MADAME DE STAEL AND CARLYLE

By LAWRENCE BLAIR*

Madame de Staël's Germany was published in England in November, 1813. Having been suppressed in France in 1810, the book was well calculated to arouse interest in English literary circles. A summary of the work follows, given as briefly as is consistent with any plan that does not intend merely to cover the table of contents.

GERMANY

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS.—Among the French, there is less inclination to abstract reflection than among the Germans. The French and the Germans are at the two extremes of the moral chain, since the former regard external objects as the source of all their ideas, while the latter think of ideas as the source of all impressions. No nations can be more opposite in their literary and philosophical systems. Since Germany is, of all Europe, that nation that may be considered the native land of thought, in so much as study and meditation have in it been carried so far, it might be worth while to make the German nation known to France. German literature, objected to in France on the grounds of absurdity and lack of taste, may contain, after all, ideas that will enrich the French people.

PART I. OF GERMANY, AND THE MANNERS OF THE GERMANS.—Since Germany has no capital city, and the spirit of society exerts little power, all the people of that nation do not attempt to be alike. The Germans, slow and inert, but with an internal vivacity, are characterized by imagination and understanding, and an enthusiasm for the arts and poetry. They are not warlike, they have not a patriotic love of liberty, the enthusiasms of glory, or religious fanaticism. A just and persevering nation, the German people suffer no shackles in the "dominions of speculation". German women are senti-

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mental, and have a lack of rapid comprehension that makes them less brilliant in conversation than French women. Chivalry still exists in Germany, and love there is a more serious quality than in France. Southern Germany is characterized by good living, domestic enjoyments, and a lack of animated conversation; Northern Germany, by the lack of a highly specialized society, the absence of which makes for independence of thought, seriousness of character, and individual literary expression. Weimar is called the Athens of Germany. The German universities of the North are the most learned in Europe, the education given there being not practical, but theoretical. Germany is particularly interested in philosophy, and in the literature of foreign countries.

PART II. ON LITERATURE AND THE ARTS.—The French are unjust to German literature, because they do not know it. They do not understand German taste, nor the fact that German writers pay little attention to their public. German writers are purposely obscure. The French attach great importance to style; the Germans, to thought. The Germans pursue truth for its own sake, not fearing new paths of inquiry. Madame de Staël now goes into an analysis of certain German writers: Wieland, who has improved the language, making versification more flowing and harmonious; Klopstock, whose aims are either patriotic or religious; Lessing, a critic with modes of perception German, with manner of expression European; Winckelmann, who has banished from fine arts the mixture of ancient and modern taste; Goethe, who never loses himself in the ideal, never gives up the earth, never holds the powers of his mind in subjection—he possesses all the principal features of German genius: great depth of ideas, grace which springs from imagination, a sensibility bordering on the fantastic; Schiller, a man of uncommon genius and perfect sincerity, who loved art for its own sake. The Germans are more capable of lyric poetry than most other nations; they possess no epic poem, no more than do the French. The French are bound by classical poetic rules, the Ger-
mans are not. There is scarcely any classic poetry in Germany, since the language is not fixed, and taste changes with every new production of men of genius. There follows an analysis of poems by Wieland, Klopstock, Goethe, Schiller, and Schlegel. One inexhaustible source of poetic effect in Germany is terror. Burger best has made use of this vein, while Goethe is successful with it in the *Bride of Corinth*. In the matter of taste, the French judge of the fine arts by rules of social fitness and propriety, while the Germans judge of them as they would of the fine arts. In the field of dramatic art: Adherence to the unities has made French literature sterile. Madame de Staël here analyzes and criticises the dramas of Lessing, Schiller, Goethe, Werner, Kotzebue, Gerstenberg, Klinger, Tieck, and the Danish writer Oehlenschläger. German comedy is not so noteworthy as German tragedy. The Germans prefer strong to delicate humor. Parody is scarcely admitted on the German stage, and the lines between tragedy and comedy are not clearly drawn, as they are on the French stage. Declamation: The Germans imitate nature as closely as they can; the French strive to arouse emotions. Of romances, many abound in Germany, *Werther* being the one unparalleled. Here are discussed romances of Goethe, Tieck, Claudius, and Richter. There follows a consideration of German historians, of the writings of Herder, and of the two Schlegels, the Schlegels being the most renowned critics of Germany. Fine Arts: In painting, architecture, and sculpture, the Germans are not successful; but in instrumental music, they excel.

**PART III. PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS.—Metaphysics occupies the attention of the Germans to a marked extent.** Madame de Staël traces the rise of materialistic philosophy from Bacon, in England, to France, where it has flowered. This system is opposed in Germany. Descartes, Bossuet, Fénelon, and Pascal were idealists which the French have failed to follow, but they resemble the German philosophers with whom speculative philosophy is in order today. The philosophy of Leibnitz, the Ger-
man Bacon, is here analyzed, and is followed by an exposition of Kant, in which Madame de Staël shows the difference between the "reason" and the "understanding", one of the outstanding features of the Kantian system. Before Kant, the most celebrated philosophers are Lessing, Hemsterhuis, and Jacobi; after him, Fichte and Schelling. The last two pretend to simplify the Kantian system, as is seen by an analysis of their works. The truly admirable thing in German philosophy is that it leads to the examination of ourselves. Madame de Staël here stresses the influence of the new German philosophy on the development of the mind, on literature and the arts, on science, and on the character of the Germans.

Ethics: Ethics founded on personal or national interest, as practiced especially by the French, are not to be thought of as high, and are opposed by the idealistic philosophy of the Germans. Duty and truth are the main ethical points of the German system, Kant especially insisting on strict truth. This book is closed by an admission of the false sentimentality existing in Germany, the sentimentality that Goethe attacked among the first, and by a discussion of love in marriage.

PART IV. RELIGION AND ENTHUSIASM.—In Germany, the bias of the mind leans more toward enthusiasm than fanaticism. Religion in Germany has been recalled by Luther to the land of thought. Madame de Staël defends Protestantism, on the basis that we have a right to investigate the truths that we are to believe. French philosophy has made a jest of the Christian religion, but the same subject in Germany has been made an object of erudition. From a discussion of the position in Germany of the Moravians and the Catholics, Madame de Staël is led to remark that the Protestant religion is not unprovided with poetry, even though the ritual be less pronounced than that of the Catholic Church. Her attempt to explain "mysticism" is comparatively unsuccessful. Her next topic is Novalis and his works. The book closes with an animated outline of "enthusiasm", which Madame de Staël says is the love for the beautiful,
the elevation of the soul, and the enjoyment of devotion, all united in one single feeling which combines grandeur and repose. It aids learning, since it gives life to the invisible, and interest to what has no immediate action on our comfort and this world. Therefore, it is more adapted to the pursuit of abstract truths, and, for that reason, is cultivated with great ardor in Germany. Enthusiasm alone, however, cannot bring happiness. If we are hypocrites, and show no enthusiasm, we stifle our emotions. The more we benumb our feelings, the nearer we approach to a state of material existence. One without enthusiasm can have no real appreciation of the fine arts.

Madame de Staël’s friends among reviewers, poets, and people of fashion (one of whom was Byron), gave her a tremendous prestige. But the cordial reception accorded her book was not untinged with adverse criticisms of a nature that seems sane to us a century later. A writer in the Quarterly Review for January, 1814, points out “several faults in Madame de Staël’s work: the too general and unmixed character of the praises of German literature; ambition of style, with overfondness for refining and adorning everything; and want of orderly arrangement in her topics. But these he considers petty faults compared with her accuracy of taste, ardentia verba, depth of thought, and, purity of sentiment”¹. In the Monthly Review of April, 1814, William Taylor declares that Madame de Staël “professes to treat of the principal epochs of German literature, but without displaying much historical or antiquarian research”. Taylor, however, disagrees with Crabb Robinson as to the justness of Madame de Staël’s opinion of Goethe, for he says that “Madame de Staël’s seventh chapter, concerning Goethe, is excellent; it displays the observation which knows how to paint and to judge; and it forms in our opinion the most consummate piece of

¹ Whitford, R. C., Madame de Staël’s Literary Reputation in England, p. 81.
portraiture that she has executed”. The delineation of Schiller he finds more vague, more general, less precise, and less individual than that of Goethe.\(^1\) Another critic complains “that the eye is dazzled by unvaried brilliancy”. He furthermore admits that there may be “here and there in the Germany some vagueness of statement”, but “the critics, men of greater intellect than susceptibility, who accuse Madame de Staël of using vague language in expression, unjustly charge defects to that deep, moral, and poetical sensibility with which they are unable to sympathize”.\(^2\) The *Edinburgh Review* for February, 1816, contained the accusation of superficiality in the notice Madame de Staël had given the *Nibelungen Lied*.\(^3\)

An interesting contrast is what the Germans themselves thought of the gifted author. In 1815, Richter wrote a review of *Germany*, and this review Carlyle translated in 1830. Richter says that Madame de Staël had “this advantage, that she writes specially for Frenchmen; who, knowing nothing about German art and the German tongue, still gain somewhat, when they learn never so little. . . . . She dwells so much in the heart, as the bee in the flower-cup, that, like this honey-maker, she sometimes lets the tulip-leaves overshadow her and shut her in”. After this accusation of a too great sentimentality, Richter asserts that her taste in poetry is French, not German, and that therefore she cannot perfectly interpret German poetry to the French, no matter how hard she try. She is not the mediatrix between the two nations he could have wished, since she selects the things that will decoy the French into sampling German writings; they will then find them with all their harshness unsoftened, and will be displeased rather than enraptured. “The clear water of their poetry will ever exclude, as buoyant and unmixable, the dark fire-holding oil of ours”. Richter is impressed by the fact that the French like antitheses and witty reflexes too much to

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2 Ibid., p. 32.
3 Ibid., p. 42.
care for German poetry, in which all of Goethe would not have so many charming sayings as one scene of Voltaire. But he thanks the author for her good work in making the German nation see itself, although she has not succeeded in luring the French to appreciate them. As to the book itself, Richter thinks Madame de Staël judges of generalities better than of specialties and poets. He denies her statement that Frenchmen alone can produce scenes of “one impression” in the theater. Furthermore, he denies her accusation that the deficiency of witty speech among the Germans is due to the language of the country. Her critical judgment in several instances is denounced, especially in her selection of a certain scene from Mary Stuart as an example of the genius of Schiller. Then, in direct opposition to William Taylor of England, Richter says that Madame de Staël does justice to Goethe “where she admires him, but less where she estimates him”, but that her portrait of Schiller is her kindliest and justest! Some of the lady’s remarks about Richter himself he facetiously shows to be inexact. Leading up to his opinion of her treatment of the German philosophers, Richter observes: “While men, after long studying and re-studying the great philosophers, so often fall into anxiety lest they may not have understood them, finding the computation look so easy, women of talent and breeding, simply from their gift of saying No, infer at once that they have seen through them. The reviewer is acquainted with intellectual ladies who, in the hardest philosophical works—for instance, Fichte’s—have found nothing but light and ease”. He then closes the subject by the succinct remark that Madame de Staël doesn’t half understand the German philosophers. In closing, however, Richter praises the author for her noble sentiments, and says that she is, probably “the only woman in Europe, and still more probably, the only French person in France, that could have written such a book on Germany”.¹

One of the most ardent admirers of Madame de Staël’s book in England seems to have been Thomas

Carlyle. As early as 1817, according to his latest biographer, he was reading Germany. One of his earliest apparent interests in a German writer was that in Werner, stimulated it would seem by Madame de Staël. "There was no translation of the illustrious Werner who had told best the secrets of the rocks; but Carlyle would not let the German language stand between him and any knowledge Werner had to give. Besides, Madame de Staël's Germany has made him curious". In 1818, he said of Madame de Staël: "With all her faults, she possessed the loftiest soul of any female of her time". He sent Jane Welsh a copy of De Staël in 1821. And Wilson says further of him: "In 1822, his letters and notebooks reveal that he was meditating to write unlike a German, in the manner of de Staël's Allemagne, or the histories of Voltaire, with better regard for the truth". His high regard for Madame de Staël is shown by his statement that "the Miltons, the de Staëls—these are the very salt of the Earth. They deserve their 'Patents of nobility direct from Almighty God' and live in the bosoms of all true men to all ages". In a letter to Jane Welsh, 1822, he refers to "our favorite, de Staël".

That Carlyle was not blinded by his fondness for the book to its shortcomings, we can see when on two occasions he mentions Germany. The quotations given show his appreciation for Madame de Staël's masterpiece, but it is an appreciation made critical by a realization of the book's greatest weakness. In the short paragraph preceding his translation to Richter's Review of Madame de Staël's "Allemagne", Carlyle says "There are few of our readers but have read and partially admired Madame de Staël's Germany; the work, indeed, which, with all its vagueness and manifold shortcomings, must be regarded as the precursor, if not parent, of whatever

2 Wilson, D. A., Carlyle till Marriages, p. 144.
3 Ibid., p. 165.
4 Ibid., p. 166.
5 Ibid., p. 211.
6 Ibid., p. 233.
7 Ibid., p. 247.
8 Ibid., p. 248.
acquaintance with German Literature exists among us”. ¹ And in his *State of German Literature*: “Madame de Staël’s book has done away with this; all Europe is now aware that the Germans are something; something independent and apart from others; nay, something deep, imposing, and, if not admirable, wonderful. What that something is, indeed, is still undecided; for this gifted lady’s *Allemagne*, in doing so much to excite the curiosity, has still done little to satisfy or even direct it. We can no longer make ignorance a boast, but we are yet far from having acquired knowledge”.²

These two direct statements of Carlyle about *Germany* indicate to us what would probably be his debt to the book. It aroused his curiosity, it made him want to understand thoroughly the country and the people about whom Madame de Staël had written so charmingly, but it laid itself open to suspicion just because it did not itself allay that curiosity so aroused in the reader. Madame de Staël occupies, with regard to Carlyle, something of the position of the “cub” reporter who puts an expert newspaper man on a glowing trail. As to literary men, as to philosophers, Carlyle investigates and writes about practically every one mentioned and expounded by Madame de Staël. But Carlyle seems to go to the writers themselves; he studies them, rather than Madame de Staël’s exposition of them. Often in Carlyle, one finds the same opinions that one finds in the *Germany*, but it appears on investigation that they are such opinions as would occur to any earnest reader, and are not to be supposed as taken from the *Germany*.

Assuming as granted the statement that Carlyle’s work on the Germans was inspired by Madame de Staël’s book, in just what ways did Carlyle refine on the methods of the Frenchwoman?

Where Madame de Staël is often vague and superficial in her treatment, Carlyle is clear and thorough. Madame de Staël is at times vague in her entire exposi-

tion of a topic. Carlyle, at least in his early works on the Germans, seems to me to be vague only in isolated sentences, if he is vague at all. Furthermore, Carlyle is not content to show us the surface workings alone of an author or a philosopher, as Madame de Staël too often is: Carlyle helps us to understand the man under discussion by fortifying the account of his works with biographical and critical material that Madame de Staël deemed unnecessary, or found impossible to supply.

The following comparisons of the treatment of topics undertaken both by Carlyle and Madame de Staël will illustrate my point: that Carlyle found Madame de Staël at times vague, incomplete, and superficial in her Germany.

In her discussion of Richter, Madame de Staël says that he could compose a work interesting to foreigners, but that nothing he has published could extend beyond the limits of Germany; that there are admirable beauties in his works; that he is a genius; that he has a mine of new ideas that would enrich the French nation, and that he has humor.¹ Carlyle showed his lack of agreement in one point here, by translating at least one romance of Richter, Quintus Fixlein. Furthermore, he makes an attempt to explain Richter by giving the facts of his life, and by making a more searching analysis of his literary characteristics than did Madame de Staël. He says: “Richter’s intellectual and literary character is, perhaps, in a singular degree the counterpart and image of his practical and moral character. His works seem to us a more than usually faithful transcript of his mind; written with great warmth direct from the heart, and, like himself, strong, original, sincere. . . . He does not cunningly undermine his subject, and lay it open, by syllogistic implements, or any rule of art; but he crushes it to pieces in his arms, he treads it asunder, not without gay triumph, under his feet; and so in almost monstrous fashion, yet with piercing clearness, lays bare the inmost heart and core of it to all eyes. . . . He

not only loves Nature, but he revels in her; plunges
into her infinite bosom, and fills his whole heart to
intoxication with her charms. He tells us that he was
wont to study, to write, almost to live, in the open air.
We know of no Poet with so deep and passionate and
universal a feeling towards Nature”.¹ This, to Carlyle,
deeply important subject of nature in relation to Richter
is entirely ignored by Madame de Staël.

In the Germany, the Nibelungen Lied is dismissed
thus: “An epic poem has lately been discovered, called
the Nibelungen Lied, which was composed in the thir-
teenth century; we see in it the heroism and fidelity which
distinguished the men of those times, when all was as
true, strong, and determinate, as the primitive colors of
nature. The German, in this poem, is more clear and
simple than it is at present: general ideas were not yet
introduced into it, and traits of character only are nar-
rated”.² Carlyle, on the same subject, says: “The un-
known singer of the Nibelungen, though no Shakespeare,
must have had a deep poetic soul. . . . . His Poem,
unlike so many old and new pretenders to that name, has
a basis and organic structure, a beginning, a middle, and
end”.³ Then he gives an excellent synopsis of the story,
and appends to this a criticism that makes the poem
stand out in relation to other epic works.

In her discussion of Novalis, Madame de Staël says:
“Among the works of Novalis, some Hymns to the Night
are distinguished, which very forcibly depict the train
of recollections which it [sic] awakens in the mind. The
blaze of day may agree with the joyous doctrines of
Paganism; but the starry heavens seem the real temple
of the purest worship”.¹ But Carlyle is more impressed
with these Hymns. “These Hymns to the Night, it will
be remembered, were written shortly after the death of
his mistress, in that period of sorrow, or rather of holy

² Germany, ed. O. W. Wight, I, p. 154.
³ Carlyle’s Works, III, p. 127.
¹ Germany, ed. O. W. Wight, II, p. 350.
deliverance from sorrow. Novalis himself regarded them as his most finished productions. They are of a strange, veiled, almost enigmatical character; nevertheless, more deeply examined, they appear nowise without true poetic worth; there is a vastness, an immensity of ideas, a still solemnity reigns in them, a solitude almost as of extinct worlds". Then he translates one of the hymns, by way of proving his assertions.

In the introduction to her book, Madame de Staël says that German literature is objected to in France on the ground that it is not in good taste. But she takes little trouble to prove to the world that this accusation is not, at least from her viewpoint, true. She explains later in the book that German and French tastes "differ". Carlyle, on the other hand, in the State of German Literature, shows that the accusation of poor taste has been brought unfairly upon the Germans, and that German taste is not only good, but that it is a thing to be studied and followed by Englishmen.

Madame de Staël leaves one in a mentally-suspended condition at the end of her exposition of "mysticism". What she has to say has been pleasing, but just what she means is not yet clear. "—have been mystics", says Madame de Staël: "that is, men who have made religion a sort of affection, and have infused it into all their thoughts, as well as their actions. . . . The ruling opinion among the mystical Christians is this, that the only homage which can please God is that of the will which he gave man. . . . The elevation of the soul toward its Creator is the supreme act of worship among the Christian Mystics". All these assertions, combined with many others in her rather lengthy attempt at explaining "mysticism", result only in mystifying one the more completely. Carlyle gives us at least one important point with a remarkable degree of clearness. He says that "mysticism" is usually synonymous with not understood. A man may know something perfectly, but

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1 Germany, II, p. 320.
not understanding the language of men, he may not be able to explain it. Therefore he will be called a mystic. "A simple nature, ignorant of all the ways of men, of the dialect in which they speak, of the forms by which they think, is laboring with a poetic, a religious idea, which, like all such ideas, must express itself by word or act, or consume the heart it dwells in. Yet how shall he speak, how shall he pour forth into other souls that of which his own soul is full even to bursting? He cannot speak to us; he knows not our state, and cannot make known to us his own. His words are an inexplicable rhapsody, a speech in an unknown tongue. Whether there is meaning in it to the speaker himself, and how much or how true, we shall never ascertain; for it is not the language of men, but of one man who had not learned the language of men; and, with himself, the key to its full interpretation was lost from among us. These are mystics, men who either know not clearly their own meaning, or at least cannot put it forth in formulas of thought, whereby others, with whatever difficulty, may apprehend it".2

Primarily, then, we see that Carlyle was not moved to use the work of Madame de Staël as a source for his critical opinions on German authors. But did he elsewhere adopt some of her ideas for his own? It is almost impossible that in reading so brilliant a book, one to which he was peculiarly attached, he should not incorporate certain of the original ideas of the author. From my knowledge of the Germany and of Carlyle's writings, I have been able to select a few striking thoughts and theories from Carlyle that seem to come directly from Madame de Staël. Of course, there is always the possibility that Carlyle and Madame de Staël both took these ideas from certain German works with which I am unfamiliar.

Madame de Staël says, in speaking of the crime of witchcraft, "In order to conceive the terrible effects of an accusation of witchcraft, we must transport ourselves

2 Carlyle's Works, I, p. 60.
to those ages in which the suspicion of this mysterious crime was ever ready to fix upon all extraordinary events”.¹ And to those who would write historical tragedies, she gives this advice: “The preference is given in Germany to those historical tragedies in which art displays itself, like the prophet of the past. The author who means to compose such a work as this must transport himself altogether to the age and manners of the personages represented, and an anachronism in sentiments and ideas is more justly obnoxious to the severity of criticism than in dates”.² These two statements agree with one of Carlyle’s historical tenets: to understand a man, one must know all about him, and must sympathize with him. It is this theory that he carried to an extreme when he made so many fruitless efforts to determine from which window the Countess Lamotte fell.

Another agreement in historical ideas seems to indicate that Carlyle was impressed by this statement from the Germany: “The idealists believe that an art, a science, or any object, cannot be understood without universal knowledge, and that from the smallest phenomenon to the greatest, nothing can be wisely examined, or poetically depicted, without that elevation of mind which sees the whole, while it is describing the parts”.¹ The thought that the “whole” must be realized by the artist is brought out by Carlyle in his essay on History. He says there that there are historical Artists and Artisans; the Artisan has no eye for the whole, but the Artist depicts everything in relation to it.²

I find one striking agreement of ideas on the subject of history. In reproaching Schiller for the ending of his Joan of Arc, Madame de Staël says that the marvellous in invention, placed by the side of the marvellous transmitted to us in history, robs the subject of a great part

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¹ Germany, I, p. 318.
² Ibid., p. 274.
¹ Germany, II, p. 203.
² Carlyle’s Works, II, p. 259.
of its seriousness. This is almost precisely the point made by Carlyle in Biography, where he stresses the importance of the smallest historical fact, and urges writers to stick to "reality", since the purpose of invention should be to discover truth.

Madame de Staël's Germany, then, fired the imagination of Thomas Carlyle. He, following her illuminating outline of Germany, explored with more care and with keener critical analysis the treasures of German literature and philosophy. Some of the ideas of the French author he seems to have adopted for use in his later writings. What more does Carlyle owe to Madame de Staël?

Since a statement that Carlyle "was meditating to write, in the manner of Madame de Staël's Allemagne" was made earlier in this paper, one might suppose that Carlyle owed more than a little to Madame de Staël's style. This is a question that must be discussed elsewhere. But does not Carlyle derive much of his ambition to introduce the Germans to the English, from Madame de Staël's unswerving determination to do exactly the same thing for the French? Of course, one might say that Madame de Staël wrote the Germany as a means of making herself well known, and that Carlyle wrote of the Germans merely to fill up pages in British magazines that paid him for his enthusiasm. But to me there is seen in both writers a spirit of duty—the duty of making known something that is to them both fine and profitable. This spirit seems to dominate the works of both, and to link them closely together as literary geniuses.

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3 *Germany*, I, p. 319.