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The History of the History of the Salon

DUNCAN McCOLL CHESNEY

This article explores the development of an historical understanding of the French salon as an important cultural inheritance in the nineteenth century. During the July Monarchy and the Second Empire the salon, while remaining a *lieu social*, became a *lieu de mémoire* for writers and scholars looking back to the *ancien régime*, either nostalgically or simply in the attempt, so characteristic of the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe, to reconcile the two French traditions, the aristocratic and the revolutionary. Several key figures in this (re-) invention of the salon are discussed, especially Victor Cousin, Pierre-Louis Roederer, and, above all, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve.

Balzac, attempting to sum up the whole of French society in his monumental *œuvre*, played an important role in the reassessment of society (*le monde*), the salon, and aristocracy. His representations of aristocracy and his modifications of the codes of worldliness in an overall project with quite different aims have been well documented in the critical literature.[1] I would like briefly to explore one episode in the *Comédie humaine* as exemplary of this movement of the middle century of reassessment and reinvention of the *ancien régime*. Balzac sought to instruct the *juste milieu* functionaries, bankers, merchants, and so forth on the old aristocracy – always assuming his readership's relative ignorance on this score. The elegant manners and conversation of the past are often, in the *Comédie*, negatively invoked, as what the society of Louis-Philippe lacks. In one famous episode, Balzac explores the afterlife of this tradition in his times, not accidentally elaborated through the study of *women*.

In *Autre Étude de femme*, a somewhat piecemeal collection of stories around the themes of women, society and decline from around 1840, Balzac stages, in an idealized salon setting, a conversation on the society of the *ancien régime*. The story begins with a confidential revelation that the elite of contemporary society enjoys, after balls and other more popular gatherings, a second, more exclusive *soirée* (thus placing *de* Balzac in a socially and narratively privileged position). It is here that the values of the old society are still realized, and "comme sous l'ancien régime, chacun entend ce qui se dit, où la conversation

est générale, où l'on est forcé d'avoir de l'esprit et de contribuer à l'amusement public" (*Les Secrets* 41). These purely worldly, elegant gatherings are necessarily more exclusive, even secretive, in a France (under Louis-Philippe) where "tout le monde court vers quelque but, ou trotte après la fortune" (42). It is to the salon of Mlle des Touches that Balzac takes us, where one can observe – if, like the narrator, one is allowed entry – "la grâce dans les manières malgré les conventions de la politesse, de l'abandon dans la causerie malgré la réserve naturelle aux gens comme il faut, et surtout de la générosité dans les idées" (42–43). In this purified context a whole host of Balzacian characters, led by Henri de Marsay, unite for a discussion of "les changements qui se sont opérés chez la femme française depuis la fatale révolution de Juillet."

The setting of this story is as important as its subject. The secrecy and exclusivity of the gathering suggest its difference and distance from the norm of his time. Balzac expounds at some length on the quality of the conversational exchange and company in descriptions that are meant to have a critically negative effect, as everything society has lost over the course of the nineteenth century. In this pinnacle of sociable interaction, where "une égalité absolue . . . donnait le ton," the conversation revolves, meaningfully, around *la femme*, who will exemplify the decline, as she exemplified the golden age, of salon-aristocratic society of the seventeenth century. While everyone contributes (including such Balzacian standards as Lord Dudley, la baronne de Nucingen, la princesse de Cadignan, Daniel d'Artez, and Rastignac), the *soirée* is dominated by de Marsay.

De Marsay, after a story of deception in love that led to his characteristic sang-froid,[2] declares: "Depuis cinquante ans bientôt nous assistons à la ruine continue de toutes les distinctions sociales, nous aurions dû sauver les femmes de ce grand naufrage, mais le Code civil a passé sur leurs têtes le niveau de ses articles" (61). The Revolution destroyed the society of orders and its distinctions; Napoleon further disempowered women, by rendering them fully dependant on their husbands, and thus denying them any power and wealth of birth. Moreover the Empire "aristocracy" further contaminates the remaining distinctions, leading to a definitive loss of the *grande dame*.

This loss has serious ramifications for French culture. Daniel d'Artez remarks, "Les femmes qui pouvait fonder des salons européens, commander l'opinion, la retourner comme un gant, dominer le monde en dominant les hommes d'art ou de pensée qui devaient le dominer, ont commis la faute d'abondonner le terrain, honteuses d'avoir à lutter avec une bourgeoisie enivrée de pouvoir . . ." (64). Rastignac continues: "La Presse a hérité de la Femme . . . une presse à la place des cercles élégants qui y brillaient jadis" (65), thus manifesting a lucid awareness of the role of print media in the rise of the bourgeois public sphere and its replacement, in class (and gender) terms as well as social space, of the traditional social function of the salon. The *grande dame* is extinct. Now there is only *la femme comme il faut*, still to be distinguished from the bourgeoise, but incapable of truly influencing and dominating, leading French society,

which was a vital role of the great woman of the eighteenth century. There are still codes of distinction (of dress, of morals, of conversation), but the world has fundamentally changed. Woman here is a symbol of aristocracy, of distinction. Her loss is France's. She no longer governs that semi-public sphere of opinion and culture as she had so gloriously since the seventeenth century. Despite the caricatural and unrealistic nature of the gathering he describes, Balzac nonetheless seeks to indicate this loss, at the same time as he fuels his own version of its mythology.

Balzac played a principal role in the re-imagining and vulgarization of the aristocratic culture of the *ancien régime* for his century. But the novelist, however important his immensely popular books were in this representation, was merely one participant in a much larger movement in French society of the nineteenth century, the reconciliation of the two French traditions, that of the *ancien régime* – Louis XIV and the *Grand Siècle*, the source of France's international prestige – and the new, Revolutionary (and by extension, Imperial), once again the model for a new generation in Europe and beyond. The Restoration had tried to restore the pre-Revolutionary society, ignoring the intervening twenty-five years as much as possible, but this was untenable. The bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe, founded on a political compromise that forever severed any continuity with the ancient monarchy, sought legitimacy in a cultural revival and revitalization of earlier traditions. A great deal of literature, history, and other cultural material served this movement, for example the first full edition of Saint-Simon (1829–30; 1856), the continuing publication of the *Historiettes* of Tallemant des Réaux (1833; 1854–60), and the publication of *L'Histoire amoureuse des Gaules* of Bussy-Rabutin (1856), all of which contributed, as more intimate, if not vulgar accounts of the lives of legendary figures across the seventeenth century, to a humanization of the ancient regime at the same time as they encouraged a new mythology. In turn, the Revolutionary educational system provided the basis for a reassessment and (re)publication of the French literary tradition. A principal figure in this reassessment was Victor Cousin.

Cousin, along with Abel François Villemain and François Guizot, the "triumvirate of the Sorbonne" according to Brunetière, were perhaps the most important institutional intellectual figures in the middle century. Each served as minister of Public Instruction, taught at the Sorbonne, and exercised considerable power in the formation of the French educational and academic system. Cousin (1792–1867) was professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne from 1815,[3] and later director of the *École normale supérieure*; after 1848 he became a peer of France, a member of the superior counsel of public instruction, even the minister of education, all the while continuing his popular lectures in philosophy. While he was perhaps most interested at the time in his "eclectic" synthesis of recent developments in German idealist philosophy with the Cartesian and Enlightenment traditions, he was particularly instrumental in this re-invention of the *Grand Siècle* through his popular historical works of the 1840s and 1850s, generally conceived under the rubric of *Études sur la société et*

les femmes du XVIIe siècle.[4] These studies contributed a great deal to the seventeenth-century mania of the mid-century, as well as to a reassessment of the role of women in developments, both literary and political, of France's greatest epoch. Why he felt compelled to present a detailed picture of this period, and not through its philosophers but rather its aristocratic women, Cousin explains in the introduction to the second edition of *Mme de Sablé* (xiv):

> Pour inspirer aux générations présentes le sentiment et le goût de plus nobles mœurs, leur faire connaître, honorer et aimer la France à la plus glorieuse époque de son histoire, puissante au dehors et au dedans, guerrière et littéraire tout ensemble, une France où les femmes étaient, ce semble, assez belles, et exciteraient d'ardentes amours, mais des amours dignes du pinceau de Corneille, de Racine et de Mme de La Fayette, une France enfin qu'il ne fallait pas renverser en un jour de fond en comble, mais élever et perfectionner encore [...] en ajoutant à tous ses grandeurs, la grandeur suprême de la liberté.

Clearly France must keep alive its tradition of manners, mores, and art, despite Revolutionary upheaval, and it is the *femmes illustres* who will exemplify the greatest achievements of this earlier period. The exemplary ladies will be offered as a model to the women of the 1840s and 50s, many of whom were readers of Cousin's popular histories, but these histories will also be offered as versions of literary and cultural history by an eminent professor of letters, as a new kind of historical literary criticism. Finally, the traditions he seeks to recuperate and continue will be specifically figured, for his students and readers, through women. Just as the Revolution used images of women to figure its goals and ideals (Marianne), the conservative and reconciliatory movement of July and the Second Empire will find in Mme de La Fayette, Mme de Sevigné, and others all the way to Mme de Staël, examples of French manners and taste to counter the virile extremes of the more recent French traditions of revolution and conquest and give an air of continuity – and legitimacy – to the *juste milieu*, bourgeois upstarts and the neo-imperial usurpers.

Earlier in 1835, a former Napoleonic statesman, P-L Rœderer had published a *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire de la société polie en France*, seeking to set the record straight, in response to such recent, impolite publications as Bussy and Tallemant, as well as contemporary accounts of the seventeenth century. Rœderer, despite his Napoleonic political career, first as a member of the *Assembleé constituante*, and later as an administrator and financier in the Empire, was similar in some respects to Mme de Staël in his love for the tradition of polite society and conversation of the *ancien régime* coupled with his ardor and enthusiasm for Revolutionary ideals. In the memoir Rœderer gives an idealized account of the salon of Mme de Rambouillet as the origin of modern French polite society, and by a defense of Molière and a meticulous disentanglement of Mme de Rambouillet from the effect of any of Molière's wit against

the *précieuses*, he manages to salvage not only her pure image, but also that of the great dramatist. Finally he describes the full victory of the sociable values of Mme de Rambouillet and Molière in the person of Mme de Maintenon and her ascendancy.

Evidently there were conflicting versions of the *Grand Siècle* (and other periods of French history, for example the sixteenth century) circulating in the 1830s and 40s, but what seems clear is that the *ancien régime*, now definitively historical rather than actual, was a hot spot of cultural memory as the bourgeois monarchy sought cultural marks of legitimacy. Everyone from Cousin and Rœderer to Dumas, Vigny, Gautier and Hugo was writing about the seventeenth century. One main figure in this reassessment rises, however, above the general movement as the most important inventor of a French literary tradition, especially as regards salon-aristocratic society and its resident Muses: Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve.

Failed Romantic poet and ineffectual novelist and lover, Sainte-Beuve gives some credence to saying "those who can't do, teach; and those who can't teach, write literary criticism."[5] Sainte-Beuve was no Victor Hugo, but he wanted to be. The 1840s were for him a great period of resignation after the disappointments of the previous decade: the waxing and waning of the *Cénacle* (Hugo's circle), the trials and failures of Joseph Delorme (Sainte-Beuve's *alter ego*), the overly moderate success of *Volupté* (Sainte-Beuve's attempt at a novel), the cooling of his relationship with Adèle Hugo. After a stint during the short-lived Second Republic (1848–1851) in Liège lecturing on Chateaubriand (whom, after the death of Mme Récamier in 1849, the critic could finally discuss honestly), Sainte-Beuve returned to Paris and assumed the position for which he is principally remembered: the *causeur* and portraitist of the *lundis*, a role he would play unflaggingly for twenty years.[6] He would become *the* literary critic of the middle century. In the face of the ineluctable march of nineteenth-century French literary science (from Villemain to Lanson) Sainte-Beuve stands out, though, for his un-scientificity, despite occasional claims to the contrary. The so-called "botanist" of the *esprit*, the Linnæus of human genius and literary disposition was never so systematic at all. His main achievement was to have broadened the scope of the critical purview, loosened critical dogmas, and deepened the appreciation of the social (and biographical) *milieu* necessary to understanding the "great" literary works. And certainly one of Sainte-Beuve's subjects of predilection was the seventeenth century, the era of France's greatest literary achievements, thus the one most in need of a deeper appreciation of its minor works, its salons, academies, letters, diaries, journals: in short, its general cultural ambiance.

In his Monday article of July 18, 1853, Sainte-Beuve takes as his subject the Mémoire by Rœderer, remarking that "Ce mémoire . . . est devenu comme le signal de ce mouvement de retour au dix-septième siècle qui n'a fait que s'accroître et se développer depuis" (*C.L.* 7: 325). After his customary discussion of Roederer's biography and an account of the book, Sainte-Beuve indi-

cates a novelty of the study which is indeed a cornerstone of the great critic's own method (390): "Il y a d'ailleurs, indépendamment de toute conjecture, un idée vraie et neuve dans son livre, c'est de ressaisir à distance l'histoire de la conversation, d'en noter l'empire en France, de reconnaître et de suivre à côté de la littérature régulière cette collaboration insensible des femmes, à laquelle on avait trop peu songé jusqu'à-là." In the 1850s Cousin and Sainte-Beuve were attempting to write precisely this history. Earlier, in 1849 Sainte-Beuve had acknowledged this in a *causerie* on Cousin. "Parmi les écrivains témoins de la langue, M. Cousin s'est attaché de prédilection à une classe de témoins d'autant plus sûrs qu'ils le sont avec moins de préméditation . . . des femmes qui ont écrit . . ." (*C.L.* 1: 117). Sainte-Beuve applauds this effort but mildly rebukes the respected professor for coming dangerously close to dispensing with the task of criticism and its values, such as talent, and approaching too closely to mere erudite appreciation. This seems somewhat disingenuous from the pen of Sainte-Beuve, and his real criticism of Cousin is revealed elsewhere. "La révolution introduite par M. Cousin dans la critique littéraire consiste précisément à traiter la periode du XVIIe siècle comme si elle était déjà une antiquité, à en étudier et, au besoin, à en restaurer les monuments . . ." (115).[7]

Sainte-Beuve benefits from the revival of interest in the literary culture of the *ancien régime* facilitated by Cousin and the beginnings of institutionalized French literary history, but he objects to Cousin's method of treating this inheritance as *history*, as past, rather than as a living tradition. What is important for Sainte-Beuve – and insofar as he can be said to have a method, this is its fundamental tenet – is to inhabit a work so that it is alive, to put oneself into an historical situation so that it is a *present*, not a past. This is the source of the biographical nature of his criticism, because one must know everything there is to know about a writer and her milieu in order to experience her work as contemporary.[8] Moreover, Sainte-Beuve had a strong sense of the continuity of this salon tradition across the eighteenth century to Mme de Staël, Mme Récamier, and to his time: it was not antique at all.[9] This critical positioning reveals a tell-tale cause of Sainte-Beuve's literary interest, and mitigates what otherwise is certainly an admirably refreshing opening and broadening of the scope of the nascent literary history. "On peut juger un homme public, mort ou vivant, avec quelque rudesse; mais il me semble qu'une femme, même morte, quand elle est restée femme par les qualités essentielles, est un peu notre contemporaine toujours; elle l'est surtout quand elle n'a cessé de se continuer jusqu'à nous par une descendance de gloire, de vertu et de grâce" (*C.L.* 4: 240). Sainte-Beuve, it seems, unlike Cousin, the curator of museum pieces and antiquities, is treating his eternal contemporaries with the only proper gentlemanly respect. And while this gallant treatment of the fair witnesses and chroniclers of the *ancien régime* may preserve them from the merely academic interest of a Cousin, it is not clear how Sainte-Beuve, constrained by the codes of gentlemanly behavior, can salvage the methods and goals of criticism any more than the academician.

It is all too easy to question Sainte-Beuve's suspicious motives for becoming the literary historian of the women around whom the literature of France's great era flourished. But this certainly does not detract from the import of his critical achievement in the twenty years he singularly dominated French letters. In any case, he will prove not to have been the last critic either to make a career out of the *minores* or to pursue his fervent study with dubious motives. There is, to say the least, more to Sainte-Beuve than this. In any case, Sainte-Beuve's role in the reappraisal of French literary history with respect to *salonnières* and conversation has not been sufficiently stressed to date, even in the admirable recent biography of Lepenies, although this aspect of French society seems increasingly important today. For this reason, despite his faults Sainte-Beuve deserves our continued attention.

Among many interests – for example, Ronsard and the Pléiade, whom Sainte-Beuve helped (re)invent as a model for the nascent romantics, or Virgil (Sainte-Beuve's chair at the Collège de France was in Latin poetry) – Sainte-Beuve celebrated most highly the seventeenth century, and above all Mme de Sévigné. She must have a seat in the *Pléiade* of that other, unofficial French tradition of a more casual and active wit and decorum embodied not in *alexandrins* but in conversation: "l'esprit de conversation et de société, l'entente du monde et des hommes, l'intelligence vive et déliée des convenances et des ridicules, l'ingénieuse délicatesse des sentiments, la grâce, le piquant, la politesse achevée du langage" (*Portrait de femmes* 39). But she is also, without doubt, one of the great writers of her period, according to Sainte-Beuve. Sainte-Beuve the Romantic, who had sought sustenance in the pre-Malherbean freedom of Ronsard for the *Cénacle* to find their way in the 1830s, writes a parallel tradition of French literature – not unrelated to this unsung tradition of conversation – with Mme de Sévigné as one of its masters, along with Montaigne, Regnier, Queen Marguerite, La Fontaine, Molière, Fénélon, and Saint-Simon (as opposed to Malherbe, Guez de Balzac, Boileau, Racine). In the space of these other two traditions, one social and conversational but unwritten, the other casual and conversational, but crafted, we find most of the women Sainte-Beuve celebrates: *salonnières*, muses, correspondants: women forming their *esprit* with grace and natural restraint, not with learned and measured control (since, in any case, the education, institutional positions, and general social roles which would foster or sustain erudition and measure were not open to them except very rarely).

While Sainte-Beuve by no means invents this image of Mme de Sévigné, he stamps it with his own touch and offers her popularly to his century and beyond (to Proust), not only as a legitimate talent, brilliant writer and rightful recipient of the highest possible accolades along with the likes of Molière, but also as exemplary, like Mme de Rambouillet, of polite society and conversation (*causerie*) of the seventeenth century, of which he suggests: "sans doute l'ensemble de la société n'est plus là, mais il y a de beaux restes, des coins d'arrière-saison" (46). It is the task of these portraits and articles to emphasize

(if not fabricate) these beautiful remainders.

Together with Mme de Sévigné, Sainte-Beuve offers as great figures in this tradition Mme de La Fayette and the Duke de La Rochefoucauld, whom he hardly differentiates, so much is their shared milieu the object of his interest. Mme de La Fayette, whom Sainte-Beuve describes as the "[Boileau-]Despréaux de la politesse de cour," is naturally celebrated as the author of "le premier en date des plus aimables romans" (341), of which the "nouveauté particulière à Mme de La Fayette consiste dans l'extrême finesse d'analyse" (326). But Sainte-Beuve is less concerned with her novels than with her exemplary character. In fact, it is precisely her relationship to La Rochefoucauld he finds most admirable, not *La princesse de Clèves*.[10] Against Rœderer's account of polite society from Mme de Rambouillet to Mme de Maintenon, Sainte-Beuve, while retaining the very misogynist contemporary received ideas about the *précieuses*, especially Mlle de Scudéry, nonetheless recognizes the essential relationship between Sapho and her avatars and salon society.[11] The two cultural developments – salon society and "blue-stockings" in all of their excesses – are inextricably interrelated. There are extremes of politeness and of wit that must be acknowledged, as he suggests in a criticism of Rœderer (339).

The perfect balance of *esprit* and grace was reached by Mmes de La Fayette and de Sévigné in the setting of the salon of Mme de Sablé. La Rochefoucauld, who is included somewhat counter-intuitively in the *Portraits de femmes*, actually belongs there, according to Sainte-Beuve, since his history is told by the study of four women, Mmes de Chevreuse and de Longueville during his *frondeur* days, and Mmes de Sablé and de La Fayette during the later period of his genius, the era of the Maximes and reflections. Moreover, describing, in *Port Royal*, Mme de Sablé, whose "salon était le grand laboratoire des *Maximes*" (81), Sainte-Beuve suggests that the maxims were virtually a collaborative production of that salon. At any rate, they must be understood in the context of the rich relationship among those four *esprits* before they can be fully appreciated in their stature as classic.

Sainte-Beuve "a contribué plus que quiconque à imposer de notre littérature une vision telle que le XVIIe siècle est exalté aux dépens du XVIIIe, qu'une morale catholique à forte coloration janséniste est présentée comme la description authentique de la condition humaine, que tout ce qui touche de trop près à la politique est délibérément négligé ou formellement condamné, dès lors qu'il s'agit de menacer l'ordre établi" (Fayolle 9). According to Fayolle, this Sainte-Beuve of *Port Royal* had a definitive influence on French letters. However, the critic goes on to study the numerous articles Sainte-Beuve wrote on the *salonnières* and writers of the eighteenth century. While it is true that Sainte-Beuve expresses a sense of decline in sociability over the course of the eighteenth century once conversation had become a profession and lost its spontaneity and vivacity,[12] the further refinement during the period of the great salons of the Enlightenment truly was the high point in the European prestige of French conversation. "En fait de société polie et de conversation,

le XVIIIe siècle n'eut qu'à étendre, à régulariser et à perfectionner ce que le XVIIe siècle avait premièrement fondé et établi" (Sainte-Beuve, *C.L.* 4: 174). This regularization and perfection, institutionalization, vulgarization, deterioration or what have you, whatever else might be said of it, occurred on a much larger scale during the Enlightenment than during the *Grand Siècle*. And in fact two-thirds of the collected portraits in the *Portraits de femmes* involve women or works after 1715. Despite various pronouncements and this general narrative of decline, Sainte-Beuve constructs a tradition of *salonnières* and authors that bespeaks continuity much more than golden and silver ages. If there is a period of decline it is his present which needs to keep alive the society of conversation and gallantry by looking to and learning from Mme de Sévigné, Mmes de Lambert, du Deffand, de Staal(-Delaunay), Geoffrin, and de Staël.

Of the latter Sainte-Beuve had much to say, as one of the principal intellectual and artistic figures of the immediately preceding generation, but also as a last, or at least the latest embodiment of the great French salon tradition of conversation and *esprit*, in so far as her times allowed her to cultivate the society she experienced in the salon of her mother, Mme Necker. As in the case of Mlle de Scudéry, Sainte-Beuve is less impressed by the novelistic achievement of de Staël than by her conversational presence.[13] "Le caractère dominant de Mme de Staël, l'unité principale de tous les contrastes qu'elle embrassait, l'esprit rapide et pénétrant qui circulait de l'un à l'autre et soutenait cet assemblage merveilleux, c'était à coup sûr la conversation, la parole improvisée, soudaine, au moment où elle jaillissait toute divine de la source perpétuelle de son âme . . ." (129). In this sense, Mme de Staël represents continuity with, and even perfection of the eighteenth-century society of Mlle de Lespinasse and others.

Through numerous articles on the *salonnières* and conversationalists of the eighteenth century, Sainte-Beuve continues this "revolutionary" view of French literary history, with important ramifications both in the understanding of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and in the methods of literary scholarship. Why, we must ask, did Sainte-Beuve feel compelled to write this history?

> Quelle est mon intention et mon but en revenant volontiers ici sur ces sujets du XVIIe et du XVIIIe siècle? Ai-je en vue de proposer des modèles? Non pas précisément; mais je voudrais aider avant tout à maintenir, à renouer la tradition, sans laquelle rien n'est possible en bonne littérature . . . Je voudrais que, dans le commerce de ces hommes ou de ces femmes d'esprit d'il y a un siècle, nous nous reprissions à causer comme on causait autrefois, avec légèreté, politesse s'il se peut, et sans trop d'emphase. Un des défauts des générations nouvelles (lesquelles ont leurs qualités d'ailleurs, que je ne conteste pas), c'est de vouloir dater de soi seul, c'est d'être en général dédaigneux du passé, systématique, et, par suite, roide et rude, ou même un peu farouche. . . . (*C.L.* 2: 266)

This obviously (ideologically) supports a more social, collaborative model of literary production as opposed to the isolated, individualist conception derived from Romanticism but filtered through the growing competitive, cultural market (and the looming social alienation of Modernity). In attempting to revive the tradition of polite conversation as an antidote to the more brusque and decisive manners of the revolutionary generation, Sainte-Beuve addresses a problem Mme de Staël had lucidly elaborated in 1800 in *De le littérature*.

Germaine de Staël, whose mother's salon had been a primary Enlightenment meeting ground, herself oversaw one of the most important and prestigious salons of the immediate pre-Revolutionary period. She was indeed the embodiment of certain ideals of the salon-aristocratic society of the *ancien régime*, a veritable child prodigy who was destined to take this tradition in exciting new directions, had conditions permitted. On the other hand, she was also, and remained so her whole life, a believer in the pre-Terror Revolution, in liberty, equality, and the perfectibility of man and woman. In *De la littérature* she pinpoints clearly the reasons behind the great achievements in manners and in literature during the *ancien régime* – namely, a rigid social structure of inequality and complete political disempowerment of the notables. The nobles, increasingly subjected over the course of the seventeenth century to a point of absolute submission at Versailles, developed correspondingly strict codes of honor,[14] of behavior and conversation which were guarded over all the more, the less power the nobles actually had to exercise in the political sphere: thus all the duels, the development of *ridicule*[15] and the consequent sharp wit of a Molière, the nuanced practice of observation which led to the works of the moralists. "Obligés d'étudier sans cesse ce qui pouvait nuire ou plaire en société, cet intérêt les rendait très observateurs . . . Dans l'ancien régime, tous les Français, plus ou moins, s'occupaient extrêmement du *paraître*, parce que le théâtre de la société en inspire singulièrement le désir" (276–77). The extremely intensified environment of observation and performance produced some of France's greatest cultural achievements. Moreover, the role of women was central, both through the salons, and by virtue of the forced leisure of many of the aristocrats who were compelled to focus more exclusively on conversation, courting, and sociable intercourse. "L'influence des femmes est nécessairement très grande, lorsque tous les événements se passent dans les salons, et que tous les caractères se montrent par les paroles . . ." (278).

These social graces and cultural developments, de Staël insists, were born of a politically intolerable situation – from the standpoint of Revolutionary liberty. Still, the ideological products of a certain system can certainly outlive the conditions that gave rise to them. Similarly, such ideological phenomena, although born of a false situation, can express a truth: "quoique le bon ton de la société de France fût entièrement fondé sur les relations factices, c'est à la gaieté de cette société même qu'il faut attribuer ce qu'on avait conservé de vérité dans les idées et dans la manière de les exprimer" (277). However, at a

certain point, things must change; the ideological remainders of a former state of affairs begin to ring false in a new and true one, and they belie the truth they coded in the false historical situation. What should society look like, once its fundamental tenets have changed from prestige and submission to liberty and equality, and how can the embattled truth be preserved?

The manners and taste of the *ancien régime*, however nuanced and delicate they may have been, were oppressive. "La nation française était . . . trop civilisée" (302). The codes of comportment, and worse, the law of ridicule, were too stifling, and too despotic. What should Revolutionary society retain from this infamous and exquisite tradition? What must it sacrifice? "Il faut donc, pour donner aux écrits [actuels] plus d'élévation, et aux caractères plus d'energie, ne pas soumettre le goût aux habitudes élégantes et recherchées des sociétés aristocratiques, quelque remarquables qu'elles soient par la perfection de la grâce; leur despotisme entraînerait de graves inconvénients pour la liberté, l'égalité politique, et même la haute littérature . . ." (305–06). Since the unjust causes that gave rise to the social graces of the *ancien régime* now lack, Mme de Staël courageously declares that the graces themselves must be sacrificed (308). "Si la société qui inspirait cette sorte d'instinct [cet esprit aimable, élégant et gai qui faisait le charme de la cour], ce tact rapide, est anéantie, le tact et l'instinct doivent finir avec elle. Il faut [y] renoncer . . ." (311). Still, intercourse and conversation remain vitally important, and should be retained along with an ideal of urbanity more like that of the English Enlightenment model. *La politesse* and its related values must disappear. Philosophy, literature, conversation, education will be the new pursuits and pass-times. And the women, who despite their inequality and, often, their ignorance, were at the heart of everything refined and distinguished about the society of the *ancien régime*,[16] must continue to participate in and lead urbane society of the new era, but now as better educated and more empowered participants.

Sainte-Beuve, as we have seen, was less critical of the society of orders and more interested in keeping alive the traditions of manners and *esprit*. Perhaps this was naïve, or conservative on the part of the critic; perhaps he was much cannier, more astute in appreciating the after-life of the "ideology" or codes of the society of orders, in understanding the human need for distinction and in seeking that it at least be cultivated and elegant. In any case, he strove to find a way out of the developing market-governed literary movement ("la littérature industrielle") – much as Mme de Staël had sought a way out of the rudeness and lack of grace in the post-Revolutionary manners – through emulation of certain aspects of the society of the *ancien régime*. In so doing he wrote his alternate history of French letters, his Monday *causeries* many of which were devoted to the *minores* of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and passed on to subsequent generations – despite his shortcomings in more contemporary criticism (for example, Baudelaire) – a new cultural self-understanding.

The salon, which began in the early seventeenth century as an anti-courtly appropriation of an Italian courtly tradition, and became a touchstone of

French society during its great centuries, had resurfaced after the Revolution as a reconciliatory symbol. It is then taken up by Sainte-Beuve and others and projected across the nineteenth century and into the next to be imitated, celebrated, emulated, modified, but retained in the French popular imagination, not to be lost until the final decimation of the French aristocracy – and consequently of its resilient prestige – in the Great War and the radical transformation of entertainment and social gathering brought about by twentieth-century technologies (for instance, the moving picture). Proust, for one, would enviously contemplate the image of this society in his preferred writers of the *ancien régime* (Saint-Simon, Sévigné), would assiduously seek out opportunities to participate in gatherings of Third Republic aristocrats and artists in this tradition, and would assume, as one of his formidable tasks, the project of representing the late exemplars of this salon-aristocratic society, in all of their pathos and absurdity, in his great book.[17] Sainte-Beuve, negatively and positively, provided a link between the world of Mme de Sévigné, Mme de La Fayette and La Rochefoucauld and Proust, though the latter will be reluctant to admit it. However devastating Proust's ultimate critical judgment of this society, his book nonetheless attests to the successful cultural work, briefly documented here, whereby a social phenomenon is transformed into a myth, a *lieu social* into a *lieu de mémoire*.

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NOTES

1 See for example, Fortassier, Forest, and Barberis.

2 And which leads to the famous lines, "Il y a toujours un fameux singe dans la plus jolie et la plus angélique des femmes!" (53). Proust will criticize this line, or rather its continuation, "A ce mot, toutes les femmes baissèrent les yeux comme blessées par cette cruelle vérité, si cruellement formulée." This illustrates not only Balzac's vulgarity, but also his greatest literary failure: to tell rather than to show. It is unbelievable, perhaps, that the women reacted this way, but at any rate, it is self-congratulatory and tedious for Balzac to tell us so in these words. See *Contre Sainte-Beuve* 206–09.

3 Cousin was suspended from this post from 1820–27 for his *doctrinaire* sympathies, shared of course with Guizot, the real leader of the *juste milieu* moderate constitutional royalists.

4 This is a large study of polite society and letters of the Grand Siècle undertaken in autonomous installments on *Jacqueline Pascal* (1844), *La jeunesse de Mme de Longueville* (1853), *Mme de Sablé* (1854), *La duchesse de Chevreuse* (1856), *Mme de Hautefort* (1856), *La Société française au XVIIe siècle d'après Le Grand Cyrus de Mlle de Scudéry* (1858), and

Mme de Longueville pendant la Fronde (1859).
5 "Il passa critique comme tous les impuissants qui mentent à leurs débuts," as Balzac would say of another (quoted in Sainte-Beuve, *C.L.* 2: September 2, 1850).
6 It is, then, during the Second Empire that Sainte-Beuve, as well as Victor Cousin, produced most what I call the reconciliatory work of cultural legitimization. I believe this work is best understood as a response to the turmoil of the Restoration and the July Monarchy, but obviously it continues through the period of great wealth and presumption under Napoleon III.
7 See also Sainte-Beuve, *Cahiers Intimes inédits* 59–60: "[Cousin] traite ces femmes [du dix-septième siècle] comme il ferait les élèves dans un cours de philosophie; il les régente, il les range; toi d'abord, toi ensuite . . . il les classe, il les claque; il leur déclare comme faveur suprême qu'il les admet. Tout cela manque de délicatesse. Quand on parle des femmes, il me semble que ce n'est point là la véritable question à se faire et qu'il serait mieux de se demander tout bas, non pas si on daignera accueillir, mais si elles vous auraient accueilli."
8 The shortcoming of this method in the assessment of contemporaries is another issue altogether, about which Lanson, Proust, Wellek, and many others have commented. For a recent and convincing recuperation, see Lepenies.
9 For an historical study of the continuities and novelties of nineteenth-century salon life with respect to the glory days of the *Grand Siècle* and the Enlightenment, see Kale. Kale is much more interested in the historical intricacies of the salons and their relationship to the shifting politics of the first half of the nineteenth century. Nostalgia, reactionary or not, for the institution in general he treats only briefly (Ch. 7). This article thus complements his substantial study.
10 "Si Mme de La Fayette réforma le roman en France, le roman chevaleresque et sentimental, et lui imprima cette nuance particulière qui concilie jusqu'à un certain point l'idéal avec l'observation, on peut dire aussi qu'elle fonda la première un exemple tout à fait illustre de ces attachements durables, décents, légitimes et consacrés dans leur constance, de tous les jours, de toutes les années jusqu'à la mort . . ." (*Portraits de femmes* 314).
11 "Sapho" was the artistic *alter ego* of Madeleine de Scudéry. Sainte-Beuve does give some credit to de Scudéry, especially with respect to "les Conversations pour lequelles elle avait un talent singulier, une vraie vocation" (*C.L.* 4: 121). Cousin, alone, shows any real respect for Mlle de Scudéry, and attempts to exculpate her from the crimes of preciosity. (*La société française* 289–305) Even for him, though, it goes almost without saying that preciosity is a crime. The insight that the phenomenon of preciosity was above all an index of anxiety over a shift in the literary field, and in (sexual) power relations in general, was not available to these critics. See DeJean.
12 See *Portraits de femmes*, "Mme de Sévigné," 47.
13 We recall that this was also the case with Mme de La Fayette. Sainte-Beuve was perhaps not entirely prepared to accept the realization of "feminine" genius in the form

of the novel, although he did acknowledge it in his contemporary George Sand, especially in *Lélia*. In any case, it was in conversation, letters, literary epiphenomena that Sainte-Beuve sought the merits of his subjects. Clearly this was both broadening and constraining.

14 "La délicatesse du point d'honneur, l'un des prestiges de l'ordre priviligié, obligeait les nobles à décorer la soumission la plus dévouée des formes de la liberté" (273).

15 "Le ridicule est, à beaucoup d'égards, une puissance aristocratique: plus il y a de rangs dans la société, plus il existe de rapports convenus entre ces rangs, et plus l'on est obligé de les connaître et de les respecter" (276).

16 "Je crois fermement que dans l'ancien Régime, où l'opinion exerçait un si salutaire empire, cet empire était l'ouvrage des femmes distinguées par leur esprit et leur caractère . . ." (336).

17 For a continued discussion of the role of the salon in French society from Proust's perspective, see Chesney.

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