

CHAPTER 7

Suicide, Meaning, and Power in the Querelle of Delphine

Un suicide pose un homme.

Jérôme Paturot à la recherche d'une position sociale (1848), 162¹

Ah ! que je hais la mort. Il est si doux de vivre.

Staël, *Jean de Witt* [1797], 486

This is the first of six chapters concerning Napoleonic Europe. Like Stendhal's later *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Staël's 1802 *Delphine* crisply dissects a specific society, the collapsing aristocratic world of 1789–1792. Delphine is a rich husband's young widow, raised enlightened and trusting her heart. In Constituante Paris, she leads a salon life ringed by admirers, then falls in love with her devout cousin Mathilde's fiancé Léonce, a slave to public opinion. Misunderstandings compound with the schemes of Mathilde's mother, and Léonce marries Mathilde, but Delphine goes on seeing him, despite his refusal of divorce, until a crisis leads her to a convent. Mathilde dies, the Revolution spirals on, and Léonce finds Delphine too late to stop her taking the veil. As the Revolution permitted, she breaks her vows to follow him; he is captured on French soil, and she takes poison before he dies by firing squad. Sentiment replaces peripeteia, leaving an insistent raising and crushing of hope, the closing horizon of tragedy. *Delphine* is also an act of war on all despotism and deceit. It attacks Napoleon Bonaparte's Concordat, rejecting monastic vows, the prison house of marriage without divorce, and a Catholic morality equally cancerous to Léonce, who accepts its tenets, and Delphine, who refuses them. Based on sacrifice, suffering, and generosity of spirit, Staël's new and kindly ethics would repay careful study.

In the months following the Papal Concordat and the arrest of Jean Bernadotte's aides-de-camp, the *querelles* of *Delphine* and François-René de Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme* offer two defining cultural moments in Consulat France. Like Chateaubriand in 1802, Staël with

This chapter is previously unpublished.

Delphine split Paris into two camps, with conflicting views of art, politics, religion, ethics, and the place of women in society; the quarrel also reached Britain, Germany, and the Alps. This chapter aims to situate several fine studies of the novel's politics and reception within the broad continuum of a struggle in the field of power over textual meaning and the future of France, fought between Staël's liberal camp and the camp of Bonaparte – who exiled her from France to end their argument. During this debate, Staël drafted three things – a new preface for *Delphine*, reflections on the novel's moral purpose, and a less controversial ending – then chose not to publish them; so, we are looking in a sense at a revision that never happened. *Delphine*'s original suicide, deleted in the revised manuscript ending, offers a microcosm of this whole debate and will be our focus.²

The Meaning of Suicide: Field and Author in 1803

What did suicide mean in 1803? Attempted suicide was a hanging offense in early modern Europe. In England, suicide ceased to be a felony in 1961; the last person who died by suicide to be staked at burial like a vampire was in 1823. Society thus echoed the church: Augustine calls suicide a greater sin than any it might prevent, while Aquinas, still today the sanctioned Vatican philosopher, calls suicide a triple sin against God, society, and ourselves, like Immanuel Kant, Aristotle, and Plato. Staël's own Calvinist tradition, rejecting the doctrine of purgatory, is even more categorical, despite popular wisdom about frequent Protestant suicides. Fine work has shown how after the Concordat, *Delphine*'s appeals to divorce and to monastic marriage were anathema; France also legalized suicide after 1789, a third new Right of Man threatened by the Bonapartist dispensation as liberty's brief window closed shut. Yet the Bible nowhere condemns suicide; the Stoics, Staël's models, call it proof of a great soul. To canonical suicides like Cato, Socrates, or Lucretia, John Donne adds Christ's death on the cross, while the term *suicide* itself was coined in 1643, since the previous term *self-murder* preempted discussion. The Enlightenment brought defenses by David Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Cesare Beccaria, based in contract theory and property rights. After debate in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Werther* (1774) made the suicide question fashionable around Europe, and these two novels are cited by almost all Staël's modern readers. In sum: Is suicide a sin or a precious right, a badge of greatness even? Staël's European public had either meaning at its disposal.³

Staël herself was no neophyte; her whole career shapes the highly charged field of suicide, a field that exploded around her with *Delphine*. Artist and society, private and public agendas intersect here, offering insight into each. Staël's first book in 1788 announced that Rousseau had committed suicide – creating wild controversy and helping to sell nine editions in two years. In 1795–1796, *Zulma*, the *Recueil de morceaux détachés*, and *De l'influence des passions* are all grounded in suicide. Each tale in the *Recueil* ends in death. Pauline wastes away; Adèle arranges death with her lover, like Delphine; Mirza and Zulma stab themselves; and Adélaïde takes poison in the bed she just gave birth in. *De l'influence des passions* argues that only those capable of suicide may risk falling in love – “cette grande route de bonheur” (IP 203). This bizarre ethics oddly mirrors Kant's contemporary charge that the escape of suicide allows indulgence in crime. Staël footnotes her phrase, fearing misreadings of her argument and citing the Roman Cato. After her high-profile Rousseau and *Delphine* controversies, Staël reuses suicide only in her unstaged *Sapho*, whose heroine leaps into the sea, and not in her five staged plays; yet it still shapes *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), her greatest public success, in which Corinne allows herself to die. In 1812, Staël's public recantation, the *Réflexions sur le suicide*, sketches out Emile Durkheim's sociogenic argument eighty years early; public opinion, she argues, causes suicide in England and its absence in Latin countries (RFS 377).⁴

Was Staël's suicide fixation some sort of cry for help? Was it sociogenic, feminist, or proof of true love or a great soul? Some excellent work contrasts these etiologies, and they deserve sustained thought. In a crisp exchange, Jean Starobinski calls suicide a proof of Staël's self-obsession; Margaret Higonnet replies that suicide enables Staël as a woman to speak. Perhaps each etiology is true, as Staël brings her passions and her principles, her private and public selves into fruitful dialogue; and if her fixation on suicide seems ethically shabby, three new readings may help. Staël's fictive suicides may also be catharsis for private guilt about adultery and filial revolt; a moral protest, since life is painful, against an unjust God; or, my favorite, a public protest against tyranny. Delphine dies then a death of honor, a hero not a victim – like Cato in Rome. Yet Staël here faces three obstacles to speech. Her guilt will not help her argument; she resists confronting her challenge to God's goodness; and political suicide is not an option for women subject to gender's gag. In consequence, Staël fudges the issue, selling us muddy, nagging deaths of passion built on her grounding structure but transformed in meaning – a reminder that even suicide is a floating signifier, then as now. In 1812, Staël's *Réflexions* quote

Shakespeare: “And then, what’s brave, what’s noble, / Let’s do it after the high Roman fashion, / And make Death proud to take us” (*R/S* 382). That masculine remark is Cleopatra’s, which Staël chooses not to indicate.⁵

During 1802, the Parisian republic of letters was at war, and Staël was deeply involved. Bonaparte purged the Tribunat in January, including Staël’s partner Benjamin Constant; in June, the police seized her friend Camille Jordan’s brochure, *Vrai sens du vote national sur le Consulat à vie*, while August brought her father Jacques Necker’s *Dernières vues de politique et finance*. On May 5, four days before her husband’s death, Staël signed a contract for *Delphine*, which I stumbled upon; in June, she found out that her Paris publisher, Claude François Maradan, had just pirated *Zulma* without her permission, probably abetted by Madame de Genlis. Relations would only worsen as Staël threatened him with her Genevan publisher J. J. Paschoud, her friend Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi’s business partner. Chateaubriand, the new star of conservatism, wrote to her twice – in September, indignant at attacks on Necker, and in December, saying that Staël would be “exposée à un violent orage.” She had precluded his help, he writes, by refusing to review his *Génie du christianisme*: “Vous sentez qu’après cela je ne puis parler de votre roman dans le *Mercur*. Je tremble que vous ne tombiez entre des mains ennemies” – a pious fear, since three weeks later that same *Mercur* published Joseph Fiévée’s scandalous attack. The *Mercur* had launched Chateaubriand’s career in 1800 with his veiled attack on Staël. Staël knew the risk, writing in November 1802, “Plus que jamais la véritable France est étrangère aux opinions de ces stipendiés du pouvoir.” Meanwhile, Staël’s family continued its very public private life, simultaneously limiting Staël’s writer’s choices and preconditioning her audience. Staël begins and ends *Delphine* with two resonant mottoes from her mother’s *Mélanges*: “Un homme doit savoir braver l’opinion, une femme s’y soumettre”; “On ne me répond pas, mais peut-être on m’entend” (*Delphine* [D] I 958 and frontispiece). Some fine work treats the novel as a daughter’s answer; it is worth noting then that Necker chose to republish his dead wife’s *Réflexions sur le divorce* – an oblique attack on Staël’s mores – alongside the *Nouveaux mélanges* and the anonymous *Pensées extraites de Mme Necker* just as Staël completed *Delphine*.⁶

Preparing Meaning: Staël Makes *Delphine* Public

Delphine appeared with Paschoud on December 8, 1802, in 1,500 copies, and with Maradan on the 14th in 3,000, a very large print run for what

may be France's last great epistolary novel; between Madame Riccoboni and George Sand, Staël shows a force no *romancière* can rival.⁷

By 1802, no stranger to controversy and even exile, Staël has a fair idea of the minefield her next publication will face. From *Delphine* onward, Staël's prefaces claim that her works contain no politics, and arguably this author famous for nonfiction since the days of Louis XVI wrote her first novel as a *pis-aller*, a sop to the new gender dispensation in which women stay at home. Yet politics is not only present in *Delphine*, it is the focus of Staël's letters; and if she is to explode the *romancière* model from within, *avant-* and *après-texte* alike reveal her sense of the problems of the field, inviting genetic study. First, manuscript moral verdicts are cut: "Je souffre parce que j'ai été coupable," the heroine writes before her suicide (*D* II 545), while Lebensei concludes that "les torts de Delphine et de Léonce appartenoient plus à la société qu'à eux-mêmes," ending like the texts of *René* or *Adolphe*, two related novels, in a double verdict where, as with suicide itself, each position seems valid (II 560). This lack of moral markers will later haunt *Delphine's* reception. Second, the manuscript ending vanishes. In the first version, Delphine runs in front of Léonce and is shot, then he insults the soldiers and is shot in turn; in the second version, the soldiers shoulder arms but one shoots her by mistake (II 462–463, 558). As author, Staël clearly needs Léonce and Delphine dead; her choice of means, in print and manuscript, will shape their death's meaning and her novel's message. In manuscript, Delphine simply yields to passion; in print, she takes Lebensei's poisoned ring as Socrates took the hemlock, and her priestly ministry to Léonce before his death, like her ministry to her dying enemy Madame de Vernon, supplants the church as God's agent. When this ending caused public outcry, Staël drafted her new revision: The lovers retire to Léonce's château; he remains too weak to marry an ex-nun; Delphine sickens and dies; he dies fighting in the Vendée (I 961–990). Yet Valorbe's mad suicide went unprotested by critics and unchanged when Staël revised, as did Léonce's two proposals of double suicide – this despite his call for Delphine to plunge her dagger into his trembling body (II 417), and though Staël had evidently anticipated controversy. In manuscript, Valorbe blows his brains out before Delphine's eyes, and Léonce talks of "les voluptés de la mort" (II 264, 455). These suicides may have passed unmentioned because militaristic societies, like Sparta or Bonaparte's Consulat, permit male suicides through honor; Delphine's problem seems again to be her sex.⁸

Staël's Mixed European Reaction: The Struggle over Meaning

Reactions to *Delphine* were swift and fierce, as Simone Balayé has shown: The *Journal de Paris*, the *Mercure*, and the *Débats* attacked, the *Débats* three times. Staël's old ally, Pierre-Louis Roederer, editor of the *Journal de Paris*, drafted an unpublished attack; the *Mercure's* attack caused such a scandal that Louis de Fontanes, not the review's author, published disclaimers in several newspapers. Staël's friends Claude Hochet and Constant countered in the *Publiciste* and *Citoyen français*, as did Pierre-Louis Ginguené in the *Décade philosophique*, making a rare sortie from Italian literature, like her friend Henri Meister in his *Correspondance littéraire* sent to Europe's sovereigns. Roederer claims that Léonce and Delphine discuss physical love "tout crûment," which they don't; his sexism may seem private, but in 1802, the nascent separate spheres ideology represented a complex web of gut reaction and politics, private and public choice. Fiévée's *Mercure* attack retraces this institutional web; in October 1802, offering to write whatever Bonaparte wanted, he became the Consul's secret mouthpiece; in February 1803, Bonaparte exiled Staël from France, a month after Fiévée called Delphine *bavarde* and "contre la nature." "Elle parle de l'amour comme une bacchante," he writes, "de Dieu come un quaker, de la mort comme un grenadier, et de la morale comme un sophiste." These slanders matter because others repeat them. Fiévée cites one *Delphine* line three times: "L'égoïsme est permis aux âmes sensibles" – a line the vaudevillian Jean Baptiste Radet repeats. Fiévée, Genlis, and Radet suggest that *Delphine* seems translated from the German; he and Radet condemn in advance any woman who praises *Delphine*. By her suicide, Fiévée claims, Delphine abandons a girl she had promised to raise; Genlis makes the girl her daughter, while Radet in his vaudeville makes it her father who is abandoned. This slander justifies the charge that suicide proves egotism, but in *Delphine*, the child was not the heroine's but Mathilde's, orphaned through that Catholic's stubborn Lenten fasting – another suicide (*D* I 862). Delphine, Fiévée tells his readers, proposes to eat poison with Léonce, which she doesn't, and follows him as a *confesseur femelle*; her Protestant inner conscience is a blasphemous "arrangement réglé avec Dieu." Fiévée cites Madame de Genlis as a countermodel. "Que Mme de Staël calomnie la religion, c'est son métier," he argues; "n'ayant jamais eu de patrie que par illusion," Staël has written a novel for the false and the corrupt.⁹

Genlis, another informant for Bonaparte, published her novel *La Femme philosophe* with Maradan in March 1803, while Maradan and Staël

discussed *Delphine* reeditions. Genlis's attack deserves Freudian analysis, an odd window into one woman author viewing another. Pairing of the two was routine; Genlis earned public attacks for *La Femme philosophe*, and Louis-Gabriel Michaud's *Biographie universelle* repeats this, citing Staël on Genlis: "[E]lle m'attaque et moi je la loue, c'est ainsi que nos correspondances se croisent." Genlis for her part notes that "depuis la publication de *La Femme philosophe* il y a eu beaucoup moins d'affectation dans sa manière d'écrire." To parody her rival, Genlis announces in *La Femme philosophe* that she is reworking *Edmund Oliver* by Charles Lloyd (148). Critics have thought this apocryphal, but it has a fascinating story of its own, witness to the virtue of checking such references. The novel not only exists, it is a parody of Lloyd's mentor Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from the same year and publisher as his *Lyrical Ballads* – a small, curious link between French and British Romanticism. Coleridge was furious, but Dorothy Wordsworth liked it. Lloyd's Gertrude in *Edmund Oliver* is Godwinian, writing of "the rubbish which fills the onward path of . . . human perfection" (I 35). At her suicide, she leaves a daughter whom Edmund, Lloyd's Coleridge figure, raises (II 294). Meanwhile in Genlis's *La Femme philosophe*, Gertrude cites Staël; her lover Doiley, a Constant figure, cites Denis Diderot (169). Kant himself, Genlis notes in her preface, would not understand these dialogues – a fine argument for the "système de la perfectibilité" (150). Gertrude's childhood love Edmond finds her in London; she sits between him and Doiley, remarking, "[S]e plaindre de l'inconstance, est, de toutes les injustices, la plus stupide" (172). Doiley breaks his promise of marriage; Gertrude sends him Staël's letter on suicide, as Genlis strips her to a pregnant, penniless abandon brought on "à force de prétendre à l'originalité" (187–191). A friend asks Gertrude about responsibility (212): When she calls suicide sublime, does she not fear encouraging some unfortunate person to kill himself? That spring, Madame Sismondi's Genevan journal talks of a young girl, Miss Dunant, "turned mad after reading 2 volumes of *Delphine*"; "Mme de Staël has been much affected and will call upon her." Madame Melrose, a Genlis figure, saves the young Gertrude by ruse. "Mon angélique amie," Gertrude tells her, "je te dois tout; . . . [mon repentir] pourra servir à ta gloire" (240–241). As the novel ends, Gertrude atones for her sins "en se confinant, pour jamais, dans une retraite absolue" (243).¹⁰

The *querelle* went on. From Geneva, Staël protested to friends when Emmanuel Dupaty's *Delphine, ou l'Opinion* opened at the Théâtre du Vaudeville on May 16. On the 18th, Hochet in the *Publiciste* condemned Dupaty and Genlis together, and the vaudeville folded – a small victory.

Radet's superior *Colombine philosophe* then opened at the same theater on June 6. It closed the same day, thanks to a cabal organized by Staël's friend Camille Jordan – brusque but effective, since ridicule is unanswerable, as Staël knew. In it, Colombine, a perfectibilist since reading *Delphine*, ignores both her betrothed and her Neckerian father Pantalón to marry Léandre, her opposite in character, principles, and politics, singing that having nothing in common makes for a perfect marriage: “[J]’ai calculé les chances du bonheur, & j’ai pris la vie en masse” (18). Ridiculous “pour faire du bruit” (6), Colombine sits between her two fiancés: “J’ai placé mon bonheur dans la célébrité” (20). Léandre leaves her – “[J]e ne juge vos actions que sur ce que les autres en pensent” – and when she attempts suicide with her “English” opium, they give her a *calmant* instead, as in Genlis. Cured, Colombine marries Scapin and renounces philosophy. Fiévée, Genlis, Radet – with two of these authors in Bonaparte’s pay, and Staël’s own exile in February, it seems certain that this campaign was governmental. Every Radet extract appears in Genlis, and one quote Genlis took from *De l’influence des passions*, which Radet attributes to *Delphine*, suggests that Radet hasn’t even read Staël’s novel. Thus, a *légende noire* is born. Other attacks follow; the Bishop of Morocco’s *Entretiens sur le suicide*, dated “An X” but from 1803, takes its epigraph from Bonaparte and calls *Delphine*’s politics Godwinian – a handy bugbear, in France as in England. The years 1804–1805 bring the vaudeville *Delphinette ou le mépris de l’opinion*, “tronquée d’un bout à l’autre” and ending with a repentant heroine, and the volume *Remarques sur quelques ouvrages modernes, précédées de l’analyse de Delphine*. I haven’t seen *Delphine, ou la langue sans frein*, nor the vaudeville *Delphine, ou, Heureux après moi*, from 1838–1840; but I do know Augustin Legrand’s *Delphine, ou, L’enfant gâté* from 1823, a children’s book with twenty-three pages, five paper dresses, and an elegant blonde head. The carping, proud, *bavarde* Delphine, who yields to each whim then blames others, leaves Mother at a loss; a “cure de campagne” fails, so, trying a ruse, they tell her she is the servants’ daughter. The “humiliation” works, but she remains “détestée de tout le monde.” Legrand then kills her off, at sixteen, of consumption. With thirty-four French editions by 1904, *Delphine* maintained its threat to gender ideology.¹¹

Europe’s reaction to *Delphine* was violently divided. In Paris, Maria Edgeworth calls it “cried down universally,” while the *idéologue* Ginguené remarks that “[a]ucun ouvrage n’a depuis longtemps autant occupé le public que ce roman.” His ardor cools when the new Tribunat directory omits his name. Bernard-François Chauvelin, Secretary of the Tribunat,

calls Staël to Paris to witness her real success, presenting her as a new Voltaire, a banner for the liberal opposition: “[V]enez à Paris, venez souffler de près sur l’échafaudage des petites cabales. Venez jouer du succès réel de *Delphine*.” In Britain, Sidney Smith in the *Edinburgh Review* begins, “This dismal trash . . . has so alarmed Bonaparte that he has seized the whole impression”; the *Critical Review* calls it “one of the most fascinating novels we have lately met with,” adding, “we abominate both its religion and its morals.” The year 1806 brought a book titled *Anti-Delphine*, as well as Maria Edgeworth’s novel *Leonora*, in which Olivia, a melodramatic and unscrupulous adventuress, returns from Romantic Germany to disrupt a marriage and stage an abortive suicide; it also saw the publication of Lewis Goldsmith Stewarton’s *Female Revolutionary Plutarch*, linking *Delphine*, which he claims Constant coauthored, to Necker’s *Suites funestes d’une seule faute*, a tale that ends in double suicide: “Such is the *moral tendency*” of this “last production of a *sincere christian*.” Margaret Doody has argued that Fanny Burney and Jane Austen each wrote answers to *Delphine*, seeing Staël’s trace in *Sense and Sensibility*. In German lands, the elector of Saxony banned *Delphine* on Bonaparte’s personal order, and August von Kotzebue’s Berlin *Freimüthige* attacks it; Goethe and Friedrich Schiller call passages superb, Achim von Arnim praises it, and August Wilhelm Schlegel’s protégé Wilhelm von Schütz borrows *Delphine*, name and all, for his play *Lacrimas*, which Schlegel published. Franz Schubert later set his *Delphine*’s song to music. *Delphine* and Florio choose nature over religion; hers is the only French name in Schütz’s Italian drama. Charlotte von Schiller prefers *Delphine* to *Corinne*, as many Germans did; visiting Germany in 1804, Staël met a *commis de barrière* who said he could now die happy, and the novel shaped her German visit.¹²

In Calvinist Geneva, Staël’s home base, in 1802, Benjamin Constant’s cousin Rosalie complains about fickle public opinion: “Jamais, depuis *Clarisse*, je n’avais éprouvé cette illusion complète.” Though she likes *Delphine*, she notes that “le dénouement me paraît insupportable.” She suggests a new ending, which will become *Corinne*: *Delphine* would reconcile Léonce and Mathilde, then die. Rosalie cannot excuse Léonce. In April, she meets Genlis’s niece, who rather remarkably calls her aunt’s parody “un devoir bien pénible.” But even Staël’s friends had reservations. Her friend Constance, another cousin of Benjamin’s, also dislikes Léonce; she calls Necker, Constant, and Staël’s cousin Albertine Necker de Saussure “très coupables” for not warning Staël better. Staël’s old friend Mathieu de Montmorency, later minister to Louis XVIII, regrets “cette

idée désespérante qui semble sortir de toutes les pages: qu'après l'amour, et sans l'amour, il n'y a pas de bonheur, il n'y a plus rien dans le monde qui vaille la peine de vivre." He asks despairingly if it is certain that Necker is content "du but et de l'effet moral." Meister, who has known Staël since childhood, dislikes both Léonce, whom Diderot's daughter calls *odieux*, and the ending – "d'un caractère trop sombre, trop terrible." These are two near-unanimous opinions, from Chateaubriand to Ginguené, Schiller, or Stendhal: "Le dernier volume de *Delphine*," notes Stendhal, "est absolument insupportable à vivre." As Sismondi's mother put it, "[T]he end crush [*sic*] the heart to pieces."¹³

Why Staël Plans an Intervention Then Rejects It

Risking the loss of two years' labor, and suddenly aware of her open flank, Staël is sketching a supplement by January 1803, a month after publication: "*Ce roman a-t-il un résultat moral?; c'est la seule critique qu'il m'importe de confondre.*" In February, she notes, "[J]e n'ai pas trouvé une seule critique où ce que je crois de bien et de mal dans l'ouvrage fût discuté." Bonaparte simply exiles her from France. In March, Necker writes two letters to the Consul Charles-François Lebrun, stressing his daughter's noninvolvement in his own *Dernières vues*. Necker's curious role appears in an anonymous letter to Staël on Bonaparte – "[C]'est moins contre vous que contre votre père et son dernier ouvrage qu'il éprouve de l'humeur" – and in Lebrun's reply to Necker, calling Bonaparte "convaincu qu'elle avait travaillé votre opinion et influé sur vos ouvrages." Perturbed, Staël writes to Joseph Bonaparte about the attacks of Fiévée and Genlis; she talks of a new preface to say "tout ce que je crois convenable," then promises Maradan her revisions, but by the 31st, her new text regarding a *but moral* is for a third edition in September. Staël now repeats that "Delphine est un modèle à éviter . . . Elle doit intéresser malgré ses fautes, comme Clarisse." That day, Maradan begins a stop-gap second edition. What had happened? It seems likely that Staël had seen Genlis's and Maradan's *Delphine* parody. His third and last *Delphine* edition, also 1803, simply reprints the second with nothing new from Staël. Meanwhile, facing slander and the start of ten years' exile, Staël, a prolific propagandist, published no new text at all throughout 1803. Her friend Meister published her *but moral* text in 1805, for reasons that may be linked to Necker's death; we also have her "Avertissement à la 4e édition," a fourth edition she mentions in May 1803; but both new texts

first entered *Delphine* at her son's hands, alongside her revised ending, after her own death in 1817 – about fifty pages in total.¹⁴

In May, Charles de Villers writes from Metz. *Delphine* is “vous toute entière,” he remarks, like all Staël's critics, showing why her talk of *Delphine* as an antiheroine was doomed to failure. “Pourquoi une révolution, une armée d'émigrés, un supplice à la fin de *Delphine*?” he asks, suggesting that Staël keep her private sphere private. Sismondi disagrees: “[J]e suis fort loin de partager son opinion, que l'époque de la révolution est mal choisie, puisque le choc des préjugés contre les idées libérales est une des actions principales de votre roman. C'était bien, ce me semble, le moment où ces deux ressorts étaient le plus tendus . . . qu'il fallait choisir pour les mettre en jeu.” Having asked Sismondi, Staël cites him in her reply: “[Q]uand [*sic*] à la plus forte critique je crois que c'est la moins juste – pour la lutte entre les préjugés et la raison il n'y a pas d'époque plus favorable que la révolution française.” She will answer Villers's criticisms in a new preface: “[I]l en est une qu'il faudra que je traite parce qu'on l'a prodiguée à paris [*sic*] l'immoralité le danger de cet ouvrage.” Villers objects again in June, still rejecting Staël's Revolution ending. History and art must not mix; her fictions must remain ideal, otherwise we face “un discordé criant qui réveille l'âme.” He seems perturbed when the *polis* irrupts into the play of passion; *Delphine*'s “intimate” epistolary genre doubtless contributed, but Villers, who helped introduce Kant to France, here echoes Kantian art for art's sake. Staël's *avertissement* may date from May, but the brief text also explains her new, revised ending, news to Rosalie in October: “[I]l me semble que c'est une faute de plus.” Staël cites Villers's complaints – that her old ending had used the Revolution amid “une situation tout idéale” and that it allowed chance, not character, to determine events – but adds that she is keeping the old, political ending in a novella, *Charles et Pauline*, to be published in an appendix (*D* I 959–960). Scholars since Staël's son Auguste have never seen this novella, and indeed, her whole revised ending reads like a slightly acid joke: “ô mort, ô douce mort,” it ends. The *but moral* text may mention the *avertissement* (*D* I 1008), but this is the only revision Staël chose to publish and seems to be her real answer in this controversy.¹⁵

Largely ignoring Villers, the elegant *but moral* text is closer to Constant, whose January 1803 review attacks the “apostats de la philosophie” and “ceux qui se disent les maîtres de l'opinion.” The “esclavage de l'opinion,” Constant writes, is “la pire de toutes les servitudes.” His focus is not Staël's esthetics but her ethics; her moral purpose, he argues, is to show virtue triumph over passion, and a happy ending would ruin her point.

Condemning readers who see virtue rewarded as a required moral outcome, Constant refuses the *intérêt bien entendu* triumphant since Etienne de Condillac: “Vous n’auriez alors que des agioteurs de vertu.” *Delphine’s* epigraph, he concludes, is deceptive; the call for women to submit is ironic, since Staël’s real aim is to attack the tyranny of opinion. Staël and her cousin Albertine later repeat a series of Constant’s points. For Albertine, *Delphine* concerns loveless marriages, where accepting or rejecting woman’s narrow destiny brings equal pain. “Corinne est l’idéal de Mme de Staël,” she argues; “Delphine en est la réalité durant sa jeunesse.” The heroine “ne prévoit rien et souffre de tout.” Many, including Schiller, simply missed her epigraph’s double meaning; Staël insists on it in her 1805 *but moral* text. What is true morality, she asks? Society prefers self-interest and mutual deception to honest passion and genius, and the majority means the mediocre. *Delphine*, she writes, has two morals: Women must indeed fear opinion’s power, but society in its turn should respect genius, whatever its sex (*D* I 992–996). Albertine repeats this in 1820. Staël also stresses our sexual double standards: “[I] faut pouvoir exister par soi-même,” she notes, echoing her Stoic ethics of 1796 (*I* 1003). Finally, Staël turns to melancholy and suicide. Life falls short for any genius – that great Romantic topos – and from love alone spring all men’s triumphs (*I* 1006–1008). Staël thus answers her friend Montmorency. Her new ending, she repeats, is not a recantation; no one said Jean Racine approved of suicide when he staged it in his tragedies. Though Staël here reads *Delphine’s* suicide as domestic, that same page discreetly cites Joseph Addison’s *Cato* as a model; the personal is political in the end.¹⁶

By 1805, Staël was done with *Delphine* – not with suicide, however. Unconcerned by esthetic attacks, Staël felt real pain when readers condemned *Delphine’s* morality, her cousin Albertine writes; despite her “extrême répugnance” about revising published work, “elle a fait un ouvrage exprès pour rétracter l’espèce d’apologie du suicide qu’on lui avait reprochée.”

In fact, Staël’s 1812 *Réflexions sur le suicide* attacks Heinrich von Kleist’s *Liebestod* by using slanders she herself had faced for *Delphine* – vanity, a daughter abandoned – but Staël cites *De l’influence des passions* instead, as if *Delphine* did not exist (*RfS* 345, 378–379). Her son confirms this misdirection in her *Œuvres complètes*, putting the suicide text after *De l’influence des passions*, despite chronology, and adding his own note linking the two (*OC* I 176). Furthermore, Staël later insists that even her father approved *Delphine’s* morality, despite his republishing her mother’s attack on divorce; and Necker’s own tale of double suicide, that “last production

of a *sincere christian*,” also has its place in *Delphine*’s private story. Staël praises Necker’s *Suites funestes d’une seule faute* in July 1803, “plus extraordinaire en son genre que tout le reste de tes écrits . . . [C]ela sert à empoisonner toute relation.” The tale is the fruit of a challenge she gave him while writing *Delphine*, to base a tragic love story in conjugal love alone. In September 1803, Sismondi thanks her for having Necker’s “nouvelle à imprimer”; Staël writes that it was destined for the *Bibliothèque britannique*. In 1804, after Necker’s death, Staël publishes and prefaces his tale: “[J]e n’ai pas besoin, je pense, de dire qu’un auteur dramatique n’approuve pas les personnages qu’il représente,” she writes for her father as she had for *Delphine*; what is “vraiment utile” is to “inspirer de la terreur pour les fautes commises par des êtres honnêtes.” This neglected tale is a curious apology, both for Necker’s role in the French Revolution and for his dead wife, Staël’s mother. Necker’s Elise and Henri – two names shared by the Lebensseis in *Delphine* – have an only daughter, Clara. They acquire debts by speculating on “les fonds publics,” and a duped Henri goes bankrupt in national disgrace: “[L]a Nation ne peut pas être bien représentée par un agioteur.” Elise elects to shoot herself and Henri then does likewise, leaving Clara abandoned.¹⁷

This entire debate on authorial purpose, ranging from philosophy to slander, may seem precritical to us. “Un ouvrage d’imagination ne doit pas avoir un but moral,” Constant writes of *Corinne* in 1807; Staël there remarks, “[R]ien ne dénature les ouvrages d’imagination comme d’en avoir un” (*Corinne* 171–172). Reading Kant with Constant in Weimar in 1804, Staël notes, “*Delphine* montre trop son but moral,” while Constant in his journal records for the first time in French the famous phrase, “l’art pour l’art, et sans but.” Art for art’s sake was indeed a liberation, and it is nice to find *Delphine* involved at its inception; but what makes Staël great is precisely her *but moral*, her engagement. Author, family, public, government, Europe; for Staël, famous from London to Moscow, “condamnée à la célébrité sans pouvoir être connue” (*IP* 133), *oikos* and *polis* form a continuum, and that is rare in history, a new slant to Pierre Bourdieu’s talk of fields. Restoring this continuum takes research – vaudevilles and cabals, Necker’s publishing activities – but it reminds us that every esthetic choice is made on a shared, public chessboard. Which returns us to suicide. As Staël vainly argued, the suicide debate is hardly the whole story of *Delphine* – but it is paradigmatic. It is no accident that this novel, Staël’s most contested attack on the danger of public opinion, opens with her famous appeal to “la France silencieuse” (*D* I 90). For Staël as an artist, genius and public exist in necessary symbiosis; for Staël as a woman, public

opinion imposes painful silence. With suicide's flamboyant gesture, Staël both escapes this contradiction and protests it, as Cato once protested the republic's fall in Rome.¹⁸

Conclusion

In spring 1803, Bonaparte fought an unusual campaign; his tool was ridicule, his opponent a woman he had just exiled. This was one campaign he lost; yet Staël's victory had its price. First, the us/them narrative Staël favors in discussing these events actually included her most intimate loved ones as "them," with friends carping at Léonce and at her ending and both her parents compromised in this debate even after their deaths. Second, accepting the fight brought on ten years' exile from the France she loved. Third, it meant ridicule, as Bonaparte's lackeys rewrote her public protest as woman's caprice, handing a *légende noire* to children's authors and eminent critics alike, long after Staël's death. Was Staël right in her choice? Life is indeed a painful gift, especially when taken at the full; but suffering may elevate the soul, as Staël argues in her *Réflexions sur le suicide*, and our dignity as free moral agents comes in taking action and accepting the consequences. That was Staël's way.