

about public affairs. It was the decline of such sociability, she insisted, that did the most to harm the position of women in French society.<sup>89</sup>

Salons survived the Revolution and emerged at the end of the 1790s almost entirely unchanged. They continued to be an essential element of a sumptuous *mondanité*, offering *salonnières* and *habitués* a combination of convivial and intellectual sociability. The myth that most upper-class women found convincing was not the one that viewed domesticity as punishment for the cultural ascendancy of the salon, but the one that equated the disruption of pure sociability with the ascendancy of politics. For high society, the triumph of Napoléon over the Revolution was embodied in the social success of the duchesse d'Abrantès and the exile of Madame de Staël.

## *Ralliés and Exiles (1799–1815)*

In the spring of 1794, the revolutionary government moved to deprive popular societies of their autonomy and make them official institutions subordinate to the Convention. These societies had been the focus of the new sociability of the people, made possible by the opening of the public sphere and made potent by the assertion of popular guardianship over the Revolution. Now they became cogs in the machinery of government, approving directives and expressing a public opinion whose content was determined by the state.<sup>1</sup> In a strange analogy to the experience of the *sansculottes*, the upper-class sociability that had reappeared under the Directory underwent a similar fate during the Consulate: Napoléon annexed it to the government and turned it into an instrument of a social policy designed to bolster the stability and legitimacy of his regime.

### I

The years of the Consulate and the Empire represented the first sustained effort to work out a postrevolutionary accommodation between the state and traditional sociable institutions. The revival of salons lent the Consulate and the

Empire a measure of social prestige, but it also enhanced the social power and political autonomy of the aristocracy and gave wealthy women access to the public sphere. As a result, the struggle to control *mondanité* became a crucial part of Napoléon's efforts to consolidate an authoritarian Empire.

Napoléon had a number of reasons for reviving Parisian high society, including economic recovery, political pacification, and the restoration of France's reputation as the capital of elegance and pleasure. He also wanted France's traditional institutions of sociability to promote the fusion of old and new elites, a goal that required the return of émigrés who had been familiar with the social life of the eighteenth century and who alone knew how to make high society acceptable to what the old nobility had called *la bonne compagnie*. By all accounts, the first task was accomplished successfully. After the Napoleonic coup d'état of 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799), high society rallied to a government whose magnificent fêtes were "a signal not only to Paris, but to the whole of France, for balls, dinners, and social assemblages of every kind." Victorine de Chastenay noted that the famous ministerial balls of 1801 and 1802 were "very animated" and "followed one another with rapidity." Abrantès estimated that there were as many as "eight to ten thousand balls and five to six hundred thousand dinners . . . given in the course of the winter at Paris." As a consequence, the luxury market returned, textile merchants prospered, shoemakers, florists, hairdressers, perfumers, and dressmakers got back to work, and society events gained distinction from a rising tide of foreign visitors and diplomats. Chateaubriand's perception was that the revival of private sociability signaled a return to order: "the cafés and the streets were deserted, and people stayed at home; scattered families were reunited; they gathered the fragments of their inheritance, as troops assemble after a battle and find out how many are lost. . . . Gradually, I began to enjoy the sociability that is a characteristic of the French."<sup>2</sup>

The successful fusion of elites, however, was a much more difficult task to accomplish. Returning émigrés were gratified with the closure of the *liste des émigrés*, the amnesty granted to the victims of the Directory's various coups d'état, and the commemoration of the death of Louis XVI. But they understood that the policy of appeasement from which they benefited was part of a larger strategy of pacification, which unfolded painfully according to a series of gradual and discriminatory concessions designed to maximize the government's advantage.<sup>3</sup> The rhetoric of fusion favored by the First Consul and his supporters implicitly acknowledged that the Revolution and the emigration had seriously undermined whatever cohesion *le monde* had achieved in the eighteenth century

under the unifying influence of the Enlightenment and the regulated social mixing of the salons. The Consulate, according to Madame de Staël, was a time of competing interests, jealousy, and rancor.<sup>4</sup> After 18 Brumaire, the aristocracy was no longer (or not yet) in a position to determine the rules governing the social world. The emigration "still depopulated Faubourg Saint-Germain[, and t]hose of its inhabitants who had remained or returned, for the most part seriously injured by the Revolution in their affections and their fortunes, wanted to go into mourning for their past grandeur."<sup>5</sup> Circumstances under the Consulate, therefore, were not much different from those under the Directory: the nouveaux riches of the Chaussée d'Antin still dominated the Parisian social scene, and socially and ideologically diverse salons were rare.<sup>6</sup> Despite official encouragement, consular society did not witness a spontaneous *rassemblement*. Members of the old aristocracy insistently maintained attitudes and habits expressing nostalgia for all they had lost and were easily vexed by the behavior of the nouveaux riches, which they piteously ridiculed as either clumsy or vain, faults they attributed to profound insecurity. "[T]he people of the old society of Faubourg Saint-Germain," wrote Madame de Saulx-Tavanes, "preserved the same language and the same formulas of politesse at the same time as they dwelled on economic details necessitated by the state of their fortunes with a sort of complacency carried to the point of exaggeration."<sup>7</sup>

By lifting the ban on the elegant life of the past, Napoléon inaugurated, not the fusion of elites, but the reassertion of aristocratic preeminence within *le monde*. High society during the Consulate was the theater of a thousand little coteries divided by rivalries and jealousies. In the face of efforts by those in charge to co-opt them, those who had led it in the past sought, from a position of relative weakness, to resurrect old boundaries and rules. Their principal weapons in this campaign were tradition and exclusivity, and since the by now mythical model of the eighteenth-century bureau d'esprit could lend any salon a little of both, men of letters were typically enlisted in the cause and made part of a new cultural politics designed to replace the primacy of money and power with that of intelligence and birth. A good example of this strategy is the salon the Madame de Pastoret, which met in the home of her wealthy uncle, M. de l'Etang, and sought to reestablish the equation between *civilisation* and *bonne compagnie* by uniting returned émigrés and conservative intellectuals like Georges Cuvier, Abbé François-Xavier de Montesquiou, and Jean-Baptiste Suard, who themselves hoped to transmit the traditions of the eighteenth century and the Académie française to a new generation. The priority given to literature, poetry, and music

in the aristocratic salons of Mesdames d'Argenson, Beaufremont, Beaufort d'Hautpoul, and La Briche was part of a larger shift in cultural tastes favoring the return of madrigals, Latin poets, bouquets, and portraits, all of which recalled the ambiance of the baroque court. As Gilbert Stenger pointed out, rhyming verse, newly à la mode, was extremely popular in aristocratic salons.<sup>8</sup>

Aristocratic resistance to Napoléon's advances made the salon of the marquise de Montesson on the rue de Provence a valuable resource from the regime's point of view. Neither related to the Bonaparte family nor part of the official world, the marquise was an authentic representative of the society of the Old Regime who was both an enthusiastic supporter of the First Consul and intimately acquainted with his wife. Although members of the old nobility like Madame de Saulx-Tavanes did not think much of "her attempts to obtain by surprise some of the prerogatives attached to the rank of princess," the sixty-year-old Montesson was nevertheless the morganatic widow of the duc d'Orléans, the stepmother of the late Philippe-Egalité, and the aunt of the comte de Valence. She had been treated like a relative by Louis XVI after the duc's death in 1785 and had lost her property and gone to prison during the Terror because of her association with the royal family.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, she was the type of salonnière who embodied the survival of the manners of the old aristocracy, receiving every evening without fail seated on a couch, her feet on a *tabouret* hidden by a *couvre-pied*—hers was the first salon of the era to require sheer silk and shoes and Madame d'Abrantès considered her receptions models to be imitated.<sup>10</sup> Such qualities made it possible for her to attract returned émigrés and members of the former court to the dinners she gave every Wednesday night and to her celebrated fêtes, which "recalled the most splendid entertainments of the Monarchy." At a time when the receptions given by members of Napoléon's family were restricted to the official world, Montesson's salon was entertaining representatives from across the spectrum of society: royalists (the duc de Guines, M. de Noailles, and Archambaud de Périgord), liberals (Madame de Staël and Madame de Vaudémont), and luminaries of the new regime (Talleyrand, the duchesse d'Abrantès, and Hugues-Bernard Maret). By throwing a *grande fête* for eight hundred guests in February 1802 in honor of the marriage of Louis Bonaparte and Hortense de Beauharnais, the marquise was able to enlist the various elements of the French elite in a collective gesture of respect for the First Consul; by subsequently giving a ball for the king and queen of Etruria she did the same for a member of the Bourbon family and showed that mondain sociability could be a site of social ecumenicity.<sup>11</sup>

According to Abrantès, Napoléon hoped that the revival of old-regime so-

ciability would attract the old aristocracy to his government while propagating values favorable to a new absolutism among those who had acquired status during the Revolution.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, this strategy reflected an astute understanding of the social function of salons: Napoléon knew that a traditional salon had an inherent tendency to integrate high society because salonnières aimed for a perfect mixture of guests; he also saw that they could give nobles who rallied to his cause access to those who did not, and at the same time help initiate parvenus in the traditions of exquisite politesse. On the other hand, Napoléon displayed a profound contempt for the historical autonomy of the salon by narrowly equating politesse with the ability of the old monarchy to command obedience and by interpreting the refined manners of the aristocracy as an expression of its social authority. The First Consul wanted to annex and control these resources, but he had no use for what Habermas might have called the oppositional content of the prerevolutionary public sphere. Consequently, his instrumental conception of the salon went hand in hand with his condemnation of the libertine social atmosphere of the Directory, which he viewed as a sign of disorder, and his embrace of a rigid moral traditionalism that mirrored his views regarding the coercive function of politesse and court etiquette. As First Consul, Napoléon denounced the immorality of Barras's *fêtes galantes* at the Luxembourg Palace and spoke openly of his distaste for the new *modes grecques*. According to his brother Lucien, he was "horrificed by courtesans" and insisted on the need "to purify" the company Josephine kept at the Tuileries, going so far as to post spies at the entry to her salon in order to make sure that certain individuals, like Madame Tallien, were not admitted.<sup>13</sup> Although Napoléon thought it appropriate that women should oversee the influence exercised by "[e]verything that concerned etiquette, the life of society, [and] *le monde*" in the interest of reestablishing order "not only in general and in political life, but in the private life of each family," he did not want them to be powerful and spoke openly in the Council of State of the need to "contain women." He envisioned salons without salonnières, where the political interests of the regime would be supported by women willing to act as guardians and enforcers of a new culture of subservience.<sup>14</sup>

Napoléon's behavior toward aristocratic salons reflected his general attitude toward the old nobility—a complex mixture of envy and hatred. He was convinced that the men and women of Faubourg Saint-Germain detested him, but he was willing to go to great lengths to win their support, which made their ridicule hard to bear and their very existence a sort of permanent humiliation. The First Consul believed that his regime needed the historical legitimacy that



association with the great families of France's past would bring. He also admired the nobility's confidence and sense of honor in the face of financial ruin, and interpreted the revival of their influence in high society as a sign that they still commanded the sort of respect necessary to the restoration of social hierarchy.

Observers have often attributed Napoléon's desire to surround himself with nobles to some irrational impulse, like vanity, prejudice, or sentiment.<sup>15</sup> Psychological factors undoubtedly played a part, but they were probably less important than the fact that he drew his conception of monarchy from historical precedent and could therefore not conceive of an alternative to the manifestations of authority that had prevailed in the past. Having taken noble presumptions for granted, he ended by ratifying their mystique: the higher he rose, the more he invested in the belief that aristocratic manners were a form of magic, capable of warding off mockery and commanding respect. When Abrantès's returned from Portugal, where her husband was the French ambassador, the emperor pointed out to his family that her manners had improved "since her sojourn in a foreign court" and commented that "it is only there, in fact, that one really gets to know le monde." She pointed out that Napoléon had to learn about *les vieux usages* secondhand because he "knew nothing of the high society of Paris" in his youth and "therefore could only know through oral tradition what we called la bonne compagnie and what he wanted to have around the throne."<sup>16</sup> Unable to communicate directly with those whom he held in such high esteem, Bonaparte was always eager to receive news of Faubourg Saint-Germain from noble courtiers who had access. When the object of his obsession refused to give up its secrets or showed ingratitude for the favors and protection it received, Napoléon lashed out in violent exasperation, threatening to exile every woman who spoke ill of him, his family, or his court. The royalist grandes dames of Paris, whom he liked to refer to as *des gros bonnets*, were special objects of his frustration—not only were they the guardians of an authenticity he could not possess, but their entrenchment in private life shielded them from the normal sanctions of the law to which men were vulnerable and allowed them to criticize with impunity.<sup>17</sup> Madame de Staël saw such anger as "a certain Jacobin antipathy against the fashionable society of Paris, over which women exercised a large measure of ascendancy" and blamed Napoléon for exposing himself to mockery by making himself "a parvenu king, a bourgeois gentleman on the throne," but her attitude only underscores the problems to which his outbursts were a reprehensible response.<sup>18</sup> The dozen or so aristocratic salons that tormented Napoléon were largely products of his own prejudices and insecurities. Unable to subjugate a class whose power he

never failed to inflate, the emperor had to be satisfied with the spectacle of gentlemen and women begging for positions at the imperial court in an attempt to repair their finances. He was happy to accept their service, but he could never really trust them.<sup>19</sup>

Instead of rewarding Napoléon's overtures with gestures supporting the amalgamation of elites, the returning émigrés promptly repopulated their old neighborhoods, repurchased or reoccupied their former hôtels, and began to establish what Chastenay called "a sort of colony," anchored by a series of aristocratic and royalist salons. Madame de Falaiseau described these salons in 1808 as characterized by a network of shared relationships and a conformity of opinions.<sup>20</sup> Preferring to reconstitute an exclusive aristocracy, the elegant society of the Old Regime shunned both official receptions and the balls given by Lucien Bonaparte at the Hôtel Brissac, thereby threatening the policy of fusion. In response, Napoléon moved into the Tuileries on February 19, 1800, and set out to establish a monarchical court modeled on that of Louis XVI. The effort required a bit of historical reconstruction: Napoléon consulted musty books of etiquette, talked to former valets, and sought the advice of old courtiers like Madame de Montesson and Madame Campan, who before the Revolution had been one of Marie-Antoinette's *femmes de chambre*, and who subsequently ran a finishing school for girls in Saint-Germain-en-Laye where "all parvenu families hastened to [send] their daughters" to imbibe "the elegant manners of the old court." The First Consul also learned a great deal about the customs of Versailles from Madame de Genlis, whose letters and memoirs were suffused with details of court etiquette, courteous language, and descriptions of the mannerisms of the past.<sup>21</sup>

It was Josephine, however, who was principally responsible for managing "the feminine side of the Court." Although Napoléon generally excluded women from political affairs, he wanted his wife to supervise the process of *radiation* because he hoped to enhance her ability to win the allegiance of the upper ranks of society.<sup>22</sup> Napoléon needed nobles at the Tuileries in order to acquire the prestige of a European chief of state: if he were to receive people of rank, he would have to restore protocol and banish undesirable elements. This would not only make the palace an appropriate venue for solemn receptions, it would distinguish the new court from the official salons of the Directory and elevate it above those of the two other Consuls, Cambacérès and Lebrun. Napoléon expected Josephine to be a valuable asset in this regard. Although not a member of the elegant society of the Old Regime, Josephine had nevertheless been born into a noble family and had been married to the vicomte de Beauharnais, who was



guillotined during the Terror. In her youth, she had acquired the manners and many of the prejudices of the young nobles with whom she liked to socialize both before and after her marriage to Bonaparte in 1796. It was among the remnants of the former society of Faubourg Saint-Germain that Napoléon first met her in the salon of Madame Permon, where she also established connections with such noblewomen as Madame Caffarelli and the comtesse d'Houdetot, who would eventually help establish the social legitimacy of her receptions at the Tuileries. Josephine acquired a number of similarly useful acquaintances at the spas of Aix-le-Chapelle, where she was installed at the prefecture while General Bonaparte was in Italy, and where, according to Sophie Gay, she held grand receptions for "the principal functionaries and inhabitants of the city, including foreigners of distinction" who were taking the waters. In Paris, living in a small hôtel on the rue Chantereine, she moved in a more varied circle, but her salon was generally seen as contributing to the revival of elegance under the Directory and was able to attract such nobles as Madame de Vergennes, who used her relationship with Josephine to secure positions for her daughter and son-in-law, Charles and Claire de Rémusat, at what became the imperial court. All told, active participation in la vie mondaine had given Josephine access to a wide variety of women with important pedigrees. Consequently, when Napoléon married her, he thought "he was allying himself to a very great lady." He would later write from Saint Helena: "My marriage to Madame de Beauharnais brought me into relations with a party which I required for my plan of fusion, which was one of the most important principles of my administration, and one of the most characteristic. Had it not been for my wife, I should not have had an easy means of approaching it."<sup>23</sup>

Napoléon believed that he could marginalize autonomous sites of sociability and discourage the critical discussion of public affairs by making his court the uncontested center of la vie mondaine. Once installed in the Tuileries, the First Consul ordered the generals and civil servants to whom he had distributed pensions, positions, and hôtels to "maintain not only a credible, but a splendid establishment." Young officers were required to marry — quickly — and establish themselves at court, where their wives were encouraged to open salons and receive guests. After marrying General Junot in 1800, Laure Junot (the future duchesse d'Abrantès) and her husband acquired a house on the Champs-Élysées suitable for entertaining guests "with convenience and creditably to fulfill the duties of the post Junot occupied." Even Foreign Minister Talleyrand was forced to marry his mistress, Madame Grand, when the First Consul discovered that certain ambassadors's wives declined invitations to the salon at his hôtel.<sup>24</sup> Few members of

Napoléon's original entourage had had much contact with the bonne compagnie of the past: in addition to former Jacobins, it consisted of soldiers and their wives who hailed mostly from the provincial bourgeoisie and were too young to have acquired much knowledge of either the old court or its *usage du monde*. That is why Napoléon placed such value on the collaboration of society women like Madame Junot and Madame Ney, who could serve as teachers and models. Josephine addressed the problem by holding frequent informal breakfasts for between five and fifteen young women of the court in her private salons at the Tuileries and Malmaison in order to familiarize them with the customs of good society in an atmosphere free of the intimidating presence of men. Shortly after the establishment of the Empire, Napoléon proclaimed that he wanted his court to be "one of the most brilliant in the world" and called on the women associated with the household to support him. In 1804, he ordered all those with an official position to have a salon in which to receive guests, especially foreigners of distinction.<sup>25</sup>

Napoléon's contradictory attitude toward the nobility was reciprocated with a combination of admiration and mistrust. Regarded as a vulgar usurper, the "little corporal" was nevertheless applauded for the restoration of order and the return of military glory. Royalist women like Comtesse Charlotte de Boigne and Madame de La Tour du Pin repeatedly allude to his genius. Nobles easily succumbed to feelings of antipathy toward Bonaparte because he had never been part of their world: they ridiculed his family, found fault with his wife, and sniped at the dictator who tried to make himself their patron and protector — they unfavorably compared their own manners with those of his parvenu courtiers, who "did not know how to walk on a waxed floor."<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, his policy of fusion was grudgingly acknowledged as a partial success. In general, most observers agree with Chastenay's assessment that the former émigrés were taking advantage of "the pleasures of neutrality" in order to "marry, inherit, accept positions of all kinds, so that the income, and the title of *émigré ruiné*, would suffice to make them honorable."<sup>27</sup> A number of prominent nobles joined Napoléon's court during the Consulate. Many more rallied after its expansion with the proclamation of the Empire and Napoléon's marriage to Marie-Louise of Austria.<sup>28</sup> Jean Tulard has estimated that the old nobility made up only 22.5 percent of those who received titles during the Empire, although a large number of those who served at court were old-regime dukes.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the contemporary impression was of a massive *ralliement*. The future Louis XVIII was stupefied to see the lion's share of the *ancien amoral de France* listed in the *Annuaire de la noblesse impériale*, and Madame de Boigne claimed that "the great majority of

the nobility attached themselves to the Empire," especially after Napoléon's second marriage. Within Parisian society, Boigne met few "ladies who do not go to court" and insisted that "if the Emperor's prosperity had continued a few months longer, there would have been none of them." Abrantès concurred, noting that by 1808 there were only two or three noble households that remained in what the emperor like to call "the enemy camp."<sup>30</sup> More important than either statistics or perceptions, however, was the fact that the emperor did not need to win the adhesion of a majority of the former elite — it was enough that his policies created a mass of *attentistes* who had neither the passion nor the inclination to oppose him.

## II

The exile of Madame de Staël and the closing of her salon was the obverse side of Napoléon's campaign to monopolize elite sociability in the interest of consolidating his regime. Madame de Staël supported the coup of 18 Brumaire and was enthusiastic about the conciliatory measures taken by the new leadership toward the émigrés and the moderate royalist opposition. Over the next six months, however, she began to see that Napoléon's ambitions were compromising liberty and thwarting the establishment of parliamentary government. Her salon, now located on the rue de Grenelle-Saint-Germain, remained what it had been under the Directory: a gathering of liberal republicans and moderate royalists, among whom Staël wished to create a consensus favoring an English-style constitutional regime. It was also an extraordinarily illustrious réunion, attracting numerous diplomats, ambassadors, artists, and men of letters, as well as such political notables as Camille Jordan, Mathieu de Montmorency, Benjamin Constant, and the comte de Narbonne. Although the salon maintained its characteristic ideological mix — Napoléon's brothers, a few ministers, and a handful of journalists allied to the regime were guests for a time — Staël's close ties with Constant and the idéologues linked it to the liberal opposition inside the Tribunal. When, with Staël's encouragement, Constant used his first speech in the Tribunal in January 1800 to test the limits of debate within the new institutions by denouncing the threat of tyranny, the association between Staël and the opposition was confirmed, her salon was placed under surveillance, and Joseph Fouché, the minister of police, summoned her to his office to suggest that she spend some time in the countryside. A year later, Napoléon purged the Tribunal of unreliable elements; he also tried to buy Staël's silence by offering to give her the two million livres her

father had lent to the royal treasury. When the First Consul announced to the court his displeasure with her salon, "people deserted it," according to Abrantès. With the publication of Necker's *Dernières vues de politique et de finances* in 1802, which included a critique of the Constitution of the Year VIII, and the appearance of Staël's own *Delphine* a year later, with its appeal to "la France silencieuse mais éclairée," Napoléon had had enough — he forced her to stay away from Paris.<sup>31</sup>

At first glance, Napoléon's banishment of Madame de Staël seems easy to understand: her celebrity made her support for the liberal opposition a threat. Such a dramatic confrontation between two compelling personalities has encouraged contemporaries and historians to personalize the struggle.<sup>32</sup> There is no doubt that the two disliked each other intensely and almost right away: she found him rude and was disappointed with his policies; he believed women ought to be modest and not pretend to be "something other than their sex."<sup>33</sup> The matter is clearly more complicated. Even if we view her banishment in the context of a general crackdown on the opposition, problems remain. In one sense, Staël was a victim of timing: Napoléon's power was not yet secure in 1802 and 1803, and the increasing visibility brought by her writings coincided with his efforts to tame the Tribunal and reorganize the Institut de France, where the idéologues had their base. At the same time, she was suspected of complicity in the conspiracy of General Jean-Victor Moreau because a number of his accomplices were habitués of her salon. Years later, when Napoléon had little to fear from a few quiescent intellectuals, Madame de Staël might have been considered a minor irritant. After becoming minister of police in 1810, René Savary, who called the idéologues "boudeurs d'Auteuil" and the Institut "a retreat for philosophes," reported to the emperor that "the government is strong and its principle is national: it has rallied all opinions and all parties. One would regard as foolish those who would preach discord."<sup>34</sup> Napoléon had little tolerance for either traditional salonnières or women who spoke their minds, but that does not explain his persecution of Madame de Staël. A few old salonnières weathered the Empire unmolested, as long as they concentrated on social amusements or submitted to Napoléon's demands. Such was the case with Madame de Vaudément, who allowed Fouché to use her salon as a listening post, and Madame de Genlis, who kept things strictly literary at the Arsenal and wrote Napoléon letters denouncing the immorality of Staël's writings, while accusing her of conspiring against the government.<sup>35</sup> In 1802, Madame de Champcenetz and Madame de Dumas were exiled for participating in a royalist conspiracy, but Napoléon had nothing as

concrete on Madame de Staël. Jean-François de La Harpe was dispatched to a village some distance from Paris for holding what Abrantès called "a mysterious political confabulation," but his fate was more a consequence of the vigor with which he expressed his views than of the fact that he had a salon. Napoléon exiled courtiers such as Madame de Balbi and Madame de Chevreuse for impertinence and "jesting remarks," but he left liberal salonnières like Madame de Condorcet alone, despite her opinions, because her salon at Auteuil was not overtly political and was frequented by a relatively homogeneous group of intellectuals.<sup>36</sup>

Madame de Staël saw herself as a victim of Napoléon's inability to tolerate her "untimely conversations" and her "unnatural" interest in politics. Being a man who hated "all independent beings," she reasoned, he could not abide expressions of nonconformity. Consequently, when she pleaded for the chance to return from exile in 1810, she hoped that he would accept her promise to think of nothing but "friendship, poetry, music, and painting" as a sufficient act of "submission owed to the monarch of France."<sup>37</sup> To be sure, Napoléon considered her insubordinate and unfeminine, but he seems to have been more disturbed by the fact that she agitated public opinion. Paris was still a *grande petite ville*, in which salons had acquired considerable importance as a means of communication. As he told Metternich, he did not care whether she was republican or royalist, but he could not have her in the capital, because she was "a perpetual motion machine, who stirs up the salons."<sup>38</sup> Simone Balayé emphasizes the ideological and cultural dimension of Staël's relationship to public opinion by arguing that her status as a writer was "the key to the problem." Literature, she pointed out, has "a social and political function" and required freedom for its exercise. There is no doubt that Napoléon regarded *Delphine* as antisocial and dangerous: it not only defended ideas, such as divorce, that he considered immoral, but it treated political matters he did not want publicly discussed. It is also clear that he wanted literature to serve power.<sup>39</sup> It does not follow, however, that Madame de Staël was exiled for her political writings. Publishing alone invited neither routine condemnation nor "systematic discrimination against writers on the basis of their gender," not even during the Terror and under Napoléon, when "public anxiety about the public influence of women" crested.<sup>40</sup> Censorship rather than exile was Napoléon's usual response to the publication of views deemed harmful by the regime. The emperor routinely manipulated the political press, but he let pass most literary and technical publications; he failed to exile any of the idéologues associated with the liberal opposition and told Savary to "[t]reat men of letters well," hoping that contented writers would "bring honor to France."<sup>41</sup>

Staël's role as a salonnière, rather than her insistence on the freedom to write, constituted the greatest threat. The Directory had previously told her to leave France because her salon was a meeting place for factions opposed to the regime. Under the Consulate, her salon was once again a *salon de fusion* that brought together nobles and men of the Revolution in the company of opinion makers in the worlds of diplomacy, letters, and the arts. "When in Paris," wrote Madame de Rémusat, "Mme. de Staël received many people, and all political subjects were freely discussed under her roof. . . . Men of letters, publicists, men of the Revolution, great lords, were all to be met there." According to Sophie Gay, her salon frightened Napoléon not only because it was "composed of the leaders of the opposition," but because it attracted "many people attached to the government."<sup>42</sup> In short, her salon arranged a fusion of the very forces Napoléon hoped to bring together for his own benefit and hindered his efforts to rally the aristocracy at a time when support for the Consulate was still fragile and factionalism had left public opinion vulnerable to disarray. Napoléon had already demonstrated an understanding of the role salons played in building coalitions among elites by the way he regarded the value of his marriage to Josephine. In conversations with his brother Lucien, he equated Staël's status as "an intriguing woman, accustomed to defying Governments" not with her writings but with the salon she had run at the time of the king's trial, "the orgies of the Directory," and the troubles that had led him to purge the Tribunate. In 1802, when Madame de Staël wrote the emperor asking that she be allowed to return to Paris on the strength of her promise to "never write a single word relating to public affairs," her request was denied on the basis of police reports that pointed to the large number of visitors she was receiving in Maffliers. Six years later, when her son, Auguste de Staël, asked Napoléon whether she could return if she devoted herself to literature, he was told that the combination of her salon and her opinions constituted the root of the problem: "To talk of literature, morals, the fine arts, and everything under the sun," said the emperor, "is to indulge in politics. . . . Women should knit. If I let her come to Paris she would make trouble; she would lose me the men around me." Once in exile himself, he admitted that he had found Staël "very dangerous, because she gathered together in her salon . . . all the partisans, republicans, and royalists. She put them in each other's presence; she united them all against me. She attacked me from all sides. . . . Her salon was fatal." He filed the same complaint against the salon of Madame Permon, the mother of Abrantès, scolding General Junot for spending too much time there: "People who detest me meet in her drawing room; people who, before my return



from Egypt, were prisoners in the Temple for their opinions—these are her friends. And you, great blockhead! You make them your friends also . . . you make friends of my enemies.”<sup>43</sup>

Politically subversive sociability among elites was harder to suppress than other forms of opposition—like a critical press—because it took place in the privacy of the home under the auspices of women who were less vulnerable than men to the subtle forms of repression prescribed by the law. Madame de Staël was keenly aware of the costs and benefits of her situation: on the one hand, women were “less accessible than men to the fears and hopes which power can bestow” and therefore harder to coerce; on the other hand, they were more vulnerable to a dictator’s irrational ire.<sup>44</sup> Banishment was a crude instrument, but it had two advantages—it drove a wedge between Madame de Staël and those who feared Napoléon’s disapproval, and it swiftly decapitated her salon. If it was her salon that made her powerful, then it was enough to exile her in order to destroy it; exile, however, seems only to have enhanced her literary career.

Napoléon considered Staël’s salon a political club because he associated salons with frivolous amusements undertaken in the company of women who behaved as he expected. Staël’s salon, however, did not fit his preconceptions: it was not just a place of benign sociability, it was a forum where his adversaries met to criticize the regime.<sup>45</sup> Under authoritarian systems, private associations tend to be either official or illegal. Madame Récamier’s salon was a case in point. Although a fixture of high society under the Directory, it was not until the time of the Consulate that the immense fortune of her husband allowed the couple to entertain on a truly lavish scale. By 1802, she had acquired a reputation as an incomparable hostess with a special gift for creating amity and sympathy among men with opposing ideas. Napoléon closed her salon in February 1803 by prohibiting her regular Monday receptions. Although it was generally believed that this was the price she was made to pay for associating with Madame de Staël and General Moreau, it was the sociability of her salon that was at issue, rather than her ideas. Récamier published no political writings, but she had access to fashionable society and was thus able to provide Napoleon’s rival Moreau with exposure to a diverse crowd of notables. In addition, her varied social network made the relatively mild punishment she received an effective warning to others. Although she was not exiled until after returning from a visit to Staël at Coppet in 1809, her salon remained under suspicion from the beginning of the Empire; not only did she have friends in the opposition, but the circumstances surrounding her husband’s financial ruin estranged her from the emperor.<sup>46</sup> By all accounts, Madame

Récamier was apolitical. Constant wrote that she “occupied herself with politics only out of her general concern for the vanquished of all parties,” and Chateaubriand insisted that she “would have never entered into political matters without the irritation that she experienced over the exile of Madame de Staël.” Stendhal, who met her in 1803, saw her salon as completely benign—“There is music, the mothers play at *bouillotte* [the card game “three of a kind”], their daughters at other games, and they nearly all finish by dancing.”<sup>47</sup> The problem was not her personal attachments, however, but her association with just about everyone in a salon that was not within the ambit of the court. If Récamier had been closely identified with the regime, then her social ecumenicism would have been an asset. As it was, her neutrality made her a threat because inclusiveness in the absence of an affirmed ideology meant a lack of control. Accounts by the duchesse d’Abrantès and Madame de Rémusat show repeatedly that Napoléon resented associates who were willing to get along with his enemies and was on guard against anyone who was “careful to conciliate all parties.”<sup>48</sup>

By demanding the support of those with an independent status whose prestige he needed to consolidate his regime, Napoléon created a problem he could not entirely solve: how to control the rich and powerful once he had helped restore their wealth and social position? It was a problem to which he attended immediately by turning the granting of amnesty to émigrés and the withholding of unsold biens nationaux into tools of social appeasement and political pacification. The persecution of Madame de Staël and Madame Récamier were part of a larger strategy of intimidation that took a variety of forms—exile, imprisonment, and execution were only the most extreme. Indeed, Napoléon selectively exiled or banished quite a few nobles in a manner that most observers judged relatively effective. Madame de Boigne called exile “the chief restraint upon . . . Faubourg Saint-Germain” and attributed the scrupulous prudence of the nobility to the fear it provoked. Staël thought of her own ordeal as a clear warning to others, and Chastenay believed that the threat alone induced many to present themselves at court. The emperor, however, used a variety of other means to obtain similar results: he dispatched government agents and military personnel to society balls, placed spies in salons, drafted nobles into service at court, and arranged marriages between his associates and the daughters of the rich. If these failed he could always execute a royalist conspirator as “an example to Brittany” or suspend the sentences imposed on convicted rebels to win their gratitude and indebtedness.<sup>49</sup>

Madame de Rémusat was undoubtedly correct in arguing that Napoléon regarded women as inferior, but he also acknowledged their power by seeking their

counsel and by using intimidation to silence them or make them submit. He once told General Junot that aristocratic women thought themselves "privileged by their sex" to lure his supporters away from him. In this sense, his misogyny paralleled and frequently expressed his feelings toward the aristocracy, whose authority provoked in him the desire to humiliate, and whose eventual submission invited contempt. The most memorable episodes of imperial spite occurred in public and were calculated to emphasize a woman's deviation from the conventional norm — as when he told Madame Regnault de Saint Jean d'Angély at a ball for the grand duchess of Berg that she looked old, or when he named the lover of each woman attending breakfast with the empress. When Madame de Staël first met him in society, he told her that the greatest of all women were those with the most children.<sup>50</sup> Madame de Rémusat attributed such behavior to a fear of women's social skills, and Talleyrand thought it expressed his rejection of their civilizing role, but it seems more likely that he needed constantly to reenact and reinforce what he regarded as his victory over traditional elites. On one occasion, when he refused to pardon a group of royalists condemned to death, he told Madame de Rémusat that his resolve would "give M. Chateaubriand an opportunity of writing some pathetic pages, which he will read aloud in Faubourg Saint-Germain. The fine ladies will weep, and you will see that this will console him!"<sup>51</sup>

### III

The imperial court dominated high society to a greater degree than had the court of Versailles. To some extent, its centrality was a reflection of its size: by 1814, the court had nearly 3,000 officials and over 100 chamberlains, making it both the largest in Europe and the largest in French history.<sup>52</sup> Napoléon wanted a brilliant court befitting the grandeur of a ruler whose conquests stretched from Hamburg to Rome. Few observers doubted the court's splendor, but many also considered it a crashing bore. Victorine de Chastenay found it strained and unpleasant, despite "the magnificence of its fêtes." At Fontainebleau, wrote Madame de Rémusat, prudence and custom stifled spontaneous conversation and led to ennui.<sup>53</sup> A variety of factors contributed to excessive formality: Napoléon was alternatively aloof, imperious, or rude, and he discouraged private friendships between courtiers who were already less well known to one another because of their more diverse social backgrounds than had been the case at Versailles. Most observers, however, blamed strict protocol and the reintroduction of the rigid etiquette of the past. The emperor placed the court under martial law; etiquette was "regulated with extreme precision" and ceremonies "were gone

through as though by beat of drum." The situation worsened after Napoléon's marriage to Marie-Louise in 1810, when excessive courtly politesse became disconnected from its prior social function and served only to embellish an endless series of mechanical routines. Madame de Staël pointed to such practices as proof of the intellectual nullity of those who tolerated Napoléon's despotic rule: "When there were four hundred people in his salon," she wrote, "a blind man could have believed himself alone, so profound was the silence that one encountered there. . . . The oriental etiquette that Bonaparte established in his court blocked all the light that one reaped from easy communication in society."<sup>54</sup>

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the distance between the court and the city had widened as the salons of Paris increased their autonomy from Versailles. Under the Empire, the process was reversed as Napoléon sought "to confiscate . . . *la mondanité parisienne*" in an effort to control the elites.<sup>55</sup> By suppressing autonomous sociability and by having government officials open salons, he eventually succeeded in giving the so-called "official salons" of the Empire a predominant place in *le monde* — the policy of fusion, coupled with authoritarian rule, tended to make high society and official society one and the same.

The most prominent official salons were ministerial receptions that attracted a clientele made up mostly of diplomats, officeholders, and *gens de la cour*, a group that by then included quite a few old nobles. By the end of the Empire, according to Victor de Broglie, official society was distributed among three salons currently or formerly associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, those of the duc de Bassano (Hugues-Bertrand Maret), who became foreign minister in 1811, Armand de Caulaincourt, his rival, and Talleyrand, France's disgraced but indispensable grand dignitary.<sup>56</sup> Official salons centered not on a woman but on a powerful male figure, and they originated not in the salons of the eighteenth century but in the receptions held by the directors and the consuls of the previous regimes. Second Consul Jean-Jacques Cambacérès opened the drawing room of his hôtel and received company every Tuesday and Saturday for six months of the year during the Consulate; visitors, mostly magistrates, functionaries, and returned émigrés, remembered these gatherings as boring, albeit cordial, but had high praise for the gourmet dinners he gave. When Madame d'Abrantès became an official *maîtresse de maison* as wife of the governor of Paris, she took Cambacérès's receptions as a model, asking the famous epicure Laurent Grimod de la Reynière to recommend a chef of the same quality as his. Official salons were also prefigured by the *salle de audience* of ministers like Fouché, where casual meetings in which people with official business gathered to chat were turned into regular receptions that allowed the government to attract and unite those it hoped to convert.<sup>57</sup>

By the time Bassano became foreign minister, there was no longer much difference between the government and the court. Ministers and grand dignitaries were also officers of the imperial household and those seeking jobs or favors had to go to the imperial palace. Broglie heard of his nomination as a chief *auditeur* for the *maître des requêtes* of the Armée du Nord in Bassano's salon, and the comte de Chabrol attributed his promotion to prefect of the Seine to the fact that Napoléon had noticed him one day at the Tuileries.<sup>58</sup> The institutional and political proximity of the court and the official salons meant that those who attended the latter could not criticize the regime. Official salons could not exist for purposes unrelated to the policies of the government and became in effect physical extensions of the court into the social spaces of *le monde*. The only politics that were possible under such circumstances were court politics — hence, the contest for the emperor's favor that erupted between Bassano, Talleyrand, and Caulaincourt after 1809 was echoed in the official salons. At the Hôtel Gallifet, Bassano worked to gather support for an invasion of Russia, while his wife staged puppet shows mocking Talleyrand's and Caulaincourt's preference for peace. According to Broglie, the company kept by Bassano and Caulaincourt "mutually scoffed at and denounced one another."<sup>59</sup> Under these conditions, the role of the hostess was not that of a salonnière who presided over an exchange of ideas but a *maîtresse de maison* who did the honors of the house, supported her husband, and cultivated respect for the emperor by enforcing civility and silencing *frondeurs*.

Napoléon equated women and politics with intrigue, and he did not want women interfering, or even taking an interest, in "serious matters."<sup>60</sup> Salons, he surmised, were best designed to provide amusements that would divert women from emulating such salonnières as Madame de Staël. Although he gave his male chamberlains control over access in order to deprive court women of the influence he imagined them to have possessed in the past, he was also quite willing to use the women of the court to influence high society. On the one hand, "anything resembling intrigue was almost unknown" at court, according to Madame de Rémusat, because "each individual was convinced that everything depended on the sole will of the master" and the affairs of state "were absolutely confined to the cabinet." Napoléon refused to have a favorite, because he did not want "the empire of women" to control the court. "They have done wrong by Henri IV and Louis XIV," he wrote. "My *métier* and I are much more serious than that of these princes, and the French themselves have become too serious to pardon their sovereign for public liaisons and mistresses-in-chief." On the other hand, the efficacy of using women associated with the regime to set examples with regard

to taste and fashion was consistent with his policies — apparently matters that were "unimportant" could be political as well. After establishing the Continental System in 1806, he told officials to have their wives serve Swiss tea and chicory coffee in their salons and cautioned against their wearing dresses made in England.<sup>61</sup> Napoléon, wrote Claire de Rémusat, was convinced that "the influence of women had harmed the kings of France," and he considered "the power they had acquired in society as an intolerable usurpation." He wanted them to be little more than ornaments of his court, a development Madame de Staël registered in 1800 when she observed that "since the Revolution men had thought it politically and morally useful to reduce women to the most absurd mediocrity." Chastenay refused a position at court because she didn't want to stand around like a "mannequin." She was no more impressed with the sexual asymmetry of Bassano's salon, where she found the men standing and talking or playing billiards while the women sat behind them looking at their backs.<sup>62</sup>

The duchesse de Bassano, reputedly the most elegant contemporary *femme du monde*, and well known for her spectacular parties, preferred her husband's charming stories or the company of artists to political discussion. Napoléon, who paid the duc de Bassano a salary of 400,000 francs, was especially anxious for the duchesse to have a magnificent open house in order to lure the diplomatic corps away for the Hôtel de Luynes in Faubourg Saint-Germain.<sup>63</sup> But it was Talleyrand's salon on the rue d'Anjou that showed most thoroughly how official status warped the distinctive features of the original institution. Talleyrand's wife (the former Madame Grand), who did the honors of his salon, was by all accounts an intellectual nullity, whom her husband overtly ignored. The company was a mixture of diplomats, old nobles, and government officials, although it included a number of Talleyrand's relatives. It also tended to be politically homogeneous, since those with pronounced royalist opinions were usually unwelcome. Guests were often served dinner, after which they were more likely to play cards than engage in organized conversation. Talleyrand rarely spoke and preferred to listen to amusing stories, like those of the duc de Choiseul-Gouffier, France's ambassador to Constantinople, who often treated his guests to lively descriptions of the customs of the Turkish Empire.<sup>64</sup>

#### IV

It is hard to say at what point Napoléon no longer considered the old aristocracy a threat. His marriage to Marie-Louise suggests that he had conquered Faubourg Saint-Germain and was now intent on gaining access to the family of



kings. By then, the old aristocracy of the faubourg was marginalized and constrained. *Ralliés* were usually confined to the military and the court to ensure their vulnerability to sanctions. Although the creation of the imperial nobility was intended as the culmination of the policy of fusion, it had the added benefit of placing potential opponents in positions of subservience. Of the 950 old-regime nobles who accepted imperial titles, only 18 percent were *hauts fonctionnaires*, and many of those worked in the emperor's household. When Madame de Chevreuse, daughter of the duc de Luynes, criticized the government in high society, she was forced either to become a *dame de palais* or lose her family's estate; when she refused to attend the captive queen of Spain, she was exiled to the provinces. Meanwhile, members of the nobility awaited news of war and peace with interest, "because every family was more or less connected with the army."<sup>65</sup>

François Villemain describes the faubourg in 1808 as a society "on a second plane, a society of leisure and independent thought in this busy century; a society of elegant simplicity and witty grace under the reign of the sword and algebra."<sup>66</sup> Royalist salons were held in check not only by fear of exile and the police, but by the fact that many old nobles had relatives who had rallied to the regime. Even the duc de Luynes, whose grand hôtel on the rue Saint-Dominique was the center of gravity of Faubourg Saint-Germain, maintained a respectful restraint toward the regime.<sup>67</sup> Having rebuilt their patrimony through savings, cunning, and the emperor's largesse, the aristocracy wanted above all to live in peace and comfort. Intrigue with "inferior conspirators" and "paid agents of disturbance and disorder," as Madame de Boigne called royalist militants, was generally forbidden in salons at a time when the regime's most active opponents had already been chased from France or isolated in the provinces. The remaining *irréconciliables* of the nobles' quartier usually met not in hôtels but in the Café de Valois.<sup>68</sup> In private salons, aristocrats unmercifully ridiculed, mocked, and sneered at the emperor, his family, and his court in printed lampoons, satirical verses, and biting stories; high society indulged the most outrageous rumors about Napoléon's illegitimate birth, Josephine's affairs, and his brother Joseph's attempt to poison his wife. But opposition of this sort was strictly verbal, a sign of weakness, confined to epigrams and bad jokes behind closed doors.<sup>69</sup>

Although open political partisanship seems to have died out by 1806, the absence of a vocal opposition did not mean that the policy of fusion had been a complete success.<sup>70</sup> The old aristocratic society might have been rendered impotent in its muffled acrimony, but it had also come to form a largely separate world that resisted most of the emperor's advances. Napoléon's efforts to create a new

ruling class had paradoxical results: on the one hand, they established the juridical and institutional framework for a fusion of interests at the top of the social hierarchy based on property and access to appointive and elective office; on the other hand, they deepened a sense of difference among the notables by promoting distinctions among supporters, victims, and "deserters," which were refined and extended each time a nomination or an act of coercion prompted anguished discussions and recriminations in le monde. To be sure, returned émigrés, habituated by family and social relations to insist upon sensitive points of honor, were bound to nurture resentments and pretensions, but Napoléon added fuel to the fire by playing elites off against one another and by using tactics that often required people tied to more than one camp to sever previous connections. The result was a petty war of coteries that put the salons of the past in a more positive light, while anticipating the "rancor and hatred" that would be given free reign during the Restoration.<sup>71</sup>

The political geography of Paris was reshaped in consequence. Posh neighborhoods became associated with the ideological preferences and social antecedents of their principal inhabitants: Faubourg Saint-Germain was ultraroyalist and aristocratic; the Chaussée d'Antin was the home of the Bonapartist nouveaux riches; and in Faubourg Saint-Honoré, liberal nobles struggled to reconcile their nostalgia for the both the Enlightenment and the monarchy by cultivating a royalism consistent with the early accomplishments of the Revolution. Although demographic realignments since 1789 contributed to the spatial differentiation of le monde, the neighborhoods that constituted its basic elements gained their rhetorical significance only under the Empire, when they acquired the power of symbols capable of designating an entire sensibility and a way of life.<sup>72</sup> Once neighborhoods became politically distinct, they could be anchored in a set of ideologically distinctive salons; members of the most elegant aristocratic society could then begin to travel between more or less exclusive private salons, where they would encounter mostly their own, and other mondain gatherings, where they mixed uneasily with others. Each neighborhood under the Empire began to be associated with a specific set of salons whose social and political nuances were generally known: those of Adélaïde de La Briche, Louise de Boigne, and Marie-Anne de Rumford in Saint-Honoré; those of the duchesse de Luynes, Madame de Vintimille, and Madame de Pastoret in Saint-Germain. In retrospect, Saint-Honoré was the seat of a nascent Orleanism under the Empire, while the salons of Saint-Germain harbored the future leadership of the ultras.<sup>73</sup>

Ordinarily, "the two societies of the old and new régimes were habitually

separated," but they sometimes met in official salons, at ambassadorial residences, or in homes of foreigners, where they would not have to be on one another's turf. Even on these occasions, however, relations were strained: at the Foreign Ministry receptions Chastenay attended, people kept to their own circle; when Caulaincourt attended a ball given by Madame Récamier to mark the end of Carnival, he was embarrassed to encounter guests who believed him to have been complicit in the kidnapping of the duc d'Enghien. Abrantès concluded that no amount of imperial splendor was capable of putting members of society at ease with one another; in the end, the Empire failed to establish the "mutual respect necessary for society to be more than a momentary gathering of individuals who no longer know one another as soon as they return home." "[G]atherings were possible under the Empire," wrote Chateaubriand, but only because the emperor had "fashioned a society of passive obedience" in which Bonapartists and their adversaries were prevented from discussing public affairs. Napoléon "would willingly have put an stop to [the] jesting" about manners and appearances that took place when different elements of society were apart, "but this was beyond his powers."<sup>74</sup>

The Napoleonic experience showed that society life could be annexed for political purposes and that the manners cultivated in salons could serve to embellish and legitimize a dictatorial regime. It also demonstrated that criticism of the state could be emptied from salons when *le monde* became contiguous with the political class and authoritarian politics turned institutions of sociability either into accessories of the court or exclusive, secretive coteries. Salons emerged from the Napoleonic era less overtly preoccupied with political questions than they had been in 1789, but more clearly partisan than in 1800. They had become vehicles of factionalism rather than instruments for the creation of enlightened public opinion, more suitable for expressing the desire for advantage or revenge than for engaging in a collective reflection on the common good, the constitutional order, and the nature of the state.

## V

Madame de Staël reentered Paris in May 1814 and took up residence in Faubourg Saint-Germain, where she revived her salon around a core of habitués who had met with her in exile at Coppet. Madame de Montcalm, sister of the duc de Richelieu, saw her from time to time surrounded by admirers and noted that even for those who detested her, she was an object of general curiosity. Her two

most famous novels, *Delphine* and *Corinne*, were still in print, and would remain popular at least until the July Monarchy, when the latter continued to receive critical attention.<sup>75</sup> Although she was discouraged and frightened by the Hundred Days, her waning years, by most accounts, were happy ones — Madame de Rémusat had the impression that she was "overwhelmed with joy at being once more in her own land, and at seeing the dawn of the constitutional regime for which she so ardently longed."<sup>76</sup> Montcalm claimed that her "admirable conversation" suffered from the onset of a fatal illness, but Broglie testified that she nevertheless rejoined *le monde* with aplomb and made her salon on the rue de Grenelle "the rendezvous for all the foreigners that the Restoration attracted to Paris."<sup>77</sup> As a leader of liberal opinion, Madame de Staël was sought out by ministers and princes; she met with the comte de Provence and the comte d'Artois before arriving in Paris and was even able to arrange an interview between Lafayette and Emperor Alexander I. Broglie, who would soon marry Albertine de Staël, used her salon to discuss pending legislation, such as the new electoral law, and helped make Staël's home a rallying point for liberal parliamentarians. Madame de Staël's personal initiatives concerned mostly foreign policy and concentrated on efforts to limit the French indemnity and reduce the number of troops occupying the capital. The latter question not only became the subject of an extensive correspondence with the duke of Wellington, it made her salon a center of opposition to British policy, to the extent that Lord Canning and Charles Stuart thought it necessary to warn their government about the "dangers inherent in Mme de Staël exciting national passions by her language."<sup>78</sup>

Madame de Staël's celebrity status and her public activities as a salonnière contrasted sharply with her pessimism about the mingling of salons and politics in the last years of her life. She was convinced that the triumph of the Empire and fifteen years of military despotism had destroyed the enlightened sociability of the eighteenth century by "enervat[ing] the public spirit" and by changing "everything in the mores of the country."<sup>79</sup> The Revolution had created circumstances favorable to Napoléon's designs, and he had in turn destroyed the sources of intellectual curiosity and humanitarian "enthusiasm" by killing liberty and choking off all communication between individuals on serious matters. Staël tied these consequences not only to a general desire to avoid chaos, which Napoléon exploited, but more specifically to the emperor's contempt for humanity and his fear of honest social interaction, characteristics he seemed to have communicated to the entire French elite.<sup>80</sup>

Staël's belief that Napoléon had brought about a fundamental change in

French sociability is evident in the skepticism with which she regarded the sociability of the Bourbon Restoration. Although she died in 1817, she saw enough of the new era to formulate a consistently unflattering impression. By reviving "the old habits of the court," Napoléon made "the hope of obtaining jobs the principle of life animating society" and bequeathed to the Restoration salons that, in her opinion, endangered the consolidation of parliamentary institutions.<sup>81</sup> High society, she wrote, had become a "labyrinth of interests and ambitions" that found expression in the intense political factionalism of the Chamber of Deputies, where the parties found it impossible to compromise. Political leaders treated one another without cordiality, lacked integrity, and were incapable of being sincere.<sup>82</sup> In the past, women had softened men's passions, and salon conversation had subjected public issues to the most rigorous intellectual scrutiny, but by the time of the Restoration, "women no longer felt the need to be superior to men." The grandes dames of the Old Regime had maintained the seriousness and good manners of the past, but they were now elderly, embittered, or had voluntarily withdrawn from public life. The center of gravity in high society had shifted to the *hommes nouveaux* who had been active in public affairs during the Empire, and who "had all the passions of the Revolution and all the vanities of the Old Regime." On the one hand, the "grand jurisdiction" the aristocracy had once exercised over the size and tone of la bonne compagnie had been broken by the invasion of "the less refined class," cheapening the price of admission and filling the salons with young people lacking in "serious instruction." On the other hand, "the fear inspired by the imperial government had destroyed any practice of independence in conversation."

[T]he French, under this government, had almost all become diplomats, so that society spent its time in insignificant talk that in no way recalled the audacious spirit of France. Assuredly, no one had anything to fear in 1814, under Louis XVIII, but the habit of caution had become a reflex, and besides, courtiers had determined that it was not good form to talk politics, or to deal with any serious subject: they hoped once again to have a frivolous—and therefore subjected—nation; but the only result they obtained was to make conversation insipid and to deprive themselves of all the means of knowing the true opinion of each.<sup>83</sup>

Such doubts about the political influence of salons centered on two forms of deception, one involving the use of elegant manners by charlatans to give themselves an "illusory importance" and the other concerning the ability of the mediocre to silence merit with ridicule and lower the general political intelligence of

society. She was not the first to notice that la vie mondaine was susceptible to artifice and frivolity, but she was more adamant than most in linking such vices to what she saw as the degeneration of the salon. It was as if she had discovered all of a sudden that every positive attribute of the salon had its antithesis: manners could indicate good character, but they could also deceive; intimacy could enhance the exchange of ideas, but it could also lead to clannishness and bigotry; equality in conversation could support generous sentiments, but it could also cultivate a sense of exclusivity; the salon could serve as a news bureau, but it could also be used to manipulate public opinion. Viewing the salon as a product of its moral environment, she was forced to conclude that it was a chameleonlike institution whose essential nature was no better than that of those who made use of it. Salons could serve to improve humanity in certain circumstances, but they would always register the defects of the prevailing political and social system. When the enlightened sociability of the eighteenth century failed to assist in the triumph of liberal institutions, Madame de Staël began to see salons less as Athenian symposia and more as small villages, with all the venal passions, jealousies, seductions, and material desires that existed in the real world. Gens du monde, apparently, were no better than anyone else.<sup>84</sup>

If women were morally superior to men, then they would have to bear the greatest degree of responsibility for society's moral decline. Salonnières, she believed, were supposed to bring out the best in people and cultivate genius. The women of the Restoration, however, were remiss in their duties and were failing to oppose the rising tide of corruption. They had become a "kind of artificial third sex, a grim product of the depraved social order," and were apparently no less factious, frivolous, and vain than the men. Instead of demanding "attentive listeners," they feigned innocence or dwelled on trivial matters in order to please; they competed for attention, engaged in hateful rivalries, and sought out celebrities to bolster the reputations of their salons.<sup>85</sup> In the end, they harmed not only themselves but also the common good: they exposed themselves and society to flattery, deception, and betrayal at the hands of men whom they had failed to influence in a positive way.

The disillusionment of Madame de Staël was just one more indication that the Enlightenment was over. Her death, like those of Jean-Baptiste Suard in 1817 and André Morellet in 1819, contributed to a sense of loss among young liberals that helped inaugurate a persistent nostalgia paralleled by an ongoing process of idealization. In imagining the eighteenth century as both superior and dead, the generation that frequented the Parisian salons of the early nineteenth century



was prepared to disdain the present and struggle to recapture a vanished ideal. Staël's pessimism at the end of her life reflected this state of affairs and gave those who identified with her legacy a language with which to deplore the folly of their time. It was not that the salon was dead — high society grew in size, popularity, and complexity throughout the first half of the nineteenth century — it was just that the social elite that had grown up in the shadow of the Revolution and Napoléon never tired of saying that it was. "My God! What a pitiful thing is the conversation in these large assemblies," wrote the duchesse de Duras in 1817 after dining in the grand monde. "You could just sense the joy of those who only lived by ridiculing others. Poor nourishment. Their spirit benefits no one. . . . It was the first [party] of the year: the stupidity, the foolishness, the gossip, the frivolity was in all its glory."<sup>86</sup> According to the marquis de Custine, the art of bringing out the best in others, which he considered "the great charm of ancient French society," was "scarcely known" by the 1830s "because it requires greater refinement of mind to praise than to depreciate." By 1837, it seemed to Delphine de Girardin that everyone had been complaining about the sterility of salons and the puerility of high society for twenty years — she insisted that there was more to it than beautiful duchesses, insignificant gossip, and dandies, although she too was forced to concede its artifice, hypocrisy, silliness, vanity, pretension, and "exceptional tolerance for what is really bad."<sup>87</sup>

The other side of this coin was the search to regenerate society by reconstructing the old sociable ideal, an ideal that by now owed much to Staël's conception of rigorous, refined, and regulated conversation as the path to political reconciliation and civic improvement. But it was also an ideal that crystallized in an age of reaction and romanticism among a generation that was tired of politics and yearned for its erasure. For François Villemain, French sociability regained its earlier perfection in a handful of salons during the Restoration, "where politics had not set aside *politesse*, where ranks, and even opinions, were brought together by the best and truest equality, that of knowledge and noble sentiments, where men, engaged in great matters, could still find improvement, where men of science were greeted by men of leisure, and all were more or less inspired by the good taste that the influence of women has contributed to high society, and that often added less to the progress of useful truths than to the grace of the conversations."<sup>88</sup> Villemain and Sainte-Beuve saw the postrevolutionary sociable ideal actualized most clearly in the salon of the duchesse de Duras, where Sainte-Beuve found "a chivalrous alliance of legitimacy and liberty" under the supervision of "a rare woman, who naturally caused to take place around her a marvelous

compromise between taste, the tone of the past, and the new forces."<sup>89</sup> By her simplicity, grace, and intelligence, Duras was able constantly to focus the attention of her guests on the higher qualities embodied in the arts — when the conversation veered into politics, she gently but firmly nudged it back. Determined to dispel the acrimony left by memories of the Revolution, Duras worked to create in her salon an atmosphere where politics would simply vanish; she never allowed her salon to become a sort of club, as did other grandes dames, where "one leaves exalted by the bluster of deputies rushing in from the Chamber after a fiery speech." When Lord Stuart raised the possibility of dissension in the cabinet between Chateaubriand and Villèle, Duras shifted the mood by asking the comte de Capo d'Istria his views on the former's latest literary achievements. According to Villemain, she welcomed the novelist Alexandre Duval, despite his reputation as a revolutionary, because she judged him a man of honor and talent. She also frequently invited Delphine Gay to read verse, convinced that the young woman's charm and beauty would silence the diplomats, politicians, and scientists in her circle and put all opinions seemingly in accord.<sup>90</sup>

Madame de Boigne considered Duras to have fancied herself a more diffident version of Madame de Staël, whose former position in the world she sought to claim. She wrote novels that displayed "a thorough knowledge of salon customs" and copied the mannerisms of her exemplar by twiddling a sprig of green in her fingers. Chateaubriand thought that Duras "had the imagination and even something of the expression of Madame de Staël," and Villemain believed that her celebrity came in part from their highly touted friendship.<sup>91</sup> Under the Empire, in letters to Staël's Swiss neighbor Rosalie de Constant, Duras expressed admiration for the Staël's books and curiosity about her life at Coppet. When the Bourbons returned, she acted on her oft-expressed desire to get to know Madame de Staël by initiating correspondence, occupying an adjacent residence, and attending her salon.<sup>92</sup> But it is not clear whether Duras loved Staël or Corinne, the heroine of Staël's most famous novel, about a woman of genius driven to despair and death by social conventions. To be sure, their friendship owed as much to what Villemain called "certain affinities of mind and heart" as it did to Duras's attraction to Staël as an author. Villemain and Chateaubriand describe her desire to play the muse as requiring a posture of devotion and intellectual passivity, but she was a well-educated woman who considered the cultivation of merit as serious work and who criticized other salonnières for occupying themselves with "petty things that [are] incompatible with what is simple and elevated." In this sense, she would have agreed with Marie d'Agoult's insistence that women could

"exercise a serious influence outside of private life" by capturing people's imaginations, stimulating their minds, and encouraging them to reexamine received opinions.<sup>93</sup> But when it came to politics, Duras took as her model the celebrated fictional muse who supported liberty by questioning conventions, rather than Staël herself, the salonnière who acted politically to promote enlightenment. Whereas Staël wanted to transform sociability into action by placing transcendent reason at the disposal of free institutions, Duras hoped to transcend politics entirely through a concerted admiration for something more beautiful and more ideal. Like many of her generation, Duras misread Staël, who criticized Restoration society, not because politics had destroyed sociability, but because salons and salonnières had failed to create a better politics.

Madame de Staël's legacy to the nineteenth-century salon was to situate politics ambiguously at the center of its preoccupations. On the one hand, her life justified the image of the salonnière as a woman with strong political opinions who was eager to act forcefully on the periphery of the parliamentary game. On the other hand, her eighteenth-century sensibilities, reinforced by long-standing gender conventions, led her to refuse to make her salon a political coterie. She continued to see the reconciliation of antagonists as the salonnière's unique and transcendent role. During the Restoration, her salon was closely associated with liberals who were skeptical about the character of Louis XVIII and openly hostile to the ultras; at the same time, she "admitted all opinions and all ways of expressing them," because "she did not care to deprive her *salon* of anyone adept at [the] kind of fencing [that] could bring it variety."<sup>94</sup> Staël's daughter, by contrast, invited mostly liberals and ex-Bonapartists and did not mind seeing the rancor and passions of aristocratic society transported into her home. As Madame de Boigne explained, the women of her generation "lived in the narrow ideas of party spirit" and considered Staël's indulgence toward those with whom she disagreed "very shocking."<sup>95</sup> At the same time, it was a generation that sought to salvage the French sociable ideal, along with a public role for upper-class women, by associating the salon with reconciliation.

## *Le Pays féminin* (1815–1848)

By the time the troops of the Quadruple Alliance entered Paris on March 31, 1814, the salons of Faubourg Saint-Germain were already helping to create a current of opinion strong enough to persuade Allied leaders to support a Bourbon restoration. Even before the fall of the Empire, the salons of Saint-Germain had been considered active coterie of royalist intrigue.<sup>1</sup> The crossing of the Rhine by Field Marshal Blücher in January was Saint-Germain's signal to awake. Within days, royalist agents arrived in Paris with the king's proclamation from Hartwell promising to respect acquired positions and give France free institutions. Copies of the document were distributed to the salons, where society women quickly got to work furtively slipping them under doors and sticking them into the shutters of boutiques. After the French capitulation, lampoons against Napoléon and his family were sold openly on the street. The duchesse de Duras, accompanied by her daughter and two servants in livery, passed out white cockades and armbands to passersby. As Allied troops approached the French capital, conflicting news regarding the coalition's plans convinced royalists of the need to demonstrate that the country favored the Bourbons. Consequently, the arrival of foreign troops on the 31st unleashed a veritable aristocratic *journée*: