



# Art, politics and identity in de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie*

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze Anne Louise Germaine de Staël's novel *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807) from the point of view of the cultural studies and the visual studies, to shed a light on de Staël's attempt at promoting the construction of a modern Italian national identity, founded on the arts. The article examines how de Staël's participation in the Italian nation-building was half linked to her prejudices upon the Italian lateness in the process of civilization Northern European countries were undergoing, and half focused on creating a transnational, cross-boundary and European artistic language.

**Keywords** *Corinne ou l'Italie* · de Staël · Visual studies · Nation building · Italian studies

Anne Louise Germaine de Staël's 1807 novel *Corinne ou l'Italie*<sup>1</sup> (de Staël, 2017, pp. 1003–1460) can be considered an *oeuvre deuble*, as Benjamin Constant has notoriously declared: “L'ouvrage que je me propose d'analyser est à la fois un voyage et un roman. Il peut donc être envisagé sous deux points de vue” (Constant, 2017, pp. 1059–1060, also qtd. Seth & Cossy, 2017, p. 1578).<sup>2</sup> Madame de Staël's novel carries out both art criticism and a reflection on cultural and territorial boundaries. Many recent studies have shown that the cultural dimension of travel narratives is particularly relevant when it comes to determining their comparative potentiality as literary works. As Michel Collot's *Paysage et poésie* (2005) or *Pour une géographie littéraire* (2011), Hans Belting's *An anthropology of images: picture, medium, body* (2014), and Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of emotion: journeys in art, architecture and film* (2018) have demonstrated, “geopoetical” studies' connection with spaces, forms and

<sup>1</sup> All the textual quotations from the novel are taken from: Madame Anne Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein (2017, pp. 1003–1460).

<sup>2</sup> “The work I propose to analyse is both a journey and a novel. It can therefore be considered from two points of view” [my trans.].

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genres is both literary, political and cultural (cf. Collot, 2011, de Certeau, 1990, p. 170, and Chevalier 1993, p. 121).

Understanding space as an ecosystem of representation can help us understand visual and literary morphology as an intersection among the readable, the visible and, ultimately, what de Staël saw as both a “cultural depiction” of the nineteenth-century Italy, and a portrait of the political decline of modern Italy. However, as Pacini and Sluga have shown, de Staël’s reasoning on arts is just as important as the spatial depiction she deployed in the novel (Pacini, 1999; Sluga, 2003, 2015). In her writing, aesthetics and politics are two deeply connected concepts and, as Catriona Seth has claimed about the nineteenth-century politics of the peninsula, even the whole movement of the Italian Risorgimento recognised “à l’occasion le rôle de la fille de Necker dans la prise de conscience collective” (Seth & Cossy, 2017, p. 1580; cf. even Seth & Cossy, 2017, pp. 1579–1580).<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the aim of this article is to demonstrate de Staël’s participation in the Italian nineteenth-century nation-building especially thanks to her artistic criticism. The article seeks to evaluate how de Staël’s participation in the Italian cultural and national identity is, on the one hand, connected to her prejudiced view of Italy as lagging behind Northern Europe’s process of modernisation and, on the other hand, focused on creating a transnational, cross-boundary and European language of the Romantic arts system.<sup>4</sup> *Corinne ou l’italie*’s pictorialism is the element that leads us to assess how de Staël’s cultural evaluation of the peninsula is connected to her Romantic aesthetical evaluations, as well as to her remarks on the difficult encounter between a Northern European Protestant culture and a Southern European Catholic one.

Accordingly, it is worth noting Mark Juvan’s point, in *Worlding a peripheral literature*, that “world literature is a system that, by establishing interaction between particular literary fields and through translation, creates channels for the cross-national circulation of literary works, the reception and cultural impact of which become anchored relatively permanently within a multitude of different literary fields outside their local environment” (Juvan, 2019, p. 61). Juvan has thus shown how much translations can be appraised as the most important political and cultural vehicle for the global assessment of a national culture (cf. Juvan, 2019, pp. 1–35). Hence the relevance today of studying Madame de Staël’s cultural operation in promoting literary translations in early-nineteenth-century Italy, with her essay: *De l’Esprit des traductions* (1816), which was translated into Italian in the first issue of the magazine *Biblioteca italiana* (1816).<sup>5</sup> This publication initiated a long debate,

<sup>3</sup> “*The role of Necker’s daughter in the collective awareness*” [my trans.].

<sup>4</sup> On how de Staël constructed an “in-between” space, see: “Mme de Staël conscientiously blurs the barriers that separate what have traditionally been considered binary oppositions and opens up an “in-between” space” (Law-Sullivan, 2007, p. 53).

<sup>5</sup> See also the considerations on the culturally relevant value of translations expressed in *Corinne*: “« - Ne voudriez-vous pas, belle étrangère, reprit le comte d’Erfeuil, que nous admissions chez nous la barbarie tudesque, les *Nuits* d’Young des Anglais, les *Concetti* des Italiens et d’Espagnols ? Que deviendraient le goût, l’élégance du style français après un tel mélange ? » Le prince Castel-Forte, qui n’avait point encore parlé, dit : « Il me semble que nous avons tous besoin les uns des autres ; la littérature de chaque pays découvre, à qui sait la connaître, une nouvelle sphère d’idées. C’est Charles Quints lui-même qui a dit qu’un homme qui sait quatre langues vaut quatre hommes. Si ce grand génie poli-

in Italy, between classicist and romantic writers at a time when the Italian literature, entrenched in positions of firm adherence to Neoclassicism, was increasingly losing ground compared to the influence it had exercised in previous centuries over the European cultural sphere (cf. Moslemani, 2017). Taking this into account, Anne Louise Germaine de Staël's intellectual positions in her previous work *Corinne ou l'Italie* are multifarious, more complex, less programmatic towards Romanticism, and have only recently been more considered by critics (cf. Pacini, 1999, and Sluga, 2003; see even Guerlac, 2005; Casillo, 2006; Moslemani, 2017). From a comparative perspective, it is necessary to analyse how de Staël attempted to construct an Italian national identity from her position as one of the most influential female figures of the eighteenth- and the nineteenth-century Europe—an enemy of Napoleon's policy of conquest, who, through this novel, proved herself, on a transnational level, to be an enemy of cultural colonisation and an acute comparatist. Indeed, even though *Corinne ou l'Italie* is set during Napoleon's rise to power, themes of international politics are barely mentioned in passing, although they influence some of the protagonists' decisions: here too Madame de Staël was a non-conformist.

The Romantic authors, in opposition with the Winckelmannian idea of classicism—that well-known aesthetical principle of the “Edle Einfalt und stille Größe”—tried to define modernity even criticising the nation-building of the modern European history (cf. Carter, 2013). And de Staël participated in this, although she did that by taking up the debate on the Italian Renaissance and Middle Ages, as two periods that profoundly influenced the foreign perception of modern Italian identity, above all for their artistic significance and symbolism. As Robert Casillo has shown, in *The empire of stereotypes: Germaine de Staël and the idea of Italy* (2006), the reason for Staël's predilection for Italy lies “not just in her cultural preferences but in her conception of European history.” She collaborated in a re-evaluation of the Medieval Period which made the Italian history of the *comuni*—as is found even in the Geneva-born Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi's theory on the history of economics—closer to the cultural peaks of the Periclean Athens and the Augustan Rome; as if to suggest that the Middle Ages should be seen “as a stage in the progress of modern, that is, Northern European civilization” (Casillo, 2006, p. 34). Italian modern history, slightly devaluated because of its lack of contribution to the

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Footnote 5 (continued)

tique en jugeait ainsi pour les affaires, combien cela n'est-il pas plus vrai pour les lettres ? Les étrangers savent tous le français, ainsi leur point de vue est plus entendu que celui des Français qui ne savent pas les langues étrangères. Pourquoi ne se donnent-ils pas plus souvent la peine de les apprendre ? Ils conserveraient ce qui le distingue, et découvriraient ainsi quelquefois ce qui peut leur manquer » (*Livre VII, chapitre i*, p. 1125). [“Would you wish us,” asked d'Erfeuil, “to admit such Gothic barbarisms as Young's ‘Night Thought’, or the Spanish and Italian *Concetti*? What would become of our tasteful and elegant style after such a mixture?” The Prince Castel Forte now remarked, “I think that we all are in want of each other's aid. The literature of every country offers a new sphere of ideas to those familiar with it. Charles V. said, ‘The man who understands four languages is worth four men.’ What that great genius applied to politics is as true in the state of letters. Most foreigners understand French; their views, therefore, are more extended than those who know no language by their own. Why do they not oftener learn other tongues? They would preserve what distinguishes themselves, and might acquire some things in which they still are wanting” (Eng. trans. by Hill, de Staël, 2020, pp. 108–109).

process of the European modernisation and civilisation, is thus re-evaluated because of the Medieval Period: an era of interrelation between Nordic and Italic populations that represented a step towards the “civilization” of the Northern European countries. This theory is pursued by de Staël within *De la littérature* (1800) and partly in *Corinne*, though with the latter offering a complex picture of the Italian culture, made up of a philosophical reasoning on the cultural history of the peninsula (cf. Casillo, 2006, pp. 35, 36, 255; and see Ferguson, 1984). It is well known that foreign *Grand Tour* travellers—and not Italian ones—invented the modern myth of the Middle Ages and Renaissance Italy. Travelling through Italy was one of the most common practices in the European world, and there are many examples of these travel memoirs within Northern European literature (Buzard, 2002, pp. 40–45). Much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature is famously devoted to the theme of the *journey to the South*—and especially to Italy and Greece—even to the point of establishing a new aesthetics: a set of nostalgic feelings dedicated to the aesthetic taste of the ‘ancient’ and the ‘characteristic’ (cf. Jeremy, 1996, pp. 532, 533). Thus, the Northern European intelligentsia developed a Romantic taste for the ‘picturesque’ and the medieval world interpreting them as the roots or the “origins” of the Western culture.

It is worth noting that those same travellers contributed to the persistence of many prejudices and preconceptions about the Southern regions and especially about the whole peninsula (De Seta, 1982, pp. 135, 136). And in a peculiar way, even de Staël herself contributed to this. The author is known to have concluded a seven-month Italian tour herself, between December 1804 and June 1805, during which, compared to the education she had received about Italian literature and art history—as she acknowledges in *De la littérature*—she deepened her knowledge of Italian culture. At the start of her tour, her impressions of *Italianité* were so deeply immersed in those preconceptions she attached to the Italian world that, as we know from her travelling companion and would-be lover, the historian Sismondi, she was frequently deploring “Italy’s decline from its acme in republican Rome, its savage customs, its swarms of beggars and indolent priests, its ignorance and superstition, its moral weakness coupled with intellectual stagnation and superficiality, the oppressive weight of a monumental past upon a decaying civilization” (Casillo, 2006, p. 34). Nevertheless, on the recommendation of the Schlegel brothers, by 1804 she was reading Winckelmann and Lessing to extend her knowledge of the Roman world and the classical antiquities. August Wilhelm Schlegel himself was called to play the role of *cicerone* during her Italian tour; Sismondi’s theories on medieval Italian *comuni* led her to adjust her view of the supposed Italian political servility after the fall of the Roman Empire, and, finally, she read more Italian literature thanks to her friendship with the Italian poet Vincenzo Monti, which even prompted her to attend at Maffei’s, Goldoni’s and Gozzi’s plays (Casillo, 2006, p. 35; Seth & Cossy, 2017, p. 1575).

De Staël left Geneva on the 4 December 1805, with her children, their tutor August Wilhelm Schlegel and her servants, the Uginets. After passing through Lyon, the travellers crossed Mont-Cenis on the 19 December in conditions that inspired the evocation of Lucile and Oswald’s difficult journey in *Corinne*’s Book XIX. They arrived in Turin two days later and spent Christmas there. From 29 December to

14 January, they stopped in Milan. On 3 February, they were in Rome and stayed in Piazza di Spagna. Wilhelm von Humboldt, ambassador of the King of Prussia to the Holy See, was among the intimates of the small cosmopolitan circle during their stay. Staël was then admitted to the Arcades Academy. On the 17 of February, the tourists left for Naples with Sismondi. Three weeks later, they were back in Rome and stayed there for almost two months. On the way back, they passed through Florence, Bologna, Padua, Venice, and Milan (Seth & Cossy, 2017, p. 1573).

One of Staël's first experiences of the Italian art was in 1784 when she attended the *Armida*, a *dramma per musica* composed by Franz Joseph Haydn, for the private theatre of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy at Eszterháza (Piperno, 2011, p. 234, see Genari, 1947). This occasion, as Piperno argued, was clearly “neither the best opportunity to meet Italian opera in its country nor to get acquainted with its up-to-date repertoire,” although through this biographical information—including even the anecdote as it is recorded in her *carnets*—it is possible to note how much liberal arts and aesthetical experiences were relevant to de Staël's reading of the Italian political and cultural datum (Balayé, 1971, pp. 165, 166; see Piperno, 2011, p. 235). Indeed, it was not only music and operas that were relevant to her depiction of Italy, but literature, poetry and the art of *improvisatori* too (cf. Casillo, 2006, pp. 36–44).

*Corinne* is thus a narrative work that gains much from its reasoning on other art forms. In the novel, de Staël also reiterated “the instrumental function of the arts in the construction and definition of a nation” (Pacini, 1999, p. 171); but, as Sluga has noted, there is even room for something more here, since “*Corinne* is not only a novel about Italy, but also about gender differences—and their political and cultural importance, when they matter politically and culturally and why” (Sluga, 2003, p. 242). De Staël's writing acts as multi-layered: as a form of artistic criticism, as a representation of female identity and gender, and as an identity-centred depiction of nations.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, *Corinne* is a novel not only about Italy, but also about France and Britain, as much as it is a novel about the role of women in Italian, French and English society (Casillo, 2006, pp. 11, 12).

In the vein of Franco Moretti's theories argued in *Atlas of the European novel 1800–1900* ([1997] 1999), in which he followed the idea that literary genres belong to those places where they are mainly practised, it is worth noting that nothing, but a Romantic novel could describe de Staël's idea of Italy. Since cultural identity, nation-building, literary genres and artistic forms are all connected, these connections prove how de Staël, while maintaining, on the one hand, a strong political prejudice in favour of the supposed civilising superiority of Northern European countries over Southern ones, tried, on the other, to construct a de-hierarchical artistic language, based on the mixing of genres, forms and styles: a language that is *European* and *global* by its very nature.

Even though *Corinne* was composed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the story is placed at the end of the eighteenth, during the years 1794–1795, immediately before Napoleon's Italian campaigns in 1796–1797, inasmuch de Staël's scope was precisely to describe and illuminate for the European society the “monde latine” (Pacini,

<sup>6</sup> On this and for a discussion of the “feminized” and “oriental” character of the Italian nation in de Staël's works, cf. Patriarca (2005, p. 380) and followings. See even: O'Connor (1998).

1999, p. 163; and Seth & Cossy, 2017, p. 1573). Indeed, she would later parallel her work—as a sort of *De l'Italie*—with her *De l'Allemagne* (1810) (cf. Moslemani, 2017, p. 134; Pouzoulet, 1999, p. 39)—a statement that casts a light on how the arts symbolise a theoretical *medium* between *Corinne* and the Italian identity, or, as Guerlac has put it, the mean that mediates the relation between “the character *Corinne*” and “the character of the nation” (Guerlac, 2005, p. 48). Therefore, to exemplify these considerations, it is interesting to take a closer look at the novel plot.

Lord Oswald Nelvil, a young Scottish nobleman, head of a military regiment, is settled in France when his father dies, which sends him into a state of deep depression.<sup>7</sup> Advised by his doctors, he decides to travel South and go to Italy. On the way, he meets a frivolous French nobleman, the Count of Erfeuil, with whom he decides to continue his journey, first passing through Ancona, where they witness a huge fire. They continue their trip, and, once in Rome, Lord Nelvil does not seem to be impressed in any way by the Roman antiquity, and he seems to perpetuate his state of melancholy, until he comes across the well-known scene of *Corinna's* coronation in the Campidoglio, presented by the Prince of Castel Forte.

Regarding the coronation, at the time when de Staël was journeying through Italy, the *improvisatrice* Maria Maddalena Morelli (1727–1800), an improviser and poet laureate at the court of Vienna, known by the Arcadian pseudonym of Corilla Olimpica and who received the laurel crown on the Capitol in 1778,<sup>8</sup> was still fresh in the memory of the people of Rome. Even though de Staël is known to have claimed that she derived her heroine's name not from Corilla, but from “a Greek poetess of Pindar's time or perhaps from Propertius's *Corinne*,” the Italian *improvisatrice* provided a clear model for *Corinne's* genius for poetic improvisation (Casillo, 2006, p. 36; Seth & Cossy, 2017, p. 1583).

Next, Oswald is admitted to the salons of the Prince of Castel forte, thanks to Count d'Erfeuil, and he is by then more and more fascinated by *Corinne*. De Staël uses the long process of *Corinne* and Oswald getting to know each other intimately to portray the difficult encounter between the British and the Italian cultures. The author clearly employs this narrative pretext to devote several books to a theoretical reasoning on the character of the Italians. She first describes the churches, the catacombs and the monuments in Rome (IV–V), and then the folklore and the customs of the Italians (VI), the national literature (VII), Italian sculptures and paintings (VIII), the folk festivities and popular music (IX), and, finally, three cities of art: Naples (XIII), Venice (XV), and Florence (XVIII).

<sup>7</sup> On the relevance put by the author on the cultural differences between England and Scotland, see Law-Sullivan (2007, p. 54).

<sup>8</sup> See Seth & Cossy (2017, p. 1583): « Corilla Olimpica est le pseudonyme arcadien de Maria Maddalena Morelli (1727–1800), improvisatrice et poète, nommée lauréate à la cour de Vienne. De retour en Italie, elle est reçue à l'académie des Arcades. Grace à la pression d'admirateurs, entre autres le prince de Castiglione e l'abbé Godard, qui sera présent lors de la réception arcadienne de Stael, il est résolu de la couronner au Capitole. Un tel honneur n'était échu, avant Corilla, qu'à Pétrarque et à un improvisateur bien oublié, Bernardino Prefetti ; le Tasse est mort avant le triomphe prévu. Le couronnement de la poétesse le 31 août 1778 a suscité de moqueries. Les critiques modernes ont proposé de réévaluer le rôle joué par Corilla dans la genèse du roman, comme seule femme jamais couronnée au Capitole ». Cf. even Giuli (1999, pp. 165–184).

After their trip through the last three cities, the two lovers are forced to separate due to a malevolent fate. When Oswald confides to Corinne that he fears he has caused his father's death by falling in love with a woman *perdue* in France, she confides to him, by letter, that she is half Scottish and the descendent of a family close to his own father. Corinne thus reveals to him that she spent part of her youth in Britain, without ever being able to bond with the austere customs of that country, and that, after the death of her own father, she returned to Italy to enjoy the fame and glory that derived from her talents. After this discovery, Oswald returns to Scotland and finds out that the woman his father had designated for him is Corinne's half-sister. Having left Italy with a promise to plead the cause of the too-liberal Corinne before her stepmother, Oswald, while he is in the home country, slowly becomes more attached to Corinne's half-sister, Lucille. Corinne, attempting to join Oswald in Scotland, falls ill. When she realises that Oswald can rejoice in a life spent with the woman designated for him, she releases Oswald of their bond through a letter and she comes back to Italy, succumbing to her weakness and illness. Corinne thus sacrifices herself for her ideal of the art of her country, to ensure the renewal of the *Bel Paese* and because she is too far from the British—and North European—ideal of civilisation to be designated as a bride (cf. Guerlac, 2005, pp. 40–43). When Oswald arrives at Corinne's bedside, after some years of war in France, she asks, as her last wish, to see her half-sister's daughter, Juliette, and to teach her the talents in the art of poetry, of music and of painting.

Throughout the novel, Corinne plays the role of both the protagonist and the *cicerone* of the Roman art, for the other characters as well as for the reader. It is precisely the theoretical union between the Romantic ideal of the Sister Arts and the narrative representation that leads de Staël to reflect on the religious and political differences between Italy and Great Britain:

Notre religion, comme celle des Anciens, anime les arts, inspire les poètes, fait partie, pour ainsi dire, de toutes les jouissances de notre vie, tandis que la vôtre, s'établissent dans un pays où la raison dominait plus encore que l'imagination, a pris un caractère d'austérité morale dont elle ne s'écartera jamais. La nôtre parle au nom de l'amour, la vôtre au nom du devoir. Vos principes sont libéraux, nos dogmes sont absolus ; et néanmoins, dans l'application, notre despotisme orthodoxe transige avec les circonstances particulières, et votre liberté religieuse fait respecter ses lois, sans aucune exception (*Livre X, chapitre v*, p. 1201).<sup>9</sup>

To paraphrase—when put into application—the Italian system of the arts depends on Christian orthodox despotism and is forced to compromise with the contingent, while the English system of the arts—when put into application—thanks to the religious freedom of the Reformation, enforces the laws. In this respect, a good deal of criticism tends to trace de Staël's prejudices about Italian

<sup>9</sup> “Our religion, like that of the ancients, animates the arts, inspires the poets, and makes part of all the joys of life; while yours, established in a country where reason predominates over fancy, is stamped with a moral sternness that will never be effaced. Ours calls on us in the name of love; yours in that of duty. Your principles are liberal; our dogmas bigoted: yet our orthodox despotism has some fellowship with private circumstances; and your religious liberty exacts respect for its own laws, without any exception” (Eng. by Hill, de Staël, 2020, p. 169).

decadence—partly because of her father Necker’s intellectual influence—back to the idea that much of the European civilisation must necessarily have passed through the Reformation as an event that imposed severity, stability and the predominance of the “philosophical thinking” onto the Baroque phase, dictated by a supposed Italian moral confusion in alliance with the Spanish domain and the Counter-Reformation. However, de Staël’s interest in the fine arts moves somewhat contrary to this theory (cf. Casillo, 2006, pp. 4–6; 14, 15). Indeed, Staël saw no conflict between the Protestant Reformation and that “philosophical spirit” which the Romantic movement was promoting throughout Europe and which Staël hoped to transmit to the Italian culture. In fact, within *De la littérature*, she acknowledged “the inferiority of Ossian to Homer”; nonetheless, she demands her reader “whether the latter’s ‘Southern’ images awaken in the reader ‘so many ideas’ or whether they reveal as ‘immediate a rapport with the sentiment of the soul’, as do those of the melancholy Scottish bard” (Casillo, 2006, pp. 13–15). For this reason, the wide ekphrastic dimension of *Corinne ou l’Italie* intimates that the author’s admiration of Protestant culture is partly at odds with her artistic taste. However, as Casillo has noted, even if, at the time of writing *Corinne*, de Staël’s impressions of Italy were less negative than critics have always perceived, or, at least, dedicated to considering “national characters” as enigmatic systems (Casillo, 2006, p. 44), I would argue that it is precisely de Staël’s use of *ekphrasis* and artistic description that shows her high evaluation of the Italian art system and her admiration for cross-cultural and transnational art criticism, as we discover it especially in her work *De la littérature*.

Keeping this in mind, it is now relevant to give a closer look to the passage dedicated to Corinne’s arrangement of the Vatican tour for Oswald:

Viennent ensuite les portiques du Musée, où l’on voit à chaque pas un nouveau chef-d’oeuvre. Des vases, des autels, des ornements de toute espèce entourent l’Apollon, le Laocoon, les Muses. C’est là qu’on apprend à sentir Homère et Sophocle ; c’est là que se révèle à l’âme une connaissance de l’antiquité, qui ne peut jamais s’acquérir ailleurs. C’est en vain que l’on se fie à la lecture de l’histoire pour comprendre l’esprit des peuples ; ce que l’on voit excite en nous bien plus d’idées que ce qu’on lit, et les objets extérieurs causent une émotion forte, qui donne à l’étude du passé l’intérêt et la vie qu’on trouve dans l’observation des hommes et des faits contemporains. Au milieu des superbes portiques, asile de tant de merveilles, il y a des fontaines qui coulent sans cesse et vous avertissent doucement des heures qui passaient de même, il y a deux mille ans, quand les artistes de ces chefs-d’oeuvres existaient encore. Mais l’impression la plus mélancolique que l’on éprouve au Musée du Vatican, c’est en contemplant les débris de Statues que l’on y voit rassemblés ; le torse d’Hercule, des têtes séparées du tronc, un pied de Jupiter, qui suppose une statue plus grande et plus parfaite que toutes celles que nous connaissons (*Livre VIII, chapitre ii*, p. 1161).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “About the porticoes of this museum each step presents new wonders: vases, altars, ornaments of all kinds, surround the Apollo, the Laocoon, and the Muses. Here may one learn to appreciate Homer and Sophocles, attaining a knowledge of antiquity that cannot be elsewhere acquired. Amid these porticoes are fountains, whose incessant flows gently reminds you of past hours: it is two thousand years since the artists of these *chefs-d’oeuvre* existed. But the most melancholy sight here are the broken statues, the



The culturally problematic iconoclasm of the Protestant revolution clearly has little to do with de Staël's descriptive style, or with her theoretical focalisation on the fine arts. Indeed, as she wrote, from the “vases, des autels, des ornements de toute espèce entourent l'Apollon, le Laocoon, le Muses,” moderns can more easily understand Homer and Sophocles. Thus, literature and the arts are philosophically connected, and this is the reason why our experiencing of the arts makes it easier to discover “l'esprit des peuples.” Even so, in the passage, we are facing not only a matter of visualising the “spirit” of one specific nation, but, more importantly, a tacit relationship *between* two nations. As Pacini, *via* Balayé, has pointed out, we know that while de Staël had only seen copies of the Laocoon and the Belvedere Torso, Corinne and Oswald seem to be looking at the originals, and this small event in the plot would have alerted readers to the fact that after the Napoleonic campaigns, from 1805 onwards, the Belvedere Torso would no longer be in Italy, but in the Louvre, at Napoleon's behest (cf. Pacini, 1999, p. 171; Balayé, 1994, pp. 111–135). This is how de Staël established a dialogue between political facts and aesthetic description—through the visual paths her characters traverse among the Italian works of art. In fact, Seth has even claimed that some narrative elements are aimed at criticising the imperial regime. De Staël's characters face objects of art—in the Vatican collections, in the Tivoli villa, in Florence—that the novelist knew in her repatriation to Paris: the French spoliations are thus condemned. While the early Revolutionary France is represented as the lost nation of liberty, the provincial Northumberland society in which Corinne finds herself as a teenager is constrained by provincial attitudes and marked by the societal conventions. The Italian nation, meanwhile, politically divided and economically lagging behind Britain, gives Corinne a prominent place without measuring her against the social prejudices of the rest of Europe. Accordingly, after the publishing success of the novel, the French nation read *Corinne* as an attack on the Empire, and an attack on the frivolous, illiberal Napoleonic society. De Staël, for her part, demanded that the authorities pay no attention to her talent as a novelist, and instead take note of the moderate side of the work (Seth & Cossy, 2017, p. 1591).

Insisting on the novel's pictorialist call, the description of Corinne's Tivoli gallery, in Book VII, represents a remarkable visual moment, as Pacini has argued. The critic has demonstrated how the description of two paintings in Corinne's Tivoli mansion constructs a relevant ekphrastic moment and yet a cultural and political intertextuality within the story (Pacini, 1999, pp. 172–174). One of these paintings is Jacques-Louis David's *Les Licteurs rapportent à Brutus les corps de Ses fils* (1789), which depicts the return of the corpses of Brutus' sons. This work of art shows Brutus' unwavering devotion to the Republic, above and beyond any private interest: it is Brutus himself who decides to execute his own sons after they had plotted in a royalist conspiracy. The painting, presented at the 1789 Salon in Paris, right after the assault on the Bastille, was considered as a symbol, in the eyes of the Parisian public, of the Jacobin

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Footnote 10 (continued)

torso of Hercules, heads separated from their trunks; the foot of a Jupiter, which it is supposed must have belonged to the largest and most symmetrical statue ever known” (Eng. by Hill, de Staël, 2020, p. 137).

insurrection against the French monarchy. As Pacini claimed, after Alfieri and Voltaire wrote their dramatic versions of this story, both “royalists and radicals took opposite sides and vehemently applauded Brutus or Tarquin: they turned the plays into forceful political demonstrations upholding either a republican regime or the old French monarchy” (Pacini, 1999, p. 172). Moreover, it is interesting that de Staël risked Napoleonic censorship by depicting Corinne showing Oswald François Gérard’s work *Le Bélisaire* (1795): a painting dedicated to the *Bélisaire affair*, namely an affair that saw Marmontel publishing a subversive *Bélisaire* in 1767, which was immediately condemned by the Sorbonne. The publication was then defended by the most enlightened and radical Parisian *intelligentsia*, including Turgot and Voltaire, while it was condemned by Louis XV in support of the Sorbonne. Thus, as has been shown, the “mention of French paintings,” within de Staël’s writing, “celebrate[s] recent battles against despotism and civil intolerance, at the same time that [the paintings] also provide models of enlightened activism for both politicians and artists” (Pacini, 1999, p. 174). In these terms, the author’s attempt is very much to restore a European picture of the relationship between the arts and the political action, which becomes especially clear, thanks to de Staël’s iconotextual, ekphrastic and visual representation.

As they continue their visit in the Tivoli mansion, Corinne shows Oswald two sacred-themed paintings, which lead her to make some remarks on the Catholic and the Protestant religions. After a few steps, in an attempt to represent the whole of the European artistic identity in her gallery, in a comparison with the European national literary canons, Corinne reviews for Oswald four pictorial subjects. The first one is classical: Aeneas approaching Dido in the Elysium. Then, she shows an Italian subject from Tasso’s epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata*: Clorinda, who forgives Tancredi at the moment he strikes her breast with his sword. The third painting is from Shakespeare and depicts Macbeth’s terror as he learns that the witches’ oracle has been fulfilled, that the forest of Birnam is advancing towards Dunsinane, and that he will be fighting Macduff, who is born by Caesarean section. The last painting brings together French literature as exemplified by Racine’s *Phaedra*. The painting shows the handsome young Hippolytus rejecting the perfidious accusations of his beautiful mother. Theseus still protects his bride, while Phaedra, with a frightened countenance, is advised by her nurse to continue with her criminal accusations. Corinne, after stating that Hippolytus is probably more handsome in the painting than ever before in Racine, concludes by remarking:

« Le poète n’a jamais mis en scène Hippolyte avec Phèdre, depuis que Phèdre l’a calomnié ; la peintre devait les réunir pour rassembler, comme il l’a fait, toutes les beautés des contrastes ; mais n’est-ce pas une preuve, qu’il a toujours pittoresque, qu’il vaut mieux que les poètes fassent des vers d’après les tableaux, que les peintres des tableaux d’après les poètes ? L’imagination doit toujours précéder la pensée ; l’histoire de l’esprit humaine nous le prouve » (*Livre VIII, chapitre iv*, p. 1174).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “The poet never brings them together after she has slandered him. The painter was obliged to oppose them to each other; but it is not the distinction between the picturesque and the poetical proved by the fact, that verses copied from paintings are worth all the paintings that have imitated poetry? Fancy must ever precede reason, as it does in the growth of the human mind” (Eng. by Hill, de Staël, 2020, p. 148).

The theory according to which the ideal imagination should precede the rational thinking—namely, that the poets should versify on paintings, and not vice versa—is a critical theory that elevates literature as an art aimed at reasoning, whereas painting is supposed to be an art that speaks to the eyes and to the instant emotions. In these terms, Lessing's well-known theory included in the essay on the Laocoon *Laokoön oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), and which lead him to determine the superiority of Virgil's written word over the presumed 'staticity' of the marble movement, necessarily constitutes a source for de Staël (G. E. Lessing, trans. by McCormick, 1984, pp. 78–85). Nevertheless, the Classical, Italian, French and English literatures are all placed side by side in Corinne's gallery, as if to show that the various European nations have something to learn from each other, from a literary, artistic and critical point of view. The difference between Oswald's and Corinna's way of life is in fact remarked on in the novel as a difference between a Counter-Reformation and a Protestant way of living—namely, a difference between a Protestant Reformation culture—iconophobic—and a Counter-Reformation culture, devoted to iconophilia. In this regard, the scene where the characters listen to the *Miserere* in the Sistine Chapel, in Book X, becomes peculiarly relevant:

Oswald se rendit à la chapelle Sixtine pour entendre le fameux *Miserere* vanté dans toute l'Europe [...]. Michel Ange s'était pénétré de la lecture du Dante ; et le peintre comme le poète représente des êtres mythologiques en présence de Jésus-Christ ; mais il fait presque toujours du paganisme le mauvais principe, et c'est sous la forme des démons qu'il caractérise les fables païennes. On aperçoit sur la voûte de la chapelle le prophètes et les sibylles appelées en témoignage par le chrétiens ; une foule d'anges les entourent, et toute cette voûte ainsi peinte semble rapprocher le ciel de nous ; mais ce ciel est sombre et redoutable ; le jour perce à peine à travers les vitraux qui jettent sur les tableaux plutôt des ombres que des lumières ; l'obscurité agrandit encore les figures déjà si imposantes que Michel-Ange a tracées ; l'encens, dont le parfum a quelque chose de funéraire, remplit l'air dans cette enceinte, et toutes les sensations préparent à la plus profonde de toutes, celle que la musique doit produire (*Livre X, chapitre iv*, p. 1198).<sup>12</sup>

De Staël, through her ekphrastic skill, represents and discusses Michelangelo's pictorial intentions, as well as the very picturisation of the *Dies Irae*'s verses, namely the verse "Teste David cum Sybilla." Here Oswald and Corinne face Michelangelo's depiction, symbolism and bulwark of the Italian Renaissance art, as well as

<sup>12</sup> "He sought the Sistine Chapel, to hear the far-famed *Miserere* [...]. Dante had infected this painter with the bad taste of representing mythological beings in the presence of Christ; but it is chiefly as demons that he has characterised these Pagan creations. Beneath the arches of the roof are seen the prophets and heathen priestesses, called as witnesses by the Christians (*teste David cum Sybilla*); a host of angels surround them. The roof is painted as if to bring heaven nearer to us; but that heaven is gloomy and repulsive. Day scarcely penetrates the windows, which throw on the pictures more shadows than beams. This dimness, too, enlarges the already commanding figures of Michel Angelo. The funeral perfume of incense fills the aisles, and every sensation prepares us for that deeper one which awaits the touch of music" (Eng. by Hill, de Staël, 2020, p. 167).

of the Counter-Reformation and the Catholic painting commissions. Far then from carrying out a Protestant evaluation of the role of images within the history of ideas, throughout the novel, de Staël conducts an exaltation of the Sister Arts, as well as an equation between the arts, literature, music and sculpture, so as to remark, through the narrative medium, the influence the art system casts on the Western theoretical, religious and philosophical thinking. In these terms, the guiding tour that Corinne conducts for Oswald is a view that attempts to insert Italian culture into a broader European dialogue, as de Staël's essay *De l'Esprit des traductions* aspired to do, but evaluating the other fine arts at the level of the prominence of the literary field. *Corinne* is therefore a necessary narrative feature employed to explain the intermediality of the arts. Hence, de Staël's will is for a European reception of the history of the arts that takes different layers of artistic and cultural expression into account (cf. Brylowe 2019, pp. 1–36). While Italians must necessarily translate other literatures, in the same way, Romanticism can spread only by considering various European artistic paths, and focusing on aesthetical forms, on intertextuality and on iconology. De Staël, through *Corinne*, proved what Svetlana Alpers called the modern Western “mapping impulse.”

Alpers recognised how, at the beginning of Western modernity, and in the visual culture of seventeenth-century Dutch art in particular, “there was perhaps at no other time or place such a coincidence between mapping and picturing” (Alpers, 1983, p. 119). This permeation of two different impulses becomes, through de Staël's pen, something very similar to what we could call a “cultural picturing.” Thus, mapping, describing and picturing uncharted territories in our historical, political and cultural knowledge of other cultures, is what moves de Staël in her desire to encapsulate Italy in a single work of art: a novel. It is only through these considerations that becomes clear how the comparative datum of the novel was of great importance for the reviewers of *Corinne's* time.

In conclusion, the paper tried to demonstrate how de Staël's mapping of pre-Napoleonic Italy was a mapping concerned with the renewal of a national identity, from the point of view of an artistic ideology. De Staël's use of an ideology, which, paraphrasing Mitchell, is inherent in every iconological representation, makes Corinne's identification with Italy the icon of a country supposedly experiencing political decadence, but devoted to renewal, or, if it resists, doomed to failure. If we accept the difference between idolatry and iconoclasm, as Mitchell speaks of it, we realise how the iconoclastic impulse, coinciding with the Protestant and the Puritan cultures, always sees itself “at a historical distance from the idolater, working from a more ‘advanced’ or ‘developed’ stage in human evolution, therefore in a position to provide a euhemeristic, historicizing interpretation of myths taken literally by the idolater” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 197). Thus, from a historical point of view, this very ‘advanced’ stage, from which de Staël analyses Italy, is relevant to her art and literary criticism, although, from a critical point of view, it represents at the same time a thorn in the side of the author's own efforts to obtain the cultural “advancement” that she plans for the *Bel Paese*, and which she recognises instead in the Northern national cultures. Finally, we can evaluate de Staël's work from a double perspective. On the one hand, it contains the prejudicial view of modern Italy as a nation that was falling behind in the process of civilization that was being achieved at a

political and cultural level by the Northern European countries—a theory that, as for instance, Burckhardt put forward in *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860). On the other hand, we can evaluate de Staël's critical thinking as being devoted to demolishing the iconoclastic-idolatrous Western dialectic and to rendering *Corinne*, and its consequent identification with Italy, as a work based on a comparative, mixed, intermedial, cross-national art system.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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