

Romantic Spain and National Resistance
Staël, Rocca, and the Mémoires sur la guerre des
Français en Espagne

They fight for freedom who were never free,
 A Kingless people for a nerveless state;
 Her vassals combat when their chieftains flee.

Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–1818), I 883–885¹

This chapter focuses on Spain. When we consider the new Europe of nations that Staël bequeaths us, Romantic Spain at first seems striking in its absence. Her article “Camoëns” of winter 1811 has more on exiled genius than on Iberia; in *Delphine* (1802) Léonce and the family of his Spanish mother are proud and devout to excess; and finally, the description in *De la littérature* (1800) of Spain’s inability, in contrast to Italy, to fuse the Arab South and the Christian North – a sterility born of priests and despotism – is fundamental for the 1813 debates of Staël, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi (*DL* 164–166). But here stands proof that Staël revised the war memoirs of her husband Albert Jean Michel (John) Rocca to show a popular struggle that checkmated Napoleon’s troops. According to her, “Lord Wellington a dit à Vienne . . . qu’il ne connaissait point de livres où ses campagnes en Portugal fussent aussi bien racontées.” This memoir could be set alongside that of Ernest Hemingway, on a similar war; in sum, Rocca’s memoir remains by far the most detailed political analysis of Spain to come out of Coppet. In 1814, Staël names this text a “catéchisme militaire,” adding, “[L]es nations ont toujours raison contre les armées de ligne.” It is among the first French glimpses of Spain before the country’s vogue after 1823, and the Roccas thus contribute to forming its legend; the praise for Spain’s new guerrilla war in this Calvinist memoir adds a certain piquancy to it. At every step, the text plays on the lively

¹ This chapter appeared in French in *C’est la faute à Voltaire C’est la faute à Rousseau: Recueil anniversaire pour Jean-Daniel Candaux* (Geneva: Droz, 1997), 197–206.

debates at Coppet between French and German Romantics concerning art, religion, nationhood, and liberty. Here is a new Spain to add to the Romantic pantheon, and a woman's strategy to introduce herself into a very male war. Finally, with seventeen editions of his memoir in a century, we see to what extent Rocca inherited European fame from his wife – yet it has been a long wait for a new edition.²

Rocca, Staël's second husband, returned home injured from the Peninsula to Geneva, where the two met in winter 1811. Twenty years younger than this European celebrity, Rocca was taciturn and jealous, but Byron found him intelligent. He composed three texts before dying at thirty in 1818, with the brief *Campagne de Walcheren* of 1815 and a manuscript Genevan memoir, *Le Mal du pays*. Textual evidence suggests a role for Staël in all three. Madame de Pange notes that the start and finish of his Spanish memoir seem entirely Staël's work, "comme le prouvent les corrections sur épreuves et des pages manuscrites."³

In Vienna in 1812, Staël shows this Rocca text to the prince de Ligne: "[I]l est enchanté de votre journal . . . Il m'a reconnue dans la préface." A year later, as Rocca prepares a final section, she recommends English sources and revises pages. I have also published two prefaces for Rocca's text written in his wife's hand: the *note de l'auteur* of 1814 and the *avis de l'éditeur* of the second edition. Within the text, a handful of key passages seem to be Staël's contribution: I suspect she furnished a frame to the narrative with three long passages – the opening, the remarks on Arab influence in Andalusia, and the conclusion – and that she added at least five paragraphs, on Spain's "ancient" religious patriotism, on its public opinion as the true source of power and its mobile southern imagination, on terror as France's only support in Spain, and on Wellington, Staël's friend, "ce moderne Fabius" (35–36, 67, 140; 144, 254–255). An ambivalent passage on King Joseph, finally, seems torn between the contradictory judgments of the Rocca couple. Forty years later, this explicit political discourse is exactly what George Sand, another woman author, will avoid in the *Histoire de ma vie*; this is then a splendid tool to underline the compromises imposed on these two writers by their Romantic century. The interventions leave 250 pages essentially in the hand of the young Rocca; and yet, countless offhand remarks, affective signals, and maxims that anchor the discussion suggest Staël's help, and her indisputable stylistic revision can be felt throughout this elegant text, in which some autonomous *morceaux de bravoure* suggest the work of an experienced rhetorician.⁴

The collaboration is not untroubled. Compare this explosion of Staël's: "Vous ne tirez aucune partie de mes lumières. – Vous vous êtes persuadé

que l'on pouvait tout faire par soi-même . . . Vous parcourez au hasard quelques livres." Lady Stafford had also heard that Rocca was "si violent en faveur de Napoléon que je n'osais pas parler devant [lui]." Staël's propositions, like her momentary explosion, echo Rocca's remark that the Portuguese part of his book (246–279) uses materials collected "pendant un séjour d'une année en Angleterre" (247); Staël is in fact almost invisible in this brusque section. Indeed, she disavows her part in Rocca's text to the Duchess of Devonshire on December 29, 1814: "Je suis bien aise que vous ayez été contente des *Mémoires* . . . mais je vous donne ici ma *parole* que je n'y ai pas écrit une ligne. Je lui ai donné quelques conseils négatifs pour retrancher tel ou tel mot mais jamais je ne l'ai aidé." With her handwriting on the manuscript, this denial is subject to caution.⁵

At the start of the book, Rocca leaves Prussia and its war of regular troops, "qui s'intéressent peu d'ordinaire à l'objet de la querelle qu'elles soutiennent," for Spain and the "guerre de résistance" that its citizens have launched against the conquering troops of the line: This is the theme of the preface Staël furnishes him with in 1814. German heads of state had weakened the national character of their country, "seul boulevard invincible que les nations puissent opposer aux invasions des étrangers," as *De l'Allemagne* also says (*DA* I 11/10). We are present at the genesis of nationalism. The German people, conquered and without any practice in the exercise of their will, dared not act without the impulsion of governments or lords; conquest subordinated these governments to the influence of the conquerors (2). This is Staël's theme in the *Considérations*, in which she speaks of "gouvernements à ressort . . . qui s'arrêtaient dès qu'on cessait de les faire marcher," like Jérôme Bonaparte's kingdom of Westphalia (*CRF* 348). The Prussian clergy had little hold on the nation, we learn, because the Reformation had ended the hold priests maintain in Catholic Europe, in Spain in particular; at the same time, the writers who might have influenced opinion were rarely invited to take an active part in public affairs (3) – two key themes of *De l'Allemagne*. In brief, the German war concerned only troops of the line, while in Spain, "il n'y avait déjà plus ni troupes réglées, ni gouvernemens." The French were to fight not mercenary troops but a people isolated by their habits, their prejudices, the nature of their territory from every other continental nation. In fact, we read that Spain was more than a century behind the continent's other states. Isolation and religious severity had distanced the Spanish from the Protestantism that enlightened Europe in the sixteenth century; they also escaped the philosophical spirit that aided the arrival of the French Revolution (5). This theme of Spanish isolation, if not sterility, opposes

the Calvinist Sismondi to A. W. Schlegel, translator of Pedro Calderón de la Barca and Félix Lope de Vega y Carpio, in a passionate debate culminating in winter 1811 as Rocca begins to write; I examine this debate in Chapter 14. In 1800, Staël had preceded the attacks of Sismondi; in *De l'Allemagne* in 1810, she fuses Sismondi and Schlegel, as does this text of her husband's. Spanish thought can die, but not its character, as this popular guerrilla war proves.⁶

In sum, the indolence and administrative corruption of a long despotism had not affected the Spanish "caractère national," a departure from Staël's views in 1800. A brief popular history follows, opening much as Sismondi does – the kings of Spain, usurping the rights of the great and of the *cortes*, had "anéanti les libertés espagnoles" – but then insisting like the *Considérations* that a sort of freedom remained in practice: Scarcely a reign had passed since then without the people making its presence felt (6; *CRF* 69–80). The priests were "la seule milice exécutive puissante qu'eussent les rois d'Espagne." These priests, scapegoats of Sismondi also, hated the French "par patriotisme et par intérêt," because the French would end their privileges. Resistance, writes Rocca, is easier in this Southern climate, allowing partisans to sleep outside; Coppet's famous North–South distinction here acquires a military meaning (8).

The narrative then turns to Napoleon's soldiers, for whom the world divided in two: "la zone heureuse où croît la vigne, et la zone détestable qui en est privée." Hearing at the start of every campaign that they had to give one last blow to the teetering power of the English, these good fellows judged the distance to England by the number of marches they had made "depuis bien des années, d'une extrémité du monde à l'autre, sans avoir encore atteint cette espèce de pays imaginaire et lointain qui reculait sans cesse devant eux." If the sea had stopped them at Boulogne, perhaps Spain would offer a land route – an improbable geography (10). This unflattering vision of Rocca's fellow soldiers echoes Staël's *Considérations* and her *Dix années d'exil*. Thus, they recrossed the Rhine: "Nous traversâmes la France comme si c'eût été une terre nouvellement conquise et soumise à nos armes" (11). The army had in its ranks Germans, Italians, Poles, Swiss, Dutch, Irish, and even Mamelukes; these strangers, still dressed in their national uniforms, kept their national customs and spoke their own languages, but military discipline united them all "sous la main puissante d'un seul" (12), as Staël often repeats, and as Benjamin Constant explains in 1813 in *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*. Here ends the grandiose opening; it yields to a rapid narrative of events, which Staël revised for style at most.⁷

The observations on Andalusia that, 150 pages later, interrupt Rocca's breathless account are structured according to two preoccupations very dear to Staël, as to countless later Romantics: the appeal of the picturesque Orient and the search for organic roots to explain a national character over the centuries. To speak of Spain's Arab roots is not new – after the *Essai sur les mœurs* of Voltaire or Thomas Warton's *Of the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe*, *De la littérature* stresses exactly that – but it is a topical subject at Coppet, where Sismondi rejects Schlegel's claim that the Spanish hated the Arabs. In fact, each observation here marks a position taken in Coppet's debates. These are hardly the preoccupations of the young Rocca, another reason to suspect Staël's help.

The sky of Andalusia is so serene and pure that one can sleep outside almost year-round; even in winter, one sees men asleep at night beneath a portico. The poor ask, not if they have a shelter “comme dans les pays du Nord,” but if they have a good coat, to resist the summer sun and winter rain. At every step in Andalusia, one meets traces of the Arabs, a “mélange singulier des coutumes et des usages de l'Orient avec les mœurs chrétiennes” that distinguishes the Spanish from other Europeans: Staël, Schlegel, and Sismondi, like Warton or Johann Gottfried Herder, see in this mixture the genesis of Europe's Romantic literature. In the *Dix années d'exil*, curiously, Staël sees in Russia the same thing (*DxA* 269). The houses in town, all built in Moorish fashion, have in their interior a paved courtyard, with a fountain shaded by lemon trees or cypresses that endlessly refreshes the air (161); in the old palaces of the Moorish grandees and kings, these courtyards are surrounded by peristyles or porticos, “dont les arcades étroites et nombreuses sont soutenues par des colonnes minces et très-élancées.” Staël had insisted in 1810 on these Spanish trees and palaces (*DA* III 340). At the door hang jars named *alcazaras* – an Arabic word – which Vivant Denon describes in his *Voyage de l'Égypte* (162). In the cathedral of Cordoba, once a mosque, the arcaded columns of the inner courtyard suggest “une immense forêt de palmiers, dont les rameaux, régulièrement recourbés, se toucheraient en s'inclinant.” Even the goatherds who travel with the seasons between plain and mountain follow an old Arab custom (163) – delicate observations for a twenty-three-year-old hussar!

In these old towns, the narrow Moorish streets are not made for carriages; the inns are “de vastes caravansérails”; the citizens, when they leave the main road, travel in little caravans, a rifle hanging from their saddle for fear of smugglers (165). Workers sleep on mats that they roll up and transport with them – hence the biblical phrase, “Prends ton lit et

marche.” The nuns sit in Andalusia like the Turks without knowing it, on circular mats of rushes. The Spanish *mantilla*, we read, has its origin in the Arab veil; Spanish dances, the fandango in particular, resemble the “dances lascives de l’Orient,” while castanets are still used in Egypt (166). In Andalusia, a burning wind from the east is still called the wind of Medina. The Andalusians stay sober like the Arabs, out of religious principle. They eat salted pork daily, an “espèce de profession de foi” maintained since the reconquest of their country from the Moors, when many Arabs and Jews remained converted in appearance only (167). Even the way of waging war, in some parts of Spain, is so Moorish that one might substitute Spanish names for Arab names and imagine that a memoir of the Egyptian campaign described Spanish events. The Spanish, we read, share the impetuosity, the “furie mêlée de désespoir et de fanatisme” that distinguish the Arabs in war, and the two nations are said to combine the unrelenting hatred and the mobility of imagination of the Orientals (169). These same character traits form Staël’s vision of the South, in her treatises as in *Delphine* or *Corinne*.

To conclude, the text returns to its contrast of Napoleon’s Spanish War with those of central Europe, where nations showed little interest in the quarrels of their governments and where victory even gave new troops to the French (276). In Spain, the French grew weaker as they advanced, like Jean de La Fontaine’s lion, wounding only themselves as they chased the flies that stung them. Spain in fact sustained almost alone, for more than five years, the weight of Napoleon’s immense power. Victor from Italy to the Niemen, he had attached Europe to his fortune and enrolled its peoples beneath his flag; the great powers, which might have resisted, were struck with immobility by the prestige of his force. When he imprisoned the Spanish royal family, the Emperor thus expected a weak and apathetic people who, denied their chiefs, would prefer a foreign government to war on their soil. All Europe thought like Napoleon that Spain would surrender without a fight, but in five years in Spain, though the French won ten consecutive battles and took almost all the strongholds, they could not guarantee the lasting submission of a single province (277). Spain was set afire by love of independence and by hatred of the foreigners who sought to crush Spanish pride by imposing a foreign government. France’s enemy in Spain was neither fortresses nor armies, it was the Romantic “sentiment un et multiple dont le peuple entier était pénétré” – and the soul of each Spaniard, a stronghold that bullets and bayonets could not reach.

Since the writing of these memoirs, concludes the text in an echo of *De l’Allemagne*’s famous preface, we have seen the Russian nation, then the

Prussian nation, give Northern Europe proof of a devotion to their country answering that of Spain; thus, these nations quickly regained their freedom. These events, which changed the face of Europe, establish once again that the true force of nations resides not in the number of their troops but in “un sentiment religieux, patriotique ou politique,” strong enough to interest each citizen in the public cause, “comme si c’était la leur propre” (279).⁸

Removing these long passages leaves us essentially with a hussar’s narrative, as one might imagine: “Nos hussards mêlés pêle-mêle avec eux les sabraient sans résistance . . . En un instant l’armée qui était devant nous disparut comme les nuages chassés par le vent” (99). And yet, Rocca calls this same campaign a “guerre injuste et sans gloire” where the “sentimens intimes de mon âme” disavowed all his actions (229, 244); the text is itself a battlefield where rival perspectives on Napoleon and France wage war, and this tension culminates in the figure of the king who was Staël’s friend, Joseph Bonaparte.

Rocca’s Joseph is a king of dreams. He compromises military security, despite the “douceur connue de son caractère”; with an apathy acquired in Naples, deceived and “entouré de flatteurs . . . il se laissait aller à de folles espérances.” Instead of following his armies, he lives “plongé dans la mollesse, et regrettant les délices de l’Italie. Il voulait dormir et régner.” He fills the newspapers with decrees that are never executed, offers churches relics stolen long before, and confers on courtesans medals they dare not wear outside the palace; he promotes soldiers in as yet inexistent royal armies and assigns royal jurisdiction in two hemispheres while fearing to visit his residence a few leagues from Madrid. All Latin America had its independence before 1826, a direct result of this invasion. The Spanish repeat that Joseph is one-eyed, a shameless calumny he cannot escape. Here, it seems that Staël adds a discordant paragraph: “La bonté naturelle au roi Joseph fut . . . regardée comme de la faiblesse par les Français eux-mêmes.” But the text, which does not belong to her, concludes that Joseph always believed the Spanish before the French, and that the French nicknamed him, thanks to his indulgence, the chief organizer of the Supreme Junta of Seville (115–119). Later, we see Joseph give a powerless colonel “les pouvoirs les plus illimités sur les provinces circonvoisines” (198).

This game of appearance and reality is a strange echo of the Spanish picaresque tradition, as in *Lazarillo de Tormes*; it also speaks to the theme of public credit that governs Staël’s entire work. Spain is a kingdom of masks, as Sand brilliantly illustrates in *Histoire de ma vie*. A long series of details traces this play of masks, when rival forces fight for Spain: the

French who rename streets and buildings; Rocca's interpreter, a Flemish deserter in a monk's costume whom the Spanish think a prisoner (25, 28–29); the man dressed in blue whom Rocca pursues as a Spanish officer, in reality a dance teacher from Toulouse (40); Rocca who speaks *Latin* to communicate (43, 207); the monk who says to the Madrileños that the French force him to dress in civilian clothes; Napoleon who feigns anger, as in Staël's memoirs; the Spanish forces that increase with the exaggeration of their successes (109, 139, 241); the partisans reorganizing the lands the French abandoned, in the name of Ferdinand VII; Rocca who learns that the farm he drank in was a smugglers' lair (140, 172). Or the village of Olbera, which believes his Swiss mercenary alias, set straight, then deceived again in taking his companions for the French vanguard; serving the French *donkey* presented as veal – “Vous avez mangé de l'âne à Olbera!,” an insult that follows them across Spain – plotting with the priest, secret chief of the village, while Rocca pretends to sleep, then finally massacring eight imbeciles who come to get their horses shod (174–189); a peasant envoy whose boasting reveals that the partisans have no English support, another who drops his shepherd's horn to keep his military air (201–203); the partisan chief “l'inconnu au grand bonnet,” curious presage of *Carmen*, ex-math teacher who claims illustrious birth to gain prestige (219–221); and, finally, the hussar driven mad by wounds that he now attributes to imaginary battles (245). This game of masks takes on a painful weight from the hard truths about war that underlie it; Rocca's horse, for instance, hesitates in a defile, because its old master was killed in an ambush (234).

The Roccas, that oddly matched Genevan couple, help thus to launch a mythical Spain that will be taken up in Romantic France by Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, Charles Nodier, Alfred de Musset, Prosper Mérimée, Alexandre Dumas, and George Sand; and this memoir translated into four languages also has a certain European resonance. It is nothing new for Staël to be hiding behind a man she loves; she did it with Louis de Narbonne in 1791–1792 and she will do it with her father in the *Considérations*. Men offer to this daughter of Jacques Necker a sort of pseudonym, a mask to reenter the public sphere from which this Romantic century had exiled women; there is nothing more masculine than war. But this guerrilla war in which Napoleon entangles himself, and France with him, turns out to be another show of masks that this memoir too long neglected retraces with a pitiless eye.⁹