

Toril Moi, "A Woman's Desire to be Known: Silence and Expressivity in Corinne." In Ghislaine McDayter, ed, Untrodden Regions of the Mind: Romanticism and Psychoanalysis. Bucknell Review 45.2: 143-75.

A Woman's Desire to Be Known: Expressivity and Silence in *Corinne*

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L'humanité est mâle et l'homme définit la femme non en soi mais relativement à lui; elle n'est pas considérée comme un être autonome.

[Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.]

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

J'aurais pu, ce me semble, envoyer à ma place une poupée légèrement perfectionnée par la mécanique; elle aurait très bien rempli mon emploi dans la société.

[It seems to me that I could have sent a delicately improved mechanical doll in my place. It would have fulfilled my function in society very well.]

—Madame de Staël, *Corinne, or Italy*

Efterhaanden blev da Hørelsen mig den kjæreste Sands; thi ligesom Stemmen er Aabenbarelsen af den for det Ydre incommensurable Inderlighed, saaledes er Øret det Redskab, ved hvilket denne Inderlighed opfattes, Hørelsen den Sands, ved hvilken den tilegnes.

[Little by little, hearing became my favourite sense; for just as it is the voice that reveals the inwardness which is incommensurable with the outer, so the ear is the instrument whereby that inwardness is grasped, hearing the sense by which it is appropriated.]

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

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Introduction

WE no longer die for love. When relationships break up, we soldier on, seeking solace in work, family, friends, or casual sex. Sooner or later we start looking for new relationships. Not so with Corinne, Madame de Staël's pathbreaking woman of genius. When her lover marries another, Corinne loses all her formidable talents, her interest in art, books, other people, her voice, and, finally, her life. Why? What does the brilliant Corinne's lingering death mean?

I want to show that Corinne's death is not simply the result of Staël's failure of feminist nerve. In spite of Corinne's sad demise, the novel offers a radical analysis of women's situation in 1807. (*Corinne* was written in 1806–07, and published in April 1807.) And although there is much melodrama in *Corinne*, to think that one can dismiss Corinne's death by calling it "melodramatic," is to blind oneself to the philosophical and psychological meanings of the melodramatic mode. Peter Brooks speaks of melodrama's aesthetics of *excess*, and shows that it is immensely influential on nineteenth-century literature and theater.¹ In particular, the influence of pictorial melodrama is ubiquitous in *Corinne*.² All the crucial scenes in the novel are staged as if they were paintings, or in theatrical terms: tableaux. In the world of *Corinne*, as in the world of melodrama, aesthetics and ethics are deeply intertwined. In this novel pictures are expected to convince by their contents, not just by their color or technique. Corinne and Oswald both expect paintings to have strong ethical implications.³ Corinne's death scene exemplifies this aesthetic program: it is at once a tableau and the outcome of Staël's meditations on the relationship between love and expressivity, and between love and our capacity to understand others.

A major concern in *Corinne* is the problem of knowing others and of being known by them. Philosophers usually refer to these questions as "skepticism concerning other minds," and the problem arises when someone comes to experience his or her existential separateness from others. But Staël does not ponder such questions in the abstract, as so many philosophers have done. Pitting England against Italy, and male against female, *Corinne* asks us to think about what it takes to understand human beings separated from us by national or sexual differences. These are uncannily modern problems, as relevant today as two hundred years ago.

Corinne explores these questions through an almost obsessive concern with Corinne's expressivity, represented both in terms of her capacity to show others who she is, and in terms of her capacity to

understand others. Yet, in spite of the insistence on expressivity, Corinne's sudden silence in book 17 is the turning point of the plot. The novel's explicit preoccupation with the aesthetics of theatricality and absorption, to draw on Michael Fried's useful terms, is closely connected with its understanding of expressivity and silence, love and knowledge. Thus Corinne's ceaseless attempts to show herself to others is contrasted with her rival and half-sister Lucile's constant efforts to hide herself from others. Against Corinne's direct gaze, the novel sets Lucile's lowered eyelids; against Corinne's rhapsodizing voice it sets Lucile's constrained silence. Moreover, it would seem that Oswald falls in love with Lucile precisely because her silence prevents him from getting to know her: "[I]l aimait Lucile presque sans la connaître, car il ne lui avait pas entendu prononcer vingt paroles," the narrator comments (F17.8.494)⁴ [He loved Lucile almost without knowing her, for he had not yet heard her utter twenty words] (E17.8.337). In fact, the contrast between Lucile and Corinne is used to illustrate all the important themes in this novel: while it is crucial to its aesthetic considerations, it is also central to its ruminations on women's position in society, and on love and knowledge. The novel's treatment of love and knowledge, moreover, returns us to the question of melodrama: *Corinne* now seems to me to be the prototype, or the literary precursor, of the film genre Stanley Cavell has called the "melodrama of the unknown woman."

One final question needs to be addressed: why write on *Corinne* at all? I think I owe my enduring fascination with *Corinne* to Ellen Moers's chapter on the "Myth of Corinne" in her pioneering book *Literary Women*, first published in 1976. Moers's vivid account of the importance of *Corinne* for nineteenth-century readers enthralled me. "[*Corinne*] is an immortal book, and deserves to be read three score and ten times—that is once every year in the age of man," Elizabeth Barrett wrote at the age of twenty-six.⁵ Jane Austen, Mary Godwin Shelley, George Sand, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Margaret Fuller ("The Yankee Corinna"), Kate Chopin—all of them read *Corinne*, passionately. Daisy Miller's visit to the Coliseum in moonlight is taken straight out of *Corinne*. Even Ibsen's Nora dances the tarantella in secret homage to Corinne, who danced it first. *Corinne* was published in more than forty editions (in French alone) between 1807 and 1872.⁶ The success and influence of this novel was quite simply immense.⁷

But does *Corinne* matter today? Of course, a book that mattered so intensely to a whole century is of enormous historical interest. For Staël's contemporary admirers, male and female, *Corinne* was a "remarkably courageous celebration of the rights of spiritual genius

and intellectual freedom, in defiance of the spreading imperial rule of a military genius named Napoleon."⁸ For its post-Waterloo readers, however, the novel's appeal lies in what Moers calls the "ultimate fantasy of the performing heroine."⁹ "What Oswald is made to love in *Corinne*," Moers writes, "is not the woman in the genius but, if the expression is pardonable, the whole package: the woman of genius at the moment and in the place of her greatest public triumph."¹⁰ As long as passionate love affairs keep going badly wrong, as long as some people believe in the myth of the unbearable ugliness of the intellectual woman, as long as some girls feel that they have to "dumb down" in order to be loved, there is good reason to reread *Corinne*.¹¹

Absorption and Theatricality

Corinne is a highly theatrical novel, in the sense that it constantly invites its readers to approach it as if it were the text of a play, the kind of play that relies on tableaux for its greatest effects.¹² Thus we are supposed to see *Corinne* at the Capitol, *Corinne* at Cape Miseno, *Corinne* in her dying moment pointing toward the cloud over the moon, and so on. Tableau in French means painting or picture, and paintings play an important part in the novel. Oswald and *Corinne* visit picture galleries together, and *Corinne*'s own collection of paintings is detailed at length. Lucile identifies with Coreggio's *La Madonna della Scala*, *Corinne* with Domenichino's *The Sibyl*.¹³ Modern editors always stress the importance of these paintings. Thus my French editions of *Corinne* and *De la littérature* both reproduce a detail of François Gérard's *Corinne at Cape Miseno* on the cover, whereas the Oxford edition of *Corinne* opts for Domenichino's *Sibyl*.

Nothing provides a better grasp of the contrast between *Corinne* and Lucile than the novel's first representation of the two women. *Corinne* is, famously, introduced in book 2, where Oswald witnesses her crowning at the Capitol in Rome. Lucile, on the other hand, is not seen until book 16, when Oswald catches a glimpse of her in the park of Lady Edgermond's Northumberland estate. I shall start with Oswald's first impression of Lucile, which also is the novel's first description of her:

[Oswald] se promena dans le parc et aperçut de loin, à travers les feuilles, une jeune personne de la taille la plus élégante, avec des cheveux blonds d'une admirable beauté, qui étaient à peine retenus par son cha-

peau. Elle lisait avec beaucoup de recueillement. Oswald la reconnut pour Lucile, bien qu'il ne l'eût pas vue depuis trois ans . . .

C'était Lucile, qui entrait à peine dans sa seizième année. Ses traits étaient d'une délicatesse remarquable: sa taille était presque trop élancée, car un peu de faiblesse se faisait remarquer dans sa démarche; son teint était d'une admirable beauté, et la pâleur et la rougeur s'y succédaient en un instant. Ses yeux bleus étaient si souvent baissés que sa physionomie consistait surtout dans cette délicatesse de teint qui trahissait à son insçu les émotions que sa profonde réserve cachait de toute autre manière. . . [Oswald] rêvait à la pureté céleste d'une jeune fille qui ne s'est jamais éloignée de sa mère, et ne connaît de la vie que la tendresse filiale. (F16.5.450)

[(Oswald) went for a stroll in the grounds. Through the foliage he saw, in the distance, a girl with the most elegant figure and with wonderfully beautiful fair hair barely contained under her hat. She was reading very attentively. Oswald recognized her as Lucile, despite not having seen her for three years . . .

It was Lucile, who was just sixteen.¹⁴ Her features were remarkably delicate, her figure almost too slender, for a little weakness could be seen in her walk. Her complexion was wonderfully beautiful and paleness gave way to blushes in a moment. Her blue eyes were lowered so often that her expression lay mainly in that delicate complexion which, unknown to her, betrayed emotions which her deep reserve concealed in every other way . . . (Oswald) meditat(ed) on the heavenly purity of a young girl who has never left her mother's side and whose only knowledge of life is filial affection.] (E16.5.306)

Readers of *The Mill on the Floss* will remember that this is the exact point where Maggie Tulliver gives up on *Corinne*. "I didn't finish the book," said Maggie. "As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable."¹⁵

Lucile is reading attentively. Her eyes are not lifted. She does not look at Oswald or anyone else. She doesn't know that she is being watched. Even if she had known, she would never knowingly have revealed her feelings. The young, blond girl reading in the park is the very definition of *absorption*, as defined by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality*, his epochal study of Diderot's aesthetics and eighteenth-century French painting.

Briefly put, Fried understands absorptive art as art that seeks to absorb the beholder, to fix her in front of the canvas. Fundamentally, the point of absorptive art is to allow the beholder to forget that she is a beholder, to "establish the fiction that no one is stand-

ing before the canvas."¹⁶ There is a paradox here: the fiction that there is no beholder serves to stop and hold the beholder precisely there, in front of the canvas (*AT*, 108). In its effort to eradicate self-consciousness in the beholder, absorptive art is the antithesis of modernism. In the eighteenth-century people visiting an art exhibition would remain transfixed in front of a canvas, often for hours on end. Today, such behavior would probably strike us as a highly theatrical, self-dramatizing gesture on the part of the beholder. We'd think that the person doing this was making an exhibition of herself. In the eighteenth-century, however, such experiences were sought after, and taken as evidence of the greatness of the art that induced them. Absorption, then, is a state of intense reverie, in which the beholder is able totally to forget herself, to let herself dream (free-associate) without self-restraint.

In early to mid-eighteenth-century French painting, painters sought to inspire the desired state of absorption in beholders by representing characters who were themselves absorbed. In the first half of the century, this could be done through the representation of everyday activities (think of Chardin's paintings of young people blowing soap bubbles or building card castles). By the 1760s, Fried writes, absorption could only be induced by more extraordinary means. Greuze still represents absorbed young girls, but now seemingly everyday activities—a girl crying over a broken mirror or a dead bird—are suffused with a dramatic and emotional intensity absent in Chardin.¹⁷ *Corinne's* representation of Lucile instantly brought Greuze's *Une jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort* (A young girl crying over her dead bird, 1765) to my mind.¹⁸

Lucile's (self-)absorbed inexpressiveness becomes the source of erotic fantasies for Oswald:

[S]a complète réserve lui laissait toujours du doute et de l'incertitude sur la nature de ses sentiments. Le plus haut point de la passion, et l'éloquence qu'elle inspire, ne suffisent pas encore à l'imagination; on désire toujours quelque chose de plus; et ne pouvant l'obtenir, l'on se refroidit et on se lasse, tandis que la faible lueur qu'on aperçoit à travers les nuages tient long-temps la curiosité en suspens, et semble promettre dans l'avenir de nouveaux sentiments et des découvertes nouvelles. Cette attente cependant n'est point satisfaite; et quand on sait à la fin ce que cache tout ce charme du silence et de l'inconnu, le mystère aussi se flétrit, et l'on en revient à regretter l'abandon et le mouvement d'un caractère animé. (F17.5.485–86)

[(H)er complete reserve always left him in doubt and uncertainty about the nature of her feelings. The highest point of passionate love and the

eloquence it inspires still do not satisfy the imagination. You¹⁹ always want something more, and if you cannot get it you become cold and weary. But the faint glimmer you can see through the clouds holds curiosity in suspense for a long time and seems to promise new feelings and new discoveries in the future. This expectation, however, is not satisfied. In the end, when you know what is hidden by all the charm of silence and the unknown, the mystery, too, fades, and you come back to regretting the lack of restraint and the animation of a lively personality.] (E17.5.331-32)

Oswald's attraction to Lucile is the attraction of a lover to a blank screen. This is transference love: Oswald admiring his own projection.

It is tempting to assume that if Lucile is presented as the quintessential absorptive painting, then *Corinne* must be theatricality incarnate. This conclusion seems all the more compelling to anyone reading *Corinne* after the advent of modernism. To us, it is almost impossible to understand *Corinne* as anything else than a misguided painting by, say, Bouguereau or Alma-Tadema, a kind of camp incarnation of theatricality and bad taste. But these are anachronistic associations. The character of *Corinne* embodies the aesthetic ideals of *Corinne*, and these have to be understood on their own terms before we choose to embrace or reject them. The "modernist" response to *Corinne* has another flaw: it can't account for the emotions, feelings, identifications that the novel still stirs up in many readers. Such readers (I am one of them) are not necessarily aesthetic morons: there are reasons why the hopeless love affair and death of the supertalented *Corinne* still have the power to move. I shall return to this.

In order to avoid the "modernist" response to *Corinne*, we need to understand what theatricality meant in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century France. Again I'll rely on Fried's study of the term. It is crucial to note that theatricality and absorption are not in fact binary opposites. Theatricality is a feature of a work of art or of a particular artistic performance, whereas absorption is a mental and emotional state experienced by the beholder. Theatricality destroys this state because it brings about a jarring awareness in the beholder of her own act of beholding, one might say. Already in the 1760s it had become evident that the mere representation of absorptive states was no longer enough to secure absorption in the beholder. Fried shows that a new, dramatic conception of art was being established at this time:

The dramatic conception calls for establishing the fiction of the beholder's nonexistence in and through the persuasive representation of fig-

ures wholly absorbed in their actions, passions, activities, feelings, states of mind. (As we have seen, increasingly strong measures came to be required in order to persuade contemporary audiences that a figure or group of figures *was* so absorbed.) (AT, 131-32)

For Diderot, anything that reminds the beholder that he *is* a beholder, was theatrical. He used the term *le théâtral* [the theatrical] to mean "consciousness of being beheld," and took it to be synonymous with falseness (AT, 100). Diderot also distinguished between *attitudes* and *actions*: "Autre chose est une attitude, autre chose une action. Toute attitude est fausse et petite; toute action est belle et vraie" [An attitude is one thing, an action is another. Attitudes are false and petty, actions are all beautiful and true.]²⁰ Fried comments:

Diderot's distinction between actions and attitudes asserted a difference not of degree, but of kind, i.e. between natural, spontaneous, largely automatic realizations of an intention or expressions of a passion on the one hand and conventional, mannered, and (in the pejorative sense of the term . . .) theatrical simulacra of those on the other. (AT, 101)

A Diderotian critic, then, would want to know whether the performing Corinne strikes attitudes, or expresses deeply passionate actions. The answer to this question would decide whether she should be rejected as theatrical or applauded for being simple and natural.

Let us turn to the novel's first description of Corinne, as seen through Oswald's eyes. He catches his first glimpse of her as her triumphal chariot is moving through admiring crowds:

Elle était vêtue comme la Sybille du Dominiquin, un schall des Indes tourné autour de sa tête, et ses cheveux du plus beau noir entremêlés avec ce schall; sa robe était blanche; une draperie bleue se rattachait au-dessous de son sein, et son costume était très pittoresque, sans s'écarter cependant assez des usages reçus, pour que l'on pût y trouver de l'affectation. Son attitude sur le char était noble et modeste: on apercevait bien qu'elle était contente d'être admirée; mais un sentiment de timidité se mêlait à sa joie, et semblait demander grace pour son triomphe; l'expression de sa physionomie, de ses yeux, de son sourire, intéressait pour elle, et le premier regard fit de lord Nelvil son ami, avant même qu'une impression plus vive le subjuguât. Ses bras étaient d'une éclatante beauté; sa taille grande, mais un peu forte, à la manière des statues grecques, caractérisait énergiquement la jeunesse et le bonheur; son regard avait quelque chose d'inspiré. L'on voyait dans sa manière de saluer et de remercier, pour les applaudissements qu'elle recevait, une sorte de naturel qui relevait l'éclat de la situation extraordinaire dans laquelle elle se trouvait; elle donnait à la fois l'idée d'une prêtresse d'Apollon,

qui s'avavançait vers le temple du Soleil, et d'une femme parfaitement simple dans les rapports habituels de la vie; enfin tous ses mouvements avaient un charme qui excitait l'intérêt et la curiosité, l'étonnement et l'affection. (F2.1.52)

[She was dressed like Domenichino's Sibyl. An Indian turban was wound round her head, and intertwined with her beautiful black hair. Her dress was white with a blue stole fastened beneath her breast, but her attire, though very striking, did not differ so much from accepted styles as to be deemed affected. Her demeanour on the chariot was noble and modest; it was obvious that she was pleased to be admired, but a feeling of shyness was mingled with her happiness and seemed to ask pardon for her triumph. The expression on her countenance, in her eyes, and in her smile aroused interest in her, and the first sight of her inclined Lord Nelvil in her favour even before he was conquered by any stronger feeling. Her arms were dazzlingly beautiful; her tall, slightly plump figure, in the style of a Greek statue, gave a keen impression of youth and happiness; her eyes had something of an inspired look. In her way of greeting people and thanking them for the applause she was receiving, there was a kind of naturalness which enhanced the effect of (*qui relevait l'éclat de*) her extraordinary situation. At one and the same time she gave the impression of a priestess of Apollo who approaches the sun-god's temple, and of a woman who is completely natural (*simple*) in the ordinary relationships of life. In short, all her movements had a charm which aroused interest and curiosity, wonder and affection.] (E2.1.23)

This is in many ways an extraordinarily melodramatic scene. A man struck by love at the sight of a woman's public triumph: nothing could be more pictorial, more unlikely, more excessive, than the novel's enthusiastic description of Corinne's crowning at the Capitol. But although *Corinne* may strike modern readers as theatrical ("mannered," Diderot would say), it doesn't follow that its contemporary readers saw the novel in that way.

Oswald's vision of Corinne has been preceded by aural impressions. As she approaches, the ecstatic crowd talks about her accomplishments and the mystery surrounding her name and birth, concluding that "Quoi qu'il en soit . . . c'est une divinité entourée de nuages" (F2.1.51) [Whatever the truth may be . . . she is a goddess surrounded by clouds"] (E2.1.22). This phrase contains the same apparent ambiguity as the longer description of Corinne. She is at once extraordinarily elevated (a priestess of Apollo, the god of art) and completely ordinary (she is straightforward or unaffected [*simple*] in ordinary relationships). Corinne is "noble" and "modest," "pleased to be admired," and yet marked by "shyness" and a sense that she needs to be "pardoned" for her success. While transgres-

sing all rules for female behavior, Corinne exudes a charming (in Oswald's eyes) awareness that such transgressions are not to be condoned. Identifying with the Sibyl, she dresses in blue and white, the traditional colors of the Madonna.²¹ The myth of the Cumaean Sibyl contains a similar blend of paganism and Christianity, since this pagan prophetess was venerated by Christians because she was said to have foretold the coming of Christ. Corinne, then, unites in her person all kinds of traditional oppositions. She shines like the sun (Apollo was the sun god, too), yet she is veiled behind a cloud. She is at once pagan and Christian, transgressive and submissive, extraordinary and ordinary, goddess and mortal woman. It seems obvious that Staël is trying to represent the half English and half Italian Corinne as the triumphant synthesis of traditional opposites. No wonder that many modern readers have found her ludicrously idealized.

Idealized or not, Corinne is explicitly described as "simple" and "natural." Absorption is still the novel's aesthetic ideal: "[L]e calcul du succès est presque toujours destructeur de l'enthousiasme" (F8.3.223) [(T)o work for success is nearly always to destroy strong feeling] (E8.3.144), Corinne says to Oswald in one of their discussions of paintings. Corinne moves her interlocutors, but not by calculating her effects. Her art moves because it is all genuine *expression* of passionate inner feelings. It is no coincidence that Corinne's most admired art is that of public improvisation on a given theme.

Staël repeatedly demonstrates Corinne's overwhelmingly absorptive effect on Oswald. The description of her arrival at the Capitol, which I just quoted, continues in the following way:

L'admiration du peuple pour elle allait toujours en croissant, plus elle approchait du Capitole, de ce lieu si fécond en souvenirs. Ce beau ciel, ces Romains si enthousiastes, et par-dessus tout Corinne, électrisaient l'imagination d'Oswald. . . .

Oswald était tellement absorbé dans ses réflexions, des idées si nouvelles l'occupaient tant, qu'il ne remarqua point les lieux antiques et célèbres à travers lesquels passait le char de Corinne. (F2.1.52-53)

[The nearer she came to the Capitol, that place so rich in memories, the more the crowd admired her. The beautiful sky, the wildly enthusiastic Romans, and above all Corinne, fired²² Oswald's imagination. . . .

Oswald was so lost in his thoughts, so absorbed by new ideas, that he did not notice the famous, ancient places through which Corinne's chariot passed.] (E2.1.23-24)

That Corinne is supposed to have supremely "absorptive" effects is borne out by the paroxysmatic chapter in which her performance

as Juliet leaves Oswald in a state where he is unable to distinguish between reality and fiction. At one point Corinne, on stage as Juliet, stretches out her arms, and Oswald "crut voir qu'elle étendait les bras vers lui comme pour l'appeler à son aide, et il se leva dans un transport insensé, puis se rassit, ramené à lui-même par les regards surpris de ceux qui l'entouraient, mais son émotion devenait si forte qu'elle ne pouvait plus se cacher" (F7.3.199) [thought she was stretching out her arms to him to summon him to her aid, and, in a crazy outburst of passionate love, he got up. Then he sat down again, brought to his senses by the surprised looks of the people around him, but his emotion became so strong that he could hide it no longer] (E7.3.127). When the performance is over, Oswald is so moved that he still can't tell the difference between reality and fiction: "Dans l'excès de son trouble, il ne savait pas distinguer si c'était la vérité ou la fiction" (F7.3.200) [In his great disarray, he could not distinguish between truth and fiction] (E7.3.127). Throwing himself at Corinne's feet, Oswald starts speaking Romeo's lines to her.

Oswald, in fact, behaves exactly like Diderot reading Richardson:

Ô Richardson! On prend, malgré qu'on en ait, un rôle dans tes ouvrages, on se mêle à la conversation, on approuve, on blâme, on admire, on s'irrite, on s'indigne. Combien de fois ne me suis-je pas surpris, comme il est arrivé à des enfants qu'on avait menés au spectacle pour la première fois, criant: "Ne le croyez pas, il vous trompe . . . Si vous allez là, vous êtes perdu."²³

[O Richardson! whether we wish to or not, we play a part in your works, we intervene in the conversation, we give approval and blame, we feel admiration, irritation and indignation. How many times have I caught myself, as happens with children being taken to the theatre for the first time, shouting out: *Don't believe him, he's deceiving you . . . If you go there it will be the end of you.*]²⁴

For Diderot, nothing is better evidence of the absence of theatricality in art than this. For Diderot and Oswald are here "forgetting the fiction"—forgetting that what they are experiencing is a work of art. They are so absorbed, in other words, that they experience art as reality. Elsewhere, Diderot speaks of a supremely antitheatrical quality which he calls *le naïf* [the naive]. The naive, understood as something simple, innocent, original and true, is found in all beautiful art: "C'est la chose, mais la chose pure, sans la moindre altération. L'art n'y est plus" [It is the thing, but the thing in itself, without the slightest alteration. Art is no longer there].²⁵ When spectators take

art for reality, when they want to storm up on stage in order to rescue Ophelia from her doom, they testify to the supreme greatness of the art that provoked the response.²⁶

I have compared Lucile reading in the park to a painting by Greuze. By the time of the French Revolution, however, Greuze had lost his fortune, his popularity, and his power to move the beholder. In 1807 Greuze was dead, and David reigned supreme over French painting. Corinne at the Capitol is not in the least Greuzelike. The intensely expressive drama of the crowning of Corinne recalls, rather, the 1780s masterpieces of David, which are usually said to inaugurate modern painting.²⁷ The contrast between Greuze and David is repeated in the contrast between Lucile and Corinne. Corinne embodies an aesthetics of dramatic expressivity which was radically modern in 1807, and which also turned out to point to the future of Western painting. Set against such a radically modern aesthetic ideal, the inexpressive, absorbed Lucile must have seemed pale and old-fashioned. I shall now show that the aesthetic contrast between Corinne and Lucile, between radical modernity and prerevolutionary past, is repeated on the political level.

Expressivity, Silence, Individuality: Corinne as a Modern Woman

Because Corinne is a woman, her extraordinary expressivity—the very feature that secures her antitheatricality according to Diderot's dramatic conception of art—makes her exceptionally vulnerable precisely to accusations of theatricality. The scenes emphasizing the clash between Corinne's personality and the norms of womanhood in England bring this out. Explaining her hostility to Corinne, Lady Edgermond says to Oswald: "Il lui faut un théâtre où elle puisse montrer tout ces talents que vous prizez tant, et qui rendent la vie si difficile" (F16.6.461) [She needs a theatre where she can display all those gifts you prize so highly and which make life so difficult] (E16.6.313). More alarming to Oswald is the fact that his own revered father turns out to have said the same thing, in the fatal letter explaining why he doesn't want Corinne to marry Oswald:

elle a besoin de plaire, de captiver, de faire effet. Elle a plus de talents encore que d'amour-propre; mais des talents si rares doivent nécessairement exciter le désir de les développer; et je ne sais pas quel théâtre peut suffire à cette activité d'esprit, à cette impétuosité d'imagination, à ce caractère ardent enfin qui se fait sentir dans toutes ses paroles: elle en-

traînerait nécessairement mon fils hors de l'Angleterre; car une telle femme ne peut y être heureuse; et l'Italie seule lui convient. (F16.8.466-67)

[she needs to please, to charm, to attract attention. She has far more gifts than vanity, but such exceptional talents are bound to arouse the desire to develop them, and I do not know what audience (*théâtre*) can satisfy the intellectual activity, the eager imagination, the ardent nature, which can be felt in all she says. She is bound to lead my son to leave England, for such a woman cannot be happy here, and Italy alone will suit her.] (E16.8.318)

To align oneself with this kind of antitheatricality is to align oneself with the defenders of silence and anonymity for women. This is why *Corinne* works so hard to establish its heroine as an intensely dramatic woman who nevertheless avoids theatricality. Corinne's performances are high-wire balancing acts, one wrong step and she will be perceived as theatrical. To agree with the novel's antitheatrical forces is also, of course, to cast Italy, Corinne's double (the novel is after all called *Corinne, or Italy*), as a place of dubious reputation, the site of excess and social transgression. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the common "modernist" reaction to *Corinne*—the one that finds it excessive, melodramatic, lacking in artistic restraint and self-awareness—ends up in the same camp as Lady Edgermond and the elder Lord Nelvil. In order to avoid the condescending (and uninteresting) conclusion that Corinne's expressivity is simply excessive, that she is a ludicrous figment of Staël's narcissistic imagination, we need to read it against what the novel posits as the norm for women, namely silence. For Staël a silent woman is one who is not recognized as an individual. In *Corinne* silence is anonymity.

When Lucile and Oswald, now long married, finally travel to Italy, Lucile does not express a single wish: "Lord Nelvil craignait les souvenirs que lui retraçait la France; il la traversa donc rapidement: car Lucile ne témoignait, dans ce voyage, ni désir ni volonté sur rien, c'était lui seul qui décidait de tout" (F19.5.548) [Lord Nelvil was afraid of the memories which France recalled to him. So he crossed it quickly for, on the journey, Lucile showed no wish or desire for anything; he alone decided everything] (E19.5.376). To express wishes and desires is to assert one's subjectivity; Lucile's idea of perfect womanhood is to eradicate herself as a subject. According to Staël this is the English idea of ideal womanhood. It also happens to be Hegel's.

It is a delicious irony that both *Corinne* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit* were published in 1807. For the character of Corinne magnifi-

cently challenges Hegel's analysis of women's place in society. All commentators agree that Staël's first trip to Germany in 1803-04 had decisive impact on *Corinne*. Madelyn Gutwirth reminds us that the philosopher August Wilhelm von Schlegel was tutor to Staël's children and one of her closest friends. He was instrumental in introducing Staël to the German intellectual elite and also accompanied her on the voyage to Italy in 1805.²⁸ In Germany, Staël discovered dialectics. Whether or not she saw excerpts from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Perception*, the future author of *De l'Allemagne* (On Germany) would have been exposed to conversations about Hegel's work. Insofar as women were concerned, Hegel was in any case only systematizing the dominant antifeminist views at the time, which Staël could hardly have failed to discover.

It would carry too far to discuss Hegel's view of women in detail.²⁹ Suffice it to say that according to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* men, but not women, can achieve self-consciousness, that is to say, become fully individualized human beings. Men achieve this by engaging in conflict and collaboration (work) with other men in the public sphere. Men thus become citizens endowed with the capacity and right to participate in public life; women, on the other hand, belong only to the family. Because they do not oppose themselves to others in the arena of the universal (society or the state), women do not achieve self-conscious subjectivity. They therefore have no understanding of the universal, which here means the common good, that which serves the state or community as a whole. Women are incapable of transcending themselves toward the universal, that is, they will never sacrifice their own petty self-interest for the well-being of all. To Hegel, women remain generic creatures. When they do behave altruistically (Antigone comes to mind), they do so in virtue of their function as mother, sister, wife. Modern feminism can be defined as the attempt to prove Hegel wrong, to produce a society which recognizes women as individuals, as citizens, as human beings. (No literary text expresses the conflict between the Hegelian and the feminist view on women better than *A Doll's House*.)

By making her a woman who does not hesitate to speak on matters of public interest, Staël represents Corinne as the perfect antidote to Hegel's unindividualized, generic family woman. Corinne wishes to be recognized as a human being in her own right in a society which does not consider this to be an option for women. Asking for recognition as a subject, Corinne is asking to be recognized as a fully individualized ("self-conscious," in Hegelian terms) human being, and as an Other in relation to men (so that she can become their opponent, collaborator, enemy or friend). Corinne thus refuses to

become the "relative being" sexist ideology expects her to be. "L'humanité est mâle et l'homme définit la femme non en soi mais relativement à lui; elle n'est pas considérée comme un être autonome"³⁰ [Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being],³¹ Simone de Beauvoir writes, in what amounts to a pointed rebuttal of Hegel.

The contrast between Lucile and Corinne on all these points is striking. Whereas the character of Corinne points to the future, to a time of bourgeois democracy in which a woman—an ex-show girl at that—can become the respected speaker of the British Parliament,³² Lucile points to the past, to a time when women were the undifferentiated property of feudal clans or dynasties. Politically, Corinne may be the first modern woman in Western literature, in that she is trying to find a way out of a dilemma typical of modernity, namely one in which women are invited to consider themselves either as women or as human beings, but not as both at once. In 1807, Corinne's very modern efforts to avoid this impossible "choice" doomed her.

The aesthetic and political difficulties Staël was up against are now clear: in a culture that denied women the right to participate in the struggle to define political, ethical, and aesthetic values, a culture that thought of women as somehow less individual and more generic than men, she had to show that Corinne was worthy of participation in the sphere of the universal. Ipso facto Corinne had to be represented as extraordinary, and in particular as capable of extraordinary public and private expressivity. This is why Staël can't just make Corinne less expressive, why she had to expose her heroine to the risk of theatricality. If Corinne is endowed with extraordinary talents, learning, and expressiveness, it is in an attempt to make men accept her as an individual, that is to say as a human being *like themselves*.

But the phrase "like themselves" points to the obvious difficulty of the project. For Corinne does not want to be taken for a man. This is difficult to avoid, however, in a culture that thinks of the individual and of "mankind" as male. Just think of Staël's ex-lover Talleyrand's quip: "I have heard that in her novel, Madame de Staël depicted us both disguised as women."³³ No wonder, then, that Staël overemphasizes Corinne's female and heterosexual charms, just as she overemphasizes her expressive individuality. In the crucial scene of Corinne's crowning at the Capitol, to give an obvious example, Oswald is deeply moved by Corinne's public triumph, but also by what he takes to be evidence of her womanliness, defined by him as

her need for protection by a male friend.³⁴ But Staël can't win this game: the very excess of Corinne's female charm and individual expressiveness is precisely what will give rise to accusations of "disguise," or in other words, of theatricality.³⁵

The same dilemma does not apply to men. In a sexist society a man can assert himself as a political and intellectual subject without risking that his sex (or sexuality) is going to be brought into question. Nor does a man's capacity for public self-expression cast doubt on his ability to love. Insofar as Corinne's dilemma has come to seem less pressing to women in the year 2001, it is because we have succeeded in loosening the grip of sexist ideology. *Corinne* issues a challenge to its readers, asking us whether we are capable of acknowledging a woman as a human being without converting her into an abstraction (into an ungendered "human being," for example), and without stripping her of her femaleness.³⁶

Now we are in a position to realize the importance of Oswald to Corinne. During Corinne's triumphal ascent to the Capitol, Oswald is immediately struck by her individuality. When Roman poets praise Corinne, Oswald suffers:

Déjà l'ord Nelvil souffrait de cette manière de louer Corinne; il lui semblaît déjà qu'en la regardant il aurait fait à l'instant même un portrait d'elle plus vrai, plus juste, plus détaillé, un portrait enfin qui ne pût convenir qu'à Corinne. (F2.1.54)

[Lord Nelvil was already suffering from this way of praising Corinne. He felt already that, just by looking at her, he would have produced right away a more true, accurate, and detailed portrait, a portrait which would have fitted no one but Corinne.] (E2.1.24)

The "portrait which would have fitted no one but Corinne" is a testimony to Corinne's uniqueness, to her individuality. Whereas the pretty first picture of Lucile could only have a generic Greuzelike title, such as "Young girl reading in a garden," the first glimpse of Corinne produces a David-inspired individualized portrait of a brilliant, triumphant woman, entitled "Corinne at the Capitol." Oswald's instant recognition of Corinne's individuality is in part based on Corinne's intensely expressive body, face, and clothes. Her astonishingly expressive face is noted by everyone, even the dour old Mr. Dickson who meets her in Scotland when she is sick with the loss of Oswald, and no longer capable of much speech: "—Et sa figure?—Oh! la plus expressive que j'aie vue, quoiqu'elle fût pâle et maigre à faire de la peine" (F19.2.534) [—And her face?—Oh, the most

expressive I have ever seen, although she was painfully thin and pale] (E19.2.367).

Because she says nothing, reveals nothing, Lucile is not truly Other to Oswald. Oswald does not discover that Lucile is another human being; to him she is just a pretty picture, of the kind that made Diderot dream of erotic experiences. Ultimately, Staël points out, such narcissism will come to grief. Genuine love requires recognition and acknowledgment of the Other's otherness. Meeting Corinne, Oswald meets another human being, with all the potential for conflict, pain, and disappointment that that entails; meeting Lucile he meets his own fantasies. Oswald's tragedy is that he simply can't sustain his initial recognition of Corinne. Retreating from Corinne to Lucile, he retreats from genuine reciprocity to silent adoration of his own fantasies.

Readers have always recognized that the scene of Corinne's crowning at the Capitol is deeply fantasmatic. It is a scene in which Oswald recognizes all at once Corinne's individuality, her femaleness, and her humanity. He is, as it were, granted an immediate understanding of Corinne's way of being in the world. The fantasy here is of a relationship between a man and a woman, in which the woman does not have to struggle to "say all" in order to be understood. *This* is the fantasy that fires Staël's erotic imagination, the fantasy that so many women responded to throughout the nineteenth century. It is still the source of the novel's power. The question then becomes: Why does Corinne's fantasy have to be crushed? Why does Staël doom Corinne to isolation, silence, and death? The answers to these questions will start to emerge if we take an even closer look at Corinne's relationship to expressiveness and silence.

The "Perfected Doll":
Fearing and Desiring Inexpressiveness

In a striking passage, Corinne complains of the silence imposed on women in Northumberland, and compares her silent self to "a doll slightly perfected by mechanics":

J'aurais pu, ce me semble, envoyer à ma place une poupée légèrement perfectionnée par la mécanique; elle aurait très bien rempli mon emploi dans la société . . . L'existence des femmes, dans le coin isolé de la terre que j'habitais, était bien insipide. (F14.1.369-70)

[(I)t seems to me that I could have sent a delicately improved mechanical doll in my place. It would have fulfilled my function in society very

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well . . . (W)omen's lives, in the isolated corner of the earth where I was living, were very dull]. (E14.1.249)

The figure of the mechanical doll, the automaton or the robot is a *locus classicus* in skepticist philosophy. In his *Meditations* Descartes looks out of his window on the street below, and notes that all he really sees from his window are "hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs."⁵⁷ In *The Claim of Reason* Stanley Cavell shows (among other things) that there are no criteria for existence, by exploring the example of a craftsman perfecting an automaton to the point where it becomes indistinguishable from a human being.⁵⁸ Corinne's fear of being interchangeable with a "doll perfected by mechanics" is a fear of loss of humanity, a fear of not being recognized as human, a fear of not being known. The "body snatcher" theme, so prominent in science fiction and horror stories, trades on the same fear, the sense of horror that arises when we start doubting that another person is human, or worse: when we start to feel that others doubt our own humanity. (Relevant examples here are the *Alien* movies, particularly the Sigourney Weaver character, but also the more simplistic *Species* movies.)

Corinne's casual reference to the "mechanical doll" is also picked up by another Romantic writer, E. T. A. Hoffmann, who explores it in "The Sandman," a story given everlasting fame by Freud's reading of it in "The Uncanny."⁵⁹ Hoffmann too connects the silence of women to the idea that women might just as well be dolls. There's a feminist twist here: any man who falls for a doll-woman (Lucile, Olympia), deserves what he gets: misery, madness, death.

Corinne makes it clear that sexism encourages women to identify themselves with mechanical dolls. This is what happens to Lucile. In her marriage to Oswald, Lucile behaves like a mechanical doll: she fails to assert herself, remains silent, leaves him to guess what her feelings might be. As we have seen, the blankness of the woman-doll is at first a source of pleasure and delight for the man. Lucile's behavior aids and abets Oswald's failure to recognize her as a human being. But Lucile's eradication of her own subjectivity also prevents her from understanding Oswald. Their marriage—succinctly represented in book 19 as undone by the silence and reticence of both partners—is a breeding ground for projections, conjecture, and mistrust. Lucile suspects Oswald of not loving her; Oswald first manages to persuade himself that Lucile genuinely has no wishes and desires and then gets furious when he discovers that she hides her desires

and fears from him (this is shown in the description of Lucile's unexpressed fear at crossing the Alps in winter).

The text's comparison between the silent woman and a "perfected mechanical doll" tells us that a woman's voice and speech are the very emblems of her humanity. Yet Staël's novel also contains a very different attitude to voice, words, and expression. *Corinne* is a text haunted by the theme of exile (Staël herself was half way through her own ten years of exile when she wrote the novel). In book 14, devoted to Corinne's exile in Northumberland, the heroine appears to take refuge in a fantasy of the mother tongue as home, as a guarantee of understanding and communion:

[M]ille intérêts qui vous sont communs avec vos compatriotes ne sont plus entendus par les étrangers; il faut tout expliquer, tout commenter, tout dire, au lieu de cette communication facile, de cette effusion de pensées qui commence à l'instant où l'on retrouve ses concitoyens. Je ne pouvais me rappeler, sans émotion, les expressions bienveillantes de mon pays. *Cara, Carissima*, disais-je quelquefois en me promenant toute seule, pour m'imiter à moi-même l'accueil, si amical des Italiens et des Italiennes; je comparais cet accueil à celui que je recevais. (F14.3.378)

[A thousand interests you share with your compatriots are incomprehensible to foreigners. You have to explain everything, comment on everything, say everything, instead of the instant communication, the outpouring of thoughts, which begins the moment you are reunited with compatriots. I could not recall without emotion my country's kindly words. Sometimes, as I took a solitary walk, I would say *Cara, Carissima*, to imitate to myself the friendly welcome of Italian men and women, and I compared this welcome to the one I was receiving.] (E14.3.255; translation amended)

Corinne is describing her life with her stepmother, the hostile Lady Edgermond, the incarnation of the severe English view of women. In England, any expression of Corinne's is, per definition, a faux pas. In this situation, it is understandable that Corinne repeats words of affection to herself: *Cara, Carissima*. Thinking of Italy, Corinne thinks of a world in which her experiences of life and of culture are shared with others. Corinne's longing for her homeland is a longing for community, for immediate understanding. A world of exile is a world of silence, alienation, and hostility. Exile means isolation, separation, the absence of understanding, a life in which she is denied recognition as a subject.

So far, the passage would seem to elaborate the same fear of inexpressivity as the figure of the mechanical doll. But this is not all. For

this passage also thinks of Italy as a place where Corinne will finally be relieved of the burden of having to "explain everything." How does this fit with our image of Corinne, a renowned poet, actress, musician, singer, and dancer, the woman who is crowned at the Capitol for her expressive improvisations? The passage draws, I think, an implicit distinction between *having* to "say everything" and *choosing* to do so. For Corinne, exile would seem to mean enforced expressivity. Having to express herself, having endlessly to explain her (Italian) ways to these English strangers, is quite different from choosing to express the feelings of her soul to an enraptured audience, whether at the Roman Capitol or the romantic Cape Miseno. Thus the text intimates that there may be friendly forms of silence. The mechanical doll may have her counterpart in a restfully silent woman, in the woman who feels understood without having to use words (we remember here the novel's fantasmatic representation of Oswald's immediate understanding of Corinne at the Capitol). But how can this attitude coexist with the novel's intense promotion of expressivity? What exactly is *Corinne* telling us about women, humanity, expressivity, and silence?

In order to reach a coherent answer to this question, I want to examine a final set of passages. They come from the pivotal book 17, entitled "Corinne in Scotland." This is the book in which Corinne, having followed Oswald to England and Scotland, renounces Oswald, without ever meeting with him, and without letting him know why she suddenly sets him free from his many oaths of eternal fidelity. In fact, even for an enthusiastic admirer of *Corinne*, it's not at all obvious why the heroine suddenly chooses such a self-defeating course of action. In my view we will not understand Corinne's erotic defeat and death unless we understand the meaning of Corinne's silence in book 17.

In chapter 4 of book 17, the disguised Corinne goes to the theater in London to see the famous Mrs. Siddons in *Isabella, or the Fatal Marriage*. Inevitably she happens to be in the audience the same night as Oswald and Lucile. (Book 17 insists on the reversal of Corinne's fortunes: three times Corinne, the star performer, is placed in the position of being the unknown and unnoticed spectator in relation to Lucile and Oswald.)⁴⁰ We are quickly informed that the fictional Isabella commits suicide by stabbing herself with a dagger. In a text awash with presentiments and warnings it is difficult to escape the thought that this suicide is intended to prefigure Corinne's own end. But if this is right, then Corinne's death is not simply the result of Oswald's betrayal, of his metaphorical murder of her spirit. Rather, we are encouraged to believe that Corinne also *chooses* si-

lence and death. What fate seems worse than death to Corinne? Here's the scene in the theater, where Corinne sees Lucile:

Lucile s'était plus parée qu'à l'ordinaire en venant au spectacle; et depuis long-temps, même en Angleterre où les femmes sont si belles, il n'avait paru une personne aussi remarquable. Corinne fut douloureusement surprise en la voyant: il lui parut impossible qu'Oswald pût résister à la séduction d'une telle figure. Elle se compara dans sa pensée avec elle, et se trouva tellement inférieure, elle s'exagéra tellement, s'il était possible de se l'exagérer, le charme de cette jeunesse, de cette blancheur, de ces cheveux blonds, de cette innocente image du printemps de la vie, qu'elle se sentit presque humiliée de lutter par le talent, par l'esprit, par les dons acquis enfin, ou du moins perfectionnés, avec ces graces prodiguées par la nature elle-même. (F17.4.481)

[Lucile had dressed more elegantly than usual to come to the theater, and even in England, where the women are so beautiful, no one had seen such a remarkably beautiful girl. Corinne was painfully surprised when she saw her. It seemed impossible to her that Oswald could resist the attraction of such a face. Mentally she compared herself to Lucile, and she thought herself so inferior, she exaggerated to herself, if that were possible, the charm of youth, of that fair complexion, of that blond hair, of that innocent picture of the springtime of life; and so she felt almost humiliated to struggle by means of talent and wit, in short, by acquired or at least perfected gifts, against these charms lavished by nature itself.] (E17.4.328)

The importance of the passage is shown by the fact that Staël chooses to reinforce the same points just a few pages later:

L'imagination de Corinne était tellement frappée des avantages de sa sœur, qu'elle avait presque honte de lutter avec de tels charmes. Il lui semblait que le talent même était une ruse, l'esprit une tyrannie, la passion une violence à côté de cette innocence désarmée; et bien que Corinne n'eût pas encore vingt-huit ans, elle pressentait déjà cette époque de la vie où les femmes se défient avec tant de douleur de leurs moyens de plaire. Enfin la jalousie et une timidité fière se combattaient dans son ame; elle renvoyait de jour en jour le moment tant craint, et tant désiré, où elle devait revoir Oswald. (F17.6.487-88)

[Corinne's imagination was so impressed by her sister's advantages that she was almost ashamed to fight against such charms. It seemed to her that even talent was a ruse, wit a tyranny, and passionate love (*la passion*) a violence beside this unarmed innocence, and although Corinne was not yet twenty-eight, she already foresaw that period of life when, with so much pain, women mistrust their ability to be attractive. In short, jeal-

ousy and shy pride fought against each other in her soul. From day to day she put off the dreaded, longed-for moment when she was to see Oswald again.] (E17.6.333)

Together these two passages tell us why Corinne chooses not to see Oswald again. In the first passage, Lucile is described as astonishingly beautiful. Her blond innocence is contrasted with Corinne's talents and wit [*esprit*]. Described entirely in terms of her looks, Lucile could be a painting. Her appeal is to the eye. Described entirely in terms of her inner capacities, Corinne's appeal is to the ear. Kierkegaard's preface to *Either/Or* brings out the value of this contrast. Kierkegaard begins by exploring his sense of mistrust of a person's outside, his sense that the outside does not necessarily reveal the inside. The eye deceives us, he writes, which is why he has come to cherish the sense of hearing:

Efterhaanden blev da Hørelsen mig den kjæreste Sands; thi ligesom Stemmen er Aabenbarelsen af den for det Ydre incommensurable Inderlighed, saaledes er Øret det Redskab, ved hvilket denne Inderlighed opfattes, Hørelsen den Sands, ved hvilken den tilegnes.⁴¹

[Little by little, hearing became my favourite sense; for just as it is the voice that reveals the inwardness which is incommensurable with the outer, so the ear is the instrument whereby that inwardness is grasped, hearing the sense by which it is appropriated.]⁴²

For Corinne to feel "almost humiliated" to use her wit and talents—her words—to win Oswald from Lucile, is to say that she now thinks that Oswald no longer knows how to hear her words. She is saying, in fact, that it would be humiliating for her to try to express herself, to struggle to exteriorize her inner feelings for someone who has shown himself to be deaf, someone who has capitulated to the treacherous pleasures of the gaze.

We note, too, that all of Corinne's qualities are now understood as "acquired or at least perfected gifts," as opposed to Lucile's charms, which are said to be "lavished by nature itself." Gone are Corinne's many references to her God-given talents. It is as if Corinne now is renouncing her education, since education—the acquiring of "culture"—is a way to "perfect" nature. Losing her faith in Oswald's capacity to hear her, Corinne also loses her pride in the very culture and learning that enabled her to improvise so gloriously at the Capitol. It would seem that nothing short of an astonishing transformation of Corinne's identity is now under way.

Contrasting Corinne's "acquired or at least perfected gifts" with

Lucile's "natural charms," the text echoes the opposition already established between the "perfected mechanical doll" and a woman, between that which is dead and that which is alive, between the inhuman and the human. But now the relationship between Lucile and Corinne is reversed. Lucile is the real woman, Corinne the one who has come to doubt her own humanity, her own "perfectedness." What the novel so far has seen as the emblem of Corinne's humanity—her expressive language—has now, in a strange reversal, come to be the humiliating sign of her artificiality and inhumanity. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Corinne *desires* inexpressiveness.

The second passage amplifies this impression. Corinne is "most ashamed to fight against [Lucile's] charms." A series of stunning comparisons follows: "It seemed to her that even talent was a ruse, wit [*esprit*] a tyranny, and passion a violence beside this unarmed innocence." Ruse, tyranny, violence: these are fighting words. A ruse is a stratagem, a form of trickery. If talent is a ruse, it means that Corinne's talents doom her to inauthenticity and theatricality, to a kind of violent, tyrannical self-expression which can only turn her into a termagant, an older woman (there is the reference to her advancing age—she's all of twenty-seven) whose very expressions do violence to young innocence. No longer identified with the Sibyl, Corinne casts herself as Medea to Lucile's Creusa. Again the underlying fantasy would seem to be a dream of not having to exteriorize her feelings.

From now on Corinne is a silent woman. She never speaks to Oswald again. Before she leaves Scotland, she catches several glimpses of him, always disguising herself, always hiding herself among the crowd or among the trees, always keeping secret those feelings she used so candidly to reveal. There is no denying, then, that Corinne quite deliberately chooses silence, isolation, and death rather than speech, expression, and marriage to Oswald. (As if to reinforce the point, book 17 keeps repeating that if only Corinne had revealed herself to Oswald, then their destinies would have been different.)⁴³ There is no denying, either, that Corinne has come to think of her words as histrionic, artificial, and violent. Having dedicated her life to expression, expression now disappoints her. Why is this? The answer, I think, can be found if we manage to understand Corinne's seemingly contradictory attitude to expression and silence. As I shall now go on to show, *Corinne* is quite possibly the very prototype of the genre Stanley Cavell has called the "melodrama of the unknown woman."⁴⁴ By "prototype" I mean that Corinne is something like

the literary foremother of the Hollywood heroines discussed by Cavell.

Suffocation and Exposure: *Corinne* as Melodrama of the Unknown Woman

The "melodrama of the unknown woman" is a term coined by Cavell to describe the connection between four Hollywood films: *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Now, Voyager*, *Gaslight*, and *Stella Dallas*. There are differences between these films, and in my view, *Corinne* is more like *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Now, Voyager* and less like *Gaslight* and *Stella Dallas*. The principal features of the genre are as follows:

- the woman's father is not on the side of her desire, but on the side of law
- the woman is shown in relation to a child (as a mother)
- the woman searches for a mother, or the loss of her mother is always present
- there is a negation of communication between the principal couple
- the genre's answer to the question: "What does a woman want?" is "A woman wants to be known"
- the woman's superior knowledge becomes the object of the man's fantasy
- the ineffectuality and irrelevance of the man is underscored
- the man's struggle is against recognition
- the woman's struggle is to understand why recognition by the man has not happened or has been denied or has become irrelevant
- the woman undergoes a radical change of identity
- there is a final negation of marriage itself
- the woman chooses solitude (figured as a refusal of marriage)
- the woman's choice of solitude is a judgment of the world⁴⁵

Corinne contains every one of these features. We have already considered a number of them. I will not tire readers by going through all the others. Anyone who reads the book can see how apposite they are. In this last section, I shall concentrate on the woman's sense that she is not known, and never will be, and particularly not by the man she has chosen as her erotic partner.

We have seen that *Corinne* fears inexpressiveness (the mechanical doll). She also fears enforced expression (*having* to say all in exile). At the same time, book 17 shows her longing for a state of inexpress-

siveness. In his masterly exploration of skepticism, *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell writes:

So the fantasy of a private language, underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out, so far, to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown; but in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control.⁴⁶

Cavell, then, considers that the fear of inexpressiveness and the fear of involuntary expressiveness are reactions to the *same* metaphysical and existential predicament. Both fantasies, after all, share a picture of a person who is powerless in relation to her own expressions. Both fantasies have their roots in a fundamental disappointment with expression; they reveal a loss of faith in words, a conviction that our words necessarily betray us. Cavell connects such anxieties to a deep-rooted anxiety about meaning: "Why do we attach significance to *any* words and deeds, of others or of ourselves?" is a question that this mood gives rise to, just as it produces an "anxiety that our expression might at any time signify nothing. Or too much," or "an anxiety over there being nothing whatever to say."⁴⁷

This fear, Cavell writes, is at once a fear and a wish. But how can anyone come to *wish* for inexpressiveness? If we could answer this question, we would know why it is that Corinne chooses silence. Cavell writes:

A fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness would solve a simultaneous set of metaphysical problems: it would relieve me of the responsibility for making myself known to others—as though if I were expressive that would mean continuously betraying my experiences, incessantly giving myself away; it would suggest that my responsibility for self-knowledge takes care of itself—as though the fact that others cannot know my (inner) life means that I cannot fail to. It would reassure my fears of being known . . . it would reassure my fears of not being known . . .—The wish underlying this fantasy covers a wish that underlies skepticism, a wish for the connection between my claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall to occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements. As the wish stands, it is unappeasable. In the case of my knowing myself, such self-defeat would be doubly exquisite: I must disappear in order that the search for myself be successful.⁴⁸

I shall try to gloss this difficult, but immensely suggestive, passage. The wish underlying the fantasy of inexpressiveness is a wish for a state in which words would have absolutely objective meanings. This

is a yearning for a language which would not depend on the intervention of human subjectivity for its meanings. There is a dream here of a world in which all objects and human beings somehow naturally come equipped with big labels naming their essence. The "labels" would have to be of a magical kind so that everyone who looked at them would instantly grasp that the label and the thing were, as it were, one and the same thing. In such a world there would be no language differences, no translation from "horse" to "cheval," simply because there would be no language in any meaningful sense of the word. Skepticism is born of the realization that the world is not like this. (Skepticism, one might say, is fixated on the idea that there *must* be an unbridgeable gap between words and things.)

Cavell (and Wittgenstein) reaches a different conclusion. We may be made of language, but language is also made of us: there can be no meanings without speakers of the language. Each one of us participates in the production of the meaning of our words. The fundamental question, then, is not about reference or the floating of signifiers, but about my responsibility for my words. For if I am in part responsible for the meaning of language, then I am also responsible for making myself known to others. I can't just sit back and wait for others to decipher me, as if I were the Rosetta stone of humanity. Nor am I justified in assuming that my illegibility to others somehow guarantees my legibility to myself. To believe something like this would be to take refuge in a fantasy of an inner, private subjectivity unreadable and unreachable by all others. The idea of unplumbable inner depths is the flip side of the dream of objective decipherment. Both fantasies share a deeply skeptical picture of a human being as a swamp-infested treasure island, an isolated, inaccessible, treacherous surface hiding rich inner depths. (This is pretty much the thought that bothers Kierkegaard in the introduction to *Either/Or*. As we have seen, *Corinne* is filled with the very same concerns.)

We can now see what the dream of inexpressivity has to do with Wittgenstein's critique of the idea of a private language, namely that it is underpinned by a metaphysical picture of utterly private inner depths. Such a vision completely fails to understand the relationship between language and subjectivity. There can be no concepts, no language, without shared criteria. We all participate in shaping the meaning of language; nobody can be the sole dictator of meaning. Not even my knowledge of myself (if "knowledge" is the right word here) can exist apart from the dense weave of shared human meanings we all belong to.

Corinne, however, is a skeptic at heart. Throughout the novel, she

has struggled to "say all." In book 17 she gives up on that struggle. She moves, in other words, from a fantasy of perfect communion with the beloved Other, to an outright denial of that fantasy, from excessive expressivity to total silence. This is the terrain of melodrama. In *Contesting Tears*, Cavell picks up precisely the passage from *The Claim of Reason* that I have just quoted, and adds a few comments to it:

I am led to stress the condition that I find to precede, to ground the possibility and the necessity of, "the desire to express all," namely the terror of absolute inexpressiveness, suffocation, which at the same time reveals itself as a terror of absolute expressiveness, unconditioned exposure; they are the extreme states of voicelessness. (I claim that these are the polar states expressed in the woman's voice in opera.)⁴⁹

Corinne is an opera, I am tempted to say. The dying Corinne, struggling for breath, is not at all unrelated to the dying Violetta in *La Traviata*.⁵⁰ She is also—and this may be more surprising—the predecessor of Ibsen's heroines, who constantly find themselves caught between suffocation and exposure (none more so than Irene in *When We Dead Awaken*, yet Nora, Mrs. Alving, and Hedda Gabler all struggle with the same dilemma).

Giving up on Oswald, giving up on language, Corinne chooses death. In her dying moment she directs her last words to the faithful Prince Castel-Forte:

—Mon ami, lui dit-elle, en lui tendant la main, il n'y a que vous près de moi dans ce moment. J'ai vécu pour aimer, et sans vous je mourrais seule. —Et ses larmes coulèrent à ce mot; puis elle dit encore: Au reste ce moment se passe de secours; nos amis ne peuvent nous suivre que jusqu'au seuil de la vie. Là commencent des pensées dont le trouble et la profondeur ne sauraient se confier. (F20.5.586)

["My friend," she said, holding out her hand to him. "Only you are with me at this moment. I have lived for love, and but for you I would die alone." At these words, her tears flowed. Then she spoke again. "Besides, no help is possible at this moment. Our friends can follow us only to the threshold of life. The thoughts beginning there are so confused and deep, they cannot be confided."] (E20.5.404)

Corinne's last words speak of human separation and of thoughts "so confused and deep, they cannot be confided." The ultimate realization of human finitude is doubled by a zealous protection of her own, separate and secret interiority. Corinne's dying words affirm her intense conviction that she has remained *unknown*.

Corinne dies seated in an armchair by a window from which she can see the sky. As she is about to breathe her last, the "malheureux Oswald" rushes into the room and falls on his knees in front of Corinne:

Elle voulut lui parler, et n'en eut pas la force. Elle leva ses regards vers le ciel, et vit la lune qui se couvrait du même nuage qu'elle avait fait remarquer à lord Nelvil quand il s'arrêtèrent sur le bord de la mer en allant à Naples. Alors elle le lui montra de sa main mourante, et son dernier soupir fit retomber cette main. (F20.5.586)

[She wanted to speak to him, but was not strong enough. She raised her eyes to heaven and saw the moon covered with the same cloud as the one she had pointed out to Lord Nelvil when, on the way to Naples, they had stopped by the seashore. Then, with her dying hand, she pointed it out to him, and with her last breath that hand dropped down.] (E20.5.404)

The reference is to an evening the two spent in Terracina, a little village fragrant with the smell of orange and lemon trees, an earthly paradise where children spontaneously throw flowers into the carriages of strangers. That moonlit evening by the sea inspires the greatest transports of love in the whole book. As the evening ends, Corinne suddenly becomes sad. A cloud covers the moon, and she takes it as an omen: "[J]e vous le dis, Oswald, ce soir [le ciel] condamnait notre amour" (F11.1.289) [I tell you, Oswald, this evening (heaven) condemned our love] (E11.1.191). Oswald protests and Corinne replies that perhaps the sky threatened only her. Two months later, they return to Terracina, on their way north. This time the mood is one of pain and bitterness. The truth about the past has been told, and Oswald has decided to return to England. Again they spend the night in Terracina, again they sit on the same cliff by the sea, again the moon is covered by a cloud. This time Corinne takes it as a warning of death: "N'oubliez pas, Oswald, de remarquer si ce même nuage ne passera pas sur la lune quand je mourrai" (F15.2.400) ["Do not forget, Oswald, to notice if this same cloud passes across the moon when I die"] (E15.2.270).

Pointing to the moon in her dying moment Corinne, like so many of Cavell's "unknown women," is affirming her connection to the transcendent at the end of her story. But she is also delivering a stinging rebuke to Oswald. Given her previous warnings, the obvious meaning of the gesture is "I told you so." In a brisk final paragraph Oswald is dispatched. He follows Corinne's funeral procession to Rome, and nearly goes mad before finally returning to his wife and

daughter. The text stresses Oswald's reintegration into society, as if to make Corinne's exile all the more bitter. After his crisis, we are told, Oswald returns to "le monde qui l'approuva" (F20.5.587) ["society's approval"] (E20.5.404).

The "moon behind the cloud" motif is only the last reinforcement of a well-established theme: Oswald's failure to acknowledge Corinne. The end of the novel loses no opportunity to remind us of Oswald's betrayal, for example by pointedly comparing the dying Corinne to the wronged Dido.⁵¹ Throughout the novel, Madame de Staël has never tired of demonstrating Corinne's emotional and spiritual superiority over Oswald. The melancholic Oswald we first meet in chapter 1 was always too ambivalent, too guilt-ridden, to commit himself wholly to a woman, we now realize.⁵² Corinne's rejection of Oswald leads to death because she is not just rejecting a man, she is rejecting the world that approves of him. No man can provide Corinne with the "apt and cheerful conversation" Milton thought was the very meaning of marriage.⁵³ Rejecting marriage, rejecting Oswald, Corinne looks at the world and judges it worthless to her. It is difficult to say that she was altogether wrong.

Notes

I would like to thank Ghislaine McDayter for being an immensely understanding editor, David L. Paletz, Roberta Pearson, and Karin Sanders for giving feedback on some very early (and very incoherent) drafts, Yunyi Wang at Duke's Lilly Library and Helene Baumann at Duke's Perkins Library for expert help at the last minute.

1. The phrase "melodramatic mode" is taken from Peter Brook's foundational study *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976; reprint, with a new preface, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 4.

2. The phrase "pictorial melodrama" is inspired by *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), Martin Meisel's thought-provoking study of nineteenth-century British art, narrative, and theater. Meisel writes: "In the new dramaturgy, the unit is intransitive; it is in fact an achieved moment of stasis, a picture . . . What is striking and characteristic in the nineteenth-century theater is that its dramaturgy was pictorial, not just its *mise-en-scène* . . . Its pictorialism could flourish, if necessary, in the absence of much that is normally associated with theatrical spectacle . . . the most powerful expression of its pictorial dramaturgy was . . . melodrama" (38–39).

3. There are differences of opinion between Oswald and Corinne. Oswald prefers history paintings, or paintings based on famous tragedies or histories, whereas Corinne prefers religious paintings. But they both agree that paintings have to be immediately understandable, which is why any scene represented must be well known. For their discussions of painting and for a description of Corinne's own picture gallery, see book 8, chapters 3 and 4. Margaret Cohen's discussion of painting and sculpture in *Corinne* considers the question of realism. See Margaret

Cohen, "Melancholia, Mania, and the Reproduction of the Dead Father," in *The Novel's Seductions: Staël's "Corinne" in Critical Inquiry*, ed. Karyna Szmurlo (Lewisburg, Penna.: Bucknell University Press, 1999), 95–113.

4. All references to *Corinne* will be given in the text. The French text used is Germaine de Staël, *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), ed. Simone Balayé (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). References to the French text are preceded by "F." The English text used is the widely available *Corinne, or Italy*, ed. and trans. Sylvia Rafael (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). References to the English text are preceded by "E." References are given to book and chapter as well as page. F17.8.494 thus means book 17, chapter 8, page 494 in the French edition.

5. Moers's chapter 9 is devoted to *Corinne*. See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: Women's Press, 1977), 173–210. The quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning can be found on page 172.

6. See Madelyn Gutwirth, "Seeing *Corinne* Afresh: *Corinne's* Second Coming," in *The Novel's Seductions*, ed. Szmurlo, 27.

7. On this topic, see also Ellen Peeland and Nanora Sweet, "Corinne and the Woman as Poet in England: Hemans, Jewsbury, and Barrett Browning," in *The Novel's Seductions*, ed. Szmurlo, 204–20; Katharine Rodier, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Marble Faun*: Textual and Contextual Reflections of *Corinne, or Italy*," in *The Novel's Seductions*, ed. Szmurlo, 221–42.

8. Moers, *Literary Women*, 182.

9. *Ibid.*, 179.

10. *Ibid.*, 181.

11. I briefly discuss the relationship between seduction and brainpower in the "Afterword," to Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 253–57.

12. In an early study of Staël, Carl Benzoni documents her constant and life-long passion for and involvement with theater. See *Staël og Theatret* (Copenhagen: Wiens, 1906).

13. There are black and white reproductions of these paintings in Madelyn Gutwirth, *Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as a Woman* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 238–39.

14. This must be a translator's error. Lucile "entraît à peine dans sa seizième année," Staël writes, which means that she had just turned fifteen.

15. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) (London: Everyman, 1991), 312.

16. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 108. Hereafter *AT*, cited in the text. Fried also refers to this idea as the "supreme fiction of the beholders non-existence" (149).

17. "Chardin and Greuze represent different worlds," Fried writes (*Absorption*, 61). For more examples and some black and white reproductions of Chardin and Greuze, see *ibid.*, 50–60.

18. This, of course, is also the painting which inspired Diderot to indulge in a long, explicitly sexual fantasy. "Diderot finds in Greuze's canvas a scarcely veiled allegory of the young girl's loss of virginity," Fried writes, after giving a delicious quote from Diderot's 1765 *Salon* (*Absorption*, 59).

19. I think I would have translated Staël's "on" by "we" rather than "you" in this passage.

20. Denis Diderot, "Essais sur la peinture" (1765), in *Oeuvres*, vol. 4: *Esthétique—Théâtre*, ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Laffont, 1996), 471; my translation.

21. Although Domenichino's Sibyl does have white sleeves and a small blue rib-

bon or shawl under the chest, the dominant colors in his Sibyl are gold, ochre, and red (the turban, the shawl, the outer dress).

22. It is a pity that the English translation here chooses to forego the verb *électriser*. In 1807, the verb *électriser* was a very modern one. The Robert *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* defines it as "to transmit electrical qualities to a body," and claims that the figurative usage about people ("to produce an exciting impression on someone") dates from 1772.

23. Denis Diderot, "Éloge de Richardson" (1761), in *Oeuvres*, 4: 155–56.

24. Denis Diderot, "In Praise of Richardson," in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. Geoffrey Bremner (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 82.

25. Denis Diderot, "Pensées détachées sur la peinture" (1781), in *Oeuvres*, 4: 1051; my translation. Fried also quotes this passage (in *Absorption*, 100).

26. There is a connection to be made here between Diderot's aesthetics and Stanley Cavell's analysis of the reality of theater, where the figure of the child screaming at Red Riding Hood is crucial to the argument. See Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), particularly 326–31.

27. Fried writes: "[T]he history of modern painting is traditionally—in my view, rightly—seen as having begun with David's masterpieces of the 1780s, most importantly the *Serment des Horaces* (1784, exhibited 1785), which at once established itself as paradigmatic for ambitious painting: as exemplifying, down to the smallest details of its execution, what painting had to do and be if it were to realize the highest aims open to it" (*Absorption*, 72). One of David's 1780s masterpieces was *Bélisaire, reconnu par un soldat qui avait servi sous lui au moment qu'une femme lui fait l'aumône* (Belisarius, recognized by a soldier who had served under him at the moment when a woman gives him alms, 1781). Corinne actually has a painting of Belisarius receiving alms in her own picture gallery.

28. Madelyn Gutwirth discusses the origins of *Corinne* in chapter 5 of her important study of Staël. According to Gutwirth, three factors were particularly important in the gestation of the book: Staël's first voyage to Germany in 1803–04, when she stayed in Weimar; the death of Necker (Staël's father) on 10 April 1804, while she was away in Germany; and her voyage to Italy in 1805. See Gutwirth, *Staël*, 154–82.

29. This dangerously brief account gestures toward a more serious account of Hegel's analysis of *Antigone*, which leads him to conclude that woman is the "eternal irony of the community." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), particularly §§473–75. I discuss Hegel's analysis of women at greater length in my introduction to the new Norwegian translation of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. See Toril Moi, "Innledende essay," in *Det annet kjønn* by Simone de Beauvoir, trans. Bente Christensen (Oslo: Pax, 2000), particularly xix–xxv.

30. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, vol. 1 (1949) (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 15.

31. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xxii.

32. I am referring, of course, to Betty Boothroyd, who announced her retirement as speaker of the British House of Commons in the summer of 2000.

33. Quoted in Marie-Claire Vallois, "Voice as Fossil; Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy: An Archeology of Feminine Discourse*," in *The Novel's Seductions*, ed. Szmurlo, 127. Talleyrand actually said this about *Delphine*, not *Corinne*, but the remark remains an excellent illustration of how little it took for a writing woman to be accused of being a man in disguise, i.e., of not being "feminine."

34. [M]ais au milieu de tout cet éclat, de tous ces succès, il lui semblait que Corinne avait imploré, par ses regards, la protection d'un ami, protection dont jamais une femme, quelque supérieure qu'elle soit, ne peut se passer; et il pensait en lui-même qu'il serait doux d'être l'appui de celle à qui sa sensibilité seule rendrait cet appui nécessaire (F2.1.54) [(I)n the midst of all this splendour and success it seemed to him that Corinne's eyes had sought the protection of a man friend, a protection no woman, however superior she may be, can ever dispense with. And he thought it would be pleasing to be the support of a woman who would feel the need for such support only because of her sensitivity] (E2.1.24).

35. This is an extremely condensed analysis of the dilemma sexism poses for women: they are enjoined, either to consider themselves women, or to consider themselves "just a human being." This is a choice, Beauvoir would say, between being imprisoned in one's subjectivity, and being asked to eliminate it altogether. *The Second Sex* is a passionate denunciation of this dilemma. I analyze the philosophical and existential implications of such sexism in *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), particularly in chapter 2, 200–207 and 212–19.

36. In August 2000 the British press gave much play to a Tory attack on Cherie Blair. The British Prime Minister's wife had committed the unpardonable sin of co-authoring a defense of the European Human Rights legislation for a British newspaper. This legislation was about to be incorporated into British law, and Cherie Blair (Booth, by her professional name), is a QC specializing in human rights law. The Tory MP accused her of being a combination of Hilary Clinton and Lady Macbeth; simply because she had the temerity to express her own views in public. As the Prime Minister's wife, he felt, her proper role was to say nothing about anything at all in public, whatever her own professional expertise and commitments might be. Otherwise there would be a dangerous "conflict of interests," the Tories claimed. There are remnants here of the ideology which is under attack in *Corinne*.

37. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. John Veitch (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 84. Veitch correctly translates the 1647 French text. But this is itself a translation of Descartes's 1641 Latin original, albeit a translation corrected and reviewed by Descartes himself. The phrase "artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs" translates a single Latin word, namely *automata*. For the French 1647 text and the 1641 Latin original, see René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques*, ed. and trans. Florence Khodoss (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1956), 49.

38. See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (1979; reprint, with a new preface, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 403–11.

39. See E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Sandman," in *Selected Writings of E. T. A. Hoffmann*, ed. and trans. Leonard J. Kent and Elizabeth C. Knight (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), 93–125, and Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 17:217–52.

40. Nancy K. Miller has explored the meaning of the gaze and its reversals in *Corinne* from a feminist and psychoanalytic point of view in "Performances of the Gaze: Staël's *Corinne, or Italy*," in *The Novel's Seductions*, ed. Szmurlo, 84–94.

41. Søren Kierkegaard, *Enten—Eller*, vol. 1 (1843) (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1988), 9.

42. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, abridged and trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 27.

43. See for example F17.8.494 (E17.8.337-38); F17.9.501 (E17.9.342); F17.9.502 (E17.9.343).
44. I am referring to Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
45. This list simplifies, and in some cases flattens out, some of the nuances in Cavell's extraordinarily suggestive text. The list is extracted from Cavell's introduction to *Contesting Tears*, 3-45.
46. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 351.
47. *Ibid.* for all the quotations in this paragraph.
48. *Ibid.*, 351-52.
49. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 43. This passage is, at least in part, a response to Peter Brooks's discussion of the desire to "say all" in melodrama.
50. See here Cavell's interesting comments on Garbo in *Camille*, in *Contesting Tears*, 17-20.
51. When the dying Corinne sees Oswald in the audience at her last improvisation, she turns away her face, "comme Didon lorsque'elle rencontre Énée dans un monde où les passions humaines ne doivent plus pénétrer" (F20.5.581) [like Dido when she met Aeneas in another world, impervious to human passions] (E20.5.400). The pointed reference is to a painting in Corinne's own picture gallery, described in book 8, which functions as a clear warning of the fate awaiting Corinne: "Le premier représente Énée dans les Champs-Élysées, lorsqu'il veut s'approcher de Didon. L'ombre indignée s'éloigne et s'applaudit de ne plus porter dans son sein le cœur qui battrait encore d'amour à l'aspect du coupable. La couleur vaporeuse des ombres, et la pâle nature qui les environne, font contraste avec l'air de vie d'Énée et de la Sibylle qui le conduit" (F8.4.234) [The first shows Aeneas in the Elysian Fields when he wants to approach Dido. The indignant ghost moves away and congratulates herself on not bearing any longer in her breast the heart that would still throb with love at the sight of the guilty man. The misty colour of the ghosts and the pale countryside which surrounds them afford a contrast with the appearance of life in Aeneas and the Sibyl who is his guide] (E8.4.152). Corinne's fate is here outlined: she is to be transformed from colorful, live Sibyl to shadowy, dead Dido. And it's all going to be Oswald's fault.
52. Oswald is so clearly Hamlet's descendant, and equally clearly Adolphe's twin brother. Although it wasn't published until 1816, Benjamin Constant, Staël's long-time lover, wrote *Adolphe* in 1806, at the same time and at times in the same house where Staël was writing *Corinne*.
53. John Milton, "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce Restored to the Good of Both Sexes" (1643), in *John Milton*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 183.