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THE END OF FRENCH EUROPE

Germany, for its geographical location, can be considered the heart of Europe, and the great continental association will never be able to recover its freedom if not through the freedom of this country.
—MADAME DE STAËL, De l’Allemagne

Germany? But where is it? Here’s a country I cannot find!
—FRIEDERICH SCHILLER, “Das deutsche Reich”

The sort of nationalism that Juan Andrés had pitted against a Francocentric Europe was not a peculiarly Spanish or southern phenomenon. In the second half of the eighteenth century, while Andrés was already working on Dell’origine, the idea of the nation was affirming itself in Europe against the cosmopolitan ideals of the Republic of Letters: “The particular against the general, the individual against the universal. Exactly because the fear is that universality will suffocate individuality, and that the general will suffocate the particular—for this very reason, the promoters of national individuality hold a strong polemical attitude against [Francocentric] Europeanism” (Chabod 122).

After the “Discours” of Dijon and the letter to D’Alembert, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had penned some “Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne” in 1772. The “Considérations” had been occasioned by the latest events in Poland’s political history. At the opening of the eighteenth century, Poland was still under the sphere of influence of its powerful neighbors—Prussia, Austria, and, especially, Russia. In 1768, local resentment against foreign influence had led to the formation of the so-called Confederation of the Bar. For four years, the confederation attempted to govern Poland as an independent nation, to protect its constitution, and to make of Roman Catholicism, as opposed to orthodox eastern Christianity, the religion of the land. The confederation was
supported, at a distance, by both France and the Ottoman Empire. In 1772, however, Russian military intervention brought the experiment of the confederation to an end. Austria and Prussia, afraid of a complete Russian takeover, struck some deals with the czarina Catherine II, proposing to partition Polish land for the sake of continental peace. The proposal was accepted by Catherine II, who managed, however, to keep control of most of Poland. In 1772, therefore, the aspirations of an independent nation had been sacrificed at the table of European diplomacy. Who was to blame? The three powers, for sure; but in the “Considérations,” Rousseau went as far as to blame the entire concept of Europe—a concept, elaborated in the salons of Paris, too quick to celebrate cosmopolitanism and universalism at the expense of any national spirit:

Today, there are no longer Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, and Englishmen, whatever you call them—only Europeans. All have the same tastes, all the same passions, customs, because not a single one of them has received a national form by a distinctive legislation. In the same circumstances they would all do exactly the same things. They will all tell you how unselfish they are, and act like scoundrels. They will all go on and on about the public good, and think only of themselves. They will all sing the praises of moderation, and each will wish himself a modern Croesus. They all dream only of luxury, and know no passion except the passion for money; sure as they are that money will fetch them everything they fancy, they will all sell themselves to the first man who is willing to pay them. What do they care what masters they serve, or what country’s laws they obey? Their fatherland is any country where there is money for them to steal and women for them to seduce. They are everywhere at home. (Oeuvres 3:960)

This was not the first time that Rousseau had expressed some distrust toward cosmopolitanism, and, more specifically, against Europeanism. Already Émile, in the eponymous novel of 1762, had been taught to “distrust those cosmopolites” (4:249) who try to better “Man” and fail to improve the citizen. La nouvelle Héloïse (1761) had also praised the Englishmen, who “don’t have the need to be Man” (2:216), for being nationalists and insular at heart. As I have suggested in the previous chapter, Rousseau’s distrust for such concepts was largely motivated by his suspicion that behind them lurked the hegemony of some state powers—France, or even Russia in the case of Poland—which were ar-
rogant enough to legitimate their interests, ambitions, and even ways of living as universal or European. Had not the partition of Poland, after all, been legitimated in the name of European peace?

At the risk of rewriting universal history against Montesquieu and Voltaire, the “Considérations” were a frontal attack against Europe first, and against European Russia, the archenemy of Polish nationalism, consequently. In *De l’esprit des lois*, Montesquieu had praised the czar Peter the Great (1682–1725) for “giving European customs and manners to a European nation” (*Oeuvres* 2:565). Voltaire, too, had offered a similar monument to Peter the Great, who transformed Russia, hitherto “scarcely known in Europe,” into a great European Empire (69). In sum, for both Montesquieu and Voltaire, Peter had brought Russia to the eighteenth century—that is to say, to modernity—by bringing it to Europe: after that, Russia was no longer the “Orient”; it became a European empire. For Rousseau, instead, exactly because of that Europeanness conquered through Peter’s love for the West, “the Russians will never be really civilized . . . Peter had the genius of mimicry; but not the true genius that creates and makes everything out of nothing . . . . He made [of his people] a German one, a British one, instead of starting to make of it the Russian people” (*Oeuvres* 3:386).

What was this abhorred Europe for Rousseau? In the *Extrait du projet de paix perpétuelle de M. l’abbé de Saint Pierre* (1761), Europe did not sound like such a bad deal after all:

All the powers of Europe constitute, among themselves, some kind of a system that unites through the same religion, through the same set of laws, customs, letters, and commerce, and provides the necessary balance of forces. Add to this: the particular situation of Europe, which is more populated and more united than other continents; the continuous mixing of interests that ties of blood and of commerce, of arts and colonies, have instituted among European monarchs; the multitude of rivers and the variety of their courses, which make communications easy; the restless mood of its inhabitants, which makes them travel incessantly, and brings one in the country of the other; the invention of the printing press, and the common taste in the arts, which has made possible the sharing of scholarship and knowledge; and finally, the multitude and small size of the European States which, interdependent in their common need for luxury and in the difference of climates, has always made each people necessary to all others. All these causes together make of Europe not only,
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like in Asia or Africa, an ideal collection of peoples that only have one name in common, but a real society with its religion, its habits, its customs, and even its laws, which no single people can break without immediately causing some danger to the others. (*Oeuvres* 3:567)

Yet, as it is already implicit in the *Extrait*, this “real society,” perhaps exactly because it *is* real, remains quite distant from any ideal: this system of Europe, capable only of satisfying “luxury” and the “sharing of scholarship and knowledge,” careful only about its internal “balance of forces” that had led to Polish partition, was a perennial threat to the “originality” of its single parts. Hence the inherent dissatisfaction in *all* notions of Europe, including those that aimed for a perpetual peace. Perpetual peace, once obtained through the European balance of forces, when detrimental to national originality, was capable of leading only to its exact contrary: “The perpetual dissent, brigandage, thrones usurped, revolts, wars, homicides which daily sadden this respectable home of the Wise, this brilliant asylum of the Sciences and the Arts . . . the pretended fraternity of the Peoples of Europe is a name to be laughed at, a name, ‘fraternity,’ that expresses with irony their mutual animosity” (*Oeuvres* 3:567–68). A repressed sense of nationalism, sacrificed at the altar of a common and supposedly balanced Europe, returns through the symptoms of perpetual dissent and war. This is all that can be achieved in the name of Europe.

It is in this sense that Rousseau was said to close an old, cosmopolitan epoch in order to father a new one—called Romantic and hinging on the question of national specificities. Against the uniformity of Europe, the nation starts affirming itself as the true center of a true fraternity: freedom, which for Montesquieu was the end of European history, begins now with a savage “disdain of European pleasures” (Rousseau, *Oeuvres* 3:182), and with a recuperation of more local, national desires. Rousseau, along with Andrés, contributes to the logic that at the eve of the French Revolution starts undoing, rather than consolidating, the very idea of Europe.

Yet the distance between the old and the new, between doing and undoing, should not be overestimated here: Does such novel logic of nationalism truly undo the idea of Europe? Or is it, rather, a reformulation of it—a denial of cosmopolitan Europe, that is, advanced in the name of a new Europe of nations? The rhetoric of Rousseau’s logic is so explicitly and blatantly critical of Montesquieu’s Europeanism that it is easy to miss in it that rhetorical unconscious that still ties the Polish
considerations to *De l’esprit des lois*. With an echo of Machiavelli, Montesquieu had written that “in Europe the natural divisions of the terrain form a plurality of States . . . . This forms, in turn, a spirit of freedom” (*Oeuvres* 2:529). Twenty-four years later, Rousseau similarly located in “the multitude and small size of the European States” the reason for a return to national freedoms—but also, as a matter of paradoxical facts, the very Europeanness of nationalism.

**The Unbearable Europeanness of the French Revolution**

In the eyes of Europe, we can be the model.
—**MAXIMILIEN DE ROBESPIERRE, Discours**

Should the Revolution only be French, just as the Reformation was Lutheran?
—**NOVALIS, “Die Christenheit oder Europa”**

“What is a nation?” asked Ernest Renan in 1882. First of all, he answered, a nation is *not* “the vast agglomerations of men found in China, Egypt or ancient Babylonia, the tribes of the Hebrews and the Arabs, the city as it existed in Athens and Sparta, the assemblies of the various territories in the Carolingian Empire” (9). Montesquieu’s “extended territories” are thus not only “despotic” (*Oeuvres* 2:362): “Vast agglomerations,” adds Renan, are also “without a patrie [homeland].” Europe, the land of Montesquieu’s freedom, is therefore also the land of Rousseau’s “nations, such as France, England and the majority of the modern European sovereign states” (Renan 9). In truth, it is not simply Europe that functions as the homonym of nation: neither the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta nor the Roman Empire were nations in any sense of the word. Only modern Europe, as it were, has nations: “Nations . . . are something fairly new in history” (9). In European history, that is, if such specification is still needed after Montesquieu. The newness of history began for Renan with yet another echo of Montesquieu: when “the Germanic invasions . . . introduced into the world the principle which, later, was to serve as the basis for the existence of nationalities” (9). One sees the slow work of construction of the idea of Europe, the unfolding of its rhetorical unconscious here: feudalism, private property, and freedom were for Montesquieu the beginning of a modern Europe brought about by the German Franks. Renan also adds to the picture of German
achievements the introduction of nationalism in modern European history. That modern history had begun with Montesquieu’s Gallic feudalism: it had climaxed, however, only with the revolution of 1789. “France,” declares Renan with the clearest sense of patrie, “can claim the glory for having, through the French Revolution, proclaimed that a nation exists of itself. We should not be displeased if others imitate us in this. It was we who founded the principle of nationality” (12).

In a way, Renan was attributing nothing less than everything to the French Revolution, and theorizing, once and for good, the intimate relation between nation and revolution. The syllogism went like this: the nation is the highest embodiment of a people’s freedom; freedom is a will of law and self-determination that pits a people against the old order of empire and absolute authority; ergo, the nation is the product of a revolution. By ultimately realizing what the Germans had “introduced” in the history of the universe, 1789 was thus for Renan the climax of a modern Europe united no longer by the spirit of cosmopolitanism but by its plurality of nations. “Africa . . . and Asia,” had written Machiavelli, “have always been one or two empires at most . . . ; only Europe has had a few empires, and an infinite number of republics” (Opere 585). “In Europe,” had echoed Montesquieu, “the natural divisions of the terrain form a plurality of States” (Oeuvres 2:529). Renan could then conclude: not unity, but national difference is the essence of Europe. Nationalism is not the undoing of Europe, but the final realization of a modern Europe spurred by the French Revolution.

It may sound curious that such a modern Europe of nations is made to begin in 1789, and not, for instance, in 1776. In that year, on July 4, on the other side of the Atlantic, the U.S. Declaration of Independence had already mentioned “citizens” and “their Country”—let alone equality and liberty—thirteen years before the Jacobins would utter those same words again. The fact is that inheriting the Enlightenment’s belief in the universality (and originality) of French values, it could only be France, not the thirteen United States of America, that could paradoxically see in French nationalism not a peculiarly French desire, but, paradoxically, a European one. As the count Honoré de Mirabeau told the National Assembly after the fall of the Bastille: “The influence of such a nation [France] will undoubtedly conquer the whole of Europe” (qtd. in Davies 713).

And conquer it did. “After 1789 everyone knew that the world could be turned upside down, that determined men could mobilize the so-
cial forces and psychological motors which underlay the surface of the most tranquil society” (Davies 713). More important, after 1789 everyone seemed to know that modern Europe was defined neither by Voltaire’s letters nor by Montesquieu’s feudal institutions, but by national revolutions. Take William Blake’s *Europe: A Prophecy* of 1794, for instance, where Europe is the apocalypse of revolutionary hubris—“in the vineyards of red France appear’d the light of his fury” (66)—liberating itself from the yoke of paltry reason, petty religion, and ancient regimes. Or take William Wordsworth’s 1804 poem entitled “French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement”: from France to the British Isles, Europe entire sings the Revolution’s “pleasant exercise of hope and joy” (1:636).

Certainly, not everybody was enthusiastic about this new revolutionary Europe of nations. Edmund Burke, for one, in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), lamented the end of a once-glorious Europe, and the beginning of a petty bourgeois one: “The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom” (126).

In *Considerations sur la France* (1796), Joseph de Maistre went so far as to interpret the revolution as God’s punishment against France, whose monarchy had betrayed its providential mission, thus leaving Europe, demoralized, in the hands of *philosophe*s and libertines:

> Every nation, like every individual, has a mission which it must fulfill. It would be futile to deny that France exercises a dominant influence over Europe, an influence she has abused most culpably. Above all, she was at the head of the religious system, and it was not without reason that her king was called *most Christian*: Bossuet has not overstressed this point. However, as she has used her influence to pervert her vocation and to demoralize Europe, it is not surprising that terrible means must be used to set her on her true course again. (50)

This was neither Burke’s time, however, nor Maistre’s. It was the time of revolution, and Napoleonic General Bonaparte was antonomasia and personification of this very revolution.

On May 5, 1789, the reunion of the General Estates in Versailles had opened a new cycle in the history of France by converting the old regime
into a constitutional monarchy. On August 10, 1792, the monarchy was overthrown and, on September 21, France was declared a republic—an event symbolized by the spectacular beheading of the king and queen. Monarchic Europe had obviously followed the French events with increasing preoccupation. Already in 1789, revolutionary forces, inspired by the French example, had declared a United States of Belgium and overthrown Joseph II, the emperor of Austria. In 1791, the Poles demanded once more a national constitution and independence from Russia; in 1794, led by Tadeusz Andrzej Bonawentura Kociuszko (who had just come back from North Carolina where he fought against Britain under General Nathaniel Greene), the Poles started their own national revolution. In Germany, resentment against Prussian hegemony was on the rise in all the other states. Since 1791, the *Patriote français*, edited by Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville, had started a crusade for the military liberation of the peoples of Europe—“only Robespierre,” observes Stuart Woolf, “asked himself to what extent those peoples would welcome the French as their liberators” (“Storia” 152–53).

The coalition that Austria, Prussia, Russia, Holland, and England formed against France could not do much to halt the spread of revolutionary ferments. Worse, it could not do much to stop its military advance in Europe. In 1796, the Directorate of the Revolution had planned a strategy of simultaneous wars for the liberation of Europe: General Lazare Hoche was to invade Ireland; the generals Jean Victoire Marie Moreau and Jean Baptiste Jourdan Germany; and the young debutant Napoléon Bonaparte had to start the Italian campaign with the putative goal of freeing Italy from the Austrian yoke, and the more concrete economic objective of having Italian taxes pay for the reconstruction of postrevolutionary France. In a few months, Napoléon liberated Milan, besiegged Mantua, and broke the Austrian lines in Rivoli. It was an astounding beginning of his career.

“Ce n’est qu’un début,” went the Parisian slogan of 1968, “this is only the beginning.” In a period in which the principle of a “revolutionary expansion” of France, theorized by Larevollière Lepaux and legalized in 1792 by the Republican Convention (Ricceri 57), was becoming some kind of Frenchman’s burden, Italy truly was nothing more than a beginning for Napoléon Bonaparte: “You [Italians] are the first example . . .” (qtd. in Woolf, “Storia” 162; emphasis mine). What was the end, then? A perfect reintegration and novel Europeanization of Europe. The historian Stuart Woolf describes Napoleonic integration in these words: “If
the Orient was ‘orientalized,’ as Said argues, Europe had been ‘Europeanized’ by the construction of a unifying grid of civilization, against which all cultures could be measured and classified” (“Construction” 89). What this meant, in Napoléon’s own words, was “to found a European code, a supreme Court for all Europe”; and to make of Europe “a single European people . . . a truly united nation [so that] everybody, no matter where he traveled, would always have been in the common fatherland of all.” Focused on such a modernizing mission, Napoléon, who may have read De l’esprit des lois, certainly shared with Montesquieu the idea of a Frankish origin of Europe fathered by Charlemagne. Asking to be crowned in Aix-la-Chapelle, once the capital of Charlemagne’s reign, Napoléon presented himself as the new father of a new Europe. Just as Charlemagne had reunified and regenerated the Roman Empire, so was Napoléon to reunify and regenerate the Holy Roman Empire into, so to speak, the new revolutionary French Europe: “There is not enough sameness among the nations of Europe. European society needs regeneration. There must be a superior power which dominates all the other powers, with enough authority to force them to live in harmony with one another—and France is best placed for this purpose” (qtd. in Thompson 38–39).

Europe, in turn, seemed quite eager to be regenerated by the example of revolutionary France: the Swiss were ready to declare the Helvetic Republic, in 1798, against the aristocratic cantonal governments; and the Italians themselves, in large measure, were quite enthusiastic that the revolution was entering, with Napoléon, Italy as well. This state of euphoria, however, was not to last long. If the welcoming of the French liberators had been quite triumphant, the following fiscal pressures (someone had to pay for all these liberations!), the military draft, political interferences, and the fundamental disinterest of the French in Italian nationalism quickly turned the Italians against the rescuers of their freedom (Banti, Risorgimento 18–31). The French, wrote Vincenzo Cuoco, who was certainly not a conservative of the likes of Burke and Maistre, had brought a revolution that was “too French and scarcely Neapolitan” (qtd. in Casini 244). “The French have deluded themselves about the nature of their revolution, and believe to be universal what is, in fact, the product of the specific political circumstances of the French nation” (Cuoco 37). Other peoples, like “the stupid Belgians and the bestial Germans” (in the words of the directorate, qtd. in Woolf, “Storia” 161), were not much happier than the Italians about this liberation im-
posed through the means of military occupation. Especially in Germany, which was at the time a collection of small states under the control of Prussia, the project had become that of the construction of a German nationalism far from the French model. Robespierre might have been right, after all: Why would people welcome unconditionally the French as their national liberators?

The limits of wars of liberation are certainly a hot topic today. In the time we are discussing, even hotter was any mention of the archenemy of Napoleonic imperialism—Anne Louise Germaine Necker, married de Staël. “Bonaparte had so persecuted her that people said in Europe one had to count three Great Powers: England, Russia and Mme de Staël,” offered Mme de Chastenay (qtd. in Isbell 6). England had not won Waterloo yet (Napoleon’s chief of police, at any rate, would blame Mme de Staël, not Wellington, for the fall of Napoléon); and Russia had scarcely come out unscathed from the Polish quagmire. Mme de Staël, instead, in the small town of Coppet, Switzerland, was already starting to dismantle Napoleonic Europe: anti-French, national, Romantic—the sort of Europe imagined by her was undoubtedly a novel one. Most notably, cultural hegemony had shifted from France to Germany. Yet even this new Europe kept being divided, just as in the times of Montesquieu, between north and south.

German Europe Considered in Her Relation to Religion

Marriage: Europe owes once more to the church
the small numbers of good laws it still has.
—CHATEAUBRIAND, *Génie du christianisme*

The product of a revolutionary age, and written by an active participant in the revolution—first as a Girondist moderate republican, then as a constitutional monarchist, and finally as an outlaw of Robespierre’s Directorate—Anne-Louise Germaine Necker Madame de Staël’s *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociaux* was in its own right a revolutionary work.1 To begin with, this was the first work proposing to study literature not simply in itself but according to the “influence that religion, customs, and laws have on literature, and the influence that literature has on religion, customs, and laws” (Staël, *Littérature* 64). For the first time, literature was caught in a dialectics with soci-
ety and was said to be, in some sort of Gramscian way, not only a product (representation) but also a producer (creation) of social institutions.

Just as revolutionary was Staël’s message: concluding *De la littérature* with a peculiar praise both of medieval Christianity and the Enlightenment culture of the ancien régime, Mme de Staël depicted revolutionary France as a moment of corruption in European history—one in which the humanism of Christianity and the Enlightenment had turned into the culture of fear called the Age of Terror or of the guillotine. Moreover, against the model of the French Revolution, *De la littérature* had begun to praise a different one—that of a bourgeois Germany centered not on the militaristic cult of heroic revolutions, but on that of “domestic happiness” (171). Staël would later develop this thesis in *De l’Allemagne* (1810), a true call for a new Europe with the “German race” (1) at its center. Germany, according to Staël, was the nation in which “men are the most learned and most meditative of Europe” (23) whose universities were “the most knowledgeable of Europe” (244), and whose “influence on thinking Europe dates from the times of Protestantism” (67). Already with the publication of *De la littérature*, however, Staël’s move against Francocentrism—if not blunt anti-Gallicism—and in the direction of a German Europe quickly aroused the anger of the Directorate of the Revolution, which decreed the arrest of Mme de Staël in 1796. After having avoided prison for the intervention of her husband, in May 1800, less than one month after the publication of *De la littérature* and the vehement attacks from the French press, Staël decided to leave Paris for her husband’s estate in Coppet, Switzerland. There she formed a salon frequented by the likes of Benjamin Constant, Simonde de Sismondi, Charles Victor de Bonstetten, and August Wilhelm von Schlegel.

In spite of its political daring, however, *De la littérature* was quite a conservative book in some respects. Although its attention to the social relevance of literature (and its attention to gender) made of *De la littérature* a breakthrough in literary theory, the idea Staël seemed to have of literature was, after all, hardly a revolutionary one. It was downright parochial, in fact, when compared to previous works such as Andrés’s *Dell’ origine*, or even when measured against Voltaire’s opening, in the *Essai*, on the literary world of China, India, and Arabia. Both Andrés and Voltaire had spent pages on the great literatures of the Orient. One paragraph on Mohammad (inspired perhaps by a premature vision of Samuel Huntington and Silvio Berlusconi) instead sufficed for Staël: “Mohammad . . . gave birth to a fanaticism with the most astonishing
insouciance . . . . His religion was destined only for the people of the south, had as its only goal to stir a military spirit by offering compensations for military exploits. This religion created conquerors, but did not bring any seed of intellectual development . . . Islam was stationary in its effects: it halted the human spirit” (167). According to Mme de Staël, both literature—which rather canonically comprehended “poetry, eloquence, history, and philosophy” (91)—and its progress were a European prerogative. Hardly any word needed to be spent to justify such a Europeanist assumption. “I believe that we can consider Asia as the true motherland, the cradle of literature,” had said Andrés. For Staël, instead, literature had begun, more simply, in Greece: “One can consider the Greeks, as it concerns literature, as the first nation [peuple] that has ever existed” (93). Literature, in other words, was the unfolding of nothing else than the “moral and political Europe” (61). Staël’s study of literature, in turn, was becoming yet another theory of Europe.

Even less revolutionary than her blunt Eurocentrism was Staël’s unassailable faith in the idea of history as continuous progress. Inherited from Montesquieu, and filtered through the philosophes, the postulate of an infinite “perfectibility of the human species” (Staël, Littérature 59, 87) shaped the entirety of her narrative. “My goal,” she asserted, “is to observe the progress of the human spirit, and only philosophy can indicate such progress with certainty” (120). Certainly, also the southern Andrés had talked about progress—but not as an ideal of linear perfectibility; and not as something that “only philosophy,” without the aid of a critical spirit, could indicate with certainty. Mme de Staël, however, seemed (I will come back to my word choice soon) not to have ever heard of such Andrés.

Literature, instead, was for Staël a story of continuous perfectibility that went, more or less, like this: literature began in Greece, the “childhood of civilization” (Littérature 94). The foundation and origin of literature, the Greeks “could not imitate anyone” before them. They were thus rough but pure (or pure but rough, depending on the point of view). “Having only nature as a model,” the Greeks began literature as pure representations of nature (111). One of the limits of their art, especially in the theater, was “the exclusion of women” (117). Exit the Greeks. The Romans enter in Mme de Staël’s literary theater of universal (European) history: “The Greeks gave the impulse to literature and the fine arts. The Romans marked the world with the traces [empreinte] of their own genius” (128–29). The Romans, in other words, were the first trace
of progress in the infinite betterment of literature that the Greeks had only begun: the Romans reached “an authority of expression, a gravity of tone, and a regularity of periods” (131) that easily surpassed anything Greek. They did not, however, reach ultimate perfection. For that, we must impatiently wait for their fall and for the inauguration of a new and most beautiful era—modernity—heralded by “the invasion of the Peoples of the North, the establishment of Christianity, and the Renaissance of the Letters” (162).

We have seen in the previous chapter how Andrés had rescued the Middle Ages, the Dark Ages, from their canonical image of gloominess and decline and promoted them as the origin of a modern Europe starting from Al-Andalus. Staël’s palimpsest, however, was not Andrés, but Montesquieu. Like Montesquieu, Staël saw the Middle Ages as a period of inexorable progress and the beginning of a modern Europe initiated not by the Muslims of Al-Andalus, but by “our German fathers”:

People count in history more than ten centuries in which one usually believes that the human spirit regressed. This would be a strong objection against the system of progress [système de progression dans les lumières], if such a long period, if such a considerable portion of time known to us, had seen the great work of perfectibility recede. But this objection, which I would consider very seriously, if it were founded, can be refuted in a very simple manner. I do not think that the human species regressed in this period; I believe, on the contrary, that giant steps were made in the course of these ten centuries, both for the spread of knowledge [lumières], and for the development of intellectual faculties. (163)

What were these “giant steps” that knowledge made in the Middle Ages? Put simply, they were the entry of “the nations of the North” into “civilized society.”

When the northern nations entered civilized society, however, they did not come in timidly knocking at the door. They shattered a Roman Empire. They ended an epoch, and ushered in a new one—modernity. It was an age no longer complacent in the imitation of nature: “Imitation does not allow . . . for infinite perfectibility” (179), since nature, after all, remains (for Staël at least, before Hegel) always the same. What Montesquieu’s “German fathers” brought in was a “new development of sensibility and a deeper knowledge of human character.” The much-admired Friedrich Schiller had mentioned something similar, also in 1800, in Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung: the poetry of the
ancients was naive contact with and imitation of nature; “our” modern art instead, “because nature has disappeared from our humanity” (Schiller 194), was a sentimental art, swallowing in the melancholia of what was lost.

Once again, we can easily see the influence of Montesquieu on Staël’s idea of Europe: progress is the transgression of “the laws that God has established” and the overcoming of a natural state. The end of this progress is the establishment not only of human laws but of human literature as well—a “philosophical” literature disentangled from the mere imitation of God’s creation. As in Montesquieu, moreover, the spirit of Europe, after dispensing with any comparison with the Orient, became for Staël a dialectic of north and south: “There exist, I believe, two completely distinct literatures: those that come from the south and those that descend from the north; those for which Homer is the first source, and those of which Ossian is the origin” (Littérature 203). The only difference to Montesquieu—quite substantial, in fact—is that France no longer constituted the north, but the border of a south ending before Germany, the new caput mundi, the real heart of Europe, and the ultimate antonomasia of the north (212–16).

At any rate, for Staël there was one literature with “two completely distinct” origins—Homer, and Ossian, the “primitive” and “Germanic” poet that James Macpherson had completely fabricated, unbeknownst to Mme de Staël, in 1765 (see Haywood). The progress of literature, then, coinciding with a progress of Europe, was a movement from the ancient south—Greece, Italy, and the Iberian peninsula (Staël, Littérature 193)—to a modern north. As the idea of progress implied the idea of the inferiority of the origin, Staël coherently announced that “Greek tragedies are, then, I believe, much inferior to our modern tragedies” (110); and “it is not less true that the moderns, in metaphysics, ethics, and sciences, are infinitely superior to the ancients” (121). In short, “I have given my preference to the literature of the North over that of the South” (54).

There was one thing, however, in which the ancients, that is, the southerners, excelled—to the point that they were better at it than the northerners ever were: history. What about progress then, one might ask! Does not the admission that something was better in ancient times contradict the whole idea of necessary progress? Staël was genuinely at pains when trying to explain this apparent contradiction, to the point that one wonders why, rhetorically speaking, she even mentioned history if it threatened to disrupt her entire logical edifice. Was she trying to respond
directly to someone in particular—say, Andrés—who had claimed the superiority of the south in works of history? We cannot know with certainty. We can agree, instead, with Staël—once she had mentioned the southern superiority in history, she owed some explanation:

I must present here some reflections on the causes of the superiority of the ancients in the genre of history. I believe that these reflections will prove that such superiority is not in contradiction with the following progress of thought. There are histories that are accurately called philosophical histories; there are others whose merit consists in the truthfulness of their pictures, in the warmth of their narrative, in the beauty of their languages. It is in this last genre that Greek and Latin historians have excelled. One needs a more profound knowledge of man to be a great moralist than to be a good historian . . . . In ancient history one finds neither the philosophical analysis of moral impressions, nor the unperceived symptoms of the soul’s affections. (152–53)

So even if southerners would claim that they were better at histories, this did not compromise, but actually reinforced, the thesis of the south’s inferiority vis-à-vis the north: southerners could be better historians because they had not progressed as philosophers. Progress—Mme de Staël could now conclude after this most arduous test—was the prerogative of the north; and philosophy, pace Andrés, had nothing to do with history.

After literature was presented as the unfolding of a progress of the “moral and political Europe,” Europe returned, then, in *De la littérature*, as the very same dialectic of north and south that Montesquieu had originally proposed in 1748. The history of Europe was the story of its progress from Montesquieu’s amoral south—“The peoples of the south . . . fiery tempers, easily duped, easily fanatical, suffered all the superstitions and crimes that reason ever suffered” (Staël, *Littérature* 168)—to a north “born from the morality of sentiments” (116). The north, then, was modernity, the climax of a progress that defined Europe. The south constituted the past of that same Europe—purer, yes, but hardly perfect. In Schiller’s formulation: “They are what we were” (180).

*De la littérature* thus reestablished “such a difference of character between those of the north and those of the south” (Staël, *Littérature* 167) that the whole idea of Europe ran the risk of obliterating. There was not one Europe, but, at the very least, two: north and south. This did not mean that two Europes could not be reconciled into one: just as litera-
ture was one—going from the ancient naive one of Homer to the modern and sentimental one of the German Romantics—so was Europe one, from south to north. What kept the two Europes together? Not new to doubting, but unaccustomed to despair, the intrepid Mme de Staël had the right answer for all: literature, obviously, was an element that bonded the modern northerner, Ossian in hand, with his southern ancient brother (the sisters, after all, though inspirations to their men, “have not composed truly outstanding works”; Staël 171–72). Yet even more and above literature, it was religion that had made Europe one: “Christian religion has been the bond that has united the peoples of the north with those of the south; it has melted, so to speak, in one opinion two opposed customs . . . [northerners and southerners] have ended up becoming nothing else than one single people disseminated in different countries of Europe. Christian religion has contributed powerfully to that” (168–69).

“If you go from one end of the continent to the other, what is it that says you are in Europe?” asked recently, in December 2003, Italy’s deputy prime minister Gianfranco Fini when the Polish delegation was denied a substantial reference to Christianity in the preamble of the Constitution of the European Union. “The presence of the Church” was Fini’s answer—and Staël could not have agreed more. Mohammad may have given birth to fanaticism, but the fundamentalist idea of Europe as Christianity is born here, in the impossibility to keep “such a difference of character” together if not through the invocation of God.

Both north and south, for Mme de Staël, were Christian, and this was enough—pace all atheists, Jews, Gnostics, and residual Muslims of Europe—to make the continent one. Religion, in the end, operated the miracle that kept north and south together as Europe. Staël’s confessional idea of Europe was not a total novelty in 1800. The German poet Friederich Leopold von Hardenberg, otherwise known as Novalis, had already celebrated the Christian unity of Europe in 1799, with Die Christenheit oder Europa: Ein Fragment. Novalis’s was not too far removed from Staël’s: Christianity and the Roman papacy, in the Middle Ages, had ended years of European wars through the invocation of a common faith in Christ. In 1798, however, the French armies of Marshal Berthier had marched against the pope, deposed him, destroyed Rome, transformed the Papal States into a republic, and taken Pius vi prisoner to Paris. Just a few weeks before the writing of the Novalis’s fragment, the pope had died in exile, and the Directorate of the Revolution had for-
bidden electing a new one. Novalis’s nostalgia for Christian Europe was thus perfectly in tune with Staël’s enmities toward revolutionary France, which both saw as the greatest danger to the unity of Europe. Christianity was the only power capable of a “reconciliation of north and south” (Staël, *Littérature* 170); revolutionary France could only colonize, as an empire, north and south, but it could hardly reconcile them.

Mme de Staël’s discussion of Christianity marked in yet another way her epochal desire to move away from a Francocentric to a new, Germanocentric Europe. For her, the cementing force of Christianity could no longer be Novalis’s papacy, but, rather, Protestantism. And where was Protestantism to be found in the year 1800? Cardinal Mazarin had made of France a Catholic country; the revolution had secularized its institutions. If, “in general, what gives the modern peoples of the north a more philosophical spirit than the one possessed by the peoples of the south, is the Protestant religion” (Staël, *Littérature* 211), then France had become, pace Montesquieu, a miserably southern country: Catholic and despotic. Its literature, accordingly, would be discussed by Staël with the southern ones; its classicism demoted to a mere imitation of the models of Greece and Rome. Once the modern project of Protestantism had been betrayed by Mazarin’s France and by Napoléon’s revolution, Germany was not only the climax of progress but also the Protestant engine of European union. The *trait d’union* between Montesquieu’s French Europe and a new German one, on the other hand, was Madame de Staël’s salon in Coppet.

The Law of Marriage and the Order of Desire: Theorizing Sex

There were two great systems conceived by the West for governing sex: the law of marriage and the order of desire.
—MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The History of Sexuality*

It continually resurfaces as a question of either/or: freedom or servitude, the liberation of desire or its subjugation.
—MICHAEL HARDT AND ANTONIO NEGRI, *Empire*

Open the seraglios of Africa, of Asia, and of this southern Europe of yours.
—DONATIEN ALPHONSE FRANÇOIS DE SADÉ, *La philosophie dans le boudoir, ou les instituteurs immoraux*
The project that Mme de Staël began with *De la littérature*, and which she tried to complete at Coppet, was, properly speaking, one of translation. Montesquieu’s idea of a dialectical Europe—north and south, Protestant and Catholic—had to be translated from a French to a German center. Montesquieu’s German *fathers*, moreover, had to be translated into a new theory of gender (see Tenenbaum) attempting to look at the “changes that have been operated in literature at the epoch in which women have started to become part of the moral life of man” (Staël, *Littérature* 101). Undoubtedly, *De la littérature* was led by an unprecedented attention to the question of gender in the context of literary studies: what did it mean—asked Staël—“to write and think as a woman” (64)? What was the role of women in the development of literature? The question raised an even larger one: What had gender and sex to do in the constitution of a theory of Germanocentric Europe?

Already in his *Lettres persanes* Montesquieu had shown a great interest in questions of gender, and had offered what has been called “a typology of political relationships between men and women” (Mosher 25). Gender relations represented different typologies of government. Europe, besides being associated with a particular kind of politics (freedom against Oriental despotism) was also associated with a particular kind of gender politics. The *Lettres persanes* were an epistolary novel that described, through the ironic perspective of Persian voyagers, the peculiarities of European culture. Many were the differences—as we can expect from the pen of Montesquieu—between free Europe and the despotic Orient; but one was more striking than any other: the social and familial role of women. Montesquieu symbolized the position of women in the Orient through the figure of the harem—a model of despotism without limits. In the harem, the one male master—symbol of the absolute monarch—demanded a constant subjection, control, and isolation of his citizens/women (see Grosrichard). How different, the fictional voyagers observed, was the social role of women in the West! “To the peoples of Europe,” they noticed, “all the wise precautions of the Asiatics—the veils that cover the women, the prisons [i.e., the harem] where they are detained, the vigilance of the eunuchs—seem more proper means to increase the activities of this sex, than to restrain them” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 1:211–12). In Europe, according to the Persians imagined by Montesquieu, women were, for good and for bad, “free.” In Asia—this was Montesquieu’s unspoken conclusion—they were instead enslaved.
An important subplot of the *Lettres persanes* was thus the revolt that the preferred wife of the male despot, Roxanne, organized in the harem while the master was still in Europe. Montesquieu suggested that the problem with the political model of the harem—a model, I repeat, of monarchic absolutism—was not that it was patriarchal. As we have seen in the discussion of feudalism (chapter 2), patriarchy and patriarchal inheritance were in fact the very foundations of European freedoms. The problem with the harem model, instead, was that its very excess, its absolute and hyperbolic subjection of women to their patriarch, threatened patriarchy with the constant possibility of revolt. The governmental model of the harem, in other words, was “ruined by its own internal vice” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:357), a vice of excess and immoderation.

What the *Lettres persanes* offered, then, was the presentation of two antithetical models of authority exemplified through the simile of gender relations: Oriental (patriarchal) authority was the complete subjection of women and citizens alike; European (patriarchal) authority granted instead some measure of liberty to its subjects—citizens and women—in turn creating a guarantee of social order. The isolation of the women in the harem, their dependency on the sexual desire of one single male, quickly engendered dissatisfaction. The desire to escape one’s gender role transformed the seraglio into a sanctuary of sexual transgressions. The slave wife Zelid had begun by having an affair with the white eunuch Cosrou (1:208). Even Roxanne, the most faithful of the wives, had in the end “seduced your eunuchs” (1:372). By the last part of the novel, the frantic letter of the chief eunuch to his master hinted with despair at the spread of homosexuality in the harem: “Things have gotten to an unsustainable point: your women have thought that your departure [for Europe] has left them in a state of complete impunity. Horrible things are happening here” (1:362). *De l’esprit des lois* had reached similar conclusions: “Possession of many women—who could have guessed! —leads to that kind of love that nature disavows” (2:513); that is, the only way to satisfy sexual desire in the constrictive structure of harem relations is homosexuality.

Whereas the smallest unit of European society, the family, was thus built on the binary of male and female, the smallest unit of Oriental society, the harem, threatened social order not only through excessive despotism but also through a continuous proliferation of gender roles that reacted to such excess. The paradox was quite curious for Montesquieu (“who could have guessed!”): the most despotic regime, that of the
harem, was so extreme that it became, ironically, impossible to maintain. By promoting a perpetual desire to escape one’s gender role, it engendered a proliferation of such roles. In the West, both men and women could find freedom and satisfaction by observing the limits (laws?) of their gender roles. In the Orient, they simply could not, and they had to find new, deviant roles. Men needed to invent, so to speak, the eunuch as the guardian of women’s virtue. Women had to discover homosexuality to compensate for the sharing of the husband’s sexual services.

The greater freedom that Europe gave to its women, concluded Montesquieu, was, then, the guarantee of its social order. This did not mean that Europe was immune from this kind of Oriental disorder: in ancient Greece, *De l’esprit des lois* reminded the reader, “love took a form one does not dare mention” (2:342); in the Roman Empire, “young boys were priceless” (2:335) to older men; in contemporary Italy, the castrati looked to Montesquieu like horrendous monsters (2:1261); and even in England—free and constitutional England—women were so scarce that men “throw themselves into debauchery” (2:580). What this meant, therefore, was that Europe, in theory, was a social order of men and women. Yet in practice, this Europe, too, was still on the way to final perfection.

Also the *Encyclopédie*, in its unmistakable jargon of scientific authenticity, left the practice of gender out of its theoretical framework. Homosexuality, for one, did not even appear. And here is the usual, indefatigable Jaucourt (also the author, incidentally, of the entry on “Sex”): “Woman (Natural law). In Latin, *uxor*. Female of the man, considered as long as she is united to him by the bond of marriage [*considérée en tant qu’elle lui est unie par les liens du mariage*]. Look then under Marriage and Husband” (Diderot 6:471). Like north and south were the two parts of that perfect and self-contained idea that was Europe, so were male and female the two complementary elements to be synthesized in marriage. At the entry “Marriage,” still considered by Jaucourt under the heading of “natural law” and described as an “institution of nature,” we read a praise of Montesquieu’s remark that the perfectly “natural” union is that of (one) man and (one) female. In this resided for Jaucourt the “natural freedom” of the woman.

Natural or not, however, this union was also said, in the same *Encyclopédie*, to be specific to Europe only. The curator of the entry argued that marriage was an institution established by Christianity, which brought “in all European countries” a new social model of compassionate patriarchy. Before Christianity, and still in non-Christian lands, men, ac-
According to cultural “prejudices,” were considered superior to women. This prejudice legitimated, for instance, the enslavement of women in the harem. Christianity, instead, was an “exception” to this otherwise general prejudice: in Europe, it “established . . . a real superiority of man, and yet preserved for the woman the rights of equality . . . . Domestic servitude of women and polygamy made Orientals distrust the fair sex, and, eventually, made the fair sex distrustful” (Diderot 6:468). In sum, for Europe the real inferiority of women—as opposed to the inferiority sanctioned by mere prejudice—never signified for the latter a loss of liberty: women, within Christianity, were objectively inferior, but not slaves. Quite an interesting way of justifying patriarchy in the West, one might argue: the specter of Oriental prejudice legitimated European discrimination of women as a benign—let alone realistic—form of paternalism. What had European women to complain about, when their fate was measured against that of a commonplace Orient concocted by the fantasy of Montesquieu! European women had to be quite grateful of being still free, despite their “real” inferiority.

Compared to the Encyclopédie, Montesquieu had advanced a more secular hypothesis concerning the difference of European sexual mores arising along with, but not necessarily because of, the spread of Christianity. The sort of chivalric conduct sung in the chanson de geste and in the chanson d’amor had represented, perhaps invented anew, a novel relationship between the sexes in which “our [man’s] connection with women is founded . . . on the desire of pleasing them, because they are quite enlightened judges of personal merit” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:822). With similar intentions, Jaucourt had suggested (as mentioned in chapter 2) that the chanson Provençal and the chivalric romance had opened the age of modernity in Europe: the kind of modernity introduced by the chanson entailed a new relationship between the sexes. Women had now an authority of judgment, and the cavalier attitude of men was informed by a code of courtship and an expectation of refusal. Above all, love as a ritual of courtship had been formed. As an example of the gender relations appearing in the chanson, let us read, at random, from an anthology of troubadour poetry:

Midons que te mon cor gatge
prec, si com cel que merceia,
que no m’aia cor voltage,
ni fals lauzengiers no creia
de mi, ni s’albir
qu’eu vas autram vir
que per bona fe sospir
e l’am ses enjan
e ses cor truan;
qu’eu non ai ges tal coratge
com li fals drut an
que van galian,
per qu’amors torna en soan
[As someone who asks for grace,
I pray you my lady,
who keep my prisoner of love:
do not be inconstant in your love to me,
and do not trust false rumors about me,
or do not suppose that I turn my attention toward any other woman.
Because I suffer in good faith,
loving you without deceit and without disloyalty:
my heart is not like the one of lying lovers,
who cheat and make love becomes debased.]
(Sansone 327)

The chanson by Gaucelm Faidit, circa 1180, was quite typical of the genre
and of the time: the speaker was a male poet, and prayed a woman,
elevated to the status of judge (to use Montesquieu’s word) and almost to
that of an earthly divinity, to accept his plea of love. The woman had the
power of making the male poet either happy or forlorn. The male poet’s
love was not sexual eros, but an almost spiritual—platonic—form of
desire. This love, moreover, was without disloyalty, in the sense that it
was monogamous. Any different kind of love, any polygamous one,
would be debasing of the very word. This was, arguably, the kind of love
that Jaucourt found at the center of Christian ethics; but it was also a
kind of love that, from Montesquieu’s secular perspective, set the param-
eters for the kind of gender relations—monogamous and heterosexual—
that both the Lettres persanes and De l’esprit des lois considered as the
basis of modern Europe. Against the objectification of the woman in the
Oriental harem, the European society predicated by Montesquieu did
preserve a patriarchal hierarchy between the sexes—the male is still the
privileged author-poet and his reader-interlocutor—but without objec-
tifying the woman, who was elevated, instead, and even venerated, as the
judge of manly courting.

Much of Madame de Staël’s often-celebrated recuperation of the Mid-
dle Ages was, if we look carefully at it, exactly a recuperation of Montes-
quieu’s promotion of woman as a subject in the context of the chanson
and the chivalric romance. The Middle Ages of chivalry, in fact, offered
Staël an alternative model to the despotic one of Napoléon’s France. The
sort of French imperialism that Napoléon had begun with the Italian
campaign in 1976 smacked too much, for Staël, of Oriental despotism.
Napoléon had crowned himself in Aix-la-Chapelle, but he was no Char-
lemagne—he was, actually, the new Saladin. As the despotism of the
Orient was based on the enslavement of women in the harem, so was
postrevolutionary despotism based on the increasing marginalization of
women: “Since the Revolution, men have thought it politically and mor-
ally desirable to reduce women to the most absurd mediocrity” (Staël,
*Littérature* 335). What’s worse: she was right. After the coup d’état of the
eighteenth Brumaire of 1799, Napoléon had been quick to declare that
“since women have no political rights, it is not appropriate to define
them citizens”; and the Napoleonic code, architected by that paladin of
family values that was Jean Etienne Marie Portalis—“good fathers, good
husbands, and good sons make good citizens”—had marginalized the
social role of women to mere “obedience” (Bock 108–9). So, while this
Napoleonic revolution was proposing itself as the model for a new Eu-
rope, Staël recuperated the Christian model of the Middle Ages as an
alternative version of Europe—one in which the putative freedom of
women stood for the more general freedom of society at large.

Within Christian Europe, women were never the authors of “truly su-
perior works,” warns Staël (171). They did not write chivalric romances,
nor (pace Bogin) the poetry of the troubadours; “nevertheless, women
have not served [in that time] the progress of literature in lesser ways
than men, as they have inspired men an abundance of thoughts on the
kind of relations they are to entertain with those beings [women] so
mobile and delicate” (171–72). What Staël meant, simply, was that the
almost complete totality of troubadour poetry in fact presented itself as
inspired uniquely by the (male) poet’s love for a most beautiful, lofty,
and unreachable woman—a woman that only in the later traditions of
the Italian *stil novo* and Petrarchism would start acquiring a proper
name: Beatrice, Laura . . . . For Staël, then, Christianity entered Europe
to dispel “the odious institution of [familial] slavery” and to institute “conjugal love” between one man and one woman (170–71). The roman, “varied production of the spirit of the moderns” (179), was but the literary equivalent of the religious institution of Christianity—what the Catholic critic C. S. Lewis once called the “allegory” of Christian, monogamous love and marriage.

European modernity, in other words, was produced, for Mme de Staël as for Montesquieu, by a set of epochal transformations that occurred after the fall of the Roman Empire. First, the nascent hegemony of the German tribes introduced in Europe “a respect for women that is unknown to the people of the south” (Staël, Littérature 211)—a respect parallel to the new “spirit of a free people” (206). Second, the spread of Christianity replaced an ancient (and southern) culture of sensual pleasure, war, “vengeance and passion” (202), exemplified by Homer’s epics, with a new culture (Ossian’s) concerned with “the brevity of life, the respect of the dead” (205), and the cult “of domestic happiness” between husband and wife (171). Third, as the new literature created a new role for the woman, who was now both free and responsible for domestic happiness, it also discovered a new idea of love. The latter was no longer understood as immediate sensual pleasure, but as the celebration of the almost mystical courtship and union of man and wife. In this epochal transformation, Europe ultimately realized itself—qua freedom—as a new internal dialectics not only of north and south but of female and male as well. Just as the dialectics of north and south had served Montesquieu the necessity to theorize a Europe “that cannot be compared to anything else,” this new dialectics of male and female served Staël to eliminate the Orient, with its unruly gender confusion and its despotism, from the scene of European literature.

The picture of Staël’s Eurocentric universe was thus clear: the “new, dreamy, and profound sensibility, which is one of the great charms of modern literature” (Littérature 181), began in (northern) Europe with the emergence of woman as the subject of poetry and as the judge of man’s love. Modernity, ergo, was once again a European success story from which the Orient was once more excluded. One problem, however, arose at the moment in which Staël decided to argue that the index of European difference could be found in its modern literature of love. In other words, if the great epochal shift of modernity consisted in a turning toward love, was one to assume that no other time and place but modern Europe had such a notion of love? First, one had to eliminate
the poetry of Sappho, singing Lesbos’s poetess’s love already in the sixth century BC—not a big problem, arguably, since such poetry hardly fell within the strictures of heterosexual love imposed by Staël. Second, one had to eliminate the Kama Sutra (sixth century AD) and the *ars amatoria* of Ovid (ca. 2 AD) for being too materialistic—being about sex, in other words, rather than about loftier forms of love. Third, and more problematically, one had to eliminate the whole tradition of Arab love poetry, devoted to the poet’s quite monogamous love for a most beautiful, lofty, and unreachable woman: “I have Allah as my only Lord, oh Abda, / So I have gotten to take your face as my one Lord,” wrote for instance Bassar ibn Burd (qtd. in Galmés de Fuentes 18) in the seventh century AD. Was not the love for Abda as heterosexual, monogamous (as for the one God), and spiritual as the love of Gaucelm Faidit? As Simonde de Sismondi would observe in 1813, in the midst of the dispute fired by Staël’s thesis of the fundamentally European nature of love,

this delicacy of the sentiments of the troubadours, this mysticism of love, has a more intimate relationship with Arab poetry than one would think, given the vicious jealousy of the Muslims and the cruel persistence of polygamy. The women of Muslims are divinities in their eyes, and slaves at the same time. The seraglio is at the same time a temple and a prison. The passion of love has, among the peoples of the south, a livelier ardor, a greatest impetuosity than in our Europe. (1:95)

The main problem for Staël’s thesis was that the Oriental tradition, which was supposed to work as the antithesis of Europe, presented, in fact, remarkable similarities to what was supposed to be the uniqueness of Europe. Was Mme de Staël so sure that the uniquely European poetry of love of the Middle Ages did not come from preexisting Arab models? We are thus back to the very problem raised by Juan Andrés’s Arabist theory: was modern poetry—in rhymes and about love—a *European* invention? Or did the Arabs bring it to Europe? Andrés’s doubt, in the meantime, started concerning not only the origin of modern European literature but, more radically, the origin of European gender relations, which were symbolic, in turn, of social and power relations. In other words, if the Arabs had developed such a notion of love in their poetry, the whole edifice of European freedom as the antithesis to Oriental haremlike despotism was in danger of crumbling. In truth, Staël never mentioned Andrés—but she still had to face his theory, and argue, at the very least, that the Arabs did not bring modern poetry to Europe. On the
contrary, the Arabs only learned love poetry from the Europeans: “The Moors established in Spain borrowed from chivalry and its *romans* their cult of women. Such cult did not exist in the national customs of the Orient. The Arabs who remained in Africa were not similar, from this point of view, to those established in Spain. The Moors gave the Spaniards their spirit of magnificence; the Spaniards inspired the Moors their love and their chivalric honor” (*Littérature* 193). So if the Arabs learned love poetry from the Spaniards, where did the southern Spaniards learn it from? No doubt from “the northern peoples, [who] judging from the traditions that are still remnant and from the customs of the Germans, have always and in all times had a respect for women that is unknown to the people of the south” (211)! If this chronology—modernity begins with the Germans, who spread it to Spain, whence it is picked by the Andalusian Moors—sounds too much like a bilious response to Juan Andrés’s Arabist theory, that is because, quite likely, it really was.

Europe from Coppet

Coppet is the headquarters of European opinion.

—STENDHAL, “De l’amour”

The group that from 1766 to 1817 met at Staël’s salon in Coppet seemed to be quite concerned with the question raised by Juan Andrés’s Arabist theory, which threatened to comprise at its core the attempt to theorize Europe as the moral and political place of love. François Raynouard, who would begin the publication of the *Choix des poésies originales des troubadours* only in 1816, had already introduced the work of Juan Andrés to the members of Coppet in 1801, when he had started his correspondence with Simonde de Sismondi. For the collection he was preparing, Raynouard wanted to defend the thesis that Jean-Baptiste de Sainte-Palaye had elaborated in *Mémoires sur l’ancienne chevalerie* (1753) and in the *Histoire littéraire des troubadours* (1774). Sainte-Palaye’s theory was quite similar to the one Mme de Staël had elaborated concerning the origin of love poetry in the European Middle Ages (see Passerini 211–30). For that reason, arguably, Raynouard had developed an interest in the work of the Coppet group and was curious to know how they would handle the recently translated work of Juan Andrés. The *Histoire des sciences et de la littérature depuis les temps antérieurs à l’histoire grecque*
**Jusqu'à nos jours** (this was the curious French title of *Dell’ origine*, 1805) seemed to confirm the hypothesis of Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774), which had already claimed, but without strong arguments, that love poetry had entered Europe through the Arabs and was not a specific European invention. Andrés, arguing as we have seen, that the Arabs brought a totally novel idea of poetry—syllabic, in rhymes, and about love—into Europe, offered textual and stylistic confirmation to Warton.

Sismondi was the first one in Coppet who faced the problem of Andrés’s Arabist theory in a direct way. In 1813, after a long correspondence with Raynouard, he published *De la littérature du midi de l’Europe*. The book began with a short summary of Staël’s and Sainte-Palaye’s argument: chivalry and Provençal poetry had been born together under the influence of Christianity; they had both engendered a new cult of woman and love. In more ways than one, Sismondi’s project was homage to and the ideal continuation of Mme de Staël’s *De la littérature*. As the latter had established the distinction between “two completely distinct literatures,” so was Sismondi certain he could “detach [southern people] from the people of the north” (1:ii–iii), and “romance languages from Germanic ones” (1:10). As Staël had studied the “influence that religion, customs, and laws have on literature, and the influence that literature has on religion, customs, and laws,” so did Sismondi want “to show the pervasive reciprocal influence that the political and religious history of peoples has had on their literatures” (1:ii). And as Staël had promoted the Middle Ages as the origin of Europe’s modernity, so was Sismondi’s study intentioned to posit a medieval origin of modern German Romanticism. What stood between Sismondi and the realization of all of these goals was none less than the friar Juan Andrés.

Sismondi’s first mention of Andrés occurs in the very first chapter of the *Littérature du midi*—in fact, in the first note to the entire book. Its ambiguous tone of praise and scorn sets from the very outset the relation of mock respect that Sismondi wants to assume vis-à-vis his predecessor:

> I only know of two works that comprehend the history of this entire part of literature [that of the south of Europe]. The first, with an even wider scope, is that of Andrés, Spanish Jesuit, Professor in Mantua: *Dell’ origine e de’ progressi d’ogni Letteratura*. . . . He overviews the history of all human sciences in all the languages and in the entire universe; and with a vast erudition, he develops in philosophical fashion the general march of
the human spirit; but since he never gives one example, never analyzes
the particular taste of one nation, and only gives rapid judgments scarcely
motivated, he does not leave any clear idea of the writers and works
whose names he has assembled together. (1:14–15)

Better, then, the other of the two works, incidentally, Friedrich Bouter-
werk’s *Geschichte der schönen Wissenschaften*, 1801–10, which Sismondi
judges at least “credible” (16).

Despite such exordium, Sismondi drew quite liberally from *Dell’ ori-
gine*. Call it a tribute to Andrés, here is, for instance, what Sismondi
wrote in his chapter entitled “Literature of the Arabs”: “One sees hun-
dreds of camels entering Baghdad, charged only with paper and books;
and all the books that men of letters thought worthy of being brought to
the people, in whatever language they were written, were immediately
translated into Arabic” (1:47).

Here, instead, is what Andrés had written in *Dell’ origine*: “One saw
hundreds of camels entering Baghdad, charged only with paper and
books; and all the books thought to be proper for public education, were
immediately translated into Arabic to be accessible by everyone” (1:120).
Plagiarism!—denounced Andrés’s biographer (Mazzeo 87–90). Plagia-
rized from Andrés’s book, in fact, could also be Sismondi’s indictment
of Arab poetry, which for Andrés was filled with “excessively daring
metaphors . . . endless allegories . . . excessive hyperboles” (1:134–35), and
for Sismondi relying “on too daring metaphors, endless allegories, and
excessive hyperboles” (1:60).

Yet Sismondi’s thesis was, rather than plagiarism, a total rewriting of
Andrés’s theory. On the one hand, it is true, Sismondi agreed with
Andrés’s claim that “Arabia gave shelter to the lost literature, and offered
sacred asylum to the gentile culture that Europe had rudely cast away”
(1:116). In Sismondi’s words, the Arabs, “who had contributed more
than any other nation, with their conquest and fanaticism, to destroy the
cult of sciences and letters” (1:40), were the ones who revived in Europe a
love for Aristotle and the classics when the whole “West was drowned in
barbarity” (1:39). To Arabia, Sismondi’s Europe, in a clear echo of An-
drés, also owed “the invention of paper” for books (Sismondi 1:73),
the inventions of gunpowder, the compass, and the numerals “without
which the science of calculus could not have been pushed to the stage we
know today” (1:74). Still following Andrés, Sismondi also argued that
rhyme entered Al-Andalus with the Arabs (1:104). Seemingly contradic-
ing Mme de Staël and confirming Andrés, Sismondi even went as far as declaring that “it is from them [Arabs] that we have received . . . this drunkenness of love [enivrement d’amour], this tenderness, this delicacy of sentiments, this religion, this cult of women, which have had such influence on chivalry, and which we find in all southern literature, which, because of these traits, has an Oriental character” (1:66). In short, “Arab [literature] gave an altogether new impulse to literatures in Europe” (1:10), and “modern Europe [was] formed at the Arab school and enriched by it” (1:10).

Was Sismondi, then, to conclude, following Andrés and against his hostess at Coppet, that the Arabs (or Spain) were the origin of modern Europe? Not so fast. First, asked Sismondi, “What has left of so much glory?” (1:76). The question, as well as the answer to it—“the vast regions where Islam dominated or dominates still are now dead for all sciences”—was less naive than one might think at first glance. To say that Arab culture, once glorious, was dead at present meant to situate that culture, once again, in the past of the European telos of progress: “This immense wealth of Arab literature, of which I have given only some glimpses, no longer exists in any Arab country, or in any of the countries where the Muslims dominated” (1:77). Arab culture, in other words, was the last stage of the ancient world, a continuation of the Aristotelian legacy—something that, at any rate, no longer is. Modernity, instead—European modernity—began after that, and, to some measure, indifferent to the great discoveries of the “ancient” Arabs.

Andrés’s mistake, from the point of view of Sismondi, was that he had considered literature as a whole, as one organism progressing in history and moving from one nation and continent to another. Accordingly, modern literature had begun for Andrés with the Arabs, who had introduced it to Al-Andalus. From there, literature had enlightened Spain, and, in the end, the whole of modern Europe. For Sismondi, instead, there was not one but two literatures. Mme de Staël had been clear: there are “two completely distinct literatures.” Accordingly, Sismondi could distinguish between a southern literature, revitalized by the Arabs, and a northern one, “like” the Arab in some respects, yet “easily distinguishable” from it. Andrés, for instance, had maintained that rhyme had been brought to Europe from Arabia. For Sismondi, instead, “Arab poetry is rhymed like ours” (1:60; emphasis mine), but it was Andrés’s mistake to believe that Arab rhyme was the model followed by the Provençal poets of France. Rather, the European troubadours developed rhyme like
the Arabs did, but independently from them. Also the *roman*, Andrés had suggested, was Arab in origin. Though similarities between Arab storytelling and the European romance also existed for Sismondi, “Arab imagination, which sparks in all its brilliance in these tales [*A Thousand and One Nights*] is easily distinguishable from the chivalric imagination” (1:64).

The influence of the Arabs was, then, in Sismondi’s last analysis, limited to the literatures of the south: “The people of the south . . . formed their poetry at the school of the Orientals” (1:10); and “Oriental style . . . spread to all romance languages” (1:42). Germanic languages, on the other hand, seemed free from such Oriental origin. That is why, since Germany was the essence of Europe, Spanish literature was not entirely “European: it is Oriental” (1:42). And that is why southern literature presented itself as the very antithesis of the austere, ethical, and Protestant European literature: “Studying the literature of the south, we have often been surprised of the subversion of morality, the corruption of all principles, of the social disorganization that this literature indicates” (4:19); reading such southern literature, “we will then be happy to breathe, in a language close to ours [Spanish], the scents of the Orient and the incense of Arabia; happy to see, in a faithful mirror, the palaces of Baghdad . . . and to comprehend [comprendre], in a European people, this brilliant Asiatic poetry, which created so many marvels” (4:179).

Happily and gleefully, Sismondi could then make Asia and Arabia disappear from his theorization of modern Europe: not only because the love that Staël singled out as constitutive of Europe was “easily distinguishable” from Oriental love poetry; but also, and more important, because Europe contained within itself its own Oriental Other. As for Montesquieu, the Oriental was comprehended within Europe’s south and spoke its romance languages. Quite cunningly and brilliantly, Sismondi started from (or plagiarized) Andrés’s Arabist theory to claim exactly the opposite of what Andrés had claimed: not that the south was the heart and origin of Europe’s modernity, but that the south was, as Montesquieu had already declared, its internal antithesis (on Sismondi’s north and south, see also Rosset).

Compared to such cunning, the other members of Coppet had a much more pedestrian way of dealing with Andrés, the south, and Arabist theory. With the exception of Benjamin Constant—“I don’t like our ancient poetry, nor our chivalry” (qtd. in Duranton 349)—everybody at Coppet argued, at one time or another, on the question of medieval
romance, chivalric poetry, and the question of Arab influence. August Wilhelm von Schlegel, in *Observations sur la langue et la littérature provençales* (1818), steadfastly rejected the Arabist theory while declaring himself shocked that someone (Andrés) could think that such a cruel and misogynist people as the Arabs could have invented a form of poetry based on the adoration of women. Even if, Schlegel contended, the Arabs had invented the use of rhyme, they most certainly did not invent love: “Muhammad’s sect has never had the slightest influence on anything that constitutes the original genius of the Middle Ages” (67–69). The founder and editor of the journal *Europa*, Friedrich von Schlegel, would, like his brother August, in the end radicalize Sismondi’s thesis: not only was Arab influence limited to Al-Andalus—even the Spanish “muse of old Castile is . . . free from Arabic or oriental admixture” (Schlegel 247); moreover, the evolution of northern (European) literature was radically distinct from the literature “of Catholic countries, such as Spain, Italy, Portugal” (246; see also Duranton; Cometa). Even more fundamentalist was Charles Victor de Bonstetten’s *L’homme du midi et l’homme du nord*, published as late as 1824. Europe, for Bonstetten, was divided into two climates. What *L’homme du midi* added to Montesquieu was the racial ramification of climatology—there were two distinct races of “man”—and more than an echo of the Coppet discussions about troubadour love: “In the South Love appears to the senses, and through them becomes inconstant. In the North it drifts into dreaminess, and oftentimes constitutes the destiny of a whole life” (87).

The sort of Europe that Montesquieu had started imagining in 1748 sedimented in the literary theories of Coppet. Asia, to begin with, was not essential to define the culture and literature of Europe. Its influence, if any, was limited to the south. A definition of Europe proceeded instead, dialectically, from the antithesis of north and south—an antithesis that, dialectically indeed, was imagined as a spiritual progress from an old past to a modern north. This dialectic was sustained by the religious unity of Christian Europe, which provided the fundamentals for its culture. Even this unity—Christianity—was in turn dialectically split between Protestantism and Catholicism.

In this definition of Europe, the emergence of a new continental hegemony, and of new levels of subalternity, were already visible. Greece had almost disappeared from these discussions about Europe, except to return in mentions of ancient and classical literature—a primal origin, in other words, too remote to still be of any significance. Neither Turkey
nor Malta was even suspected of being part of Europe. Eastern Europe—Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, and the Slavic states—was so marginal as to be unworthy of any discussion. Sismondi, exemplary of all this, had maintained that there were “three distinct races [in Europe]: the Latin, the Germanic, and the Slav”; but his plan was to discuss only “Romance literature and Germanic literature,” which alone comprehend the totality of “civilized Europe” (1:iii). Southern Europe was Italy, Spain, and Portugal: it was Romance, somewhat Oriental, “ancient,” and Catholic. Northern Europe was England, Helvetia, Scandinavia, and above all, Germany: it was Germanic, Western, modern, and Protestant. The status of France, uncertain between north and south, was that of an eclipsed hegemonic power. Now it was Deutschland über Alles.

Dialectics, or Europe

They see themselves at the end of a long European dialectic.
—THOMAS PYNCHON, Gravity’s Rainbow

Montesquieu’s understanding of Europe as a self-contained system—“history cannot compare it to anything else”—divided into two complementary parts—north and south—was, then, as Europe (in Theory) has suggested so far, the beginning of a Eurocentric approach to universal history that the Romantics of Coppet simply reformulated in a Germanic (rather than Frankish) key. As Enrique Dussel suggests, this Eurocentric position, which “reinterpret all of world history,” ultimately cohered in the Germanocentric philosophical system of Georg W. F. Hegel, “for whom the ‘Orient’ was humanity’s ‘infancy’ (Kindheit), the place of despotism and unfreedom from which the Spirit (Volksgeist) would later soar toward the West, as if on a path toward the full realization of liberty and civilization” (Dussel, “World-System” 221).

The Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte (published posthumously in 1822) was perhaps Hegel’s most coherent attempt to theorize Europe as the center of the world. The centrality of the German Confederation (Deutscher Bund) in the new Europe, after all, was but the political outcome of the recent Congress of Vienna, which in 1815 has restructured Germany on the imperial model of Charlemagne. Hegel’s text, in a way, only wanted to theorize, after the fact, this already existing Germanocentric Europe. It also wanted to systematize the entire Euro-
pean “‘periphery’ that surrounds that center” (Dussel, “Eurocentrism” 65). Hegel’s periphery, following Montesquieu, was “Europe’s own Iberian peninsula,” and, more generally, Europe’s own south: Greece, Malta, Portugal, Spain, southern France, and Italy (65–71). Hegel’s recentering of postrevolutionary Europe on the Germanic world (see Thompson 58) needed to theorize systematically what had remained just an implicit suggestion in Montesquieu: the idea of Europe’s historical progress, that is, as dialectics. A full-fledged theory of dialectics, in other words, was what Hegel wanted to add to Montesquieu’s Eurocentric position.

What this meant was that the negativity of the south, theorized from Montesquieu to Coppet, and contrasted only by the unsuccessful challenge of Andrés and his southern historians, was not just an accident of European theory. In other words, the negativity of the south was not theorized because, accidentally, the south in 1748 or in 1800 happened to be an economic and political margin of Europe. The negativity of the south, on the contrary, was the necessary condition for all these Eurocentric theories of Europe. If Eurocentrism is the tendency to explain history “without making recourse to anything outside of Europe” (Dussel, “Europe” 469–70), then Eurocentrism needs a figure of antithesis internal to Europe itself—it needs to posit a south as the negative moment in the dialectical progress of the spirit of Europe. In sum, what a theory of Europe needed, and what Hegel provided, was a full-fledged theory of dialectics. Montesquieu had theorized “a kind of balance between the southern and the northern nations [of Europe]”; Staël had theorized “two completely distinct literatures” and their “melting” together through the bond of Christianity; and both had theorized Europe as a progress from south to north. What Hegel needed now to theorize was the very connection between progress and the much-discussed difference of north and south.

The stated aim of the *Philosophie der Geschichte* was to provide a philosophical history of the world—philosophical in the sense that, rather than being concerned with mere facts, such history would divine the transcendental significance of history and give meaning to each single event. Hegel’s assumption, accordingly, was that world history, or universal history, was a rational theodicy—a succession of events that made sense: “The history of the world . . . presents us with a rational process” (Hegel 9). This was the premise Hegel asked his reader to accept: “In beginning the study of Universal History, we should at least have the firm,
unconquerable faith that Reason does exist there; and that the World of intelligence and conscious volition is not abandoned to chance, but must show itself in the light of the self-cognizant Idea” (10; original emphasis). The idea that history was a rational process of continuous betterment—from savagery to the law—was, of course, Montesquieu’s. Hegel, certainly not accustomed to praise anybody but himself, for once was ready to acknowledge the debt: “It is only a thorough, liberal, comprehensive view of historical relations (such as we find in Montesquieu’s ’Esprit des Loix [sic’]), that we can give truth and interest to [history]” (6–7). The Philosophie der Geschichte was therefore concerned exactly with finding such “thorough” and “liberal” historical relations among disparate world events and facts. These relations, in turn, were to show that universal history had to be ultimately coherent and aiming toward a single end: “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom” (19). The echo of Montesquieu—freedom is the end of history—is certainly audible yet again. Also in Hegel’s treatment of the despotic Orient the reader should have no problem to trace the logic back to De l’esprit des lois:

The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit—Man as such—is free; and because they do not know this they are not free. They only know that one is free. But on this very account, the freedom of that one is only caprice; ferocity—brutal recklessness or passion, or a mildness and tameness of the desires, which is itself only an accident of Nature—mere caprice like the former.—That one is therefore only a Despot; not a free man. (18)

If freedom was unattainable for the Orientals, it was, then, to Montesquieu’s “German fathers” that Europe owed the knowledge of freedom: “The German nations, under the influence of Christianity, were the first to attain the consciousness that man, as man, is free” (Hegel 18). This was, arguably, Montesquieu filtered through the religiosity of Coppet (whose sense of Christianity Hegel praised in some footnotes devoted to the Schlegel brothers; see Hegel 58 and 160). Also influenced by the discussions of Coppet seemed Hegel’s interest in patriarchy as “the primary form of conscious morality, succeeded by that of the State as its second phase” (41). Despite this Coppet-like religious patriarchalism, however, the project of the Philosophie der Geschichte remained Montesquieu’s more secular one: freedom, said Hegel, was not found in a state
of nature or given by a transcendental God; rather, “to the Ideal of Freedom, Law and Morality are indispensably requisite . . . . Society and the State are the very conditions in which Freedom is realized” (41). The spirit of the law, in other words, was the realization of freedom. Freedom, in turn, is what “tirelessly transgresses,” as Montesquieu had written, the natural laws that God has established. The difference, noticeable indeed, was that Montesquieu’s spirit of the laws had become, in Hegel’s postrevolutionary age of nationalism, a spirit of the state.

All these similarities between the Philosophie der Geschichte and De l’esprit des lois, however, are just barely relevant when compared to a much more essential one: the way, that is, in which Hegel understood history exactly on Montesquieu’s geographical basis. “The Geographical Basis of History” is in fact titled the central section of Hegel’s course on world history. For Hegel, history was not simply a chronological issue but one of space, too: history “falls under the category of Time as well as Space” (79). History happened in places, and chronology could best be described as the advancement of the spirit (of freedom) from one site to another: “The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning” (103). The plot traced by true history, moreover, was the climatological advancement of the spirit from a “torrid” south to a “temperate” north: “The true theatre of History is . . . the temperate zone; or, rather, its northern half, because the earth there presents itself in a continental form, and has a broad breast, as the Greeks say. In the south, on the contrary, it divides itself, and runs out into many points” (103).

As Massimo Cacciari and Franco Cassano have separately observed, the division of the south meant here the southern inability to cohere into a nation-state—an inability overcome, of course, by the nascent German nation (Cacciari, Arcipelago 20; Cassano, Pensiero 22). History was thus a movement from east to west; but, in fact, its “true” theater was a movement limited only to Europe, and going from south to north. After eliminating America and Australia (Hegel 83), too immature and “new” to be part of true history (Gerbi 582–614), the Philosophie der Geschichte also got rid of Asia and Africa from the true theater of history. Africa, to begin with, “has remained—for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World—shut up” (Hegel 91). It could then be no part of world history. Sure enough, Carthage and North Africa had their moment of glory; but “this part [of Africa],” said Hegel, “was to be—must be attached to Europe” (91). So, Hegel could quickly
leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World . . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History. (99)

Once he crossed the threshold and got to Asia, “the region of origination,” Hegel soon informed his reader that “in Asia arose the Light of the Spirit, and therefore the history of the World” (99). This concession to be an origin, however, could not guarantee Asia a much better fate than the one Hegel had just administered to Africa: because the “empire of fanaticism” (100) failed to develop, as it were, “in a really historical form.” The “beginning of history may be traced to them”; but “they have not attained an historical character.” In other words, even if Asia “presents the origination of all religious and political principles . . . [only] Europe has been the scene of their development” (101).

Europe thus remained as the sole stage for Hegel’s true theater of history. Not that this was a limitation! The loss of Asia, Africa, Australia, and America was not, after all, a major one or to be lamented: “Europe [is] the mingling of these several elements” (103); by itself, Europe was synthesis of the whole of world history. In a sense, even Europe was too much for Hegel to deal with. An entire part of it had still to be eliminated. Hegel’s Europe was divided not in two (north and south) but, rather, in three parts: southern Europe, “looking towards the Mediterranean” and including “Greece also”; the “heart of Europe,” of which “France, Germany and England are the principal countries”; and “the north-eastern States of Europe—Poland, Russia, and the Slavonic Kingdoms.” My reader should not worry, however, that the whole idea of a Europe (in theory) predicated on the antithesis of north and south would come to a halt here: northeastern Europe was, for Hegel, de trop. “These people [from eastern Europe] did, indeed, found kingdoms and sustain spirited conflicts with the various nations that came across their path . . . . Yet this entire body of peoples remains excluded from our consideration, because hitherto it has not appeared as an independent element in the series of phases that Reason has assumed in the World” (350). In other words, eastern Europe, along with Asia, Africa, America, and Australia, was dispensable too. Europe—or world history, which is
to say the same—only needed two, and no more than two parts: north and south.

The way in which Hegel could be so confident that a history of the whole world needed no more than a look at a small part of Europe is certainly striking. Yet Hegelian history did happen in such a small theater. And a theater it was. Like a modern comedy, it had four acts—which Hegel, theatrically indeed, gave the more scientific name of “phases.”

Asia was the “first phase” of history, but a phase “really unhistorical” (105–6); the “Greek World” truly began history by positing, against Asiatic despotism, the idea of “individualities forming themselves” (106–7); “the third phase is the realm of abstract Universality (in which the Social aim absorbs all individual aims): it is the Roman State” (107–8); its fourth and “ultimate result” was the “Germanic World,” the moment of the spirit’s “perfect maturity and strength” when freedom is founded not on despotism (first stage), individuality (second), or empire (third), but in the state, understood as the perfect, Montesquieu-like synthesis of individual and communal needs (108–10). Europe was, then, the history of a progress from the absolute negativity of despotism to the final (and a bit Hollywood-like) happy end of conquered freedom. In fact, the moment of despotism (Asia) was not even part of this progress—it was merely the origin and prologue through whose negation history could truly begin.

What was peculiar about Hegel’s understanding of Europe was not the idea of its self-sufficiency, progress, historicity, or, even, of its north-south difference. All these ideas we have repeatedly encountered—in Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jaucourt, Staël, Sismondi, Bonstetten, and the Schlegels. What was peculiar was the way in which all these elements cohered now into a philosophical system, one Hegel could, and did, call Europe. In such a system, history and progress were produced by internal differences and antitheses: each of the four stages of Hegel’s world history, in other words, was not just a process of linear evolution but a process of negation of the preceding stage. History began when the Greek individual affirmed itself as a negation of despotic authority: the individual found subjective freedom. The Roman state, in turn, was the negation of the individual self-sufficiency and its alienation into the superior good of the republic: it was the moment in which the objective freedom of the state triumphed. The fourth and last stage of Europe/history—the Germanic world—was the moment in which this alienation was negated, and the individual found itself free in the state: the mo-
This is the point which consciousness has attained, and these are the principal phases of that form in which the principle of Freedom has realized itself;—for the History of the World is nothing but the development of the Idea of Freedom. But Objective Freedom—the laws of real Freedom—demand the subjugation of the mere contingent Will—for this is in its nature formal. If the Objective is in itself Rational, human insight and conviction must correspond with the Reason which it embodies, and then we have the other essential element—Subjective Freedom—also realized. (456)

If Montesquieu had theorized Europe as the modernity of universal history, Hegel was now theorizing Europe as a process of historical dialectics—a process that was certainly unique to Europe:

Universal history . . . shows the development of the consciousness of Freedom on the part of Spirit, and of the consequent realization of that Freedom. This development implies a gradation—a series of increasingly adequate expressions or manifestations of Freedom, which result from its Idea. The logical, and—as still more prominent—the dialectical nature of the Idea in general, viz. that it is self-determined—that it assumes successive forms which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages, gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape. (63; original emphasis)

Africa was nature. Asia was the prehistorical unfreedom of despotism. Only Europe “developed” toward freedom, and such development was of a “dialectical nature.” What this meant is that the idea of freedom “advances to an infinite antithesis” (Hegel 26) by constantly negating and “transcending . . . earlier stages” of freedom toward an ever-richer Germanic one. No antithesis, no progress. The south was, then, the necessary antithesis that Hegel’s Germanic north had to imagine in order to imagine itself as progress and modernity—in order, namely, to be Europe. Put differently, the south had to occupy the place of negativity (the “immaturity” of history), lest Europe, as progress, would stop existing once and for all as modernity.