suspended the progress of the Enlightenment. Many of her contemporaries, however, do not hesitate to go a little further by claiming that the Terror was the inevitable consequence of the progress of the Enlightenment itself. This is the thesis of one of the most influential counter-revolutionary philosophers, the Englishman Edmund Burke.

In a book entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published at the beginning of the Revolution in 1790, Burke criticised in particular the notion of a "social contract" that came from Rousseau, and he also criticised the Declaration itself of Human Rights. For him, these were in fact abstract principles, that is to say foreign to the historical experience of a humanity that he conceives as dominated by selfish passions, and therefore foreign to the principles of equality and fraternity. That is why it is better to prefer very real historical traditions which have always moralised the behaviour of individuals by rooting them in secular convictions, national habits or even prejudices, compared to abstract legal principles, which, according to him, do not refer to any human truth.

Madame de Staël, on the contrary, considers the return to traditions and old prejudices to be illusory. We cannot do, and I quote her, she has a wonderful expression, "we cannot downgrade reason" and to the Terror, we must respond, on the contrary, with even more light. Above all, this attitude invites it to open up new perspectives.

Following her aspiration, an aspiration that will be very characteristic of the coming 18th century and soon of our own modernity, the writer and the artist will have to respond to the violence of history by committing themselves, this is already the idea that is present in her work, to actively engaging in the transformation of the world.

De la littérature therefore calls on writers to renounce the frivolous puns that characterised French literature at the end of the Ancient Regime, because new times require literature capable of exercising a true magisterium over opinion, either from the speaker's platform or in the burning pages of a work of imagination.

In other words, with the Revolution, writers must set out to conquer new progress that can anticipate the times in which they live. Soon, these theses will guide the fictional choices of *Corinne ou l'Italie*, which is a major novel of the early 19th century.

LV: In any case, it is useless to say that the First Consul does not like this notion of the writer's role, since it wants to provide its regime with a literature that is equal to the classics. Thank you Marc-André Bernier for this rich exchange which taught us a lot about literature.

MAB: It is I who thank you.