**Mme de Staël’s philosophy of imagination[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Germaine de Staël’s oeuvre displays a consistent preoccupation with the notions of “genius” (*le* *génie*), “enthusiasm” (*l’enthousiasme*) and “imagination” (*l’imagination*). While Mme de Staël became familiar with a wide range of sources on these and related concepts throughout her intellectual career—Condillac, Smith, Grouchy and Bonstetten, among others[[2]](#footnote-2)—her thought on these phenomena as deeply intertwined bears a striking resemblance to that of Diderot and Rousseau. This is particularly clear in light of Tili Boon Cuillé’s recent chapter on French Enlightenment “philosophy of nature.” According to Cuillé, Diderot and Rousseau have several views on genius, enthusiasm and imagination which are either shared or complementary. For both philosophers, the genius is someone who, in virtue of her heightened imaginative activity, transmutes her enthusiastic reaction to natural harmony into artwork that evokes enthusiasm from its audience (Cuillé, 2021, p. 82-3, 104). For Rousseau, imagination has explanatory priority; harmonious relations in nature cannot be perceived without the help of the imagination, which combines past sensory perceptions into enthusiasm-evoking “ideal models” (Ibid., p. 131, 139). Diderot is explicit about the nature of enthusiasm, and that its causal relationship with imagination is bidirectional: enthusiasm is a state of heightened sensory awareness and emotional susceptibility that is itself predicated on imaginative activity, just as enthusiasm spurs the imagination (Ibid., p. 109). Diderot and Rousseau agree that geniuses are important contributors to society, in large part because the enthusiasm they transmit from their own experiences of natural harmony promotes individual and collective wellbeing.

Something quite like the Diderotian-Rousseauian “philosophy of nature” is evident in Mme de Staël’s earlier works like *Lettres* (1788), *De la littérature* (1799), *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne* (1807). But remarkable theoretical development appears in *De l’Allemagne* (1813), her “climate-based analysis of the origin of government, language and culture” for the nation of Germany (Cuillé, 2021, p. 229). *De l’Allemagne* is a wide-ranging theoretical work, a relatively late-career attempt to systematically integrate information about the natural world, culture, and our connection to the divine. Its breadth, lateness and systematicity make *De l'Allemagne* a particularly good source for Mme de Staël’s original philosophical thought[[3]](#footnote-3) (though as Pierre Macherey rightly notes, genre-bending is one of Mme de Staël’s preferred philosophical methods, over and against assertoric system building; Macherey, 1995, Introduction, Ch. 1).

In this paper I will begin to reconstruct Mme de Staël’s innovative theory of genius, enthusiasm and imagination, with a focus on imagination in *De l’Allemagne.* Genius and enthusiasm will be discussed in their connections to imagination, and at times I will refer to earlier works of Mme de Staël’s. But imagination in *De l’Allemagne* is a particularly good starting place because here Mme de Staël articulates her original views on imagination in dialogue with prominent German philosophers, at a time when imagination was a topic of keen philosophical interest in Germany[[4]](#footnote-4). Mme de Staël is notorious for her distinctive way of engaging with and doing philosophy—often “arguing” via literary devices rather than plain arguments, and simplifying the theories of others to promote a favored vision of politico-philosophical development (Hogsett, 1987; Isbell, 1994; Higonnet, 1986; Pagani, 2012; cf. Monchoux, 1966; Macherey, 1995; Sanders, 2018; Green, 2020). But in *De l’Allemagne* we see her advancing a distinctively French philosophical idiom (the genius-enthusiasm-imagination constellation) through perceptive, earnest engagement with cutting-edge German philosophy. Ultimately what we find in *De l’Allemagne* is indirect but trenchant criticism of Kant’s views on imagination, and an alignment of Herder—a student and prominent critic of Kant’s—with her own Diderotian-Rousseauian mode of thought. We also find a distinctively French account of the role of imagination in empirical science. Mme de Staël’s unusual philosophical method is at least partly vindicated by her theory of the imagination in *De l’Allemagne*, which achieves theoretical rigor without exaggerating the role of reason in philosophical theorizing. This method also exemplifies Mme de Staël’s oft-noted cosmopolitanism by advancing the best of French Enlightenment thought through engagement with another nation’s philosophical tradition. Mme de Staël’s philosophical acumen has often been called into doubt, and she is not widely seen as a philosopher. Furthermore, those who do see her as a philosopher generally see her as a social and political philosopher, emphasizing her interest, as a woman, in gender roles (Green, 1916; Jaume, 1997; Marso, 1997; Hillman, 2011; Fontana, 2016). But the philosophical sophistication of her treatment of imagination is evidence that she is a highly competent philosopher engaged not just in social and political philosophy, but historically significant philosophical psychology.

To be clear, I am unaware of previous attempts to reconstruct Mme de Staël’s philosophical psychology, and its presence in her oeuvre goes mostly unacknowledged. Cuillé herself, on whom I have already relied greatly, groups Mme de Staël with James Macpherson (“Ossian”) as giving a “poetics” of nature rather than a philosophy of nature, based in large part on Mme de Staël’s interest in melancholy (*la mélancolie*) in *Corinne* (Cuillé, 2021, Ch. 4). For Cuillé, “Staël questions the association between enthusiasm and genius, valorizing instead the relationship between melancholy and imagination” (Ibid., p. 230). This may capture one of Mme de Staël’s purposes in *Corinne*, but it does not seem to me that Cuillé captures the full extent of Mme de Staël’s debt to French “philosophy of nature” in *Corinne*, *De l’Allemagne* or other works. Certainly by the time of Mme de Staël’s encounter with German philosophy in *De l’Allemagne—*and, I would think, earlier—Mme de Staël places a strong emphasis on the connections among genius, enthusiasm and imagination. It therefore seems to me that, like most commentators, Cuillé underestimates the systematicity of Staëlian philosophy, or at least, the consistent presence of systematic elements. One of my aims in this paper is to show that there is much rational reconstruction of systematic Staëlian philosophy to be done, particularly with regards to her philosophical psychology and theory of knowledge. More work in this area might significantly change our understanding of Mme de Staël’s authorship.

I will proceed as follows. In §1 I will discuss Mme de Staël’s critique of Kant’s understanding of imagination. In §2 I will discuss her endorsement of Herder on the role of imagination in artistic production and cultural development. In §3 I will explain how she sees imagination functioning in the production of empirical knowledge, and its role in science. I conclude with a summary of the preceding sections, and an analysis of how Mme de Staël situates herself in the Enlightenment philosophical tradition. As I proceed, I will advance three major theses. (I) For Mme de Staël, imagination enables us to transcend the epistemic limitations of our other faculties (*les* *facultés*). (II) It is capable of this because, in addition to engaging in cognition and thought, it is the site of certain crucial feelings (*le sentiments*), including enthusiasm. And (III) it is for these reasons that Mme de Staël repeatedly emphasizes the importance of imagination over reason (*la raison*) throughout *De l’Allemagne*.

Before I begin, a word on my method of citation. In my research I have relied primarily on historical English translations of Mme de Staël’s works, especially Wight’s 1859 translation of *De l’Allemagne* and the 1813 Bells and Wait edition of *De la littérature.* Since these are not recent critical editions, my citations for *De l’Allemagne* and *De la littérature* will always direct readers to Mme de Staël’s own French in the 2017 Champion and 1998 Garnier critical editions, respectively (both edited by Axel Blaeschke). I only cite *Lettres* once, above, and in that case I give an English translation and reference a recent French reprint as well as the historical source of the English. All block quotations below will include the French from the relevant recent critical edition, as well as an historical English translation. Minor, in-paragraph quotes from *De l’Allemagne* and *De la littérature* will be provided in historical English translation but will still refer readers to a location in a recent French critical edition. This method should enable readers of English to understand while directing scholars of French to the most relevant sources.

**§1. Kant and the Limits of Experience**

Mme de Staël takes Kant to be the central figure of contemporary German philosophy[[5]](#footnote-5). Her eponymous chapter on him in *De l’Allemagne* is one of only two philosopher-specific chapters, the other being on Jacobi. The Kant chapter is elaborate and demonstrates a reasonably good understanding of his critical works, though Mme de Staël was criticized for its inaccuracies almost as soon as *De l’Allemagne* was published (Higonnet, 1986, p. 160-1). Many argue, to my satisfaction, that Mme de Staël saw Kant’s critical philosophy as a potential good influence on post-Revolution French society, and that she presents it in such a way as to encourage this positive influence. Macherey, for instance, emphasizes the pro-cosmopolitan spin Mme de Staël put on Kant: She aims to make him accessible to non-Germans, to make him appeal as much to the heart as to reason, and to turn Kant “not only into an eclectic philosophy, but into the prime spokesman for the doctrine of eclecticism” (Macherey, 1995, p. 27). Sanders argues that Mme de Staël was as concerned with rendering Kant “inhabitable.” Seeing that Kant highlights the limits of reason and puts the moral law and faith in God in the domain of practical rather than pure reason, Mme de Staël believes that he puts the soul (*l’âme*) beyond the scope of rational analysis. He thereby endows the soul with autonomous agency, widespread belief in which conduces to a free society and good government (Sanders, 2018, paras. 13-14). Similarly, Green argues that Mme de Staël is persuaded by Kant’s transcendental account of judgment because transcendental idealism seems to overcome the threat of French Enlightenment materialism she blames for the Reign of Terror (Green, 2020)[[6]](#footnote-6). While Mme de Staël probably did frame her interpretation of Kant to promote social welfare, her description of the epistemic limits of imagination in the *Critique of pure reason* in *De l’Allemagne* is accurate. And while she does not respond to them directly, at later points she challenges several of its basic features. Here is how *De l’Allemagne* glosses this aspect of the first *Critique*:

Les vérités acquises par l’expérience n’emportent jamais avec elles cette certitude absolue; quand on dit le soleil se lève chaque jour, tous les hommes sont mortels, etc., l’imagination pourrait se figurer une exception à ces vérités que l’expérience seule fait considérer comme indubitables, mais l’imagination elle-même ne saurait rien supposer hors de l’espace et du temps; et l’on ne peut considérer comme un résultat de l’habitude, c’est-àdire de la répétition constante des mêmes phénomènes, ces formes de notre pensée que nous imposons aux choses ; les sensations peuvent être douteuses, mais le prisme à travers lequel nous les recevons est immuable …Les formes du raisonnement n’ont de résultat que quand on les applique au jugement des objets extérieurs, et dans cette application elles sont sujettes à l’erreur; mais elles n’en sont pas moins nécessaires en elles-mêmes, c’est-à-dire que nous ne pouvons nous en départir dans aucune de nos pensées; il nous est impossible de nous rien figurer hors des relations de causes et d’effets, de possibilité, de quantité, etc.; et ces notions sont aussi inhérentes à notre conception que l’espace et le temps. Nous n’apercevons rien qu’à travers les lois immuables de notre manière de raisonner; donc ces lois aussi sont en nous-mêmes et non audehors de nous. (Staël, 2017 [1813], p.602-3)

Truths acquired by experience never carry absolute certainty with them; when we say: “The sun rises every day,” “all men are mortal,” etc., *the imagination could figure an exception to these truths, which experience alone makes us consider indubitable; but Imagination herself cannot suppose any thing out of the sphere of space and time*; and it is impossible to regard as the result of custom (that is, of the constant repetition of the same phenomena) those forms of our thoughts which we impose upon things; sensations may be doubtful; but the prism through which we receive them is immovable … The forms of reasoning have no result, except when they are applied to our judgment of external objects, and in this application they are liable to error; but they are not the less necessary in themselves; that is, we cannot depart from them in any of our thoughts; *it is impossible for us to imagine any thing out of the sphere of the relations of causes and effects, of possibility, quantity, etc.*; and these notions are as inherent in our conception as space and time. (Staël, 1859 [1813], vol. 2, p. 161-2; emphases added)

Mme de Staël rightly notes that for Kant, (A) the intuitions of sensibility (“the sphere of space and time”) and the categories of the understanding (“the sphere of the relations of causes and effects, of possibility, quantity, etc.”) condition all activity of the imagination[[7]](#footnote-7). (B) More generally, she emphasizes that for Kant, however important the imagination may be, it is epistemically limited by the other faculties of the mind. Both points track the fact that for Kant, (C) imagination inhabits a liminal space, as it were: it is ontologically dependent on sensibility and understanding, and to this extent less psychologically basic than sensibility, understanding and reason. Günter Zöller has recently described these three aspects of Kant’s theory of the imagination nicely:

Kant is... keen on ascertaining the limitations and restrictions under which the imagination operates. Given the intermediary, even ambivalent position of the imagination between sensibility and the understanding, the boundaries involved consist, on the one side, in the need for material provisions … to be furnished by sensibility and, on the other side, in the requirement of form functions for synthetic unification to be supplied by the understanding. (Zöller, 2019, p. 84)

Mme de Staël rejected all three positions.[[8]](#footnote-8)

By the time she wrote *De la littérature* in 1799-1800, Mme de Staël already believed that a defining fact about the imagination is that it enables us to experience supersensible realities. In fact, at that time she believed that Kant held this view, and agreed (Staël, 1998 [1800], p. 357)—though later she realized that this is not in fact Kant’s position (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 607-8). While Kant does mostly pay sentiment its due according to Mme de Staël (Ibid., p. 606), she thinks he missed the crucial point that, thanks to its sentimentality or affectivity, imagination grants us experiential access to “the infinite” (*l’infini*). In one of the most philosophically dense parts of *De l’Allemagne—*the introduction to its fourth and final part, “Religion and Enthusiasm”—Mme de Staël repeatedly emphasizes the importance of “the feeling of the infinite” (*le sentiment de l’infini*), framing it as the highest individual good and the chief, if not paradigmatic, religious experience. This is something, the importance of which Mme de Staël could hardly overstate, that on her reading Kant could not account for (except maybe inadequately in terms of judgments of beauty; Ibid., pp. 607-8) [[9]](#footnote-9). Not all German writers had made the same oversight though:

C’est au sentiment de l’infini que la plupart des écrivains allemands rapportent toutes les idées religieuses. L’on demande s’il est possible de concevoir l’infini; cependant ne le conçoit-on pas, au moins d’une manière négative, lorsque dans les mathématiques on ne peut supposer aucun terme à la durée ni à l’étendue? Cet infini consiste dans l’absence des bornes; mais le sentiment de l’infini, tel que l’imagination et le cœur l’éprouvent, est positif et créateur. (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 714)

It is to the feeling of the infinite that the greater portion of German writers refer all their religious ideas; but it may be asked, Can we conceive the infinite? Do we not conceive it, at least in a negative manner, when, in mathematics, we are unable to suppose any boundary to duration or to space? *This infinite consists in the absence of limits; but the feeling of the infinite, such as the imagination and the heart experience it, is positive and creative.* (Staël, 1859 [1813], vol. 2, p. 288; emphasis added)

According to Mme de Staël, there are at least two ways of apprehending the infinite: negatively, via concepts and reason; and positively and creatively, via the imagination and the heart. The latter is not a rational or sensory apprehension, but an affectual one. And it is this positive, creative, affectual apprehension of the infinite that is the font of all human creativity (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 717), individual metaphysical freedom (Ibid., p. 714-15), and genuine personal happiness (Ibid.)

Mme de Staël is fully aware that many would dismiss such views. “Many persons will deny this feeling of the infinite, and assuredly, they have very good ground to deny it, for we cannot possibly explain it to them; a few additional words will not succeed in making them understand what the universe has failed to teach them” (Ibid., p. 715). Her justification for the view that the feeling of the infinite is not just possible, but fundamentally constitutive of human experience, is also of interest as a critique of reason. She credits it to Friedrich Ancillon, a Prussian statesman and philosophical historian whom she holds in high regard:

il trace avec précision la ligne où les connaissances expérimentales s’arrêtent, soit dans les arts, soit dans la philosophie, soit dans la religion ; il montre que le sentiment va beaucoup plus loin que les connaissances, et que par-delà les preuves démonstratives il y a l’évidence naturelle ; par-delà l’analyse, l’inspiration ; par-delà les mots, les idées ; par-delà les idées, les émotions, et que le sentiment de l’infini est un fait de l’âme, un fait primitif, sans lequel il n’y aurait rien dans l’homme que de l’instinct physique et du calcul. (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 716)

He traces, with precision, the boundary where experimental knowledge is stopped, whether in the arts, or in philosophy, or in religion; he shows that sentiment goes much further than knowledge, and that, beyond demonstrative proofs, there is a natural evidence in it; beyond analysis, inspiration; beyond words, idea; beyond ideas, emotions; and that the feeling of the infinite is a fact of the soul, a primitive fact, without which there would be nothing in man but physical instinct and calculation. (Staël , 1859 [1813], vol. 2, p. 290)

According to Mme de Staël, Ancillon holds that knowledge derives from sentiment, and that the various expressions, manifestations, or means for knowledge (proof, analysis, words, ideas) are all ultimately grounded in it. Crucially, these derivatives from sentiment cannot comprehend sentiment itself, least of all the feeling of the infinite. The feeling of the infinite is “a primitive fact,” a more basic aspect of human existence than discursive thought, which discursive thought is therefore incapable of penetrating[[10]](#footnote-10). Writers conditioned to and preoccupied with discursive thought, like philosophical proof and argumentation, are often blind to this deepest fact of human psychology, since their means of investigation can only have sentiment at their back, and not laid bare. Unlike Germany’s philosophers—many of whom Mme de Staël held in high esteem, including, of course, Kant—it is German’s religion-informed writers like Ancillon who fully appreciate the feeling of the infinite as the “light” of the soul.

The fact that for Mme de Staël some are well enough acquainted with the feeling of the infinite that they realize both its reality and its importance, makes it tempting to say that she would attribute to these people special knowledge of the divine. Not only do they have a pre-reflective feeling of the infinite, but with Mme de Staël they have a positive and creative experience of it. Of course, we have just seen that Mme de Staël thought we all have this experience, at least so long as we are truly human. So, it probably does not make sense to say that Mme de Staël thought only some have special knowledge of the divine, but special knowledge of themselves. Knowledge of “the heart” will in a sense be the focus of §2. But I would like to note sooner rather than later that, while Mme de Staël evidently followed Kant in denying the possibility of the cognitive or empirical experience of an actual infinity, she thought the feeling of the infinite was a genuine and vitally important imaginative experience whose denial a systematic philosophy could not possibly survive. Appreciation for the primacy of sentiment, especially the feeling of the infinite and of its seat in the imagination, is a benchmark of adequacy of philosophical systems for Mme de Staël. It is worth noting that, while Mme de Staël ultimately finds Kant’s theory of imagination wanting, she rates it so highly because it recognizes the role of imagination in uniting the other faculties of the soul. She criticizes other German Idealists Fichte and Schelling much more bluntly than Kant, for what she takes to be a more serious neglect of imagination’s importance (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 618-24).

**§2. Herder, Imagination and Genius**

We have just seen that Mme de Staël is deeply critical of Kant’s account of the imagination in the first *Critique*. Contra Kant, the imagination is an ontologically independent faculty that transcends the epistemic limits of sensibility, understanding and reason by integrating sentiment, and in particular, a positive feeling of the infinite. The other German philosopher who helps Mme de Staël to flesh out her theory of imagination is Johann Gottfried Herder—a prominent student of Kant’s, and an early critic. Michael Forster’s recent account of imagination in Herder is helpful for seeing Herder’s affinity with, and likely influence on, Mme de Staël. A key concept for Herder was “*Einfühlung*,” which Forster translates as “feeling one’s way into”—into, that is, another person’s perspective or mindset, typically via their writing. *Einfühlung* is an “arduous process of historical-philological inquiry” according to Forster, involving, among other things, gaining imaginative access to the affective and sensory feelings of the interpreted subject (Forster, 2019, p. 177). The empathetic functioning of the imagination is in fact a *sine qua non* of *Einfühlung* and interpretation for Herder[[11]](#footnote-11).

Mme de Staël evidently believes something like this by 1799-1800. In *De la littérature* she tells us that “Men of imagination, by transporting themselves into the character of another, discover what they may have said” (*De la littérature*, p. 391). This is likely the influence of Rousseau, for whom the sentiments of enthusiasm and sympathy (*pitié*) are imaginative activities that enable us to empathize with others (Cuillé, 2021, p. 119, 131). It may also reflect Smith’s views on sympathy in the *Theory of moral sentiments*, with which she was familiar—in Samuel Fleischacker’s words, that sympathy arises “when we imagine how we would feel in the circumstances of others” (Fleischacker, 2020, §2). But from Mme de Staël’s commentary on genius and imagination in Herder we can glean a clearer picture of how she has come to view these concepts—a picture which resonates with Herder’s own views.

Son livre intitulé *la Philosophie de l’Histoire* est peut-être le livre allemand crit avec le plus de charme. On n’y trouve pas la même profondeur d’observations politiques que dans l’ouvrage de Montesquieu, sur les causes de la grandeur et de la décadence des Romains; mais comme Herder s’attachait à pénétrer le génie des temps les plus reculés, peut-être que la qualité qu’il possédait au suprême degré, l’imagination, servait mieux que toute autre à les faire connaître. Il faut ce flambeau pour marcher dans les ténèbres: c’est une lecture délicieuse que les divers chapitres de Herder sur Persépolis et Babylone, sur les Hébreux et sur les Égyptiens; il semble qu’on se promène au milieu de l’ancien monde avec un poète historien qui touche les ruines de sa baguette et reconstruit à nos yeux les édifices abattus. (Staël, 2017[1813], p. 521-2)

[Herder’s] book *This too a philosophy of history* has more fascination in it than almost any other German production… *[As] Herder’s object was to penetrate the genius of the earliest times, perhaps the quality he most possessed, which was imagination, proved more serviceable to him in that pursuit than any other would have done.* That sort of torch is necessary when we walk in darkness: Herder’s various chapters on Persepolis and Babylon, on the Hebrews and Egyptians, form a delightful kind of reading; it seems as if we were walking in the midst of the old world with an historical poet, who touches the ruins with his wand, and erects anew before our eyes all the fallen edifices. (Staël, 1859 [1813], vol. 2, p. 85; emphasis added)

According to Mme de Staël, Herder’s imagination was most serviceable for “penetrating the genius of the earliest times.” Without getting into detail about Mme de Staël’s conception of genius yet, part of her point is that Herder’s imagination enabled him to understand the distinctive characters of ancient cultures, which are portrayed as shrouded in darkness. Furthermore, we see that Mme de Staël thinks of Herder’s deft interpretation as making him a highly effective communicator (a “wand-bearing” “historical poet”). While one apparently must *have* an idea to communicate it, Mme de Staël sees the powers of interpretation through literature, on one hand, and communication on the other, as connected in a deeper way. Both sets of powers depend on the more basic ability to access the perspectives of others, and therefore, on the power of imagination. Herder’s ability to understand ancient cultures is nothing more than his ability to imagine his way into them through literary sources. And his ability to communicate the spirit of those cultures flows directly from his indirect, but felt, imaginative experience of them. Indeed, the fact that Mme de Staël likens Herder to a historical poet suggests something more specific: namely, that Herder’s interpretive and communicative abilities were a matter of his imaginative access to *the minds of the authors* of the works that gave him access to the cultures in question, and therefore to the special genius of those cultures. If this is right then we must say of Mme de Staël that she sees imagination as enabling access to other cultures by giving access to, among other things, the perspectives of other individual people. As we have seen, this is a Herderian point itself. It is also a natural evolution of Rousseau’s view that we gain access to the internality of others in personal interaction and art consumption through the affective susceptibility of the imagination.

The imagination-genius connection found in this discussion of Herder is a helpful entrée into how Mme de Staël conceives of genius. We have seen that for Mme de Staël, imagination enables us to “penetrate the genius” of another time or culture. But what is genius? The closest thing we get to a definition comes not from *De l’Allemagne*, but *De la littérature*: “genius, or talent, is … that susceptibility of soul which makes us feel, merely from the impressions of the imagination, those emotions which others experience only in the consequence of events that have occurred in their own life” (Staël, 1998 [1800], p. 278-9). At first glance, this definition may simply seem to mirror Mme de Staël’s characterization of Herder. But it does not: how can genius be both what is penetrated by imagination, and the power that enables such penetration? Mme de Staël’s understanding of cultural progress suggests an answer. For Mme de Staël, wider distribution of genius among humankind would accelerate our moral progress: “if Heaven had granted more genius to man,” she writes, “he would have advanced so much the more in virtue” (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 559)[[12]](#footnote-12). What this betrays—particularly in combination with her idea that to “penetrate the genius” of a culture is to access a representative author’s mind—is her belief that the moral progress of humankind is due to the work of exceptional, individual geniuses, who innovate and influence others[[13]](#footnote-13). What enables these geniuses to produce culturally transformative work is, first of all, that they are attuned to the people of their own place and time, the ethos and pathos of their own culture; secondly, that they are able to penetrate into the perspectives of other cultures and peoples, through literature and through personal interaction; and thirdly, that they are able to express ideas and sentiments in such a way as to bridge cultural gaps, and introduce new cultural influences in a way that is palatable and productive for their own people. Crucially—to clarify what Mme de Staël meant when she said Herder penetrated the genius of the earliest times—what this means is to *interpret the geniuses of those times*. If this is all right, then a genius is an interpreter of peoples and texts, but also a producer of novel, original texts that are informed by their ingenious interpretations of others. They are transmitters and creators of ever-evolving culture. Not only was Herder’s interpretive ability due to his imagination, so was his ability to communicate his interpretations to influence German culture. It is the strength of the various sympathetic functions of the imagination that constitute genius for Mme de Staël, and which endows special people with the ability to transmute the ancient into the new and original. This contrasts with, but complements, Diderot’s and Rousseau’s understanding of genius as pertaining to the extraction and diffusion of enthusiasm from natural beauty[[14]](#footnote-14).

**§3. “Enthusiastic Imagination” and Empirical Knowledge**

The following passage is a particularly telling selection from one of the most philosophically significant parts of *De l’Allemagne*, its climactic concluding chapter:

Croient-ils connaître la terre, croient-ils avoir voyagé ceux qui ne sont pas doués d’une imagination enthousiaste? Leur cœur bat-il pour l’écho des montagnes? L’air du Midi les a-t-il enivrés de sa suave langueur? Comprennent-ils la diversité des pays, l’accent et le caractère des idiomes étrangers? Les chants populaires et les danses nationales leur découvrent-ils les mœurs et le génie d’une contrée? Suffit-il d’une seule sensation pour réveiller en eux une foule de souvenirs? (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 790)[[15]](#footnote-15)

Does he who is not endowed with enthusiastic imagination flatter himself that he is, in any degree, acquainted with the earth upon which he lives, or that he has travelled through any of its various countries? Does his heart beat at the echo of the mountains? Or has the air of the South lulled his senses in its voluptuous softness? Does he perceive wherein countries differ, the one from the other? Does he remark the accent, and does he understand the peculiar character of the idioms of their languages? Does he hear the popular song, and see in the national dance, the manners and the genius of the people? Does one single sensation at once fill his mind with a crowd of recollections? (Staël, 1859 [1813], vol. 2, p. 371-2)

There are a couple of reasons I introduce this passage. The fact that Mme de Staël groups natural and social phenomena here, apparently as epistemic equivalents, suggests the deeper view that imagination is the faculty most responsible for generating empirical knowledge of various kinds, and is therefore crucial for doing science[[16]](#footnote-16). In fact, *De l’Allemagne* does contain passages that substantiate this reading, and I would like to take a look at these. But it is important to note from the beginning that this quote refers not just to imagination but *enthusiastic* imagination.

The final part of *De l’Allemagne* is entitled “Religion and Enthusiasm.” Few concepts are as important to the book as enthusiasm (*enthousiasme*), and Mme de Staël specifically associates enthusiasm with imagination, and no other faculty. She is explicit that enthusiasm is a sentiment (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 787), and imagination’s capacity for this sentiment is at least as important to Mme de Staël as its capacity for any other (sympathy, the feeling of the infinite). Now, a comprehensive examination of enthusiasm in *De l’Allemagne* would be a separate, stand-alone project. For present purposes a couple of points will suffice. Firstly, like Diderot and Rousseau, with the word “*l’enthousiasme*” Mme de Staël means to invoke the classical association with divinity. She saw enthusiasm and the feeling of the infinite as mutually reinforcing sentiments: the feeling of the infinite as giving rise to enthusiasm, and vice versa (Ibid., p. 714). Secondly, Mme de Staël sees enthusiasm as the sentiment that motivates the kind of attention required for understanding, and as creating the requisite receptivity. This is readily seen in the last passage I quoted, but its context is helpful: Mme de Staël is contrasting writers with enthusiastic imagination with primarily rational ones. She is explicit that the person whose power of reasoning is strong but lacks enthusiasm will not *notice* “wherein countries differ,” or the accent or “peculiar character of the idioms of their languages.” This logic appears to extend to other social phenomena, as well as natural ones. The reasoning but unenthusiastic and unimaginative observer does not see or hear the “manners” or “genius” of people in other cultures because he does not notice key details. He does not know the mountains because he is not attuned to them (his heart does not “beat at [their] echo,”) and his senses are not “lulled” by the “voluptuous softness” of “the air of the South.” Moreover, the details to which an observer must be attuned are not all observable by the senses. Again, as for Diderot and Rousseau, to know an empirical object is to understand how it relates to other objects, including the distal and invisible[[17]](#footnote-17). This is why it is so useful, if not necessary, for “one single sensation to fill [the] mind with a crowd of recollections.” Reason is disinterested, dispassionate. But the sensitivity to detail required to understand phenomena under observation is a consequence of affectual interest. This is a strong view, but considering curiosity as a sentiment may bring out its plausibility; many great scientists have been passionately curious. My sense is that Mme de Staël’s notion of enthusiasm is similar in important ways to our notion of curiosity, if a bit closer to conceptually richer concepts like awe or wonder[[18]](#footnote-18).

If it is true that Mme de Staël sees enthusiasm, and therefore imagination, as required for understanding both social and natural phenomena, then we might expect her to say that imagination is required for doing natural science and knowing the universe in general. In fact, she does. “The universe,” she writes, “resembles a poem more than a machine, and if, in order to form a conception of it, we were compelled to avail ourselves of imagination, or of a mathematical spirit, imagination would lead us nearer the truth” (Staël, 2017 [1813],p. 651). As such, it is necessary for “[the] scientific [to] penetrate nature with the aid of imagination” (Ibid., p. 652.) Mme de Staël’s view is not that imagination is required for science simply because it is required for experience, as in Kant’s(Tolley, 2019); the “exact sciences, *at a certain height*, stand in need of imagination[[19]](#footnote-19)” (Ibid., p. 566; emphasis added). Mme de Staël’s view appears to be that the *processes* of observation and theorizing have to be infused with and partially guided by the sentimental imagination in order to produce a complete and holistic understanding of the objects under observation, and ultimately the universe as a whole. It is in this respect that the universe is like a poem. It is possible to see a poem, even to read it line by line, unemotionally. But to understand a poem is to have a dynamic, affect-inflected experience of it that unfolds as one reads it. It is not enough to understand individual words, lines or sections of the poem, and then synthesize those diverse understandings. Unlike a machine, a poem is more than the sum of its parts. The reader must make certain imaginative-affectual contributions if she is to see it for what it is. Likewise, for Mme de Staël, while it may be possible to understand certain parts of the universe with minimal contributions from imagination and sentiment, these are required in large doses to grasp many phenomena, like people or cultures. The fact that the universe contains any such things means that to understand it as a whole requires at least some sentimental imagination. But moreover, even understanding a natural phenomenon, like a mountain, requires enthusiastic observation and therefore the exercise of imaginative powers. A scientist might make useful observations with a combination of her senses and reason, but without imagination she will not understand the mountain, or be able to adequately account for it theoretically.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to reconstruct Mme de Staël’s sophisticated philosophical theory of imagination, and to show how she is situating herself in the international philosophical discourse of her time. I have tried to substantiate three claims directly: (I) That Mme de Staël sees imagination as the faculty that transcends the epistemic limitations of the other faculties; (II) that this is because, in her view, in addition to being cognitive, imagination is sentimental, or affectual; and (III) that the affectual, cognition-transcending character of imagination is why Mme de Staël emphasizes its value over that of reason. In §1 I examined Mme de Staël’s reading of Kant and showed that while she is sympathetic to his critique of pure reason (not to mention many aspects of his larger critical project), she thinks he mischaracterizes imagination in several important ways. Not only does he fail to recognize imagination as fully independent from the other faculties, but he fails to acknowledge its uniquely affectual character, and the fact that its contents are not restricted to the spatiotemporal intuitions of the sensibility or the concepts of the understanding. In addition to being cognitive, the imagination experiences sentiments like the feeling of the infinite, and grants us genuine (“positive and creative”) experiential access to the infinite. In §2 I examined Mme de Staël’s reading of Herder, and argued that it integrates Herder’s own thought to develop the French imagination-enthusiasm-genius idiom in a natural direction. For Mme de Staël the imagination is the faculty of sympathy, which gives us (indirect) access to the thoughts and feelings of others, whether near or far in space or time, and whether in immediate personal interaction or through literary composition (and probably, I venture, other artworks and artifacts). It is this sympathetic power of imagination—and crucially, *not* reason—that distinguishes the genius, who is attuned to the spiritual needs of her own people and meets them by creatively recasting and developing ideas from other places and times that are inaccessible to most. In §3, I explained Mme de Staël’s views around the role of imagination in generating empirical knowledge. The imagination is the faculty of enthusiasm, a sentiment necessary for fully grasping any phenomenon under observation, but especially people and socio-cultural phenomena (all of which are, of course, parts of the world, and must be comprehended if the world is to be comprehended). Mme de Staël believes that the nature of the universe itself is such that imaginative, affectual engagement with it is a *sine qua non* of genuine and meaningful comprehension of both individual phenomena and the universe in which they occur.

By staking out the views I’ve discussed, Mme de Staël advances a strong Romantic vision. She does so primarily by developing aspects of Diderot and Rousseau in conversation with leading German writers. In *De l’Allemagne* she criticizes not only Kant but also Fichte and Schelling for failing to do the imagination justice, arguably denying the validity of the German Idealist project; and she subtly endorses an early opponent of the Kantian “transcendental turn,” Herder. This complicates the received view of Mme de Staël’s reception of Kant as naïve and overwhelmingly positive. Mme de Staël also encourages German philosophers to take German religious writing more seriously, as it tends not to ignore the central importance of sentiment. By the same token, she would apparently recommend to Kant and his German followers that they revisit Rousseau, just as strongly as she recommends Kant to her French readership. The motivations and arguments sustaining Mme de Staël’s views are two sided. On one hand Mme de Staël clearly prioritizes personal, social and cultural phenomena as the types of thing with which philosophers should be reckoning, both because they pose special theoretical problems (particularly when too much is demanded of reason) and because of the social-political circumstances of the early nineteenth-century West (e.g. the American and French Revolutions, the rise of Napoleon). On the other hand, Mme de Staël’s religious attitudes incline her to take the experience of insensible and inconceivable realities quite seriously, apparently as pre-theoretical data that must be accommodated by philosophical theorizing, rather than simply explained away. In the final analysis, Mme de Staël believes that humanity’s first concern—and therefore philosophy’s too—ought to be collective and individual flourishing. Its guiding questions should be how to strengthen our connections to each other, nature, and the divine. A big part of the answer is sentiment—and therefore, the imagination.

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2. Mme de Staël corresponded with Grouchy about her *Letters on sympathy*, published with Grouchy’s translation of Smith’s *Theory of moral sentiments* as a commentary. Mme de Staël was also familiar with Bonstetten’s work on imagination, and corresponded with him. See (Bergès and Schliesser, 2019), and (King, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In her early book on Rousseau’s life and works, Mme de Staël claims that for authors like Rousseau, development primarily takes the form of clarification of formerly confused ideas. She writes: “Several celebrated writers have, in the same manner, displayed in their first performance the germ of all their future works. We begin by thinking upon every subject, and pass from one object to another before we confine ourselves to a plan or follow any method. In youth ideas crowd upon us, and we have then, perhaps, all we ever shall have, but they are yet in a confused state: we afterwards give them some order, and, in the eyes of others, their number increases; we submit them to reason, and, in reality, they acquire additional force” (Staël, 1979 [1788], p. 37-8; 1789 [1788], p. 39-40). This may be how Mme de Staël’s thought about imagination, enthusiasm and genius develops from this earliest work, to later works like *De l’Allemagne*. By 1788 she had already inherited an interest in these ideas from the likes of Diderot and Rousseau but does not deploy them in a way that reflects systematic thought. As I argue in this paper, by 1810 Mme de Staël has sophisticated and highly coherent views about imagination (as well as enthusiasm and genius) which reflect, but develop, her inherited conceptual framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On Hegel’s reading of Kant, Kant’s greatest service to philosophy is that he “put the Idea of authentic a priority in the form of transcendental imagination” (*Glauben Und Wissen*, translated in Gentry, 2019, p. 149)—a reading that, according to Gerad Gentry, led Hegel to make imagination the basis for “knowledge and growth” in his absolute idealism (Ibid., p. 149, 170). We cannot understand the philosophy of this consequential period if we do not understand the roles imagination played, and the stakes of the debate around it.

Another reason to focus on *De l’Allemagne* is that it is the most influential of Mme de Staël’s several highly influential books. It was the authoritative account of German national identity in France, the U.S. and to some extent Germany itself for the better part of the 19th century, and it introduced much of the French- and English-speaking worlds to a great deal of German literature and thought for the very first time. According to Margaret Higonnet, Mme de Staël is perhaps the most famous literary mediator in European history (Higonnet, 1986, p. 159). Comtesse Jean de Pange claimed that *De l’Allemagne* revealed Germany not just to France, but to the Germans themselves (Pange, 1929, p. 125). Indeed, Mme de Staël was personally acquainted with German writers attempting to build a German national identity, including Fichte and Kleist (Horn, 2010), and some Germans had a positive reception of *De l’Allemagne*—for instance, Goethe (Higonnet, 1986, p. 159-61). According to Emma Jaeck as cited by Green, *De l’Allemagne* became the primary scholarly source on German culture in Europe and the US quickly following its publication (Green, 1916, p. 134-7). See also, (Moland, 2021, p. 216).
 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The influences on Mme de Staël’s reception of Kant are debated, but certainly include Villers, Gérondo, Fichte and Henry Crabb Robinson. See for instance (Macherey, 1995, p. 25-28). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a slight contrast, consider Monchoux (1966, p. 73): “Elle s'intéresse moins aux abstractions…ou à la solution théorique de problèmes éternels qu'à l'esprit général d'une philosophie, et à ses applications vivantes, sur le plan de la culture, dans les controverses du jour” [Mme de Staël “is less interested in abstractions…or the theoretical solution of problems than in the general spirit of a philosophy, and its living applications in terms of culture and the controversies of the day.”] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an account of intuitions and their distinctness from concepts in Kant, see the Transcendental Aesthetic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, especially *KrV* A 23-25, A 30-32, B 38-40, and B 46-48. It should be noted that while sensibility and understanding do condition and limit the activities of the imagination for Kant, he also held that imagination is involved in the synthesis of space and time themselves, as intuitions and not just *forms* of intuition (*KrV* B 160-161). So imagination for Kant is both a necessary condition for intuition, and confined to intuitive-conceptual synthesis. Tobias Rosefeldt’s treatment of these passages is helpful in this connection, because he explains the role of imagination in intuition while recognizing that, in his words, “The imagination, at least in its transcendental or ‘productive’ variant, is introduced by Kant as a faculty that somehow results from a cooperation of sensibility and understanding” (Rosefeldt, 2019, p. 49). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Zöller describes how Kant was inspired by chemistry concepts in his explanation of how imagination emerges from sensibility and understanding (Zöller , 2019, p. 71-2)—for example when he writes that “chemistry provides Kant with a scientifically inspired epistemological model according to which the (power of the) imagination is the result of a quasi-chemical procedure of uniting the heterogeneous elements of sensibility and the understanding to form an entirely new entity” (p. 71) While it is true that the imagination is not primitive like sensibility or understanding for Kant, he did list the *power* of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) as one of three “original sources [*Quellen*]” of empirical experience, which “cannot be derived from any other capacity of the mind” (*KrV* A93; cf. Tolley, 2019, p. 31). So imagination, or at least the power of imagination, does have a kind of self-sufficiency in the first *Critique*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant argues that in the case of the mathematically sublime, the supersensible faculty is reason, and specifically not imagination. See §25 of the third *Critique*, and (Ginsborg, 2005) on "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology." Ginsborg writes, “In the case of the mathematically sublime, the feeling of reason's superiority over nature takes the form, more specifically, of a feeling of reason's superiority to imagination, conceived of as the natural capacity required for sensory apprehension, including the apprehension of the magnitudes of empirically given things. We have this feeling when we are confronted with something that is so large that it overwhelms imagination's capacity to comprehend it. In such a situation imagination strives to comprehend the object in accordance with a demand of reason, but fails to do so” (Ibid., §2.7). Reason, however, is able to think infinity as a whole (KdU §26; Ginsborg, 2005, §2.7). As I am about to show, Mme de Staël’s view of the powers of imagination and reason is the inverse of those in the third *Critique*. Despite this, it is unclear from Staël’s comments in *De l’Allemagne* whether she saw herself responding to Kant’s comments on imagination in the third *Critique*. Whereas some implicit criticism can be found in her discussion of first *Critique* ideas about the limits of imagination, her remarks on the third *Critique* are more unambiguously affirmative (Ibid., p. 607-9; see also Green, 2020.) She may have seen herself as responding critically to the first *Critique* when in fact staking out positions in deep disagreement with the third. Mme de Staël’s reception of the third *Critique*, and her relation to the development in Kant’s views between the first and third *Critiques*, is currently beyond my ken. But this is a promising line for further research. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is also worth noticing that in both *De la littérature* and *De l’Allemagne*, but especially in the latter, Mme de Staël repeatedly characterizes reason as the faculty of calculation. I suspect that in this case she means to imply a connection between instinct and sensibility as well. In the last clause of the passage at issue Mme de Staël is explicit that the feeling of the infinite is essential to the distinctively human soul, but she also clearly signals that it is not reason, but the imagination, that is the distinctively human faculty. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This supports Gjesdal’s claim that “For Herder, there is an intimate connection, a mutual dependency if not complete intertwinement, between imagination, sympathy and understanding” (Gjesdal, 2019, p. 203). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This quote is one of a few places in *De l’Allemagne* where a connection between imagination and morality is encoded, mediated by the concept of genius. That is, in some places Mme de Staël connects imagination to genius, and elsewhere, genius to individual moral conduct and collective moral progress. As we just saw, she claims that with more geniuses, collective moral progress would be more rapid. Elsewhere she hints (in just one more way) at the superiority of imagination to reason by pointing out that witty or clever people are sometimes nonetheless wicked, while on the other hand, “genius is almost always full of goodness” (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 707)—the thought here being that the genius can talk on ideas impersonally but with “radiance” and “good feeling,” whereas the merely witty person is often sarcastic and malicious (Ibid.) For Rousseau, whom Mme de Staël likely follows in moral philosophy, *la pitié* is a proto-moral sentiment enabled by imagination, whereas genuine morality is rooted in reason (cf. Staël, 1789, p. 25; Bertram, 2017, §2). But closer analysis of Staël’s moral philosophy, and its relations to imagination and genius, is certainly warranted. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Indeed, one of the main purposes of *De l’Allemagne* is to bring attention to German geniuses and their literary works for her French audience, to serve as an aesthetic and ethical model. See Hillman, 2011, p. 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Amy Kind (2013) discusses four putative explanatory roles of the imagination, among them, mind-reading and engaging fiction. And Dustin Stokes (2016) has examined the connection between imagination and creativity. We have just seen that Mme de Staël recognizes imagination’s involvement in these three connections as well. Kind argues that no one mental activity can fill such a variety of explanatory roles, but Mme de Staël would deny that imagination is a single mental activity. Michael Stuart (2019) would fall more in line with Staël against Kind, arguing that imagination is a mental ability, exercises of which are (diverse) mental processes. Mme de Staël’s view is similar I think, but not so simply put. At the least she would say that imagination is a tight-knit set of mental abilities that manifest in a wide array of mental processes. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This passage resonates strongly with one from Diderot’s *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, quoted by Cuillé (Cuillé , 2021, p. 81): “Who blends his voice with the torrent that falls from the mountains? Who senses the sublimity of a deserted place? Who listens to himself in the silence of solitude? He does. Our poet lives on the banks of a lake. His gaze roves over the water, and his genius expands. That is where he is seized by this spirit, sometimes tranquil, sometimes violent, that stirs and appeases his soul in turn …Oh Nature! … You are the fertile source of all truths!” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The role of imagination in generating scientific knowledge is still a topic of philosophical discussion, and some do hold, as Staël does, that scientific theorizing necessarily involves imagination. See (Toon, 2016) and (Stuart, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is a central theme of Cuillé, 2021, Ch. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. On my view it is important to stress the sentimentality and individuality of enthusiasm. In *The* *Literary Existence of Germaine De Staël*, Charlotte Hogsett summarizes enthusiasm as “connot[ing] some great *idea*” (rather than sentiment; emphasis added) in which a whole population of a nation wholeheartedly believes (Hogsett, 1987, p. 105). While she is right to point out that enthusiasm is for Mme de Staël a “fundamentally unifying factor” (Ibid.) which can unite the individual to society and propel positive social change, her account misses the fact that enthusiasm is closely connected to genius, and generally originates from special individuals. I cannot argue it fully here, but I think Mme de Staël’s view is basically that enthusiastic (read: highly sentimental, sensitive) geniuses generate ideas with wide appeal, leading to stronger social and cultural cohesion. My account in §2 lends some support to this reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In this view she believes herself directly indebted to Francis Bacon (Staël, 2017 [1813], p. 566). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)