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**DUTY, AMBITION, AND THE TYRANNY OF MATERNAL
FRIENDSHIP :
GERMAINE DE STAËL AND THE TRIALS OF
MOTHERHOOD**

Among the earliest portrayals of Germaine de Staël the mother is Albertine Necker de Saussure's valuable *Notice sur le caractère et les écrits de Madame de Staël*. In these pages the author makes the following statement : « Madame de Staël a été une très tendre mère ; et si l'amour maternel a eu moins d'éclat chez elle que l'amour filial, c'est qu'elle s'est fait davantage une loi d'en réprimer l'expression¹ ». There was « une certaine pudeur maternelle » in her that prevented her from being her habitual effusive self vis-à-vis her children, Staël confided to her cousin, adding laconically that « [i]l faut se séparer dans cette relation² ». Auguste de Staël's recently published correspondence with his mother throws this pithy statement into stark relief³. The burden of Staël's tremendous

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¹ Albertine Necker de Saussure, *Notice sur le caractère et les écrits de M^{me} de Staël, Oeuvres complètes de M^{me} la Baronne de Staël*, Paris, Treuttel et Würtz, 1820, t. I, p. ccxlj.

² A. Necker de Saussure, *Notice*, p. ccxlij.

³ Auguste de Staël, *Correspondance. Lettres à sa mère (1805-1816)*, Othenin d'Haussonville et Lucia Omacini éd., Paris, Champion, 2013.

ambition and domineering personality fell squarely on his shoulders.

To date, Staël the mother has received very little scholarly attention. The scattered remarks one finds in biographies or general histories either ignore the topic or fall into one of two camps. While writers like Marilyn Yalom paint Staël's mothering in fairly bleak colors, going so far as to claim that she did not really care about her children⁴, others consider her to have been « a rather solicitous mother⁵ ». « Madame de Staël was not in fact lacking in maternal instinct », Maria Fairweather claims, observing that Staël left her older son « in the safe and loving hands of her own nurse » and that she took « a great interest in her children's upbringing⁶ ». This is true as far as it goes, but it hardly accounts for Stael's ambiguous attitude towards maternity. An in-depth look at her mothering thus seems long overdue.

Also see Othenin d'Haussonville, « Auguste de Staël et ses parents », *Cahiers Staëliens*, n°53, 2002, p.145-164.

⁴ Marilyn Yalom, *Blood Sisters : The French Revolution in Women's Memory*, New York, Basic Books, 1993, p. 140.

⁵ Madelyn Gutwirth, « Suzanne Necker's Legacy : Breastfeeding as Metonym in Germaine de Stael's *Delphine* », *Eighteenth-Century Life* 28.2, Spring 2004, note 31, 40. According to her latest biographer Maria Fairweather, « Madame de Staël was not in fact lacking in maternal instinct », Fairweather, *Madame de Staël*, New York, Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005, p. 109.

⁶ Fairweather, *Madame de Staël*, p. 110.

In this article I examine Staël in several maternal roles : dutiful, ambitious, and domineering⁷. I approach each role through a single letter written to or by Auguste. These letters function as prisms, gathering a stream of light – the basic fact of her motherhood – and refracting it in a cluster of meanings. This « prismic reading » is meant as a foray into a topic far too vast to treat comprehensively in an essay such as this. My approach is based on the premise that the common distinction between good and bad mother, or real and ideal maternity, is too simplistic to do justice to the complex process of mothering. «The binary of the ‘good’ versus the ‘bad’ mother does not capture the intricacies of maternal experience or the multivalent responses to mothers and mothering », Marilyn Francus has recently written. « ‘Good’ mothers may parent badly, and ‘bad’ mothers may be good parents at times, and the ways that women mother may or may not be cognate with their moral and ethical character in other social roles and contexts⁸ ». Though focusing on the British context, Francus’s study has the advantage of including literary mothers such as Hester Thrale and Fanny Burney. Because of the pronounced difference in social class and cultural environment, a comparison with these women offers a mere glimpse into the predicament of writing mothers.

⁷ I intend to explore Stael’s relationship with her daughter Albertine and Albertine’s own relationship with her children in a companion-piece to this article.

⁸ Marilyn Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood : Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. 10-11.

Studying Staël the mother throws light on a relatively neglected problem : motherhood and literary creativity. Needless to say, Staël was not only a writer but a *writing mother*. Despite her reliance on nurses and tutors, she had to balance her intellectual life with the duties of her maternal role. Her mothering appears to have had a remarkably negligible impact on her writing as evidenced by the paucity of young children in her fiction. In contrast, her status as the daughter of a demanding and difficult mother left discernible traces in her fiction⁹. Of course this disparity does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in mothering and children. As Janice Doane and Devon Hodges observe, « the lived experience of motherhood can give impetus to questioning idealized views of the mother-child relationship¹⁰ ». Like the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein to whom these remarks apply, Staël appears to have largely sealed off her ambivalent experience of motherhood. Where Staël's fictional and autobiographical writing is concerned, it is a case not so much of a spectral mother but of spectral children¹¹.

Unlike contemporary writers who embraced their maternal role (Félicité de Genlis comes to mind), Staël was

⁹ See Gutwirth, « Suzanne Necker's Legacy » and Catriona Seth, « Maternités réelles et maternités d'élection dans *Delphine* et *Corinne* », *Cahiers Staëliens*, n° 53, 2002, p. 165-180.

¹⁰ Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva : Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the « Good Enough » Mother*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1992, p. 18.

¹¹ I am borrowing the term « spectral » from Mailyn Francus's discussion of « spectral motherhood ». The phrase refers to maternal absence or death. See Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood*, p. 23-24.

plagued by an undeniable ambivalence towards motherhood. In itself, this ambivalence is not unusual. Some feminists consider maternal ambivalence not only a normal but in fact an integral aspect of motherhood¹². In the case of writing mothers, this ambivalence may well be aggravated. While motherhood did not prevent Staël from writing, neither did it act as a spur to it. This ambivalence, I suggest, had its roots in her troublesome relationship with her own mother who also would have liked to be a writing mother but was prevented from publishing by her husband. Clearly, more systematic research into the link between motherhood and creativity is needed before a definite thesis regarding Staël's own literary productivity in connection with her mothering can be made.

Since this essay is predominantly concerned with Staël's relationship with her oldest son, my primary source will be the recently published correspondence. Whenever appropriate, I will draw on the thought of Melanie Klein whose insights on the conflicting forces of love and hate, compassion and aggression provide a useful framework for my study. Through her psychoanalytical work with young children, Klein became aware of the conflicting impulses that dominate the human psyche. Although this conflict is fiercest in the first months of the infant's life, it never ceases. Thus, to achieve a measure of « integration » or «

¹² Gill Rye, *Narratives of Mothering : Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2009, p.105.

balance » as Klein calls it, demands a life-long effort¹³. Klein's findings are particularly useful for a study such as this, since they not only attend to the child's experience of individuation vis-à-vis the mother, but also attempt to understand the impact of the mother's *own* childhood on her maternal subjectivity. « The attitude of a mother to her child has much in common with her feelings as a child towards her own mother », Klein points out. « We know already that this early relationship is characterized by the conflicts between love and hate. Unconscious death-wishes which the child bears towards her mother are carried over to her own child when she becomes a mother¹⁴ ». Thanks to the important work of Madelyn Gutwirth and, more recently, Catherine Dubeau, we now know more about Staël's complicated relationship with her own mother, a relationship that had a far-reaching influence on Staël's emotional and intellectual development¹⁵. Suzanne Necker's impact on her daughter did not only affect Staël's writing, I argue, but was also felt in the way she raised her children, for better or worse. Being the child of an ambitious and talented mother may be exciting, but it is far

¹³ Melanie Klein, « Love, Guilt, and Reparation », in Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945*, London, Hogarth Press, 1975, p. 309.

¹⁴ Klein, « Love, Guilt and Reparation », p. 322.

¹⁵ Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist : The Emergence of the Artist as Woman*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1978 and Catherine Dubeau, *La Lettre et la mère : roman familial et écriture de la passion chez Suzanne Necker et Germaine de Staël*, Paris, Hermann, 2013.

from easy. Not surprisingly, Auguste may have suffered as much from his mother as she had suffered from her own.

Dutiful Mother

Première lettre, Chaumont, 6 (?) septembre 1810, Staël à Auguste :

[...] Je veux t'écrire un mot parce qu'il me semble qu'on s'entend mieux ainsi. Je regarderais comme un de mes plus grands bonheurs dans la vie de faire de mon fils un ami, et depuis notre malheur, et depuis mon exil loin de mes vrais amis, j'attacherais encore plus de prix à ce que le sentiment de choix se réunît à l'affection de nature. Mais il faut pour cela que la sympathie ou la plus haute considération nous réunisse. J'ai trop de lumières pour ne pas juger, et je ne suis point susceptible de ces illusions du sang qui à quelques égards ont leur avantage, mais qu'on rencontre bien rarement, je crois, dans les personnes supérieures. Ressemble-moi ou surpasse-moi. Aime-moi ou fais-toi aimer. Mais ne considère pas ton caractère comme un fait. À mon âge même, j'essaie souvent de modifier le mien pour toi. J'écoute dix choses qui me déplaisent, je tolère dix manières que je n'approuve pas, et ce n'est qu'à la onzième que ce que j'ai réprimé rend plus fort ce que je dis. Tu me dis : « Quand vous êtes affaiblie, je vous aime plus ». Mais ne peux-tu donc pas aussi aimer, je ne dirai pas par l'admiration mais par quelque chose qui en approcherait ? Tu te dis : « J'ai pourtant le droit de fumer, de bailler, de ne rien faire, etc. ». Sans doute tu en as le droit, mais j'ai encore plus le droit de ne pas recevoir de tout cela l'effet que j'en reçois. [Le] coeur est comme la terre qui ne rend que ce qu'on y a semé. À ton égard je t'assure que je serai une terre féconde. Mais l'avantage ou

l'inconvénient d'avoir des parents distingués, c'est qu'il faut mériter pour obtenir¹⁶.

This letter is replete with significant assumptions regarding the nature of love and friendship. Friendship, Staël implies here, is superior to maternal love both by the strength of the sympathy that constitutes its core (in the literal sense of « sym-pathy », i.e. « with feeling ») and in its discerning nature. Unlike less enlightened individuals, Staël claims to harbor few illusions about blood relationships. True maternal love (« l'amitié maternelle », as she put it elsewhere), rather than being guaranteed on the basis of the mother-child relation, has to be earned. Staël then posits what we could call the basic laws of maternal friendship : « Ressemble-moi ou surpasse-moi. Aime-moi ou fais-toi aimer ». Though this may not have been intended, there is something chilling in this dual ultimatum : should Auguste fail to live up to her high standards, he risked forfeiting her love.

Staël is not often portrayed as a loving mother. In part, this is because her salon, her books, and her relationships with prominent contemporaries have claimed more interest. Motherhood, it seems, could not possibly have mattered much in a life so rich in thought and experience. This negative assessment usually has its roots in her decision to choose wet-nursing over breastfeeding. To be sure, the fact that Staël decided not to breastfeed endangered the health of her infant son, but it would be unhistorical to ignore the circumstances that made wet-nursing not only

¹⁶ Lettre de Staël à Auguste, 6 (?) sept. 1810, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 331.

acceptable but convenient for large numbers of French women. To deem her a « bad mother » simply because she refused to nurse her children posits breastfeeding as the essential proof of maternal love, downplaying all others.

In opting for wet-nursing, Staël was following a practice that was quite popular in the Paris region at the time, and this despite the grim statistic on infant mortality. More than four in five babies born in the French capital in the 1780s, were raised by wet-nurses in the countryside, even though the mortality rate of these infants was double that of babies their mothers breastfed themselves¹⁷. Although Staël may not have been aware of this statistic, she was certainly familiar with Rousseau's ardent plea for breast-feeding as enunciated in *Emile*. Her mother Suzanne, a Rousseau devotee, had insisted on nursing little Germaine, much to the detriment of her own health and well-being. Perhaps out of rebellion, Staël refused to nurse her children. Nor did she lavish her unceasing « presence and devotion » on them, another of the « proofs of love » expected of the Rousseauian mother¹⁸. Both of her sons spent months at a time away from her when still in their childhood, and later they were sent to boarding school.

¹⁷ Shari L. Turner, *The Myths of Motherhood : How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994, p. 199. Elisabeth Badinter concludes that the wet-nurse system was a « disguised form of infanticide ». See Badinter, p. 112. *Mother Love : Myth and Reality*, New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1981, p. 7.

¹⁸ Badinter, *Mother Love*, p. 169 f.

In theory at least Staël was convinced of the joys of being a mother. At twenty-two, recently married and the mother of a little girl who would die before turning two, she reflected on the duty and happiness of motherhood which Rousseau had depicted so eloquently :

[Rousseau] fit connoître aux mères ce devoir et ce bonheur ; il leur inspira le désir de ne céder à personne les premières caresses de leurs enfans ; il interdit autour d'eux les serviles respects des valets, qui leur font sentir leur rang, en leur montrant le contraste de leur foiblesse et de leur puissance ; mais il permit les tendres soins d'une mère : ils ne gêneront point l'enfant qui les reçoit ; être servi, rend tyran ; mais être aimé, rend sensible. Qui, des mères ou des enfans, doit le plus de reconnaissance à Rousseau ! Ah ! ce sont les mères sans doute [...] ¹⁹.

There is little evidence that this paen was based on Staël's own experience. Unfortunately, her first pregnancy and the premature death of her first daughter have left few traces in her correspondence. We do know that Gustavine's infancy coincided with her work on the *Lettres sur le caractère et les écrits de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* and the play *Jane Gray*. Her affairs with Talleyrand and Louis de Narbonne also kept her busy. Moreover, since the little girl was in the care of a wet-nurse, Staël did not spend a lot of time with her. It seems therefore that she had little occasion to translate the above remarks into reality. Even when Gustavine fell ill in the spring of 1789, Staël did not sacrifice her other pursuits in order to stay with the sick

¹⁹ Staël, *Lettres sur le caractère et les écrits de J. J. Rousseau, Oeuvres complètes de Madame de Staël*, I-1, Paris, Champion, 2008, p. 52-53.

child, although her letters to her husband demonstrate a tender concern for the little girl's failing health. Perhaps Gustavine's premature death alarmed her sufficiently to play a greater role in the rearing of her second child, Auguste, though in this case, too, she resorted to a wet-nurse and a nanny.

Staël's correspondence in the months following Auguste's birth testifies to a steady interest in his well-being. About a month after her confinement she left for Switzerland to rejoin her parents who had taken refuge in Coppet. Her husband Eric, meanwhile, stayed behind in Paris and was in a better position to inform her of the baby's condition. Staël awaited these reports impatiently and rejoiced when learning that little Auguste had finally gotten his first tooth. Occasionally, however, self-pity outweighed maternal interest. She did not care to hear that he had a « teint citron », but since she did not expect to live much longer, it did not really signify²⁰. This gloomy prediction was ostensibly the result of chest pains, but Suzanne Necker's tyrannical behavior may have played a role in her depressive state as well. The « maison maternelle » reminded Staël of a monarchy in the « asiatique » style, she quipped, rather uncharitably²¹. No wonder she refused to entertain Eric's suggestion and send for Auguste. « Il serait *criminel* de penser à le faire voyager quand il faut qu'il reste encore au moins six mois

²⁰ Lettre de Staël à Eric de Staël, Coppet, 27 nov. 1790, *Correspondance générale* [CG], éd. Béatrice W. Jasinski, t. 1, Genève, Slatkine, p. 402.

²¹ Lettre de Staël à Eric de Staël, 30 juin 1791, CG-I, p. 453.

avec sa nourrice », she wrote two months before the boy's first birthday. « D'ailleurs il ne me conviendrait sous aucun rapport de demander à mes parents de le recevoir ici, et cependant il faut convenir qu'à cet egard *leur consentement est tout à fait nécessaire*²² ». Apparently, recent political development in France had alarmed her husband sufficiently to consider Auguste's removal to Switzerland. According to Staël, this concern was overblown, and more to the point, she would on no account ask her parents to receive their grandson under their roof. Whether this adamant refusal stemmed from a disinclination to beg for a favor, or whether she used her parents' expected resistance as an excuse to pressure for her own return to Paris, the necessity of keeping Auguste with his wet-nurse provided a convenient argument against bringing him to Coppet.

Once Auguste was finally weaned, he was moved to Coppet. It would be interesting to know how Staël argued this new acquisition to the family, particularly in view of the above remarks regarding her mother. From the little evidence we have, it seems that both of his grandparents enjoyed the presence of the earnest little boy who dutifully attended to his daily chores. Suzanne Necker attempted to give him what Staël ironically called « de sublimes leçons », much to the little boy's annoyance²³. Meanwhile, Jacques simply enjoyed the company of his comically serious grandson on whom he bestowed the label of «*honnête*

²² Lettre de Staël à Eric de Staël, 30 juillet 1791, CG-I, p. 472-73. Italics in original.

²³ Lettre de Staël à Narbonne, 26 sept. 1792, CG- II, p. 31 et 55.

homme d'enfant ». We do not know how Auguste reacted to this appellation. In general, he was a very sensitive child, and the slightest reproach made him tear up. In an effort to cure him of this affliction, Staël resorted to a peculiar method, as we learn from Albertine de Broglie : « Elle l'exerçait à supporter une moquerie douce sur tous ses petits chagrins²⁴ ». However gentle this mockery may have been, there is something unfeeling in this response to the child's little sorrows. Did Staël herself tell her daughter of this « cure », or was it Auguste who remembered it in later years? Whatever the truth, this seemingly trivial piece of information illuminates a truth Staël was well aware of : she did not really like children, with a few notable exceptions, and may have felt awkward in their company.

Staël was not only far from the traditional mother – she was also a brilliant thinker and writer whose works attracted widespread attention. As Auguste grew older, he must have become ever more fully aware of her fame and its pan-European attraction. With Necker and then Staël being banished from Paris, Coppet became the center of a vibrant cosmopolitan intellectual exchange. In regards to family life, Staël purportedly had ambiguous feelings regarding this unorthodox atmosphere. According to her daughter, she often explained to her children « l'inconvénient qu'il pouvait y avoir pour des âmes jeunes et flexible à vivre au milieu de cette foule que son talent attirait inévitablement autour d'elle, le danger que pouvait

²⁴ Albertine de Broglie, *Notice sur M. le Baron Aug. de Staël, Oeuvres diverses de M. le Baron Auguste de Staël*, Paris, Treuttel et Würtz, 1829, t. I, p. iij.

leur faire courir l'éclat dont elle était environnée ». This atmosphere, she felt, was not suitable for children²⁵. As a child, she herself had spent many hours in the rarefied atmosphere of her mother's Parisian salon, so in that sense the difference of environment was not that significant. On the other hand, Coppet became the abode of visitors who for months at a time became virtually a part of the family – a marked departure from the nuclear Necker family. In addition, there was the undeniable fact that Auguste and his siblings did not really have a stable father figure – Staël's habit of referring to Necker as « their father » notwithstanding.

More often than not, her maternal responsibility was in conflict with other, equally or more important tasks. « Dans ce moment où je compose un livre, où j'élève ton frère et surtout ta soeur, où j'ai des affaires d'argent à mener », she wrote to Auguste, « je ne me permets pas de passer le dimanche sans t'écrire, mais ta négligence me refroidit un peu pour la longueur des lettres²⁶ ». In a letter to an acquaintance she listed learning German and writing a novel alongside teaching her sons Latin²⁷. Or consider her message to M^{me} Pastoret, a friend from Geneva, whom she informed : « J'élève deux fils, je vois grandir une petite fille très aimable, et je vous fais un livre en pensant très souvent à ce que vous en aimeriez²⁸ ». The reader senses

²⁵ A. de Broglie, *Notice*, p. xxv.

²⁶ Lettre de Staël à Auguste, 15 déc. 1805, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 63-64.

²⁷ Lettre de Staël à Gallois, 31 août 1800, *CG-IV*, p. 317.

²⁸ Lettre de Staël à M^{me} Pastoret, 16 juillet 1802, *CG-IV*, p. 527.

the pride in her activity, strung together in this casual way. Sentences such as these also demonstrate that for Staël writing a book was in some sense a task, even a duty or responsibility, similar to raising her children. At least this is how she presents it to her correspondents.

How important were her children to Staël ? This question does not admit of an easy answer, certainly not in an essay such as this. She was accustomed to having them around her and often enjoyed their company, yet not even Auguste, her favorite, occupied as important a position in her life as her father had done. With Necker's death in the spring of 1804 something irretrievable had departed from her life. To some extent her children filled the void. « Sans ces enfants », she wrote to Lord John Campbell, « j'aurais quitté la vie, elle est brisée pour jamais²⁹ ». Yet her despair over her father's loss was devastating. She felt that she had lost all interest in life and all hope : « Je remplirai des devoirs, j'élèverai mes enfants, mais il n'y aura plus sur cette terre un but pour moi, il n'y en aura plus³⁰ ». Clearly, her children were unable to fulfill her deep emotional yearning for love and support. They were a duty and sometimes a source of support, and that was all – or was it?

A year later, Staël had occasion to rethink her claim to Campbell. While fishing on Lake Geneva, Auguste fell from the promontory and tumbled into the water. In a courageous attempt to come to his aid, his younger brother immediately jumped in after him. Luckily, some servants

²⁹ Lettre de Staël à John Campbell, 4 juin 1804, *CG-V*, p. 357.

³⁰ Lettre de Staël à John Campbell, 27 juin 1804, *CG-V*, p. 375.

happened to come upon the scene and saved the boys from drowning. When learning of the near-disaster Staël was plunged into a paroxysm of grief. In losing her sons, she would have lost « beaucoup plus que la vie », she wrote somewhat grandiloquently ; indeed, nothing had affected her as painfully since her father's death³¹. The impact of the recent shock may have made her exaggerate her grief. But it is surely significant that the incident and her emotional reaction to it made her think of the sorrow that had struck her at her father's loss.

Without denying the sincerity of Staël's temporary agony, it needs to be emphasized that she had trouble finding herself in the role of mother. In her relationship with her children she missed the kind of emotional and intellectual kinship that bound her to close friends like Benjamin Constant or Mathieu de Montmorency. Recall her wish to turn her son into her friend (« faire de mon fils un ami »), expressed in the letter cited above. Her relations with her children were as complicated as those with her own parents. She admitted to not understanding Auguste well³². This lack of affinity with her favorite was exceedingly painful. « C'est une triste relation que celle de mère à fils », she complained to Juliette Récamier. « Je ne sais la faire ni égale ni supérieure³³ ». Here, it seems, was a key

³¹ Lettre de Staël à Vincenzo Monti, 8 août 1805, *CG-V*, p. 634.

³² Lettre de Staël à Récamier, vers 1811, *Lettres de Madame de Staël à Madame Récamier*, Emmanuel Beau de Loménie éd., Paris, Domat, 1952, p. 231.

³³ Lettre de Staël à Récamier, 6 sept. (1810 ?), *Lettres de Madame de Staël à Madame Récamier*, p. 200.

problem of Staël's parenting. Loving her sons and daughter neither as friends nor as blood-relations, she had trouble regulating her behavior accordingly. Indeed, the available correspondence testifies to a confusion of roles that seems indicative of this difficulty. In encouraging her children to think of Necker as their father, she implicitly put herself on their level. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Auguste occasionally considered his mother in terms of a sister³⁴.

If raising her children was merely one of several duties she had to attend to alongside other important responsibilities, they rarely figured at all in discussions of truly significant topics such as politics or literature. Maybe this observation is unfair in that it presumes Staël's ability to seamlessly unite her different roles in one harmonious whole – something few persons manage to do either then or now. Suzanne Juhasz's remarks on the composite and often contradictory nature of maternal subjectivity are apposite here : « A mother is simultaneously a mother and a daughter, a mother and a (social) woman ; a fantasy Mother and an everyday mother ; a body and mind originally connected to but now separate from another person³⁵ ». It goes without saying that the negotiation of this multiplicity of roles becomes even more difficult in the case of mothers who are also artists or writers.

A writer who is also a mother may be a devoted parent without actually writing about the topic of motherhood and

³⁴ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 9 déc. 1812, *Correspondance*, t. 1 et 30 avril 1814, *Correspondance*, t. 2, p. 514.

³⁵ Suzanne Jahusz, « Mother-Writing and the Narrative of Maternal Subjectivity », *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4.4, 2003, p. 20.

mothering. Nonetheless, it does seem rather remarkable that there are so few references to her children in her memoirs (*Dix années d'exil* and, to a lesser extent, *Considerations sur la Révolution française*). In the first part of her memoir of exile, for example, there is not a single mention of either Auguste, Albert, or Albertine whereas Necker, who was of course a statesman and of historical significance, is mentioned repeatedly. Given the very minor roles her children play in the second part, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the few times Staël refers to them, she does so for rhetorical effect, i.e. by resorting to pathos. In this context the affecting scene of her separation from Auguste is an instructive example. Having accompanied his mother to the outskirts of Berne from where she would travel on to Vienna, Auguste prepared to take his leave and return to Coppet. At this moment Staël's courage suddenly deserted her. At this point, she decided to put herself into her daughter's hand, as she put it, « comme si la voix de Dieu devait se faire entendre par la bouche d'un enfant ». Whatever the almost fifteen-year old Albertine said, it evidently had the desired effect. Auguste's departure completes the affecting scene : « Mon fils s'en alla et, quand je ne le vis plus, je pus dire comme Lord Russell : 'La douleur de la mort est passée'³⁶ ». In quoting Russell, Staël merely repeated what she had written in a letter to her father³⁷. This is not to question the sincerity of

³⁶ Madame de Staël, *Dix années d'exil*, éd. Simone Balayé et Mariella Vianello Bonifacio, Paris, Fayard, 1996, p.121.

³⁷ Lettre de Staël à Necker, 19 déc. 1796, *CG-IV*, p. XXX.

her sorrow at leaving her son behind, merely to put it in perspective.

Ambitious Mother

Deuxième lettre, Chaumont 6 juillet 1806, Staël à Auguste :

Je fais, mon cher ami, le sacrifice de te voir [*sic*] puisque l'on assure que cela pourrait nuire à tes prix. Crois, je te prie, que cela m'est tout à fait pénible, mais la solennité de ces prix distribués par un sénateur éveille mon amour-propre pour toi et je cède à ce mouvement. D'ailleurs après ces prix, d'une manière ou d'une autre j'espère que notre réunion aura lieu et pour longtemps. Je ne doute pas ton affection mais je te trouve un peu négligent et je n'approuve pas cela. Notre père qui a eu de si grandes affaires toute sa vie n'a jamais manqué ni un courrier ni une heure de courrier ni la plus petite chose qui avait rapport ou à un sentiment ou à un intérêt. Je voudrais que tu fusses ainsi. [...] Benjamin [Constant] m'a écrit qu'il t'avait trouvé de l'esprit et de la grâce ; cet éloge dans sa bouche compte beaucoup. Ajoute aux agréments de son esprit une générosité et un dévouement parfait : tu verras pourquoi je l'aime tant. Gagne ces prix du mois d'août puisque je leur fais le sacrifice de te voir [*sic*]. J'imagine d'ailleurs que cela fait bien ma situation. Je te dis cela parce que je sais que cela t'animerait. Adieu cher Auguste, avant deux mois nous serons ensemble³⁸.

Written in anticipation of her son's scholastic triumph, i.e. his admission to the recently founded École Polytechnique, Staël's letter is an intriguing combination of flattery, self-centeredness, and maternal vanity. Its most pronounced trait, however, is its lack of genuine empathy for the fifteen-

³⁸ Lettre de Staël à Auguste, 6 juillet 1806, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 108.

year old boy about to take his exams. Instead of simply encouraging Auguste to do his best, Staël emphasizes not once but twice how much of a sacrifice it is for her to see him. She holds her father up as the model to be emulated in all things, and she relays Benjamin Constant's compliments as a way of reassuring herself as much as her son. In short, the letter is informed by a maternal ethos that seeks its own gratification rather than the reassurance of her son.

In her memoir Staël pays Auguste the greatest possible compliment : having been raised with his grandfather's example ever before him, his traits resembled him³⁹. Coming from Staël, it would be difficult to think of a stronger endorsement. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the burden this resemblance, whatever its basis in reality, placed on the boy. To complicate matters further, Auguste was not only Necker's grandson but also « héritier présomptif de la gloire maternelle⁴⁰ ». Considering his illustrious provenance, it is not surprising that Staël determined to turn Auguste into something extraordinary. She entertained « des idées sublimes » on the education of a son, she admitted to her husband when Auguste was barely three months old : « Si Auguste s'avisait de n'être que le second homme de génie de son siècle je serais bien *désappointée*⁴¹ ». Although she may have made this

³⁹ Staël, *Dix années d'exil*, p. 229.

⁴⁰ C. Monnard, *Notice sur M. le Baron Auguste De Stael-Holstein*, Lausanne, Imprimerie de Hignou Aine, 1827, p. 7-8.

⁴¹ Lettre de Staël à Eric de Staël, 29 nov. 1790, CG-I, p. 406. Italics in original.

statement in jest, she was in dead earnest when it came to the topic of education. « Tu sais bien que je suis décidée à le maudire s'il n'est pas un phénomène de la nature, » she wrote several days later, « je croirai qu'on me l'a changé en nourrice⁴² ». At the time of writing these letters, she was with her parents in Coppet, as we have seen, while Auguste was in the hands of a wet-nurse and closer to his father who, as ambassador of the king of Sweden, resided in Versailles⁴³. The implications of Staël's missives are clear : the boy who had the good fortune to be both her son and Necker's grandson simply *had* to turn out extraordinary.

Although Staël never tired of expressing her allegiance to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, she did not follow his educational philosophy. Instead of allowing nature to be the child's first teacher up to the age of twelve, she began teaching Auguste to read when he had just turned two. In this she resembled her mother who had similarly ignored Rousseau's pedagogical precepts. Even before having children of her own, Staël had already anticipated disregarding Rousseau in this respect. « Je ne sais pas si je suivrais entièrement pour mon fils la méthode de Rousseau », she had written in her letters on Rousseau, adding with disarming frankness that « peut-être ma vanité voudrait-elle le former pour un état déterminé, afin qu'il fût

⁴² Lettre de Staël à Eric de Staël, 5 déc. 1790, CG-I, p. 409.

⁴³ Although Auguste as well as his younger brother Albert were the natural sons of Stael's lover Louis de Narbonne, Eric de Stael officially claimed his paternity. Neither of the two men played a role in the boys' lives.

de bonne heure avancé dans une carrière⁴⁴ ». In keeping with her plan, she now began to translate her expectations into an ambitious program of instruction which she undertook herself.

Staël's approach to education was typically unorthodox as a witness recalled : « Madame de Staël donnait à Auguste toutes ses leçons, et les lui donnait toujours au milieu d'autres occupations forcées : c'était en écrivant des lettres, en donnant des ordres, qu'elle dirigeait les études d'Auguste, lui expliquait ses leçons⁴⁵ ». It does not take a lot of imagination to picture the difficulties that a less gifted child would have had with this kind of unstructured teaching. In the event, Auguste seems to have fared well enough. To his mother's palpable relief, his intellectual qualities were astonishing, and his precocity delighted her⁴⁶. Despite her manifold activities, she observed his intellectual development closely and took pleasure in reporting his progress. « Auguste devient tous les jours plus remarquable par son esprit », she informed her husband, « et il a une passion d'étude vraiment comique dans un petit homme de cinq ans et demi⁴⁷ ». Meanwhile, the presence of grandfather Necker, himself a writer of serious treatises, undoubtedly added a further level of mental enrichment as well as pressure. In time, a *précepteur* was hired to teach her sons Latin, German, and

⁴⁴ Staël, *Lettres sur le caractère et les écrits de J. J. Rousseau*, p. 52.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Broglie, *Notice*, p. i-ij.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Lettre de Staël à Eric de Staël, 3 avril 1796, *CG-III*, p. 168.

⁴⁷ Lettre de Staël à Eric de Staël, 29 avril 1796, *CG-III*, p. 178.

English⁴⁸. Unfortunately, we hardly know how Auguste himself experienced growing up in an atmosphere saturated with genius, but the pressure and ceaseless bustle must have been a considerable strain.

Once Auguste began attending the *collège* in Geneva, his days may have become more structured but his mother's expectations certainly did not lessen, on the contrary. All her life she coveted recognition and perks for those she loved, occasionally going to great lengths to procure them. Auguste was awarded first prize in Latin, her « plaisir maternel » was undeniable⁴⁹. To make her triumph complete, the *Nouvelliste Vaudois* carried a news item on the ceremony, graciously commenting on the college's habit of rewarding genius : « L'illustre Necker se sent ainsi revivre, et voit que l'esprit et les talent sont héréditaires dans sa maison⁵⁰ ». One easily imagines Staël's pleasure at this generous reference to her father. Alas, with every achievement her expectations rose further.

After Auguste moved to Paris to attend to his mother's affairs, her concern with his education did not let up. He had now turned fifteen and was in a position to intercede for her and to restore both her fortune (Necker's famous two million) and her precarious standing with Napoleon. In addition to these formidable tasks, he had to advance his studies. Judging from the preserved correspondence, Staël was keenly interested in his intellectual development. « Il me semble que tu devrais lire de l'histoire et m'envoyer

⁴⁸ Lettre de Staël à Meister, 8 déc. 1798, CG-IV, p.171.

⁴⁹ Lettre de Staël à M^{me} Pastoret, 16 juillet 1802, CG-IV, p. 527.

⁵⁰ Note 6, CG-IV, p. 527.

toutes les semaines un court résumé de ce que tu as lu et senti à cet égard », she wrote to him shortly after his arrival. As always, she did not mince words. « Tu es trop ignorant sur ce sujet pour aller dans le monde. Tu ne me dis pas non plus si tu as, comme je le souhaite, une occasion de parler anglais⁵¹ ».

She frequently scolded him for his supposed laziness, an accusation that is particularly strange considering the seriousness with which he regarded his studies. His sister remembered that while in Paris, Auguste « travaillait les jours et les nuits, et quand le sommeil était au moment de s'emparer de lui, il se réveillait en mettant ses mains dans l'eau à la glace⁵² ». Even if this statement smacks of hyperbole, Auguste's conscientiousness seems beyond doubt. His tremendous efforts paid off, and he passed the entrance exam with flying colors. The words he chose to report his success are revealing : « Chère maman, tes ordres sont exécutés et je suis reçu à l'École polytechnique⁵³ ». Perhaps unwittingly, he reminded his mother that in preparing for admission he had merely fulfilled her orders. His own wishes and inclinations were of little consequence when it came to disposing of him. Since his admission failed to move the emperor on the issue of Staël's exile, the intention to enroll was quietly abandoned, and after a year of dedicated labor, Auguste was back to

⁵¹ Lettre de Staël à Auguste, 11 sept. 1805, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 15.

⁵² A. de Broglie, *Notice*, p. xv.

⁵³ Auguste à Staël, sept. 1806, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 129.

square one, having neither advanced his career nor having been able to truly enjoy his stay in Paris.

Though the Parisian scheme had failed, Staël was far from done with her plans. Upon Auguste's return to Coppet, she arranged for his training with a Genevan banker. At the same time, she instructed him to go inspect « nos montagnes » and to try to make himself useful to the family⁵⁴. His religious education was not to be neglected either. He prepared for his first communion with a local pastor, taking lessons twice a week. As if this were not enough to fill his time, Staël requested him to read Bossuet's *Histoire universelle*, and on Sundays, alternately the gospels and Necker's works. Hoping to see him turn out « pieux et vertueux » like her parents, she desired him not to read Catholic authors⁵⁵. About eight months later, she wished him to acquaint himself with the law by studying with the Parisian notary Fourcault de Pavant. It would not come amiss, she felt, if her son learned a bit about economy. « Il a d'excellentes qualités mais beaucoup d'indolence et laisse aller le temps et l'argent sans jour de l'un ni de l'autre », she wrote to the notary. « Vous qui faites si bien le contraire, rendez-moi le service de l'instruire à cet égard⁵⁶ ». Her concern with Auguste's supposed laziness and profligacy was a recurring theme in her correspondence. Once again, it appears that she was

⁵⁴ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 9 août 1807, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 139.

⁵⁵ Lettre de Staël à Francois Gautier De Tournes, 27 fév. 1807, *CG-IV*, p. 204.

⁵⁶ Lettre de Staël à Fourcault de Pavant, 22 mars 1808, *CG-VI*, p. 392-393.

largely oblivious to the realities of her son's character and his habits, whether in Paris or in Coppet. With a persistence bordering on obsession, she sought to mould him in her image of a perfect son, nagging him, chastising him, occasionally humiliating him, and ultimately damaging his self-esteem in ways that would prove highly detrimental to his psychological well-being.

Staël's concern for her son's education and her ambitious career plans had several reasons. To begin with, it is impossible to ignore the similarity of her and her mother's parenting-style. Like Suzanne Necker, Staël set great store by introducing Auguste very early on to book learning⁵⁷. In each case, the mother's personal ambition was coupled with the child's intellectual precocity – with problematic results for the child in question. Melanie Klein includes excessive parental ambition among the causes of familial difficulties. This particular difficulty arises « when the parents are over-ambitious and wish, by means of the achievements of their children, to gain reassurances for themselves and to lessen their own fears⁵⁸ ». If Suzanne Necker's aggressive ambition concerning her daughter was rooted in personal feelings of inadequacy, Staël's own ambitions for her son were compounded by several other factors. As a writer of considerable stature, she wished to see Auguste excel intellectually as well as socially. This was not only a matter of maternal pride. Every success associated with her family and her circle served as a

⁵⁷ On Staël's childhood education see B. Andlau, *La Jeunesse de M^{me} de Staël*, Genève, Droz, 1970, p. 23.

⁵⁸ Klein, « Love, Guilt and Reparation », p. 321.

weapon in her struggle against Napoleon. As Necker's daughter, moreover, she was keenly conscious of her father's reputation – a reputation that had to be upheld and defended at all costs. Indeed, Necker's shadow loomed large over almost everything she did or said, and her children were taught to think of their grandfather as their father and to model their behavior accordingly : « *Il aurait fait, il aurait pensé telle chose, dans telle occasion* » – this was Staël's constant refrain⁵⁹. Beyond that, her children's achievements evidently flattered her as a mother. If Auguste impressed others, this was evidence that she had fulfilled her maternal duty. In a letter to Consul Lebrun she wrote that she alone was in charge of her children's education. « L'aîné a dix ans », she added, « et quand il aura dix-huit ans le Premier Consul verra si j'ai bien rempli mes devoirs de mère⁶⁰ ». Ultimately, her reputation was at least as important to her as the actual fact of being a loving mother. As a corollary, her son's personal inclinations and well-being played a minimal role in her considerations and plans for him.

Domineering Mother

Troisième lettre, Geneve 17 fevrier 1813, Auguste à sa mère :

J'ai reçu, chère amie, en partant de Lausanne ta lettre du 22 janvier où tu m'annonces que mes lettres de Brodi te sont enfin parvenues. Je te remerciais davantage de cette lettre du 22 si à mon retour à Coppet je n'avais pas trouvé d'autres lettres de

⁵⁹ A. de Broglie, *Notice*, p. xviiij-xix. Italics in original.

⁶⁰ Lettre de Staël à Lebrun, 24 mars 1801, *CG-IV*, p. 359.

toi bien sévères et qui ont renouvelé toute la peine que les précédentes m'avaient faite. Je sais malheureusement que je suis d'un caractère pitoyablement faible, que dans ma vie je ne suis encore parvenu à réaliser aucun projet, qu'il en sera de même dans l'avenir, que non seulement toi mais toute personne que j'aime me mènera comme elle voudra. Tout cela je le sais très bien, mais comme Bridoison, ce sont des choses qu'on se dit à soi-même ; lorsqu'on me les dit par trop manifestement, je suis quelquefois un poltron révolté. D'ailleurs je lutte contre cette faiblesse, je lutte contre toi parce que c'est vis-à-vis de toi que je me sens le plus faible, et je lutte en grande partie pour ton bonheur, car si je suis à tes yeux sans aucune consistance, si je ne suis qu'un reflet de ta volonté, je me trouve dans la classe de M^{lle} Randall, de M. Schlegel et de plusieurs autres personnes qui, tout en ayant pour toi des sentiments fort dévoués, contribuent peu à ton bonheur. Si tu ne vois un choix libre dans aucune de mes actions, tu ne peux me savoir gré de rien [...]⁶¹.

What had Staël written to cause Auguste such profound pain and to call forth this devastated response? Although her letter has not been preserved, his own anguished epistle permits a fairly solid reconstruction of her accusations.

At the time Auguste wrote this letter, his mother was already well away from Coppet. On her escape from Napoleon's stooges, she had just passed through Brody, a town about 90 kilometers east of Lvov in today's Ukraine. While she was on her adventurous journey across Eastern Europe, accompanied by Albert and Albertine as well as John Rocca, Auguste had stayed behind to take care of Coppet and to ward off the authorities. It was therefore at a

⁶¹ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 17 fév. 1813, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 468-469.

particularly trying time that Staël fired off her attack. Auguste's answer indicates that she must have chastised him on several scores, beginning with lacking a strong will. He readily granted the truth of this remark, though he chafed under the unkindness of its enunciation. He knew all too well that he was easily dominated, but was it necessary to spell this out ? He had no confidence in his ability, having achieved nothing in the past, as he wrongly believed, and would probably achieve nothing in the future. Whatever she had written clearly touched a sore spot. He saw himself engaged in a struggle that pitted him, the weak and useless son, against his gifted and strong-willed character. As he puts it so shrewdly, it was precisely vis-à-vis his domineering mother that he felt weakest.

Even without attempting a thorough psychoanalytical study of their interaction as evidenced in their correspondence, their relationship can be better appreciated through the lens of the « Oresteia complex ». Discovered by Melanie Klein (and so named by C. Fred Alford), the « Oresteia complex » emphasizes the son's deep ambivalence toward and fear of the mother. This fear does not negate love but paralyzes it. To overcome it, an act of symbolic violence is necessary. Julia Kristeva whose thinking is influenced by Klein has gone farthest in emphasizing the psychic need to commit matricide. « Matricide is our vital necessity », she writes in *Black Sun*, « the sine-qua-non of our individuation⁶² ». Put differently, « in order to think, one

⁶² Kristeva quoted in Doane and Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva*, p. 55.

must first lose the mother⁶³ ». In this view, the killing of the mother is a necessary step toward humanity. If this strikes us as rather grim, Klein's theory can also be read more positively. Matricide creates the conditions for reconciliation in that it results in a cathartic realization that the good mother and the bad mother are essentially one. It is precisely this catharsis that enables the formerly fearful child to now « play the part of the good parent, and, in so doing, re-create and enjoy the wished-for love and goodness of our parents », in Alford's insightful analysis. « One might call this the triumph of pity over fear, but it is really their integration, which restores the self to a fragile wholeness⁶⁴ ». Indeed, in playing the role of « chef de famille », advisor, and « protecteur protégé », as he himself put it, Auguste eventually seems to have achieved this « fragile wholeness », his considerable mental suffering notwithstanding⁶⁵. In other words, he would come to see himself as the parent and protector of his own mother – something that had been denied to Staël in regards to her own mother.

« Killing » Staël meant resisting her dominance and refusing to let her dictate the terms of their « friendship ». This resistance was difficult because of the unequal nature of their relationship. Despite Staël's vaunted openness vis-

⁶³ Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, trans. Ross Guberman, New York, Columbia University, 2001, p. 131.

⁶⁴ C. Fred Alford, « Melanie Klein and the 'Oresteia Complex' : Love, Hate, and the Tragic Worldview », *Cultural Critique* 15, Spring 1990, p. 187.

⁶⁵ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, début nov. 1811, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 381.

à-vis her children and her readiness to explain her decisions to them, all family affairs were conducted according to her will and pleasure. « Ayant toujours eu une haute idée du pouvoir paternel », her cousin notes, « elle donnoit la loi dans sa famille, et ne croyait point que l'obéissance religieusement inculquée, avilît le coeur⁶⁶ ». Staël's correspondence with Auguste certainly illustrates her penchant for authority and her demand for unquestioned obedience. It appears all the more strange, therefore, that she charged her son with spinelessness. Auguste understandably resented this accusation. If he was indeed nothing but a « reflet » of his mother's will, he complained, this could only mean that she classed him in the same category as persons like Fanny Randall and August Wilhelm Schlegel, dedicated members of her entourage whom she trusted and depended upon but who, he believed, ultimately did not really matter to her. As her son, Auguste felt entitled to special consideration and a love superior to the affability reserved for domestic companions. The implication is obvious : while Staël had the right to order members of her household like Miss Randall and Schlegel around, things were different in his own case. *He* did what he did to advance her happiness – not merely to passively fulfill a request.

Staël's accusation of meekness and indecision, for such it must have been, appears all the more incomprehensible considering Auguste's spirited resistance to some of her requests. He did not approve of her plan to dispatch him to Rio de Janeiro, nor was he interested in going to the

⁶⁶ A. Necker de Saussure, *Notice*, p. ccxlv-ccxlvj.

United States, and he certainly did not hesitate to tell his mother so, even going so far as to threaten to blow his brains out if she forced him to undertake the American journey⁶⁷. It would appear that whatever he did, whether he approved of her decisions or resisted them, he aggravated his finicky mother.

Perhaps most galling was Staël's tendency to remind her son of his supposed inadequacy, especially compared to herself. « Je suis malheureusement bien loin d'avoir les mêmes dons du ciel que toi, il s'en faut de trop », he wrote, « mais je ne suis pourtant pas un être si complètement mort que je me le laisse dire⁶⁸ ». Maladroit as so often, Staël must have reminded him of his lack of genius. In the end, this was perhaps what rankled most : that she simply did not have the tact and empathy to spare him her tirade and told him things he himself knew very well but did not need to hear. The reader of Staël's general correspondence should not be surprised about Auguste's complaints. Unlike in her published works, in her personal letters Staël shows herself unrestrained, demanding, and often pathologically self-centered. To his credit, Auguste refused to submit to her accusations and did not hesitate to voice his anxiety. In fact, it was precisely through his struggle against his mother that he gradually achieved a sense of his own self.

Staël's maternal tyranny was rooted in her domineering character as well as in highly unrealistic expectations

⁶⁷ Lettre de Staël à Récamier, vers 1810, *Lettres de Madame de Staël à Madame Récamier*, p. 204.

⁶⁸ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 17 fév. 1813, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 468.

regarding her children. Though she cherished few illusions about those she loved, she demanded much of them⁶⁹. To be sure, her emotional neediness is less in evidence in her letters to Auguste than her attempt to control virtually every aspect of his personality and life. After his first move to Paris, she had insisted on regular, extensive reports, regardless of the brevity of her own letters. The slightest perceived negligence on his part aroused her ire and led to stern criticisms and petty yet cutting remarks such as the following : « Je trouve ton écriture mauvaise, et mauvaise d'une manière qui n'est pas de bon goût », she scolded. But that was not all. From afar she demanded to know the minutest details of his life, including his thoughts. She wrote : « Je voudrais que tu me rendisses compte chaque semaine de ce que tu as lu, et des idées que l'histoire fait naître en toi, car il est pourtant nécessaire que tu saches l'ordre des événements humains depuis six mille ans... Enfin je te prie de ne pas laisser un seul détail de ta vie sans me le raconter. Il n'en est pas un qui ne me touche, et je voudrais que tu t'accoutumasses à me montrer de la confiance⁷⁰ ». While these remarks might be construed as the expression of maternal concern, it cannot be denied that there is something awkward and schoolmasterly in the stern tone of her commands : *Confide in me ! Tell me everything !* If nothing else, they testify to her unease about her role as mother-friend.

⁶⁹ A. de Broglie, *Notice*, p. xxvij, xlvj-xlvij. It is difficult to gauge the accusation implied in this statement.

⁷⁰ Lettre de Staël à Auguste, 9 nov. 1805, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 47.

More often than not, Staël seemed to see herself unequivocally as the domineering parent. This is particularly apparent in the early months of Auguste's Parisian stay. A stickler for regular, lengthy communications, she gave him strict directions about his correspondence. Besides repeatedly criticizing his hand-writing, she warned him that she would leave short letters unanswered. Henceforth, she expected two letters weekly, each four pages long, and the pages of a specific size, she informed him. In this way he would hopefully learn what it took to please his mother⁷¹. If such pedantic orders were painful, Staël's apparent coldness was worse. Indeed, what Auguste sensed to be the gradual withdrawal of her friendship made him at times almost ill⁷².

Like his siblings, Auguste was proud of his mother and cherished her company, yet her treatment caused him a great deal of emotional suffering. A purely historical or social analysis of the context of their interaction or of parenting in general simply does not do justice to the detrimental impact of their ongoing conflict. Take Auguste's opening words from a letter written in March 1808 : « Je reçois, chère maman, une lettre de toi du 23 av[ril] qui me cause certainement et sans aucune exagération une des peines les plus vives que j'aie éprouvées de ma vie⁷³ ». Or even more poignantly on 19 mai 1811 : « Je ne conçois pas comment un sentiment de pitié ne t'a pas retenue au

⁷¹ Lettre de Staël à Auguste, 3 nov. 1805, *Correspondance*, t.1, p. 42.

⁷² Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 9 nov. 1805, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 45.

⁷³ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 15 mars 1808, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 174.

moment de m'écrire un billet comme celui que je viens de recevoir de toi. Je dirai même plus, je ne conçois pas comment un sentiment de délicatesse ne t'a pas empêchée de me dire de telles choses avec Eugène pour tiers. Sans un sentiment de religion et sans l'habitude intérieure que j'ai prise depuis longtemps de ne compter sur aucun bonheur plus long que quinze jours, il y aurait dans ta lettre de quoi me faire me jeter dans la rivière⁷⁴ ». Whatever she had written, it had been severe enough to make him think of suicide. Even allowing for Auguste's emotional nature, it is hard not to feel sorry for him. Staël's lack of restraint is particularly puzzling considering that she was well aware of Auguste's sensitivity.

This sensitivity may have been aggravated by Staël's readiness to believe unfavorable rumors regarding her son's behavior. She had no qualms complaining about him to third parties, nor did she think twice when confronting him with her own suspicions. When learning that he had a little fever, she immediately suspected that he must have contracted « une maladie dégoûtante », i.e. a venereal disease⁷⁵. This was not the first time some well-meaning acquaintance had told Staël that her son frequented brothels. Back in May 1811 he had dismissed « ces absurdes mensonges » about his supposed boasts to that effect⁷⁶. In view of Staël's frequent scoldings, is it a surprise that Auguste came to doubt his usefulness to his family? As he wrote on 26 May 1811 : « Jamais je n'ai eu

⁷⁴ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 19 mai 1811, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 359.

⁷⁵ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 3 sept. 1815, *Correspondance*, t. 2, p. 609.

⁷⁶ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 31 mai 1811, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 369.

que de mauvaises nouvelles à t'apprendre, je me persuade que c'est moi qui nous porte malheur à tous et que je ne suis sur la terre qu'un être inutile ou nuisible⁷⁷ ». Such self-doubts which occasionally bordered on self-hatred resulted in a profound feeling of inadequacy. Under the impact of her constant nagging, he began to wonder what it would take for him to live up to her expectations. » « J'espère pourtant », he confessed, “qu'à force de me battre, tu finiras par faire de moi un fils un peu selon tes idées⁷⁸ ».

Words like « battre » or, as in a letter quoted above, « lutter » came to signify the nature of their relationship. It is no wonder that the constant pressure exerted on the dutiful son occasioned much mental suffering. « Il faut me pardonner un peu, » he moaned in a moment of bitter gloom, « j'ai eu l'âme plus tourmentée que la plupart des hommes de mon âge, mais j'espère qu'elle est fatiguée et non pas deséchée⁷⁹ ». One hopes that Stael reacted with empathy rather than derision to this confession, but since her response has not survived, it is impossible to guess its contents.

Contemporary reports and sketches of Auguste's character uniformly stress his devotion to his family and the chivalry that seemed part of his personality. He was clearly not given to whining, aimless or otherwise. Yet the theme of exhaustion was a recurring one at this difficult time in his life, the years of Staël's adventurous and

⁷⁷ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 26 mai 1811, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 363.

⁷⁸ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 25 mars 1808, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 178.

⁷⁹ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 21 oct. 1813, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 485.

ultimately triumphant journey across Europe. He felt unloved, his soul was « attristée, faible, sans ressort⁸⁰ ». Under these circumstances, probably in equal part the result of his habitual sensitivity, a young man's *Weltschmerz*, and his mother's harshness, every one of her letters threatened to throw him into fresh turmoil. After what we must assume to have been an especially egregious tirade, he waited a full eight days before answering to allow his rancor to subside. « Je ne croyais pas devoir m'attendre à ce que tu me fisses un reproche de ce que je suis venu au monde sans fortune et de ce que tu as payé les dettes de mon père [i.e. Eric de Staël] », he wrote, his bitterness still palpable ; « ta bonté m'avait donné le droit d'espérer que de semblables relations n'existeraient jamais entre toi et moi⁸¹ ». Contrary to the common conception of Staël as an endlessly generous person who gave freely to others, when it came to the question of her son's financial support, she could be surprisingly stingy. More than once she chastised him for his supposed wastefulness, although he was quite frugal, limiting his expenses in Paris to simple meals⁸².

As if these squabbles over money weren't enough to aggravate him, Staël must have also reminded him of his father's notorious profligacy. This was not only in rather bad taste but scarcely something the son could be blamed

⁸⁰ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 9 déc. 1812, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 450.

⁸¹ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 13 fév. 1813, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 465-466.

⁸² Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 15 mars 1808, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 175.

for. Considering that Eric de Staël wasn't even his real father, this accusation seems especially galling. Her recriminations called forth an incisive depiction of her contradictory treatment of those close to her. Auguste wrote :

Tu as vu par ma dernière lettre que j'étais fort disposé à m'accuser ; il a fallu que tu me traitasses avec autant d'amertume pour que je me sois plaint. Mais de même que quelquefois tu flattes l'amour-propre de tes amis d'une manière aimable jusqu'à l'exagération, quelquefois aussi tu les humilies jusqu'à terre ; et l'on en conserve une rancune que d'autres éloges effacent difficilement. Cela n'est pas à craindre avec moi, parce que personne au monde, *pas même toi*, ne peut diminuer l'affection que j'ai pour toi ; mon bonheur y est trop attaché. Et puis ensuite, comme je crois dans mon âme et conscience me juger assez juste, je ne me laisse ni trop exalter ni trop abattre⁸³.

Once again, his use of the term « abattre » reveals the often contentious nature of their relationship. Her profound attachment to his mother notwithstanding, as the years went by, Auguste was evidently less and less inclined to swallow her many hurtful communications passively. Instead, he took the blatant injustice of her accusations to launch into a criticism of her own character flaws. The above letter reveals his keen understanding of her impetuous temperament and of its effect on those close to her. As a further testament to his maturity, he reassured her that he was not going to sulk or withdraw his affection but that his love for her was as strong as ever ; even Staël herself could not change that.

⁸³ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 13 fév. 1813, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 466. Italics added.

As this and similar letters reveal, Auguste gradually mustered the courage to at least tell his mother what he felt, or in his own words, to « fight against her ». But the psychological costs of many years of domineering parenting must have been egregious, though Auguste was sufficiently loyal to destroy most of the incriminating evidence. It is a great pity indeed that the majority of Staël's letters to Auguste, including what we must assume to have been her harshest ones, no longer exist. We will probably never know the full extent of the psychological scars Staël's emotional callousness inflicted on her older son. Such was Auguste's loyalty to his mother, that he would not allow anything too negative to besmear her glorious image. And yet, in a probably unconscious move born of self-denigration (who could really care about *his* letters?) and perhaps a bit of unacknowledged revenge, he allowed his own letters, which blatantly testify to many hurtful messages, to survive.

Drawing attention to the more dubious aspects of Staël's parenting style should not invalidate the love and appreciation that undoubtedly existed between her and Auguste. Despite her many complaints, she slowly began to admit his admirable qualities, yet she always tempered such admissions with caution, or worse. « Cher ami, je pense avec bonheur que nous allons passer quelque temps ensemble », she wrote on the occasion of his sixteenth birthday ; « hélas les fils donnent rarement satisfaction à leur mère⁸⁴ ». Since Staël had neither

⁸⁴ Lettre de Staël à Auguste, 1 sept. 1806, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 126.

brother nor sister, it is doubtful what inspired her to make this statement. At any rate, it certainly could not be mistaken as a compliment and makes a rather strange addition to a birthday letter. Even when praising Auguste explicitly, Staël allowed a hint of pressure to creep in : « On a dans le monde bonne opinion de toi. Si tu n'étais un homme ordinaire, tu tromperais l'espoir de l'avenir et le souvenir du passé dans notre père⁸⁵ ». Once again, Necker's shining example was paraded before him. If Auguste occasionally felt some resentment at this constant idolatry, he did not let it show.

There can be no doubt that Auguste loved his mother tremendously. He told her repeatedly how proud he was to be her son. Occasionally, his devotion took on an exalted level. On 14 Dec. 1809 he wrote : « Je voudrais par le sacrifice de ma vie pouvoir te procurer quelques moments de bonheur ; outre l'affection, j'ai une espèce de culte pour toi ; je te trouve un être d'une nature si supérieure à la mienne. Ce n'est que par toi que j'existe et je crois que sans toi je mourrais par nullité⁸⁶ ». From the point of view of modern child-rearing theories, this obsequiousness coupled with self-denigration does not seem to be the expression of a healthy self-esteem. He seemed to alternate between professions of passionate admiration and extreme distress. « Mon affection pour toi est comme une lueur d'une autre existence dans laquelle toutes les impressions sont plus vives en bonheur comme en

⁸⁵ Lettre de Staël à Auguste, 7 oct. 1807, *Correspondance*, t.1, p. 145.

⁸⁶ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 14 déc. 1809, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 285.

chagrin », he told her ; « et ce sentiment est tellement dominant en moi que je ne crois pas même être susceptible d'amour⁸⁷ ». At twenty, Auguste's feelings for his mother seemed so all-absorbing that he considered ever falling in love unlikely. As his subsequent involvement with Juliette Récamier and later with Madame de Sainte-Aulaire was to prove, in this respect he was mistaken⁸⁸.

Auguste's extravagant rhetoric may have been an attempt to cover up less positive feelings. Like Staël when writing to her mother in her youth, he probably tried to make amends to the mother he loved but also secretly hated. In her important essay on love, guilt, and reparation Melanie Klein provides some intriguing insights on the interrelated nature of identification and reparation. To better appreciate Auguste's emotional development, it is important to quote her at length :

Ultimately, in making sacrifices for somebody we love and in identifying ourselves with the loved person, we play the part of a good parent, and behave towards this person as we felt at times the parents did to us – or as we wanted them to do. At the same time, we also play the part of the good child towards his parents, which we wished to do in the past and are now acting out in the present. Thus, by reversing the situation, namely in acting towards another person as a good parent, in phantasy we recreate and enjoy the wished-for love and goodness of our parents⁸⁹.

⁸⁷ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 4 jan. 1810, *Correspondance*, t. 1, p. 302.

⁸⁸ On Auguste's relationship with the latter see Olivier de Luppé, « Le grand amour d'Auguste de Staël, Madame de Sainte-Aulaire », *Cahiers Staëliens*, n°47, 1995, p. 76-98.

⁸⁹ Klein, « Love, Guilt and Reparation », p. 311-312.

This dialectical process also illuminates Staël's own problematic relationship with her mother. Where Auguste alluded to Staël's extraordinary intellectual talents, Staël had paid tribute to her mother's rich spiritual resources and seen her as virtue personified (« la vertu même⁹⁰ »). « Ne sors point ainsi au dehors de toi pour me louer et me caresser », Suzanne Necker responded sternly. « C'est un défaut de goût assez commun à ton âge⁹¹ ».

One wonders how Staël reacted to this kind of adulation. Did she receive it as a tribute that was due to her greatness, or did she feel ever so slightly uncomfortable, perhaps being reminded of her own letters to her mother? For one so astute, she was astonishingly blind to the detrimental effect of her incessant and gross interference in her son's life.

Conclusion : Incomplete Reparation

Quatrième lettre, 10 sept. 1815, Paris, Auguste à Staël :

J'ai reçu, chère amie, ta lettre du 5 septembre, et en vérité il est bien mal à toi de ne pas m'écrire toujours des lettres amicales car j'en suis si heureux et si fier que je me sens tout un autre homme. Je suis bien sincèrement impatient de me remettre entièrement sous ta direction et de me laisser commander le travail comme un enfant. J'en éprouve le besoin et chaque jour me montre davantage que l'étude est indispensable au

⁹⁰ See Othenin d'Haussonville, *Le Salon de Madame Necker, d'après des documents tirés des archives de Coppet*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1882, t. 2, p. 37.

⁹¹ Lettre de Suzanne Necker à Germaine Necker, 15 mai 1779, d'Haussonville, *Le Salon de Madame Necker*, p. 41.

développement de mon esprit et à ma carrière politique, si jamais je dois avoir telle chose⁹².

These remarks, written in the aftermath of the Hundred Days, summarize the themes and problems raised in this essay : Auguste's joy at his mother's kindness, coupled with a hint at the rarity of such kindness ; his consistent flattery ; his voluntary submission to her tutelage and direction. In a few brief sentences he expresses the dual role he has assumed vis-a-vis his mother : feeling like a new man on account of her message, he is also ready to submit to her command « comme un enfant ». This dual identity – man and child – not only characterizes all relationships between adult children and their parents but also highlights the uneasy juxtaposition of roles that Auguste and his mother assumed in their interaction.

As the mater familias Staël was in charge of almost every aspect of Auguste's life : social, intellectual, emotional, and economic. The fact that he was the son of a celebrated thinker and writer and the grandson of a prominent statesman and would-be intellectual affected his life as much as his mother's controlling personality did. Staël herself had suffered considerably from her own mother's rigidity and coldness, but she had at least had the comfort of being staunchly supported by her father. A comparison of Necker's correspondence with his daughter and her own with Auguste is illuminating in this context. Where Necker is consistently warm and encouraging, Staël is stern and scolding ; where he inspires and reassures his

⁹² Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 10 sept. 1815, *Correspondance*, t. 2, p. 618.

beloved Minette, she has a tendency to put Auguste down. Though an only child, she had had a staunch ally. Auguste, despite his siblings, was pretty much on his own. In the absence of a constant father figure, Auguste and his siblings at best enjoyed the « surrogate fatherhood » of men like Mathieu de Montmorency, Benjamin Constant, or August Wilhelm Schlegel. Where Germaine, an only child, had seen herself as her mother's rival for Jacques's affection, her children were rivals for her affection. For better or worse, then, the emotional configuration of her family was not so very different from the triangle of the Necker family.

It is no surprise that Staël's relationship with her oldest son was frequently complicated. As Melanie Klein has shown, the human self is a veritable battlefield of warring impulses and drives, aggression, resentment, and outright hatred pulling one way, « love and the capacity for reparation and compassion » pulling another. The integration of these contradictory drives, though difficult to achieve, leads to integration and balance, both of which « are the basis of a fuller and richer life⁹³ ». Judging from the published correspondence and comments made by third parties, Auguste managed to achieve a measure of integration and balance. To the end of her life he served his mother faithfully. In a preface to her posthumously published complete edition of her works, he paid her the following tribute : « Ma mère s'est toujours montrée à nous telle

⁹³ Melanie Klein, « Some Reflections on 'The Oresteia' », *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, éd. Roger Money-Kyrle, New York, Free Press, 1975, p. 298.

qu'elle étoit, et l'indulgente tendresse qui lui faisoit admettre ses enfans à la plus parfaite intimité avec elle, leur a permis de suivre constamment le cours des pensées qui l'occupoient, et de s'instruire en écoutant ses jugemens sur les hommes et les choses⁹⁴ ». The reader is immediately struck by the idolatrous tone of the avowal, so similar to Staël's own writing on her father. To her children, it seems, she was as much of a supernatural being as Necker was to Germaine. Still, he suffered from the chronic feeling of being unloved. Nine months before Staël's death he wrote : « Je crois bien, chère amie, qu'être aimé un peu de toi est encore plus que l'être beaucoup de toute autre : mais c'est un calcul qui ne suffit pas toujours pour rendre heureux⁹⁵ ». For the most part, he had managed to accept the unequal nature of their relationship, yet much of the hurt remained.

Staël, in turn, may have loved Auguste more than she let on. If Albertine's eulogy is to be trusted, she repeatedly expressed her gratitude for having a son like him. Perhaps most revealingly, at some point she apparently planned to write a book « où elle peindrait la tendresse passionnée d'une mère pour un fils qui réalisait toutes ses espérances⁹⁶ ». What greater compliment could she possibly have paid her « cher ami » Auguste?

⁹⁴ Auguste de Staël, « Avertissement de l'Éditeur, » *Oeuvres complètes*, t. 1, p. i-ij.

⁹⁵ Lettre d'Auguste à Staël, 16 avril 1816, *Correspondance*, t. 2, p. 707.

⁹⁶ A. de Broglie, *Notice*, p. xlv.