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# GERMAINE DE STAËL'S *CORINNE*, OR ITALY (1807) AND THE PERFORMANCE OF ROMANTICISM(S)

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While in the grip of mourning for her beloved father, Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), made the first stop on an Italian tour in Florence during December of 1804. She expected it to be warm, but found instead that it was bitter cold, and she wrote dejectedly to a friend, "Winter displeases more there [in Florence] than anywhere else, because the imagination is not prepared for it" (qtd. in Moers 210). That mixed sense of disappointed expectation, grief, and fierce commitment to the imagination imbues *Corinne, ou l'Italie*, the novel she published a scant three years later, whose eponymous protagonist lives in Florence from the ages of ten to fifteen, and who returns to spend her final exile before dying there in 1803. Corinne becomes the embodiment of Staël's vision of prospects for a feminine Romanticism that is doomed to the chill of death even as it struggles to be born.

For the past twenty years literary critics have been approaching *Corinne* from a variety of angles: as a performance of heroinism (Moers), as a work that is situated within the discourses of neoclassicism and pre-romanticism (Gutwirth, Lokke, Vargo), or as a text about romanticism itself (Furst, Naginski, Vallois, Luzzi, Schoina). It is sometimes seen as an allegory of the French Revolution (Kadish, Tenenbaum), a historical record of the romantic craze for

*improvvisatore* (Esterhammer (2005), Simpson, Gonda, Weintraub), a fictionalized version of the author's own life (Balayé, Starobinski, Saurian); or an early manifestation of Cixous's *l'écriture féminine* (DeJean). This essay will look at *Corinne* as a series of very literal performances that enact through the exceptional woman's body and voice the emergence of a new but aborted romantic feminine sensibility. In other words, Staël attempted in her novel to explore not just issues of national character and historical destiny, the "Italy" part of the book's title, but to invent a type of female romanticism that would rival in its performative potential the dominant male discourses of Romanticism that she knew all too well, that is, Ossianism, Prometheanism, Faustianism, Rousseauvianism, Alfierianism, or Wertherism. In presenting Corinne's grandiose and heavily coded feminine performances under the censorious gaze of Oswald, Staël suggests to her female readers how they too can and indeed must perform a feminization of culture, history, and social institutions. But Staël seems to have also known from the beginning that her noble intentions were doomed, and the choice of performances that Corinne enacts throughout the text makes this, in fact, very clear to us.

John Isbell has claimed that Corinne has to die at the end of the novel because the Revolution and Liberty were dead by the time of Napoleon's *coup d'état* in 1799 (xiii), while he also has asserted that the name "Corinne" became shorthand for "suffering heroine" throughout nineteenth-century Europe after the publication of the book in 1807 (xi). Yes, *Corinne* the novel allegorizes the process by which modern nation-states attempted to be born, but the other, more important issue is that Corinne the character does not merely or passively suffer; she *performs* her suffering in what Balayé has called a "specularizing" manner; she displays it as a text writ large for her reading audience. She would not let them look away from the spectacle of what they had done to her. All of which is to say that Napoleon did not like this book (Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël* 235).

When Juliet, the young daughter of Oswald and Lucile asks her father, "What is a Corinne?" (396),<sup>1</sup> she might be anticipating A. O. Lovejoy's famous query, what is romanticism? Sprawling, contradictory, complex, and hyperbolically grandiose, Corinne the character and romanticism the cultural and literary movements are difficult if not impossible to neatly define. By my count, Corinne plays

twenty-four different roles throughout the novel, very close to the number of definitions that Lovejoy proffered for "romanticism" with a capital "R."<sup>2</sup> But the final role played by Corinne is as the harbinger of her own death, the stage-manager of her own demise. An enthusiastic translator of Goethe's "Bride of Corinth," Staël praised the poem's "funereal pleasure ... where love makes an ally of the tomb, where beauty itself is a frightening apparition" (qtd. in Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël* 274). Like Sappho flinging herself off Cape Leucade out of frustrated love for Phaon, or Corinna, the Greek lyric poetess who was virtually erased from history by her student/rival Pindar, Corinne seems to have been destined to lose her creativity and die as soon as she spotted Oswald in her audience. His seems to have been the face she was waiting for, the reincarnation of the lost and dimly remembered disapproving British father/son who says no to the attempts of the warm and passionate hybridized Italian/British woman to make a place and seize a name for herself in the emerging and contested culture of romantic creativity.

But before looking at *Corinne* as a series of performances that circle around female mourning, *liebestod*, melancholia, and finally death, I want briefly to acknowledge Angela Esterhammer's pioneering work on the "romantic performative," as well as the studies that a number of anthropologists have done on performance as a species of speech-act theory. As Esterhammer notes, "The identity of an individual or a group can be called performative if that identity is established through the very process of practicing it-so that doing and being, or saying and being, or becoming and being, are indistinguishable" (*Romantic Performative* xii). Corinne becomes who she is by performing as a "Corinne," whether as an *improvisatore*, a dancer, a poet, a musician, an artist, an actress, a sibyl, a Catholic theologian, a tour guide, an Amazonian, or a ghost who haunts her dead father's estate. Corinne says something very similar to this in a conversation with Oswald, "Why ask a nightingale the meaning of his song? He can explain it only by starting to sing again; we can understand it only by letting ourselves go to the impression it makes" (109).

Esterhammer also notes that this aspect of the social performative recalls Aristotle's definition of *energeia*, "an action that contains its end within itself, or acting that does not stop when some

external terminus is reached" (*Romantic Performative* xii). But Aristotle's *energeia* can be understood as strikingly similar to what Corinne calls her "supernatural enthusiasm ... the definite feeling I have that the voice within me is of greater worth than myself" (46). In *On Germany* (1810), Staël had defined enthusiasm as the God within us (qtd. In Lewis 26), and it is this core of her creative energy that is finally sapped during her disastrous return to England when she is relegated from being a performer to a voyeur.

After studying a variety of tribal groups, the anthropologist Elinor Keenan defines what she calls the practice of "ceremonial speech or oratory," and contrasts it to what Michelle Rosaldo has called "invocatory speech" (Bauman 12-13), both of which are very similar to the improvisational style that Corinne uses in her extemporaneous recitals in Rome and Cape Miseno. But such performances are generally culturally specific acts that serve the needs of a particular community, and that is precisely the question that is raised by the performances of Corinne. What and whose needs are being served by Corinne's improvisations, ethnic dances, or theatrical performances? Is she enacting a relevant cultural past or is she in fact a living, animated ruin, an anachronism that can only remind her society of what it has lost and can never replace? Victor Turner, for instance, claims that performance is a practice or event that reveals a culture's "deepest, truest, and most individual character" (qtd. in Diana Taylor 4). And more recently, Diana Taylor has defined "performance" as a "vital act of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated twice-behaved behavior" (2-3).

The larger debate on performance has in fact occurred over precisely this point: can any performance be understood as universal and transparent in its significance and meaning, or is it in its very nature artificial and constructed, bracketed and framed as standing apart from other social practices that occur within a culture?<sup>3</sup> Corinne's many performances throughout the novel raise precisely this question: how "true" is anything she does apart from that one act that contains within itself an undeniable meaning-her death. And doesn't she in -fact know this from the very beginning of the novel? Doesn't she know that staging her own death as a performance-piece can be finally the only act that her culture will accept from her? A desperate romantic

performance, inspired perhaps by the examples of both Sappho and Werther, Corinne's death can be read as an act of bitter anger directed toward a culture that had rejected her gifts and love and, by extension, the place of the exceptional and creative woman in the new romantic era.

Examining a variety of Corinne's performances will allow an interrogation of Staël's conception of the emerging feminine romantic aesthetic, poised as it was against neoclassicist and masculinist tropes.<sup>4</sup> Set during the period 1794-1803, *Corinne* positions Italy the country and Corinne the woman as a beautiful ruin/siren that beckons the melancholy British aristocrat and naval officer Oswald, Lord Nevil, to a mysterious terrain. In many ways, the love/hate dialectic between them stages an allegorical conflict between an older masculinized, Ossianic aesthetic and an even older feminized Sapphic one, both of them in thrall to the power of the father as the lost object of desire. Staël would go on to write a short drama entitled *Sappho* in 1811, in which the exceptional woman kills herself after being rejected by her lover, Phaon. As Gutwirth observes, "Only in the *act* of dying can she be restored to the sense of self she had lost in love" (*Madame de Staël* 265). While Ellen Moers reads Oswald as modeled on Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison (201), I think he can more accurately be read as something like the spirit of an Ossianic warrior brought to life—Northern, melancholic, and father-obsessed—who opposes the spirit of Corinne: Southern, Catholic, exuberant, and also, unfortunately, father-obsessed as well. That is to say, on one level the novel is an allegory about how nations and national ideologies attempt to create and renew themselves through the appropriation, control, and dissemination of artistic and cultural capital.

Arriving in Rome as the hero of Ancona, Oswald encounters a strange spectacle, certainly not something he would have witnessed in London: the crowning of a woman by the laurel wreath of poetic genius on the steps of the Capitoline in Rome. Dressed in white and blue, like a composite of Correggio's Madonna della Scala, Dante's Beatrice, and the Domenichino sibyl, Corinne makes her first appearance in the novel and it is no coincidence that she appears in a public space as a divinely inspired prophetess, giving the impression of "a priestess of Apollo" (23). But this is a muse who has inspired herself, and as a creator and an object of feminine worship, she

arrives to deliver the first of her spontaneous improvisations on "The Glory and Happiness of Italy." This performance, with its references to Dante, Tasso, and Petrarch, suggests initially the poet's necessary role as nationalistic herald and preserver of a country's glorious past; but finally her performance politicizes and genders genius and throws into stark relief the glories of the ancient Roman republic as contrasted to the despotism of Napoleon's brutal expansionist campaigns.

The first and most obvious of Corinne's many and disparate performances are her forays into drama, coding as they do Staël's inquiry into the nature and role of dramatic literature for a society, a subject she had treated at length in her essay "On Literature" (1800). During her stay in Weimar in 1803, Stael saw the opera *Die Saalnixe* (*The Saal River Nymph*) based on a tale by La Motte Fouqué. Shortly thereafter she wrote to her friend Hochet: "I saw the other day a German play which gave me the idea of a novel I think charming" (Balayé, "Corinne en Spectacle" 97-98). That novel became *Corinne*, and the origins of its composition in a German opera about a hero who is an earthly knight and a heroine who is a watery river nymph suggest that from the very beginning Oswald and Corinne are meant to represent how impossible it is for the two sexes to ever live together. We see a bit of this operatic residue when Corinne and Oswald coincidentally meet at the Trevi Fountain after a four day separation: "He bent down over the fountain to see better and his own features were then reflected beside Corinne's" (74-75). This watery merger of the two is a momentary illusion, however, and almost immediately their talk turns to the necessity of suffering.

The romantic performative of this text posits public displays of suffering and an adamant division between the sexes as two of its nonnegotiable terms. We hear some of this when Prince Castel-Forte says to Oswald, "Look at Corinne. Yes, we would follow her in her footsteps, we would be men as she is a woman, if men could, like women, make a world for themselves in their own hearts, and if the fire of our genius, compelled to be dependent on social relationships and external circumstances, could be fully set alight by the torch of poetry alone" (27). Trusting one's own genius, finding one's *Coeur*, as in Corinne or the heart, one's authentic voice within, is the challenge that Corinne flings at her audience of mere mortals. Very few,



however, can find that voice, let alone perform it successfully in the public sphere.

Translating Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* herself (121), Corinne is not hesitant to take to the boards in order to play the role of Juliet, a role that Stael had seen Mrs. Siddons perform to great acclaim in England. This *liebestod* is performed so convincingly that Oswald is dragged from the theater, groaning loudly during Juliet's death scene. Back in her dressing room still costumed as the dead Juliet, Corinne greets Oswald who finds himself compelled to play the role of Romeo, crying out "Eyes, look your last! Arms, take your last embrace" (127).

Understanding that this self-dramatizing scene is a prelude to his eventual desertion, Corinne accuses Oswald of even now wanting to leave her. The *Romeo and Juliet* scene is the first of many such performances that suggest that Corinne's love of Oswald is doomed and that in fact she knows this already, has always known it, and wants only for him to acknowledge that both of them are at the end of history, the end of culture as they know it. We know that Staël herself performed something quite similar while writing *Corinne* during the summer of 1806, Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), a neoclassical work that showcases a father's death-dealing curse on his son and the violent lust and anger of a woman hopelessly in love with her stepson and forced finally to suicide. When Corinne takes Oswald on a tour of her art gallery at her estate in Tivoli, she specifically draws his attention to Guérin's painting of *Phèdre, Hippolyte, and Thésée*, an oedipal triangle that anticipates the doomed curse that will result from the letter that Oswald's own father sends from beyond the grave.

Later, Corinne is persuaded to perform as the sorceress Semiramis in Gozzi's light opera *Daughter of the Air*, a comic work that depicts the female magician as a "coquette gifted by hell and heaven to conquer the world. Brought up in a cave like a savage, skilful as an enchantress, imperious as a queen" (294). The role seems tailor-made for Corinne, and indeed she agrees to perform it despite her growing anxiety about Oswald's intentions. At the point where she appears costumed as the Assyrian queen of Ninevah, as an "Amazon queen," Oswald begins crying in the audience, overwhelmed not simply with Corinne's show of female, castrating power, but with a very real fear



for his reputation because their affair is now the subject of public scandal in the London "news-sheets" (297). Performing this role of female political and military power is quickly punished as Oswald criticizes Corinne, she faints and bloodies her head, allowing Oswald to nurse her back to health and assert his dominance once again (298).

As the dancing partner of the Neapolitan Prince d'Amalfi, Corinne performs the *tarantella*, a folkdance noted for its "ritual steps and the charming tableaux they present to the eye" (91). The highlight of the dance is the ritualized fall to the knees that each participant makes while the other dances in staged triumph around the partner. Turning her bodily performance into a text, Corinne is able to make "the spectators experience her own feelings," "her enthusiasm for life, youth, and beauty" (91). This transfer of emotions from the artist to the audience is very similar to romantic empathy, or what Keats would later call negative capability: "Everything was language for her; ... an indefinable passionate joy, and imaginative sensitivity, stimulated all the spectators of this magical dance, transporting them into an ideal existence which was out of this world" (91). Again, the reference to the power of performative art to transport its viewers to another world beyond this one suggests a return to a neoclassical, platonic ideal realm above this one, a world that stands in stark contrast to the death-obsessed romantic place that Corinne has just shown Oswald on her tour of Rome.

Another dominant performance undertaken by Corinne is that of tour guide to the sights of Italy for Oswald. The grand tour that was part and parcel of the aristocratic young man's coming of age is manipulated in this novel by Corinne, who appropriates the cultural capitol that is Rome for Oswald's gaze. His visits to the Pantheon, St. Peter's, the Capitol and Forum, St. John Lateran, the tomb of Cestius, the Villa Borghese, and the Vatican Gallery become charged venues by which she seduces his historical imagination (86), aligning herself with the glories that were and forever will be Rome. The set-piece here is the visit to the Coliseum by moonlight (276) that was, of course, inspired by Chateaubriand's 1804 letter from Italy and printed in the *Mercure*: "Rome sleeps amidst its ruins. This star of the night, this globe one imagines as finite and deserted wanders in its pale solitude over the solitude of Rome." After reading this, Stael wrote to a friend: "To stay in Rome, as Chateaubriand says, calms the soul. It is the

dead who live in it, and each step one takes here is as eloquent as Bosseut on the vanity of life. I will write a sort of novel that will serve as framework for a trip to Italy and I think many thoughts and feelings will find their proper place in it" (qtd. in Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël* 164). This scene in her "sort of novel" made the Coliseum by moonlight a *locus romanticus* for later poets like Byron in *Manfred* (1817), Percy Shelley in "The Coliseum" (1818), Lamartine in the *Meditations* (1820), Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun* (1860), and James's *Daisy Miller* (1878).

In her last stop before leaving Rome, Corinne visits St. Peter's and imagines "what that building would be like when, in its turn, it would become a ruin" (277). *Corinne* participates in the mania for ruin that was sweeping romantic Europe at this time. Chateaubriand can perhaps be seen as the originator of the romantic ruin, "the ruined ruin," a structure that "suggests that even the record generated by destruction can pass away" (Blix 177). In an event that is somewhat analogous to the British dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII, the royal tombs at Saint-Denis, Paris, had been destroyed by the revolutionaries in 1794, revealing "that the historical thread has been broken, and even the memorial of the bygone monarchy has been wiped away" (Blix 177). This event itself expresses the modern anxiety that history can indeed be lost, for if even the mighty are not immune from the ravages of time, no one is. The Roman ruins that Corinne tours, so evocative of a lost past glory and also ominously predictive of Napoleon's eventual defeat, suggest a sweeping historical pessimism not simply in the novel, but shared by a segment of European elite culture, obsessed as it was with nostalgia, revolutionary regret, and anxiety about political futility.

On Cape Miseno, near the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, and framed by the tomb of Virgil, Corinne gives her last and most brilliant improvisation, on the subject of "the memories aroused by these places" (233). Speaking more about herself and other female mourners like Agrippina, Cornelia, and Tasso's sister, Corinne bemoans "strange destiny" (235), that "fate that pursues exalted souls, poets whose imagination springs from the force of their love and suffering" (237). When Corinne concludes this improvisation, she states: "Perhaps our fate will be decided by what we do tomorrow; perhaps yesterday we said a word that nothing can redeem .... Oh, God, but

what does grief want to tell us?" (238). With a "deathly pale" face, Corinne has finally performed the question that has haunted this text from the beginning, exactly what role do fortune or fate play in our lives versus how much are our decisions and decisive actions, our *performances*, able to counter this force, worshipped by the ancients as the goddess *Tyche*, luck.

It would appear that Corinne's fate caught up with her on the grounds of her dead father's estate, as well as in a London theater and in Hyde Park. When Corinne attends David Garrick's revision of a play by Thomas Southerne, *Isabella, or the Fatal Marriage* (1694) in London (1782), she not only witnesses the performance of Mrs. Siddons as the suicide Isabella onstage, but the mirroring action in the boxes: Oswald's obsessive gaze on Corinne's own half-sister, the blond Lucile (328-329). No longer a performer, but now a passive viewer caught in the triangulated theater of the voyeur, Corinne has become powerless to alter the fate that Oswald's father had destined for all of them. Her death as performance-piece in Florence concludes with the words written by Corinne and read by a young woman in her stead: "The great mystery of death, whatever it may be, must grant peace. You assure me of that, silent tombs....I had made a choice on earth and my heart no longer has a refuge. You decide for me; my fate will be the better for it" (402). But to cede one's life to the designs of fate is to sink back into the origins of human history. Corinne denounces modernity and instead embraces the sort of fatalism that art is charged with denying. On an allegorical level, the scene suggests that not only Italy, but also France as a nation will pass from view and eventually be eclipsed by England, the nation that modernity is destined to reward.

It was not for nothing that Elizabeth Barrett Browning praised the novel, observing "*Corinne* is an immortal book, and deserves to be read three score and ten times-that is once every year in the age of man" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 3: 25). Browning, in fact, chose a depiction of the triumphant Corinne, crowned in the wreath of a poet, for her own tomb in Florence. The "myth" of Corinne, of an exceptional, creative woman who is idolized, even worshiped by her society for her talents and her ability to transform her own and her culture's sufferings into cultural capital, is part and parcel of women's attempts to seize the modern, romantic spirit for themselves. That

Stael knew how difficult if not impossible this goal would be is proclaimed throughout the novel in Corinne's many ominous performances. One need only mention the names of Marina Tsvetaeva, Sarah Teasdale, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Virginia Woolf to see how fearfully prescient she was.

## NOTES

1. All references to *Corinne, or Italy* are to the translation by Sylvia Raphael, in the edition with an introduction by John Claiborne Isbell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998).
2. Corinne enacts these twenty-four performances: *improvvisatore*, tour guide, ethnic dancer, actress, painter, musician, "nun," voyeur at theater, debater, Catholic apologist, sibyl, "wife" of Oswald on British ship, water nymph, savior of Oswald after near-drowning episode, epistolary confessor, wreath-bearer to Oswald in Ancona, "Amazon queen" in opera, fallen woman in British scandal sheets, father-haunted, stalker of Oswald in Hyde Park, ghost to Lucile on their father's property, teacher of Juliet and Lucile, Dido to Oswald's Aneas, and stage-manager of her own death.
3. Apropos of Corinne's performances, Peggy Phelan writes: "Performance[s] cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representation....Performance's being becomes itself through disappearance" (qtd. in Diana Taylor 5). Joseph Roach makes performance coterminous with memory and history, while J. L. Austin refers to cases in which "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (qtd. in Diana Taylor 5).
4. In *Madame de Staël, Novelist* (1978), Gutwirth observes that "A rich mass of intuition linking past and present is a ground of Romanticism, and Italy represents Romantic fullness as against the 'masculine' linearity of Enlightenment England" (210). Or, "Italy is Romanticism, England the Enlightenment" (215). Or, "If Romanticism can be characterized as a dissent bathed in despair, *Corinne* is certainly one of its first fruits" (279).