Eighteenth-Century Fiction

Volume 21
Issue 1 *Death/La Mort*

Article 6

10-31-2008

Last Rites, Last Rights: Corporeal Abjection as Autobiographical Performance in Suzanne Curchod Necker's *Des inhumations précipitées* (1790)

Sonja Boon

Last Rites, Last Rights: Corporeal Abjection as Autobiographical Performance in Suzanne Curchod Necker's *Des inhumations précipitées* (1790)

Abstract
This article explores the sensibility of the dying body as it was conceived, understood, and performed by the Parisian salon woman Suzanne Curchod Necker (1737-94). My work examines the relationship between Mme Necker's autobiographical writings and her 1790 essay on premature burial, /Des inhumations précipitées/, in the context of eighteenth-century debates on premature burial and Enlightenment understandings of sensibility, death, the body, and the corpse. The instability of the dying body, as presented in the Inhumations, can function as a metaphor for Necker's own life and further, and I argue for a reconceptualization of the autobiographical act not only as text, but also as performance, such that the lived-in body of the famed salonnière functions as the locus for her self-presentation. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's understanding of abjection, I posit that Suzanne Necker, by taking the position of the living corpse, engaged in a process of corporeal abjection through which she claimed the uncertain and ambiguous space between life and death for the presentation and display of the self.

Keywords
Suzanne Curchod Necker, Des inhumations précipitées, death, last rites, rights

Last Rites, Last Rights: Corporeal Abjection as Autobiographical Performance in Suzanne Curchod Necker's *Des inhumations precipitées* (1790)

Sonja Boon

BY ALL accounts, Suzanne Curchod Necker (1737–94) was, despite her Swiss background and modest upbringing, a successful and powerful woman within the eighteenth-century French elite.[1] As a *salonnière*, she regularly welcomed some of the leading

[1] On Suzanne Curchod Necker's life and work, see Paul-Gabriel d'Haussonville, *Le Salon de Madame Necker*, 2 vols. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1882), still considered to be the standard reference work. See also Antoine de Baecque, *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Routledge, 2001); Nadine Bérenguier, "Lettres de Suzanne Necker à Antoine Thomas," in *Lettres des femmes: Textes inédits et oubliés du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Elizabeth Goldsmith and Colette Wynn (Paris: Champion, 2005), 339–77; Jean-Denis Bredin, *Une singulière famille: Jacques Necker, Suzanne Necker, et Germaine de Staël* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); André Corbaz, *Madame Necker: Humble vaudoise et grande dame* (Lausanne: Payot, 1945); Paul Deschanel, *Figures de femmes* (Paris Calmann-Lévy, 1889); Catherine Dubeau, "L'Épreuve du salon, ou Le Monde comme performance dans les *Mélanges* et les *Nouveaux Mélanges* de Suzanne Necker," *Cahiers staëliens* 57 (2006): 201–26; Dena Goodman, "Suzanne Necker's *Mélanges*: Gender, Writing, and Publicity," in *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 211–23; Goodman, "Le Spectateur intérieur: les Journaux de Suzanne Necker," in *L'Invention de l'intimité au siècle des lumières*, ed. Benoît Melançon (Nanterre: Université de Paris 10, 1995), 91–100; Madelyn Gutwirth, "Suzanne Necker's Legacy: Breastfeeding

Eighteenth-Century Fiction 21, no. 1 (Fall 2008) © ECF 0840-6286

minds of the Enlightenment into her home, among them Buffon, Diderot, Grimm, Marmontel, Morellet, Suard, and Thomas. She was active on the political stage as a woman engaged in public charity through her work in prison and hospital reform.[2] Finally, she was a writer: her husband published posthumously five volumes of private writings—the *Mélanges* (1798) and *Nouveaux Mélanges* (1801)—as well as the *Réflexions sur le divorce* (1794); during her life, she published the annual accounts of the charity hospital that she led and a short treatise on premature burial, *Des inhumations précipitées* (1790).[3]

as Metonym in Germaine de Staël's *Delphine*," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 28, no. 2 (2004): 17–40; Valérie Hannin, "Une ambition de femme au siècle des Lumières: Le Cas de Madame Necker," *Cahiers staëliens* 36 (1985): 5–29; Geneviève Soumoy-Thibert, "Les idées de Madame Necker," *Dix-Huitième Siècle* 21 (1989): 357–68; Paola Vecchi, "De la mort à la vie: La Taphophobie et l'au-delà au XVIIIe siècle," in *Transhumances culturelles: Mélanges*, ed. Corrado Rosso (Pisa: Goliardica, 1985), 119–56, and a series of articles in *Cahiers Staëliens* 57 (2006).

2 Upon the orders of Louis XVI, Mme Necker directed an experimental charity hospital, the *Hospice de Charité*, from 1778 until 1790, when her family departed from France. For more on the hospital, her role as its director, and public responses to her work, see François Doublet, *Hospice de charité, Année 1788* (Paris, 1789); Jacques Necker, *Compte rendu* (Paris, 1781); [Suzanne Curchod Necker], *Hospice de charité* (Paris, 1781); [Suzanne Curchod Necker], *Hospice de charité: institutions, règles, et usages de cette Maison* (Paris, 1780); Suzanne Curchod Necker, *Nouveaux Mélanges*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1801); and Joseph Weber, *Mémoires de Weber, concernant Marie-Antoinette, archiduchesse d'Autriche et reine de France et de Navarre; avec des notes et des éclaircissemens historiques, par Mm. Berville et Barrière* (Paris, 1822), esp. 270–72. Louis Petit de Bachaumont's *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France*, 30 vols. (London, 1784–86) includes commentary on the hospital. See also Alexandre Aimes, "Le séjour de Madame Necker à Montpellier: Fondation de l'hôpital Necker de Montpellier," *Histoire des sciences médicales* 8 (1974): 488–89; Raymond Gervais, *Histoire de l'Hôpital Necker (1778–1885)* (Paris: Parent, 1885); Louis S. Greenbaum, "Jacques Necker and the Reform of the Paris Hospitals Before the French Revolution," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 9, no. 1 (1984): 1–15; Valérie Hannin, "La Fondation de l'hospice de charité: Une expérience médicale au temps du rationalisme expérimentale," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 31 (1984): 116–30; and Lucette Pérol, "Diderot, Mme Necker et la réforme des hôpitaux," *SVEC* 311 (1993): 219–33.

3 The five volumes of *Mélanges: Extraits* and *Nouveaux mélanges* contain a variety of materials, from short personal reflections to longer character portraits and extended excerpts from her correspondence. Some of Mme Necker's extensive correspondence with leading Enlightenment thinkers—her epistolary exchanges with Voltaire, for example—appear in larger published collections, but much remains in manuscript.

These public successes could have laid the groundwork for a happy and fulfilled life. Instead, they formed the backdrop to a life of physical suffering: illness consumed Mme Necker's body. In 1765, for example, she confided to a close friend that she was finally recovering from a lengthy sickness: "Je suis entre les mains de Mr. Tronchin," she wrote, "Grâces à Dieu depuis quelques jours je me trouve mieux à tous égards, sans oser me flatter encore, car j'ai passé deux mois dans une langueur qui ressembloit à l'anéantissement."[4] Just a few years later, in September 1768, she experienced a similarly life-threatening ailment: "Un nouvel accident avoit fait craindre que ma langueur ne devînt très-dangereuse ... Ma foiblesse étoit extrême" (*LD*, 353). Debilitating illness and suffering overwhelmed her life experience, and the phrase "Je souffre toujours" is a common refrain in her writings.[5] While these complaints bear all the hallmarks of the numerous neuroses and hypochondriac maladies to which many elite French women succumbed, her frequent references to illnesses of various sorts are confirmed by her family and friends, thus suggesting something more than psychic distress: "La santé de maman, à notre grande douleur, ne fait aucun progrès quelconque en mieux," wrote her daughter, Germaine, to a family friend; "Madame Necker est toujours bien souffrante," confirmed André Morellet.[6] In attempting to treat her various illnesses, she sought

4 Suzanne Curchod Necker to Etienette Clavel de Brenles, in Fédor Golowkin, *Lettres diverses, recueillies en Suisse* (Geneva: J. J. Paschoud, 1821), 265. References are to this edition, cited as *LD*.

5 Suzanne Curchod Necker, *Mélanges: Extraits des manuscrits de Madame Necker*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1798), 2:162, 355. References are to this edition, cited as *M*.

6 Anne Louise Germaine de Staël to Mme d'Houdetot, 18 May [1785], in Germaine de Staël, *Correspondance générale*, ed. B. W. Jasinski, 4 vols. (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1962–78), 1:37. References are to this edition, cited as *CG*. The *Correspondance générale* continues in two further volumes: *Correspondance générale, volume 5*, ed. B.W. Jasinski (Paris: Hachette, 1982–85); and *Correspondance générale, volume 6*, ed. B.W. Jasinski (Paris: Klincksieck, 1993). André Morellet to an English friend, 9 December 1786, in *Lettres d'André Morellet*, ed. Dorothy Medlin, Jean-Claude David, and Paul Leclerc, 3 vols. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Taylor Institution, 1991–96), 2:27–28. Other contemporaries noted her physical debilitation: see, for example, comments by Albertine Adrienne Necker de Saussure, in J. de Mestral Combrement, *Albertine Necker De Saussure, 1766–1841* (Lausanne: Payot, 1946), 55–56; and Maria Josepha Holroyd Stanley, Baroness of Alderley, *The Girlhood of Maria Josepha Holroyd, Lady Stanley of Alderley: Recorded in Letters of a Hundred Years Ago, from 1776 to 1796* (London: Longmans, Green, 1896), 64.

the professional opinions of some of the great doctors of her era, spending significant periods of time under the care of Théodore Tronchin and Samuel-Auguste Tissot.[7] This knowledgable medical care was to no avail: after two years of profound suffering during which she frequently came close to death, Mme Necker died on 14 May 1794.[8] She was fifty-seven years old.

In this article, I explore the sensibility of the dying body, looking at the ways in which this body was conceived, understood, and performed by Mme Necker. I look more specifically at the ways in which her autobiographical writings intersect with, challenge, and merge with the ideas presented in *Des inhumations précipitées* (1790). By juxtaposing her private and public selves, I suggest that the instability and uncertainty of the dying body, in the stages between what she perceived as apparent and complete death, can function as a metaphor for her own life. I position these works within the context of eighteenth-century debates on premature burial as well as Enlightenment understandings of sensibility, death, the body, and the corpse. In the process, I argue for a reconceptualization of the autobiographical act not only as text, but also as performance, such that the lived-in body of the famed *salonnière* functions as the locus for her self-presentation.[9] Within this formulation, Mme Necker's treatise can be read as an instance of autobiographical performance, in which her own frail body, through a process of textualization, both confirmed and extended the

7 Mme Necker also solicited medical opinions while in transit. In 1776, for example, while staying in England, she consulted two doctors, Mr Simmons and Mr Denman (Morellet, *Lettres*, 2:27–28). In 1784, while travelling to Montpellier to assist in the establishment of a charity hospital for indigent Protestants, she sought the medical opinion of Dr Lamurre. See Haussonville, *Salon*, 2:294; and Aimes, "Séjour."

8 For more on the circumstances of Mme Necker's final years, see the last chapter of Haussonville, *Salon*, 2:287–303. Haussonville, Mme Necker's direct descendant, observes that while she was ill throughout most of her life, her final two years, spent at Beaulieu, near Lausanne, were particularly dangerous.

9 For more on the performative nature of illness in the eighteenth century, see Deirdre Dawson, "Voltaire's Complaint: Illness and Eroticism in La Correspondance," *Literature and Medicine* 18, no. 2 (1999): 24–38, who argues that Voltaire used illness as an erotic gesture; and Felicia B. Sturzer, "Love and Disease: The Contaminated Letters of Julie de Lespinasse," *SVEC* 2000:08 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000), 3–16, who points to Lespinasse's strategic use of suffering to mine the depths of her amorous passions.

autobiographical text itself. Such a process might be considered through the lens of corporeal abjection, whereby Mme Necker, by taking the position of the living corpse, authorized the rights of the dying and claimed the uncertain, ambiguous space of the abject for the presentation and display of the self.[10] Antoine de Baecque has suggested a powerful symbiosis between Mme Necker's public and private selves.[11] If this is the case, and I support this thesis, then her own life functions as the impetus and inspiration for the treatise on premature burial and ultimately provides some insights into the purposes and goals of this work. At the same time, the treatise can shed some light on Mme Necker's autobiography.

In this article, I will outline societal attitudes towards death, with a special focus on the increasing fear of premature burial, prior to moving into an analysis of the treatise, and then to a discussion of the ways in which the themes put forward there intersect with her life experiences. Finally, I read these understandings through the lens of contemporaneous understandings of and approaches to death and dying. In textualizing the body, Mme Necker claimed the horror of the corpse as the site upon which to imprint her autobiography and as the space in which to enact the process of memorialization.

Conceptualizing Death

Death was a popular—and controversial—topic in the eighteenth century. In the medical profession, death was seen as the antithesis of life.[12] If life could be defined through

10 I use the word "abjection" as it is understood by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). According to Kristeva, the abject is the point at which the self splits; the point of absolute ambiguity is the moment of suspension between life and death, an instant associated with profound loss, and, at the same time, overwhelming desire: "the corpse, the most sickening of wastes ... a border that has encroached upon everything" (3).

11 Baecque observes that "Madame Necker's philanthropy, her concepts of hygiene and health forged from contact with the enlightened doctors of Lausanne, Geneva, or Paris, fashion a representation of the sick body in which there is a complete similarity between private life and the collective organism" (183).

12 Paul-Jacques Malouin, "Mort (médecine)," in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers*, ed. Jean Le Rond d'Alembert

movement—respiration and the circulation of blood, argued the doctor Paul-Jacques Malouin (1701–78)—then death could be understood as the point of absolute stillness: "l'immobilité parfaite" (10:718). Even as the medical profession propagated this oppositional perspective, another, more fluid understanding of death gained equal currency. Louis de Jaucourt posited death as an imperceptible process that began at the moment of birth, envisioning life as an inevitable and drawn-out process of dying: "Peu-à-peu cette vie s'augmente & s'étend; elle acquiert de la consistance, à mesure que le corps croît, se développe & se fortifie; dès qu'il commence à dépérir, la quantité de vie diminue; enfin lorsqu'il se courbe, se désseche & s'affaisse, la vie décroît, se resserre, se réduit presque à rien. Nous commençons de vivre par degrés, & nous finissons de mourir, comme nous commençons de vivre."[13] Jaucourt's definition is heavily informed by the perspectives of the Comte de Buffon (1707–88), who offered a similar, biologically determinist view of the human life: death, he maintained, was a lengthy process that began at the point when the body reached maturity.[14] Taking each aspect of the physical body in turn—from bones and skin to the circulatory and respiratory systems—Buffon painted a picture of inevitable decrepitude, in which the glory and beauty of youth slowly gave way to physical degeneration and decay (2:558, 567). "Le corps meurt donc peu à peu et par parties," Buffon observed, such that, ultimately, death could only be understood as the final nuance of life (2:567, 578). For Buffon and Jaucourt, death and life were inextricably intertwined; each was a natural part of the other, and neither could exist on its own.

The very fact that the contradictory perspectives of Malouin and Jaucourt could co-exist within the pages of the *Encyclopédie* suggests that meanings and understandings of death were in

and Denis Diderot, 32 vols. (Paris, 1751–77), 10:718–27. References are to this edition.

13 Louis de Jaucourt, "Mort (Hist. nat. de l'homme)," in *Encyclopédie*, 10:716.

14 Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*, 21 vols. (Paris, 1749–89), 2:557–603. References are to this edition. Buffon suggests that this process can extend over decades, noting that the period of decay typically begins before the age of forty and can continue until death, which usually occurs before the age of ninety or one hundred (2:558).

flux during this period. Historians who have studied French attitudes towards death see the eighteenth century as a time of uncertainty, an era when attitudes towards death and dying were undergoing tremendous change. Philippe Ariès, for example, notes an eighteenth-century desire to conceal death, which, he suggests, manifested itself in an indifference to the rituals of death.[15] In contrast to previous centuries, when the ceremonial nature of funeral rituals was upheld, eighteenth-century mourners practiced "restraint in the outward signs of mourning": there was increased desire to hide the body; there were no ceremonies, no vigils, no tolling bells, no hired mourners, and few candles.[16] In addition, he observes that wills began to include fewer instructions for funerals. Ariès suggests that these changes came from a desire to deny the meaning and relevance of death as a part of everyday life and, in the process, to create the impression of earthly immortality (326).[17]

At the same time, a contradictory impulse emerged: just as death appeared to be losing its meaning as a public event, the physical cadaver began to assume immense importance in the public sphere as an entity possessed of motion and inherent sensibility. Such an active entity appeared to defy the prognostications of the medical profession.[18] As Mme Necker recalled: "On parloit, dans la *petite Feuille*, du tombeau du maréchal de Saxe, et l'on disoit avec ce ton précieux à la mode: *La figure de la mort a tant d'expression, qu'on pourroit dire qu'elle est pleine de vie*" (*M*, 1:208). This interest in—and fear of—the sensibility of the corpse led to public outrage at instances of perceived corporeal violation: the ransacking of graves for medical dissections, the use of cemeteries as grazing spaces, and the unhygienic nature of common graves.[19] It also

15 Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

16 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 325.

17 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 326.

18 For more insight into the symbolic power and potential of the corpse during the French revolutionary period, see Baecque.

19 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 368; and Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 69–70. See also Sylvie Camet, who notes that Sebastien Mercier and Nicolas-Edme Restif de La Bretonne, in their respective *Tableau de Paris* and *Nuits de Paris*, both expressed criticism at the apparent disregard of death and the dead body

led to a lengthy and contentious debate over premature burial, an extended discussion in which eighteenth-century society was forced to confront its fear of death through a process of public consideration and reflection. This fear, relatively minor at the beginning of the century, became a dominant feature of wills by mid-century and entered, in the words of Pierre Chaunu, "une phase paroxysmique" by the end of the century.[20]

Mme Necker entered the debate in 1790, with a short treatise on premature burial. *Des inhumations précipitées*, only twenty-two pages, was organized into two sections. In the first she outlined the reasons behind her strong critique of premature burial, while in the second she proposed a new law that would help to ensure corporeal dignity and the peaceful passage from life to death.[21] Her work capped half a century of discussion on the topic of premature burial, a debate that began with the 1742 publication of Jacques-Jean Bruhier's translation of Jacques-Bénigne Winslow's treatise, *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort et l'abus des enterremens & embaumemens précipités*, and continued with François Thiéry's *La Vie de l'homme respectée et défendue dans ses derniers momens, ou Instruction sur les soins qu'on doit aux morts et à ceux qui paraissent l'être, sur les funérailles et les sépultures* (1787).[22] Winslow, a doctor in the Faculty of Medicine in Paris and a member of the French Royal Academy of Sciences, began his *Dissertation* with a controversial statement: "La mort est certaine, & elle ne l'est pas. Elle est certaine, puisqu'elle est inévitable, elle ne l'est pas, puisqu'il est quelquefois incertain qu'on soit mort" (41). He continued by offering a wealth of well-worn tales of precipitous burial—a monk who was removed, breathing, from a grave three or four days after his interment (but who had bitten his hands

within the public sphere. See Camet, "La Mort, spectacle parisien à la fin du XVIIIe siècle," in *Le Récit de la mort: Ecriture et histoire*, ed. Gérard Jacquin (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2003), 109–23.

20 Pierre Chaunu, *La Mort à Paris XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 1978), 437–38.

21 Suzanne Curchod Necker, *Des inhumations précipitées* (Paris, 1790). References are to this edition, cited as *DI*.

22 Jacques-Bénigne Winslow, *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort*, trans. Jacques-Jean Bruhier (Paris, 1742). François Thiéry, *La Vie de l'homme respectée et défendue dans ses derniers momens* ... (Paris, 1787). References are to these editions.

off in the meantime); a woman whose body began to tremble upon the first incision of a Caesarean section; a man, fully prepared for burial, who returned to life and complete health upon having water sprinkled into his mouth—stories that not only articulated social fears but also gave them medical credence. Winslow's work painted a horrific tableau of a multitude of bodies rising from their shrouds, their coffins, and even their graves, a picture filled with the shrieks and cries of apparently dead individuals dissected prematurely. He used these scenes of horror to deliver a simple message: the conventional signs and proofs of death—holding a mirror or burning candle near the mouth or nostrils, balancing a full glass of water on the chest of a supine body, and poking or piercing the body with a sharp instrument in order to create physical flesh wounds—were insufficient means to prove certain or absolute death; the only certain sign of death was the beginning of the putrefaction of the corpse, which led him to suggest a number of reforms with regard to dealing with the dying body (85). The doctor François Thiéry took up this cause in 1787. Like Winslow, he acknowledged the limitations inherent in the conventional medical proofs of death and confirmed his belief in decay as the only sure sign that death had occurred. Such uncertainty, he suggested, demanded caution. The moment at which a body appeared to cease breathing was not to be considered death, but rather a more ambiguous "état de mort" (42), which comprised three intermediary stages: real death, which may be present but for which one had no proof; apparent death, from which a return to life was not unusual; and finally, a subtle stage he defined as "la vie réduite au moindre degré" (43).

In *Inhumations*, Mme Necker directly followed the path laid out by her predecessors: she outlined the ambiguity of death and proposed a series of reforms. Like Winslow, she posited death as uncertain; and like Thiéry, she proposed a multi-stage palliative model in which the dying individual moved almost insensibly between the stages of *agonie* and *cadavre*: apparent and absolute death.[23] In addition, she argued for an extended

[23] "La mort commencée se nomme *agonie*. La mort apparente est encore un état de vie caché & insensible, qui succède à l'agonie, & il n'est pas rare que l'on en revienne. La mort entièrement achevée, est l'état de cadavre; mais il est un intervalle entre la mort apparente & qu'on croit certaine, &

waiting period between death and burial, when the body should not be treated as dead, but rather as sick (*DI*, 11). But her work differed significantly from that of her predecessors. She was not a medical professional and, as such, could offer no horrific examples and make no medical claims. Instead, as a woman, she wrote from the position of a gendered body already medically marked by weakness. Consequently, she took a different point of departure in her treatise: speaking from the position of a woman of sensibility, she offered a moral reflection on dying, death, and premature burial. Drawing on the ideas put forward by her friend and colleague, Buffon, she posited death as the natural culmination of a lengthy process of dying. She further argued that the period of transition itself—an intermediary phase of indeterminate duration—was of profound importance and deserves humanity's care, concern, and consideration. The dying body offered the possibility for humankind to achieve its greatest potential as "le protecteur des mourans" (*DI*, 7). Just as society cared for its young and its old, so too was it responsible for the care of the dying, those who floated in the space between life and death and who were no longer capable of giving physical signs of their struggles.

In order to mitigate against what she perceived as society's lack of concern for corporeal remains, Mme Necker used the second section of the *Inhumations* to outline a public policy proposal. In a series of thirteen articles, she laid out the basic tenets of corporeal respect as they might be conceived within a judicial framework, mandating the responsibilities and actions of observers—be they doctors, police commissioners, or witnesses—and outlining detailed procedures to be followed. Death could be confirmed only after an extended waiting period[24] and even then, needed to be certified through

l'état de cadavre. Ce qu'on nomme la mort dans les premières heures, est la vie réduite au moindre degré possible; c'est l'avant-dernier terme que doit parcourir la vie interieure; c'est enfin un état intermédiaire entre la mort commencée & la mort complette, & personne de sait quelle sera la durée de cet état incertain" (*DI*, 9).

24 Mme Necker recommended a minimum interval of forty-eight hours, but acknowledged that this could be extended up to seventy-two hours and potentially further in the cases of nervous, chronic, or convulsive illnesses, with symptoms that sometimes resembled the state of death

a bureaucratic process requiring the submission of a signed report to the police commissioner. The body was to be maintained until such time as decomposition became dangerous for the living. Only the doctor could operate on, or otherwise open, the body (*DI*, 21). In short, Mme Necker crafted a method of social organization to help to alleviate the perceived problem of premature burial and, more importantly, to ensure the dignity of the dying body. By focusing directly on the period of transition between apparent and actual death, she highlighted the indeterminacy of the final stages of life by emphasizing uncertainty, ambiguity, and opacity. In the process, neither death nor life could be clearly defined; instead, each flowed seamlessly into the other. Dying, as a transitionary phase, lacked—in some cases resisted—clear definition.

Inhabiting the Abject: Suzanne Necker and the Dying Body

Most, if not all, of Mme Necker's biographers have mentioned her illness in some form. Her first biographer, Jacques Necker, for example, upon publishing his wife's personal writings in 1798, reminded his readers of her physical infirmities: "[Mme Necker] fut soumise à des angoisses nerveuses tellement pénibles, que, par degrés, elle perdit le sommeil; et le jour, obligée de céder à un mouvement d'agitation, elle se tenoit debout, même en société, et n'obtenoit un peu de repos que dans le bain."[25] While her physical weakness is mentioned, it has almost never been the direct focus of discussion; instead, her experience of illness recedes into the background, while the more conventional domestic attributes of the gendered biographical subject take centre stage.[26] This is a curious approach, particularly given the magnitude and extent of her suffering.

(*DI*, 12). In order to facilitate this, she recommended the construction of "loges d'attente": warmed, well-aired spaces, open to the public and administered by surgeons (*DI*, 14).

25 Jacques Necker, "Observations de l'éditeur" (*M*, 1:i–xx, p. xij).

26 As Dena Goodman points out, Mme Necker is most often understood as wife and mother, a positioning that has limited our undertanding of her as writer. Goodman, "Suzanne Necker's *Mélanges*: Gender, Writing, and Publicity," in *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 211–23.

Two scholars have tackled the relationship between Mme Necker and death. Paola Vecchi explores the relationships between Necker's treatise on premature burial and that of her predecessors, Winslow and Bruhier.[27] Vecchi suggests that Necker's work is overwhelmed by the horrific image of the "mort vivant" imprisoned in a mute and unresponsive body.[28] In Vecchi's postulation the space between life and death is an instance of claustrophobic anguish and proof of Mme Necker's refusal to accept the finality of death.[29] Baecque, in a provocative reading, examines the rituals surrounding Mme Necker's death and subsequent interment through the lens of the polemical displays of the French Revolution. Baecque suggests that Mme Necker's death can be read as a ritual of aestheticization, in which the horror of death is controlled, tamed, and rendered palatable.[30] Like Vecchi, Baecque suggests that this process emerges from a desire to deny the power of death: "much more skeptical and willful, proceeding even with a certain violence, refusing death with more vehemence, demanding so many actions and proofs, [these treatises on apparent death] thus compose a ceremony for the dead body very different from the Christian rite of peaceful and submissive acceptance."[31] Each of these scholars provides fascinating insights into the nature and understandings of embodied experience in late-eighteenth-century thought and experience, and each offers suggestive interpretive frameworks from which to explore Mme Necker's life. Yet I am loath to fully accept their conclusions. Unlike Vecchi, I do not believe that the dying body provokes Mme Necker's horror; rather, I suggest that her repugnance stems from what she perceives as humanity's problematic response. Nor do I fully support Baecque's conclusions. While his interpretation, embedded in a larger argument concerning the rhetorical politics of the French Revolution, is thought-provoking, I argue from the opposite perspective. In other words, I do not believe that Mme Necker

27 Paola Vecchi, "De la mort à la vie: La Taphophobie et l'au-delà au XVIIe siècle," in *Transhumances culturelles: Mélanges*, ed. Corrado Rosso (Pisa: Goliardica, 1985), 119–56.

28 Vecchi, 126.

29 Vecchi, 126, 128.

30 Baecque, 197.

31 Baecque, 190.

approached death through a process of aestheticization that tamed its horror. Instead, I argue that she directly confronted the horror of death, inhabiting the abject as the site of her autobiography. In the following section, I explore Mme Necker's thought-world by examining the intersection between her public and private selves, in particular by looking at the relationship between her charitable endeavours and her personal experiences of illness and death.

Mme Necker's concern for the dignity of the body arose as a direct result of her extensive charitable work in the area of hospital reform.[32] The *Hospice de charité*, a 120-bed charitable institution established in the Parisian parishes of St Sulpice and Gros Caillou, which Mme Necker directed from 1778 until 1790, operated under the dual principles of economy and hygiene. Established in response to deplorable conditions in the overcrowded and poorly run institutions such as the Hôtel-Dieu, Mme Necker's project was exemplary for its efficiency and cleanliness. The annual published accounts detailed every expense and clearly demonstrated that it was possible to maintain a patient in a hospital setting for approximately seventeen *sous* per day. As a model of experimental medicine, the hospital boasted well-aired rooms where patients, cared for by a resident doctor and a nursing staff of twelve, slept in individual beds for the duration of their stay.[33] Overall, the experiment was a success. Within ten years of its founding, two similar institutions had opened in Paris, and Mme Necker herself had opened another in Montpellier.[34] However, there were failures: mortality rates remained high,[35] and Mme Necker was distressed at the treatment of the dead body—"Malgré tous mes efforts," she wrote in the introduction to her work, "[je] n'ai jamais pu obtenir des Religieuses les plus compatissantes pour les vivans, assez de soin & de respect pour les morts" (*DI*, i).

32 Mme Necker begins her work by acknowledging that: "Ce Mémoire est le fruit d'observations longues & attentives, faites dans un Hôpital de malades, par une personne qui l'a gouverné pendant dix ans" (*DI*, i).

33 For more on the *Hospice de charité*, see note 2.

34 In the 23 February 1781 entry in his *Mémoires secrets*, Louis Petit de Bachaumont notes that the success of Mme Necker's hospital has already led to the creation of two similar hospitals (17:70). For more on the Montpellier project, see Aimes, "Séjour."

35 Doublet, 27–41.

Mme Necker's concerns about the dignity of the *corps* also emanated from another source: her personal experience with illness and dying. Her moral vision was only possible because of her ability to inhabit the space of the abject; she was able to position herself within the abject horror that accompanied the spectacle of the dying body. As Ariès has observed, by the eighteenth century "death was ... thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent and beautiful world."[36] As such, dying and death were conceived as cataclysmic events in which the individual was forced to come to terms with his or her mortality. Within this cultural environment, the dying body and putrefying corpse assumed horrific proportions.

Mme Necker was thoroughly implicated within eighteenth-century understandings of dying and death. Her body, wracked by illness and suffering, appeared to exemplify the instability and uncertainty posited by Buffon and Jaucourt.[37] Hers was a dying body, whose journey into decrepitude and decay was clearly discernible. At the same time, through her charity work, hers was a public body, physically marked by the sufferings of those whose causes she championed, and prominently displayed for all to behold.[38] Her autobiographical performance must be read at this curious juncture between decrepitude and display. Dying was a state that she understood intimately. As she observed in a letter to her close friend Paul Moultou,

36 Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, 57.

37 The *Encyclopédie* defined illness as the state between living and dying (9:930), thus adding further credence to the ideas put forward by Winslow, Thiéry, and Mme Necker with regard to the multiple stages of death. See "Maladie (Médecine)," in *Encyclopédie*, 9:929–38.

38 Mme Necker was thoroughly governed by her sensibility, a state of mind that caused her to experience physical pain upon hearing about the sufferings of others. She was, for example, physically tormented by her close friend Etienette Clavel de Brenles's attacks of vapours and suffered on behalf of Brenles during her son's illness (*LD*, 319–20, 339). Mme Necker's highly sensitized responses might be seen as a form of self-marking, a process whereby she claimed the sufferings of others and imprinted them on her own body. For more on the idea of marking, see Colette Guillaumin, "Race et nature: système de marques, idée de groupe naturel et rapports sociaux," *Pluriel-Débats* 11 (1977): 39–55.

"Jamais je n'ai eu plus besoin de courage pour supporter le poids de mon existence: il me semble que mes longues angoisses m'ont déjà fait connoître l'éternité" (*M*, 1:148). As a result of her frequent illnesses, she conceived herself as a frail body prone to weakness and always on the verge of death. But unlike her daughter, Germaine, who, in a youthful letter, chafed against the limitations imposed by illness,[39] Mme Necker appears to have revelled in her weakness. While she lamented that frequent illnesses made it difficult for her to travel and visit friends (*LD*, 284), she nonetheless appreciated the benefits she accrued from her experiences. In particular, she appeared fully aware of sickness's ability to fuel her sensibility, a characteristic that she saw as central to her identity: "Le temps et la santé me manquent tous les jours," she wrote in a 1773 letter to Etienette Clavel de Brenles, "ma sensibilité seule est inépuisable" (*LD*, 415–16).

Sensibility, which the Chevalier de Jaucourt defined as that "disposition tendre & délicate de l'âme, qui la rend facile à être émue, à être touchée ... la sensibilité est la mère de l'humanité, de la générosité; elle sert de mérite, secourt l'esprit, & entraîne la persuasion à sa suite,"[40] coloured all of Mme Necker's experiences and can therefore be understood as a prime motivating factor in her life. Sensibility was a way of connecting psyche and soma, and of fostering interpersonal connections. The experience of illness, therefore, which might be conceived through Buffon's postulation as a lengthy journey of dying, functioned as a conduit to Mme Necker's sensibility and enabled her to further her humanitarian projects. Her sensibility served another purpose, enabling the intersection of two otherwise contradictory impulses: decrepitude—which, within a culture of indifference in the face of death, required privacy, silence, and isolation—and display, which demanded public representation, ceremony, and ritual. In the final section of this article, I look more closely at Mme Necker's death and subsequent burial, which I perceive as gestures of absolute abjection, moments when life directly encountered death and the horror of the corpse was made fully manifest. It is, finally, the point at which the decayed body, scarred by personal illness and the sufferings

39 Germaine Necker writes: "je me défie de ma faiblesse" (Staël, *CG*, 1:7).

40 Louis de Jaucourt, "Sensibilité (Morale)," in *Encyclopédie*, 15:52.

of humanity and permanently preserved through the process of embalming, became the locus for the cultivation of memory.

Decrepitude and Display: The Death of Suzanne Necker

Mme Necker prepared assiduously for her death during her final years. Deeply concerned with maintaining the sanctity of her body after death, she consulted with numerous doctors in order to gain a full understanding of the best and most efficient approaches to embalmment.[41] She crafted elaborate plans for her tomb and spelled out her final wishes in minute detail. When death finally came, on the night of 14 May 1794, she was ready: she had accounted for every detail. Her family followed her specifications to the letter.[42] Her body was prepared according to her careful instructions and laid out in a lead casket.[43] Three months later, upon the completion of her tomb, her body was laid to rest in a vat of alcohol.[44] The story of her death and burial includes an element of the supernatural: people reported that Jacques Necker, who visited his wife's tomb daily throughout the first year after her death, found a letter from his wife waiting for him at every visit.[45] According to local legend, he

41 See Paul-Gabriel d'Haussonville, *Madame de Staël et M. Necker d'après leur correspondence inédite* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1925), 61; and Staël, *CG*, 3:1–2.

42 Germaine de Staël, in a letter to Louis de Narbonne dated 15 May 1794, writes that: "Nous allons pendant huit jours ne voir qu'embaumement, bière, tombeaux. Mon père se plaît dans cet accomplissement scrupuleux des ordres de ma mère" (*CG*, 2:285) An anonymous article in the revolutionary journal *Le Sans-Culotte*, dated 2 August 1794, details Jacques Necker's attention to his wife's final wishes, but notes that he did not follow through with her desire for a glass cover for her casket: "Il n'a pas voulu consentir, parce qu la maladie a défiguré son épouse et lui a enlevée sa beauté" (*Le Sans Culotte* [2 August 1794], 2138).

43 According to Haussonville, Mme Necker even outlined the exact angle and position of her body in order to ensure that her head would always be visible above the edge of the basin (*Madame de Stael et M. Necker*, 62).

44 Haussonville, no doubt drawing on Germaine de Staël's commentary in a letter to Meister dated 16 May 1794 (*CG*, 3:2), suggests that this event took place in August 1794 (Haussonville, *Madame de Staël et M. Necker*, 64). But Baecque asserts that the funeral took place on 8 September 1794, providing no references to back up this statement (195).

45 See Jacques Marquet de Montbreton de Norvins, *Mémorial de J. de Norvins: Souvenirs d'un historien de Napoléon*, 3 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1896), 2:88–89.

never discovered the source of the mysterious letters.[46]

Even in an era concerned about the finality of death and preoccupied with fears of premature burial, the reasons behind Mme Necker's detailed plans lay well beyond the range of society's comprehension. To her contemporaries, her death and burial were objects of morbid fascination.[47] Discerning meaning at two centuries' remove is even more difficult. How might we understand these rituals? What purpose did they serve? Finally, how can these practices elucidate our understanding, not only of Mme Necker, but also of her culture?

On an intimate level, one might suggest that her funerary rituals, by facilitating the transition from life to death, enabled the process of mourning to begin. Such an interpretation would certainly accord with her deepest wishes: that Jacques Necker, through the contemplation of his wife's corpse, would never be separated from her and that, as a result, their conjugal union would continue even after death.[48]

Norvins writes that he was drawing on the testimony of his uncle and of "Constant et de Châteauvieux" (88). References are to this edition.

46 Norvins suggests that these letters were placed by an old and trusted servant, who, given an extra copy of the key and a body of letters, fulfilled Mme Necker's desire for posthumous communion with her husband (89). Haussonville vehemently denounced this version of events, arguing that the monument was constructed after Mme Necker's death, and that, if it had any basis in fact, "la tradition s'en serait assurément conservée dans la famille; or je n'ai rien entendu dire de semblable" (*Madame de Staël et M. Necker*, 65). Béatrice Jasinski, however, notes that construction of the tomb began sometime in the final months of 1793 (Staël, *CG*, 2:524n4), which suggests that Norvins's interpretation is plausible. Norvins's version of events is given more credence through Auguste de Staël's assertion that Mme Necker wrote her husband numerous consolatory letters, expressly designed to be read after her death, two of which are included in Staël's work. See Auguste de Staël, *Notice sur M. Necker* (Paris, 1820), 327–30.

47 According to Ariès, the spy assigned to the Necker family "reported that Mme Necker had 'ordered her body to be preserved in alcohol, like an embryo'" (*Hour of Our Death*, 386). An anonymous quatrain, popular in the immediate aftermath of Mme Necker's death, and published in the 15 March 1927 edition of the *Mercure de France*, caricatured her plan: "Ci-gît qui dans son agonie / N'imagina rien de plus beau / Que d'être placée au tombeau / Comme une pêche en l'eau-de-vie." "Le corps de Mme de Staël est-il conservé dans l'alcool?," *Mercure de France* [15 March 1927], 758–60.

48 In a letter detailing the specifics of her burial, Mme Necker asked for her husband's indulgence with regard to what she perceived as her two weaknesses: the fear of being buried alive and of being separated from her husband (Haussonville, *Salon de Madame Necker*, 2:294).

Given the fluidity between Mme Necker's private and public lives, such a project of mourning must ultimately transcend the intimate. Certainly, her funerary rituals and requirements suggested a need to conceive death within the parameters of public display and to claim death as a site of public mourning and memorialization, to use the space of the abject as a way of gesturing towards a collective responsibility for dying, death, and memory. In the *Inhumations*, Mme Necker was extremely critical of society's careless attitude towards the dead, suggesting that this callous negligence could be seen as tantamount to murder.[49] As she observed: "L'on ne peut trop le répéter, le premier des devoirs des hommes est de prolonger la vie des hommes. L'assassin ne fait souvent que hâter la mort de quelques heures" (*DI*, 10). Within Mme Necker's conceptualization, dying, death, mourning, and memory were part of a public process of corporeal veneration, in which the body symbolized humankind's physical instability and uncertainty, and manifested its moral promise and potential through the enactment of memory.

Christina Marsden Gillis has observed that while death creates an absence, that very absence creates a need for presence.[50] Such a relationship must be reciprocal: presence relies on absence. In Mme Necker's case, the public visibility of corporeal abjection, as figured through the rituals of her dead body, enabled a coming to terms with the precariousness of life. "Dying," as Gillis suggests, "bridges a no man's land where the unfathomed and the unknowable confront the scientific and the humanistic imagination. While death may be the vanishing point of medical knowledge and representation, it is also a point of mediation."[51]

49 "La cessation du mouvement, l'impassibilité totale, ne sont qu'une mort extérieure, & l'on est coupable d'homicide, si l'on ensevelit le corps avant d'être assuré que la mort intérieure & complette soit absolument consommée. Nos terribles usages semblent cependant propres à causer ou accélérer la mort intérieure" (*DI*, 8).

50 Christina Marsden Gillis, "'Seeing the Difference': An Interdisciplinary Approach to Death, Dying, Humanities, and Medicine," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 27 (2006): 105–15.

51 Gillis, 113.

Last Rites: Last Rights

Mme Necker's tomb is located in a small, wooded burial plot on the grounds of the family château in Coppet, Switzerland. Completely hidden from the public gaze, the small, black marble tomb has not been opened since the death of Germaine de Staël in 1817. Inside, Mme Necker's carefully embalmed cadaver, now joined by those of her husband and daughter, functions as a symbolic reminder of the emotional power of the dying body. Permanently preserved in the state of illness that marked Mme Necker's adult years, this corpse does not rest, but remains in a state of perpetual suspension, hovering eternally at the point between life and death, *agonie* and *cadavre*. Its abject presence cannot—and must not—be tamed. Instead, it bears witness to corporeal dignity and offers a moving testimony to her heartfelt outcry: "Qui peut réfléchir sur cet état affreux, & ne pas se regarder comme le protecteur des mourans, quels qu'ils puissent être!" (*DI*, 7)

By inhabiting the abject, Mme Necker offers a profound reconceptualization of the relationship between life and death. As Winslow, through Bruhier, indicated at the beginning of the debate around premature burial, death is certain and it is not. The uncertainty of death, projected through the instability of Mme Necker's ill and dying body, reveals the fear of death as exemplified in the extended discourse on premature burial, as well as the potential that exists in the ambiguous space between life and death. By living her dying—by laying claim to corporeal abjection—Mme Necker emphasized the inherent dignity of the frail and suffering body, authorizing its role as the site for the performance and presentation of the autobiographical self.

Memorial University of Newfoundland