

Beneath the Hardened Lava: Images of Nature and Revolutionary Violence in Germaine de Staël’s “Épître au malheur”

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Since the semantic break with its astronomic sense at the onset of modernity, the word “revolution” has split into two diametrically opposed meanings. Alongside the revolutions of celestial bodies—from which derives the Classical understanding of political revolutions as cyclical, predictable and determinate—we have, conversely, revolution as introduction of the unprecedented, breaking with “the natural order of things” or the everlasting repetition of the same. To historians like Reinhart Koselleck, this new meaning came about with radical acuteness during the French Revolution in its effort to break with the past. From that moment on, Koselleck argues, revolution indicated a separation between History and Nature.¹ But how sharp have the lines of this distinction remained?

Marxism, for example, grounds the possibility for revolutionary change in the fact that there are no “eternal laws of nature” determining social forms. And yet, the same tradition suggests that it is in the nature of revolutions to somehow repeat history—from Bonaparte’s farcical 18th of Brumaire, to Althusser’s explanation of Stalinism as a reactivation of pre-1917 ideology.² In 1790s France, metaphors drawing from natural history served various rhetorical purposes, whether imbuing order to a chaotic reality, or justifying the necessity of that very chaos. Despite the alleged separation of revolution’s historical sense from its supplement in nature, we see, on the contrary, that the latter insists in surviving within the former, blurring the two together again.

Is this just a language problem, the ambiguity owing to nothing but the elusiveness of meaning itself? Or has this polysemy, although more characteristic of literature, been somehow inherent to revolutionary history all along? At the intersection of revolution, language, history, and nature, what are the stakes of understanding revolution through literary language, and especially through nature-related tropes? What does this duplicity tell us about the combat between natural determination and radical change in the history of revolutions?

With those broader questions in mind, I would like to turn here to a historico-poetic account of the French Revolution’s most controversial period. In what follows, I will look into Germaine de Staël’s “Épître au malheur,” a versed text about the Terror that makes up one of de Staël’s rare incursions in the lyrical genre. My aim will be to investigate the poem’s use of natural imagery, and how attention to that language unfolds the poem’s condemnation of revolution into other possible readings. For that purpose, I will firstly lay out the structure of

the text and its goals, as they appear more explicitly in the poem and in two scholarly pieces dedicated to it. Next, I shall focus on the images of nature in the “Épître.” I argue that they can be split into two sets, one representing human history, the other natural history. Lastly, I will linger on the final images of nature in the poem to argue that they contradict and put to the question both the author’s goals, as discussed in the first part of my reading, and the structure built by her in the second part.

Ultimately, I will argue that although de Staël’s epistle illustrates and conforms to much of the standard moderate discourse on revolutionary violence, its imagery can also be read as challenging and unsettling that conformity. In particular, the last part of my argument will focus on her comparison between revolutions and volcanoes. That metaphor, as I will try to show, can be read both with and against de Staël, pointing to how her writing can be put in dialogue with present day conceptions of revolutionary violence, such as Slavoj Žižek’s and Sophie Wahnich’s.

1. The “Épître” and its agenda

Sharing its etymology with “epistolary” in the Greek verb that means “to send,” de Staël’s “Épître au malheur” adopts the classical genre of a solemn poem written in the form of a letter in verse.³ She initially dedicates the piece to misfortune itself, although it addresses other interlocutors by the end of its 256 rhymed lines. Preceding those, an epigraph makes explicit the poem’s context of production and motivation: “This epistle was written under the bleeding tyranny that tore France apart; it cannot yet be too late to publish it,” de Stael writes. “Events such as these will not be erased by the centuries; have we reached the point where we our pain has been turned into memory?”⁴

Here, already, we catch a glimpse of what will unfold as the main goal of the poem, namely: mourning and warning, through remembrance. But before getting to those, we will need an overview of the “Épître” and its content.

Published in 1795 in a collection titled *Recueil de morceaux détachés*, Germaine de Staël’s poem “Épître au malheur, ou Adèle et Édouard” was accompanied by her “Essai sur les fictions” and “Trois Nouvelles.” Opening this ensemble of texts, the “Épître” begins as its narrator decides to face the *malheur* persistently haunting her and “entrapping her spirit.” This is done, as we learn early on, from “the hearths of fortunate Helvetia,” suggesting that what we are reading is in part a piece of testimony from de Staël herself, after her escape to her father’s, i.e. Jacques Necker’s estate in Coppet, Switzerland.⁵ A recapitulation of the most recent scenes of senseless death and sacrilege witnessed in France follows (lines 21-60), before the reader is told the (fictional) story of two fleeing French nobles, Adèle and Édouard (lines 61-182).

Because the poet fears that the horrors and crimes of the revolution are so excessive that they will not be believed by posterity, she vows that the episode may renew history’s horrors so as to inspire a hatred unaffected by time and forgetfulness.⁶ Accordingly, a footnote to the first line of Adèle and Édouard’s narrative disclaims: “These are facts of the most exact truth.”⁷

A young aristocratic couple that refused to flee the country in the first wave of *émigrés*, the story’s main characters are caught up in the general mistrust directed against their class.⁸ As nobles, they were suspected of wanting to join foreign armies in the war against the revolution.⁹ After getting to know these two individuals, not much action takes place before we skip to their tragic death by guillotine. With almost no explanation of the reasons that led

them to the scaffold, plot detailing gives place to descriptions of the emotions felt by the couple and those witnessing their pain. What is emphasized is precisely Adèle and Édouard's *character*: their dialogues and thoughts underscore above all their loyalty to the ties uniting their fate to each other, and to France herself. The tale closes with a statement of its synecdochical value: this is a story that repeated itself many times during that period; it is only one more episode of "the death of an august family," but it can stand for and represent the totality of revolutionary violence. It functions therefore as a monument for the remembrance of the Terror's victims.¹⁰

Reemerging from the memories encapsulated in Adèle and Édouard's destiny, the epistle's next verses (183-212) return to the narrator's musings, starting with her thoughts on the sad situation of those who do not share in the couple's innocence: the vengeful French who joined the Coalition armies and prefer to "divide friends and brothers,/ devouring the past with no thought for the future."¹¹ The final verses address both posterity and the foreigners who can watch France's *malheur* from a distance—spatial or temporal. The poet speaks of hope in America, and in the "divine flame" of a "clement God." Her very last lines, however, offer a much more bitter tone: "Misfortune to those who would agitate their fatherland!/ The French did not have their example to judge."¹² Recalling the desire to provoke eternal abhorrence to the crimes of the French Revolution, the poem closes in a warning that reads as a bad omen, if not a hex.

By means of the frame narrative, the "Épître" maps the narrator's movement between reason and imagination, past, present and future swinging back and forth in relation to the traumatic memory. It starts physically away from the Terror, where she can ponder in safety. Adèle and Édouard's story then moves her gradually closer to the guillotine, only to return suddenly to the Swiss background at the summit of the tale's poignancy.¹³

At the point of production, this procedure is in accordance with the objective declared in the poem's first lines: to fight against misfortune's ascendance and recover the use "of an entrapped spirit."¹⁴ From this first state of paralysis, the author relives revolutionary violence via fiction, before regaining the ability to critically reflect on reality. Once trauma is sublimated through representation, "reason's honor" may be reestablished: she can now talk of the present situation—the Coalition wars—and cast hope upon the future.

At the point of reception, i.e. with the reader, this oscillation towards and then away from the Terror should accomplish three results.¹⁵ First, by reproducing the process lived by the poet, it achieves individual as well as collective mourning.¹⁶ The "return to reason" resulting from mourning, then, is supposed to also be reached by the audience. The second and third results are entangled and overlapping ramifications of remembrance: reliving the Terror's horrors must preserve them against forgetfulness; this should inspire pity towards the victims, on the one hand, and hatred towards the perpetrators of violence, on the other.¹⁷ The remembering may serve both as a tie uniting readers in empathy, and as a warning against the violent crimes of the French Revolution, thus preventing their repetition.¹⁸

These are all goals made explicit by the poet herself in her text. They have been explored by Anne Amend and Stéphanie Genand in two of the few scholarly essays about the "Épître au malheur." Genand focuses on the work of mourning in "tempering the passions" so as to allow for consensus among disputing factions.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Amend's article examines the poem's movement between proximity and distance, production and reception.

That, according to her, is what allows the “Épître” to “paint an authentic picture of suffering” that will unite readers, inaugurating a peaceful future based on shared pain.²⁰ Both readings are grounded on the cathartic function of the literary, exploring how the author’s goals are achieved by the mediation afforded when the aesthetic is put between the writer/reader and the reality it represents.

Amend’s and Genand’s essays may be seen to echo Slavoj Žižek’s questioning of Adorno’s famous comment about poetry being impossible after Auschwitz. For Žižek, “poetry is always, by definition, ‘about’ something that *cannot* be addressed directly, only alluded to.”²¹ De Staël’s effort create a “writing of the Terror” through poetry—what Genand called an *écriture de la Terreur*—then, provides precisely the “step back” Žižek argues is necessary “to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible ‘subjective’ violence.”²² A lure which, according to him (and seconded the “Épître”), “prevents us from thinking.”²³

Still, de Staël’s intention to make the poem a warning for posterity against revolutions seems to simultaneously foreclose the possibility for the disentanglement that Žižek mentions. It appears to leave no room for any thinking about the revolution that does not condemn it utterly, which is why Genand can see it as part of the project to “reconcile opinions” so as to achieve “the difficult task of ending the Revolution.”²⁴ Likewise, in its exploitation of pain as a form of bonding, as suggested by Amend and made explicit in the desire for remembrance, the poet refuses to look at revolutionary violence objectively.

Such a sentimentalist approach accords to late 18th century *sensibilité* and its treatment of empathy and feeling—the “natural virtues—”as grounding “good politics.”²⁵ Nonetheless, when mobilized against revolutionary violence, this rhetoric also aligns the “Épître” with what Sophie Wahnich identifies as a “morbid aestheticizing of the period of Terror;” a discourse that rendered that event, even today, unspeakable from a critical-theoretical stance.²⁶ From that angle, the poem remains an important historical document, but it loses, I believe, an important part of its potential for opening up critical thinking in the present. And in a sense, while it may agree with de Staël’s goal in the poem, it goes against what she argues in her non-literary texts.

In her writings on aesthetics, de Staël posits that there are only two human faculties: reason and imagination. All other faculties derive from these two.²⁷ Moreover, de Staël understands human history as being moved by the human spirit’s perfectibility.²⁸ Imagination, as the etymology suggests, is based on images: it targets the eyes, she writes; whatever is imagined is supposed to “strike one’s vision.”²⁹ As such, imagination—and the arts derived from it—are stymied in their progress by the limits of what can be seen, of what exists in nature for the artist to imitate. Reason, on the contrary, has its pace unbounded, and may continue developing so long as humanity continues to think. This is why de Staël claims that Greek poetry will never be surpassed, at least not in beauty: all that there is to be seen and imitated was explored in Ancient literature. What is more, because the Greek were the first to express their imagination in that way, their art had, in their own time, a novel character that cannot be subsequently recovered. Modern men, having continued developing thought and reason since Antiquity, cannot see Greek poetry or art in the same manner. Whereas de Staël’s contemporaries may appreciate Homer, it is impossible for them to be touched by Homer’s images unmediated by their distance in time and thought. Accordingly, modern poetry must take that distance into consideration if it is not to be an empty, meaningless copy that bears no relationship to the social context in which it is produced.³⁰ Ultimately, then, to read de Staël’s

poetry in her own terms implies a dose of anachronism. Following her division between imagination and reason, we must make use of our historical and epistemological distance from her in order to figure out how her work can still move *our* spirit. In other words, if the images she has created in the “Épître” are fixed, the ways our critical thinking today can interpret them are not; on the contrary, they should increase proportionally to the differences that separate us from them.³¹

2. Nature’s images

Nature is abundantly present in the scene opening the “Épître”. Description of the Swiss landscape surrounding the poet begins as early as line 9. It is from its “tranquil peace” that she feels ready to “contemplate” and “consecrate a painful cult” to misfortune.³² She writes:

Often was my glance fixated by the laughing landscape,
Whose lake with pomp aggrandized the picture,
I contemplated those mountains, which forming the shore,
Painted their august peak in the middle of the water.
What! I said, this calmness in which nature pleases itself,
Will it not penetrate my agitated heart?
And is man, prey to the sorrows he endures,
the exception to the general order?³³

The natural background is one of a serenity in acute contrast with the poet’s state of mind, particularly the memories haunting her thoughts. In fact, what comes next, instead of calmness penetrating her heart, is an invasion of those memories. And they too appear, at first, in the form of natural imagery:

France, of your fate the horrible memory,
Everywhere around us sets tombstones ajar,
Your storm darkens the azure of a peaceful sky,
The blood you spill tinges the crystal of the waters.
These Alps that spike Switzerland from afar,
These mountains that set hell and the sky apart,
They cannot stop the motion of thought,
And pain is anywhere close to the unfortunate.³⁴

In this back-to-back juxtaposition of Swiss “laughing landscapes,” whose crystalline transparency is stained by the blood pouring from France’s stormy skies, we find epitomized a distinction that serves as a key to understanding the natural imagery in the rest of the poem.

On one side, we have a portrait of nature as grandiose, awe-inspiring in its peacefulness, and, above all, orderly. On the other, we have turbulent, disordered nature, associated with the violence in France. The first set of images paints the picture of a passive, indifferent natural background on which the havoc represented by the second set takes place. The question ending the first stanza quoted above helps to elucidate the difference: if humankind and its sorrows seem to be excluded from the “general order” observed in the serenity of Swiss lakes, then human’s actions must take place on a plane other than nature’s. In other words, we have *natural history* distinguished from *human history*. And each appears in the poem in the opposing images of nature summed up in its very beginning.

Much as the poet takes refuge in the Alps to face her traumatic memories, Adèle and Édouard too summon the same underlying natural order to attempt to distance themselves from the revolution's turmoil. As the main characters are introduced, the couple talks about Édouard's decision not to leave France, despite the risks they face in the country. Trying to console an Adèle fearful of the political instability, he tells her: "May the sky and my voice reassure you;/ Look at Nature, it remains the same,/ And love is even more constant in my heart."³⁵ They make their second appeal to nature as they are about to be executed. This time, it is Adèle who calls to a catatonic Édouard: "Look at the sky, whose calmness invites hope;/ By letting us die on the same day,/ It will unite me to you as a prize [*prix*] for my constancy."³⁶

But as with the poet's blood-stained memories which, like a storm, invade her attempt to anchor herself in the crystal-clear calmness of Switzerland, Adèle and Édouard too are chased by more sinister forms of nature. Symbolizing the revolution, these images of nature appear with maximum intensity in the description of the guillotine:

Skies above! How to set eyes upon this baleful instrument
Where iron, contained in new resources
Falls on virtue with all the weight of crime,
Where art, obeying the hangman's sign,
With an invisible arm strangles its victims?
Of Adèle and Édouard the pure blood ran,
Adding still to the seething rivers.³⁷

We reach full artifice [*art*], or the complete perversion of nature by men, with the guillotine. Using natural resources (iron), it takes nature's power over life and death and passes it to the executioner. Incomprehensibly, "with an invisible arm," crime wins over virtue. The result is an accruing current of agitated streams of blood [*flots qui bouillonnent*]. The mechanical device tears apart the natural ties of love and friendship, of the fraternity idealized in 1789. We can understand the guillotine here as symbolizing the pinnacle of humankind's attempt to break with natural history. Amend sees it as the moment when the poem's gradual pace towards revolutionary violence picks up until it crashes and tumbles over. More than perverting nature, humanity's movement surpasses it. From the abstract image of misfortune to its realization "at the heart of the Terror," says Amend, events "jostle free from the men who provoked them."³⁸

The world depicted by de Staël at this point is one of an overturned symbolic order. In a span of a dozen lines, we see listed, side by side, a series of oxymorons: a desperation that "is calm in its speech;" reason that has "gone astray" and is sought in fury; "hope in hatred" and evil that has a soul; executioners who are supposed to serve as justice, and loyal Frenchmen treated as France's enemies.³⁹ Humankind's dominion over nature, the struggle for historical agency against natural determination, in sum, seems to have resulted in the complete denaturalization of human relations.

The utter condemnation of revolution in the last two lines of the poem could not ring clearer. Nevertheless, if Adèle and Édouard's narrative comes to a halt with the guillotine, this is not yet where the "Épître" ends. The last three references to nature will offer attempts to mend this rupture between human and natural histories, one of them significantly contradicting that which, on the surface, looks like de Staël's straightforward message to the reader.

3. Volcanic human history

Having recovered her own reason and speech by the end of the fictional narrative, the poet, as mentioned, turns back to the reality she was unable to face initially. Lamenting the disunity perpetuated by French refugees joining forces with the Coalition against their own nation, she seeks distance again for hope. Her soul now pulled by the possibility of “a new world,” she places her bets on either time or the American Revolution. “Of posterity the equitable balance/ One day of reason will reestablish the honor; time and virtue always form an alliance,” she says, before adding further on: “America or death promise us peace.”⁴⁰

At this point, it is worth drawing attention to some of the strategies employed by the French in making sense out of a reality that had to many become illegible.⁴¹ While narratives and literature played a role in this attempt, images of nature were frequent in revolutionary as well as reactionary discourse. They were used specially to try and imbue some of the order of the natural world into the chaos of the revolution. Whether through divine or secularized providence, narratives should give purpose to tragedies, catastrophes, and injustices, natural or social.⁴² De Staël’s final appeals to try and give meaning to human history draw from strategies such as these.

Repeating her own, as well as Adèle and Édouard’s attempts to find haven in the constancy of nature, she first observes: “Of nature, at last, the invariable course/ Through so many evils has never halted.” But instead of providing solace as it did earlier, the following two lines indicate something else, as the poet adds: “Death, as before, shows itself merciless,/ the holiest of hymens is not respected.”⁴³ If, as I have noted above, the narrative’s main characters take the sky was a trustworthy symbol of stability and a promising mirror of the couple’s constant loyalty, nature is now but a cold spectator to the human passions.

In the face of nature’s indifference to virtue, its meaningless immanence, the poet turns next to transcendency in divinity. She speaks of how “ocean tides return to their beds” obeying the voice of “merciful God,” praying then that he, with the same command, may keep misfortune at check. But although God’s “divine flame” is “of the oppressed the last hope,” that hope seems be as far from realization as the last judgement. Its value, rather, is no more than mere hoping as an end in itself: “If ever virtue in its deep pain/ one day ceased to believe in your goodness,/ an eternal night would cover the world,/ and the sign of its end would flare everywhere.”⁴⁴

Finding no tangible answer for France, the poet’s last image of nature recalls her turning to distance, some verses earlier, when she talked of America and posterity. To those “from another country, of a blood other than ours,” she warns:

To love your fate, you must only look at our misery;
Do not compare yourselves to more tender dreams.
Of revolutions, volcanoes are the image:
The scholar [*savant*] who depicts their dreadful beauty,
Says that to the days of terror caused by their havoc
The earth with time owes its fertility.
But of contemporaries, all hope is lost;
But the ravaged soil threatens their children.⁴⁵

Here de Staël provides no answers to her nation, and we have seen that the poem closes with an obstinate admonishment of revolution. Yet, a closer look into the volcano metaphor opens up other readings of this message.

When we try to fit it with the earlier contrast between images of nature representing human versus natural history, it is unclear to which set the volcano should belong. For whilst it has, in the long run, the restoring, purposeful and providential characteristics of natural history, it stands as the trope for revolution, i.e. humans' actions. It is not either one or the other, like the images we have drawn attention to earlier, but a combination of that natural background—the reliable and predictable nature—on top of which human history takes place, and that history itself, the one represented by stormy, violent and artifice-contaminated nature. In this coming together of the previously opposing two sets of natural imagery, we find a possibility for a reconciliation between the two histories. Consequently, the volcano opens the space for a redemption of revolution.

Furthermore, let us recall de Staël's claim that there is hope for mankind only in the healing passage of time and, potentially, in the American revolutionary project. This means that a better world—in this life, before death—is *not*, as Adèle and Édouard believed, in the beyond represented by the sky. It is not to be found in some transcendental entity such as nature or God. Hope can only be reached in the realm of human history itself, by means of human action, in spite of its mistakes and failures. This becomes clearer if we compare de Staël's volcano with other uses of the same image by her contemporaries, for instance poet, playwright and creator of the French revolutionary calendar, Sylvain Maréchal.

In the foreword to his play *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, staged with enormous success during Year II, Maréchal summarizes his plot as follows: having decided, one day, to rid themselves of their monarchs, European peoples unite to bring their kings, queens, emperors, and the pope to an “uninhabited, but inhabitable” volcanic island. There, deprived of servants, the former sovereigns should arrange for their livelihoods on their own. The story will culminate, Maréchal tells us, with “mankind, as tranquil *spectator*,” having “the satisfaction of seeing itself freed from its tyrants by their [the tyrant's] own hands.”⁴⁶

The plot following this foreword finishes with the volcanic eruption taking the monarchs lives, in lieu of their death being entirely the consequence of their own doing, as suggested in the foreword. In either case, however, the role of the subjects remains the same: they are still “tranquil spectators,” not actors, as nature acts on their behalf in the making of history. Departing from Maréchal, de Staël's volcano, notwithstanding her lamentation of its destructive power, attributes to revolution, as a result of human agency, the creative aftermath of a more fertile earth. The difference may be subtle, but it is nonetheless significant. Although both authors rely on the volcano to mend the breach between natural and human history, Maréchal only achieves that goal by cancelling out human history in its ultimate submission to nature. On the contrary, in the “*Épître*” the volcano does not come as *deus ex machina* to take responsibility away from the revolutionaries; it adds frames of interpretation to the revolution.⁴⁷

Lastly, if we are to take de Staël's aforementioned division between imagination and reason seriously and read her “lesson” on revolutions even further against the grain, another aspect of the volcano metaphor stands out. Volcanoes do not erupt out of nowhere into ungrounded destruction. Rather—and this was somewhat known at least since the publication

of the *Encyclopédie* in the mid-1800s—⁴⁸their activity results from forces beneath the ground, invisible to us.

Volcanoes have, it is true, been used as trope to justify revolutionary violence as a necessary, or “natural—”and thus closed off from criticism—part of revolutionary change.⁴⁹ But when seen as a violent phenomenon whose causes lie beyond the visible surface, volcanoes preclude this kind of unilateral judgement. Instead, the metaphor invites further investigation.

Standing for revolutionary violence, de Staël’s volcano could be read today once again with Žižek, who draws from Jacobin discourse to distinguish between subjective and objective violence. Objective violence, he argues, is the invisible violence “that sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent;” and while “it may be invisible, it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence.”⁵⁰

Echoing Žižek’s call to look beyond subjective violence, on the one hand, and on the other suggesting that the friction causing revolution’s eruptions may, with time, lead to results fertile with creative potential, the epistle’s final metaphor allows for the possibility of looking at revolution beyond de Staël’s own warning.

Conclusion

In her book *In Defense of Terror*, Sophie Wahnich argues that Thermidorean rhetoric, in its quest to separate itself from the Terror, ended up depriving the entire revolutionary project of its meaning. As a result, revolutionary violence, associated with that period, is rejected in total. The French revolution’s potential as a political laboratory—that is, as a site for reflecting about revolution, popular sovereignty, and violence—is destroyed when judgement, in the form of unreflecting rejection, replaces as a categorical imperative understanding and reasoning. In Wahnich’s words: “What is played out here is the figure of *historical evil*, of the inability to settle political conflicts peacefully [...] The decontextualizing and naturalizing of the feeling of ‘humanity’ are made to reign in the eternal present of a moral condemnation.”⁵¹

Wahnich’s argument refers to a recovery of Thermidorian discourse to serve anti-terrorist purposes, especially in the context following 9/11. Almost twenty years later, the question of violence, of looking beyond a position of unreflecting admonishment of revolutionary violence without any insight into systemic and state violence, is no less relevant.

Reading the “Épître au malheur” against the grain, we can restore the revolution’s potential as a political laboratory. De Staël’s volcano, in its ambiguity, directs us away from the imperative of judging, towards investigating, thinking, and understanding. Following that lead, revolutionary movements and even violence appear closer to Gramscian struggle for hegemony or Walter Benjamin’s reflection on divine violence than the oppressive state’s response to “vandalism” or “terrorism.”

Ultimately, the same elusive nature that allows for us to look beyond the surface in de Staël’s imagery, whether because of a distance in time and experience, or because of language’s polysemy, enables literature to open up human history, and revolutionary thought to new ways of understanding the past and the present.

Endnotes

¹ See Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

² In the last paragraphs of “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” Althusser brings up the notion of “survivals,” which he reinterprets to reject Hegelian supersession in favor of a dialectic that accounts for overdetermination. “Survivals” are remaining elements of a past ideology that persist even after revolution of the economic structure, being susceptible to reactivation in the new superstructure. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Verso Books, 2005), 115, 116.

³ See Abbé Edme-François Mallet; Jean-François Marmontel, “Épître,” *Encyclopédie*.
<https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/encyclopedie1117/navigate/5/3056/>

⁴ Germaine de Staël, “Épître au malheur.” *Recueil de morceaux détachés* (Lausanne: Durand, Ravanel et Co. Libraires, 1795), page 2. Except where noted, all quotations and titles originally in French are presented here in my translation into English.

⁵ Staël, “Épître,” line 9.

⁶ Staël, “Épître,” lines 53-60.

⁷ Staël, “Épître,” page 5 (note to line 61).

⁸ On de Staël’s reservations against the first wave of French *émigrés*, see Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël : Lumières et Liberté*. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979), 44.

⁹ Staël, “Épître,” lines 64-76.

¹⁰ Staël, “Épître,” lines 179-181.

¹¹ Staël, “Épître,” lines 189, 190.

¹² Staël, “Épître,” lines 255, 256.

¹³ Staël, “Épître,” line 214.

¹⁴ Staël, “Épître,” lines 2, 3.

¹⁵ Anne Amend. “L’Épître au malheur ou Adèle et Édouard, une méditation de Mme de Staël sur la Terreur,” *Cahiers Roucher-Chénier*, no. 15 (1995).

¹⁶ Stéphanie Genand, “Détacher l’œil Fasciné,” *La Révolution Française*, no. 7 (2014), 5.

¹⁷ See Amend, 123. Genand, 5, 6.

¹⁸ On how the “Épître” explores the idea of forging a “community of pain” on the basis of which will be built a peaceful future, see Amend, 122.

¹⁹ Genand, 5, 6.

²⁰ Amend, 122, 123.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek. *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 5.

²² Žižek, 1.

²³ Žižek, 4.

²⁴ Genand, 6.

²⁵ On that topic, see William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 207.

²⁶ Sophie Wahnich. *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 92.

²⁷ Germaine de Staël, “Essai sur les fictions.” *Recueil de morceaux détachés* (Lausanne: Durand, Ravanel et Co. Libraires, 1795), 16, 17.

²⁸ See Madame de Staël. *De la littérature* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 59.

²⁹ Staël. *De la littérature*, 91.

³⁰ While locating de Staël’s stance on this matter is relevant for the present argument, she is, of course, neither the first nor the latter to reflect on the grounds for modern appreciation of the Classics. Other important contributions to the debate include the so called Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, in France (see for instance Marc Fumaroli, *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 18th century treatises on taste such as Montesquieu’s or Marmontel’s, as well as Hegel’s *Lectures on Fine Arts*, up until Marx’s

Grundrisse (for the latter two, see the selections on *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Second Edition, New York: Norton & Company, 2001).

³¹ For more on de Staël's understanding of how philosophy and literature intersect, as well as how, according to de Staël's writings in literary theory, literary works' "lessons" are conceived in their reception instead of in their production, see Florence Lotterie, "Madame de Staël. La littérature comme "philosophie sensible.""

Romantisme 34, no. 124 (2004): 19–30. <https://doi.org/10.3406/roman.2004.1254>.

³² Staël, "Épître," lines 10, 11.

³³ Staël, "Épître," lines 13-20.

³⁴ Staël, "Épître," lines 21-28.

³⁵ Staël, "Épître," lines 66-80.

³⁶ Staël, "Épître," lines 152, 159-161.

³⁷ Staël, "Épître," lines 169-175.

³⁸ Amend, 120, 121.

³⁹ Staël, "Épître," lines 112-132.

⁴⁰ Staël, "Épître," lines 213-215, 220.

⁴¹ For an account of some of the many ways the French attempted to face the trauma of the Terror in the couple years following 1794, see Ronen Steinberg, *The Afterlives of the Terror* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

⁴² See Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

According to Miller, some of the secular teleological explanations to the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, for instance, see it as a necessary event for improvements that would reestablish the glory of the Portuguese state. This will later be associated with the century's understanding of revolution, being used to justify the disorder that comes with movements for social changes.

⁴³ Staël, "Épître," lines 221-224.

⁴⁴ Staël, "Épître," lines 229-240.

⁴⁵ Staël, "Épître," lines 243-250.

⁴⁶ Sylvain Maréchal. *Le jugement dernier des rois*, 2008. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26124>, "Avis aux directeurs de spectacles des départements."

⁴⁷ Sanja Perovic underscores the displacement of agency from humans to nature in Maréchal's play, as well as the consonance of the image of the volcano with the revolutionary calendar's project of returning the revolution to the "time of nature." According to her, "moral regeneration is attained because the agent of change is situated outside historical time: safely located in a volcano that functions as a secular version of eschatological time." Sanja Perovic, "Death by Volcano: Revolutionary Theatre and Marie-Antoinette." *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 67, no. 1 (January 3, 2012), 16.

⁴⁸ See the entry "Volcano" in the *Encyclopédie*: "Volcanoes, like earthquakes, are caused by subterraneous fires stoked by air and whose force is increased by water. [...] Volcanoes should be regarded as the earth's windows, or as the chimneys via which it rids itself of the substances which devour its bosom. These chimneys provide a free passage to the air and fire which have been set into expansion by the furnaces or fireplaces at their base; without this these agents would cause revolutions on our earth much more terrible than those which we see in earthquakes; they would always be accompanied by the complete subsidence of the countryside. Volcanoes are therefore a kindness of nature; they provide a free passage to fire and air; they stop them from pushing their ravages beyond certain limits, and from completely disrupting the face of our globe."

<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.448>

⁴⁹ Miller highlights this as a "dangerous use" of natural history in revolutionary discourse. See Miller, 13, 57, 58.

⁵⁰ Žižek, 2.

⁵¹ Wahnich, 7, 8. Italics in the original.