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Victoria D. Schmidt. *Triumph in Exile*. New York: Chaucer Press, 2002.  
409p.

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The opening sentence of *Triumph in Exile* portrays Napoleon as a megalomaniac. The word erases Napoleon's enduring reform of French education and law, the contributions to science and culture made by the men who accompanied him on his military expeditions, and his unbelievable ascension from a modest student of the military art to Emperor of the French, and, why not, the visionary of a united Europe. This should make the reader apprehensive about all that is still to come. And yet, having read the epilogue, one reluctantly closes the book. It is entertaining and instructive, provides historical and political information, and gives a lively and fascinating picture of the years that precede and follow the French Revolution of 1789. We acquire an *aperçu* of the First Republic, the Directory, the Napoleonic odyssey, the progress of the Great Army across Europe into Russia and its eventual demise, the burning of Moscow, Napoleon's victory at Borodino, his defeat at Waterloo, Mme de Staël's return to Paris from exile, and her death in 1817. She missed by three years the glorious explosion of French Romanticism that she had prepared and greatly influenced, and that French poet Alphonse de Lamartine ushered in with his *Méditations* of 1820.

*Triumph in Exile* depicts the magnetic attraction/repulsion between Anne Louise Germaine Necker, Baronne de Staël, and Napoleon. Schmidt is not first in suggesting that Napoleon feared Mme de Staël. He first exiled her from Paris, then from France, and finally confined her life to her family estate at Coppet, in Switzerland. He pursued and harassed her during her epic escape while Mme de Staël proclaimed her love of freedom and her suspicions about Napoleon.

The novel has a Prelude (1-6), five parts, and an Epilogue (407-409). Part One shows Germaine's parents, her education, her first love affairs, and the rise of Napoleon to power (7-143). Part Two begins on the 18 *Brumaire* and ends with Napoleon's triumph in the Tribunate where he imposes his legislation that restricts debate. Constant's passionate speech denouncing the law had, no doubt, some input from Mme de Staël. It temporarily put an end to his political career (143-177). In Part Three Napoleon's and de Staël's skirmishes eventually lead to her exile from Paris (178-279). Part Four ends as Madame de Staël leaves for Austria while Napoleon extends his grip over Europe (280-348). Part Five tells Mme de Staël's epic travels in a golden *berline*, pulled by horses, through Eastern Europe and Russia, her crossing in a fishing boat to Sweden, her stop in London, and fi-

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nally her return to Paris after Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig in 1814 (349-405). In the last chapter, her friends pay her a tribute worthy of a queen at Talleyrand's home, he who, like the reed in La Fontaine's fable, bent and weathered well the storms that lead to the Restoration. The Epilogue tells of her death on July 14, 1817, and the ascension of Albertine, now married into the de Broglie family.

This is not a historical work or a biography. These fields of study require annotations and scholarly footnotes, research and proof of documentation. Schmidt, no doubt, did her research thoroughly, yet she chose not to overload her book with scholarly and bibliographical references. She tells her admiration for Mme de Staël in a novel that will appeal to scholars and specialists. Yet it is not intended for this small group of informed readers alone; it is meant to capture a much broader readership.

Europe's history and geography and her powerful political players are taken from life. Mme de Staël emerges as a savvy woman in French and European politics, and as Napoleon's victim who refuses to be victimized. In spite of her many travels as a result of the harassments that she endured, she found time and energy to write serious essays of the caliber of *De la Littérature (Of Literature)* and *De l'Allemagne (Of Germany)*. She portrayed talented women in *Delphine* and *Corinne*. These novels brought her great success and extreme anguish to Napoleon.

Of particular interest in this novel is the treatment of history and the portrayal of Mme de Staël first as a precocious daughter and a loving wife who became disillusioned with husband and marriage. Schmidt stresses her parents' influence on Germaine, the rigorous education that she received under her mother's supervision, who instilled in her the habit of diligent work and independent thinking by exposing her at a tender age to the ideas of prominent thinkers in her *salon*. As a young woman, Germaine witnessed the French Revolution. Thanks to her father, she was a participant in many key events of a historically turbulent period. Later, as the wife of the ambassador from Sweden, she reigned over the most influential *salon* frequented by the most powerful political players, except, as Schmidt points out, Napoleon. Germaine is seen as a caring and tender mother who provided the best tutors for her children. The moments she spends with Albertine send a whiff of fresh air into the story. She instilled in her children a sense of responsibility; in particular in her oldest son Auguste, and married her daughter to a young man whom Albertine loved. She appears as a faithful friend who risked her life to save others from the guillotine. As a political player on the chessboard of Europe, she did much harm to Napoleon, and according to Schmidt, she contributed to his demise. Her friendship with Juliette Récamier, her tenderness and affection for Albertine, and her independence in managing her immense fortune make a vivid

impression on the reader, as do her contacts with some of the influential minds of Europe. She also inspired long lasting devotion in her closest servants. Schmidt does not portray Mme de Staël as a perfect woman, but as one endowed with many qualities, and the intelligence and political know-how to match them. De Staël always feels the equal of others, regardless of the importance of their social and political position, or their gender.

The question of Germaine's sexual appetites and lovers can hardly be avoided. Narbonne fathered her two sons, Auguste and Alfred; Benjamin Constant, according to Schmidt, fathered Albertine. Some critics have centered in the past on Mme de Staël's tumultuous liaisons, her outrageous behavior, her tantrums, her exotic turbans and dress, minimizing the importance and influence of her works and her political role. Schmidt, on the contrary, treats Mme de Staël's energetic and healthy sexual appetites with discretion and reserve: "[Benjamin Constant] moved slowly toward the chaise and embraced Germaine. Finding his ardor as irresistible as his mind, she responded with fervent passion" (96). The writer quickly extinguishes the fire of romance, in order not to detract from the main purpose of the novel, which is to showcase the social talents and political know how of a well-educated brilliant and courageous woman with healthy sexual appetites, who meant to satisfy them.

Schmidt swiftly identifies the key political players in their cameo performances. The reader meets them long enough to savor the historical events without feeling overwhelmed by history: The monarchs of Europe and czars of Russia quickly move on as the reader turns the pages. The novel covers some fifty years of European history from 1766 to 1817. It is generously peppered with dialogues and reads like a scenario. In her introductory remarks, Schmidt suggests that the novel could well become a movie, an idea long overdue, and whose time has come. ✨