The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.
Republican histories and memories:
The Shelleys, Switzerland and Geneva

This essay explores the significance of Switzerland and the Genevan republic in History of a Six Weeks’ Tour Through A Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland: With Letters Descriptive of A Sail Round the Lake of Geneva and of the Glaciers of Chamouni, an account, by Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley, of two visits to the Continent in 1814 and 1816, prepared in the late summer of 1817 for anonymous publication by Thomas Hookham and the Ollier brothers in London later that year. Six Weeks’ Tour may be read within a tradition of fugitive narratives in which Switzerland figures as a destination for disenchanted republicans. As well as tracing the route of Napoleon’s retreating army a few months earlier, and bearing witness to a war-ravaged land and its people, Shelley, Mary Godwin and Jane Clairmont were, in August 1814, following the trajectory of Girondist-sympathizers such as Helen Maria Williams and Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray in flight from Robespierre’s persecutory regime twenty years before.

In travelling to Uri where they saw a chapel commemorating William Tell’s killing of Gessler, they were acknowledging the site of the origins of Swiss liberty in heroic resistance to Austrian Habsburg rule, a place given weight in Godwin’s Fleetwood as the native canton of Ruffigny, the protagonist’s mentor. To reach Uri they travelled through Môtiers, whence Rousseau fled to St Peter’s Island on being stoned after the publication of Letters from the Mountain. Though temporary, their residence near Brunnen was a vantage-point from which to survey the ruins of Napoleon’s empire. There Shelley began his romance, The Assassins which, in envisaging a conspiratorial sect founded on Rousseauvian principles, is both an ironic rejoinder to the Abbé Barruel’s location of Illuminist conspiracy in the Alps in Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism, and an attempt, with reference to accounts of the civil strife that afflicted Rome by Lucan and Tacitus, to imagine the conditions for a successful republic beyond such ruins. In Letters

---

1 I acknowledge with thanks the comments of Marilyn Butler, Pamela Clemit, Patrick Vincent and others on the first version of this paper which was presented at the ‘Geneva, an English Enclave, 1725-1814’ colloquium in November 2001.
3 In this essay, Six Weeks’ Tour refers to that part of 1817 based upon the 1814 visit: p. 1-81.
4 Gavin de Beer notes that ‘Shelley’s route coincided exactly with the axis of the Allied advance on Paris in the campaign of France, fought only a few months previously’. See his edition of ‘The Journal of Claire Clairmont, August 14-22, 1814’ in Kenneth Neill Cameron, ed, Shelley and His Circle 1773-1822, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1970, vol. 3, p. 342-75 (p. 363). This is a revised portion of the original journal, the standard edition of which is referred to in footnote 10 below. For an example of its anti-war sentiments, see 1817, p. 19.
5 ‘The William Tell chapel here referred to (there were at least three associated with him) was probably that on Tell’s Platt, a shelf of rock projecting into Uri (the southern bay of Lake Lucerne), which, according to one version, was the site of the hero’s slaying of the tyrannical bailiff’, E. B. Murray, ed, The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Volume 1, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 437.
6 In this essay, Letters refers to that part of 1817 concerned with the 1816 residence: p. 83-172.
Geneva likewise functions as a means to retrospect. *Letters* looks back to the revolutions of the late eighteenth century in Geneva and France that Rousseau’s champions and detractors (including Barruel) alike eagerly attributed to the influence of his writings. In *Letters*, Vevai and Meillerie, as well as Geneva, may be seen in light of Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*, as sites which show the past to be open to disputed readings. These are places which open up a contest between received opinion (or ‘history’) and subjectively-expressed recollection (or ‘memory’). Finally, if Geneva demands of the Shelleys an analysis *in situ* of divisions and tensions within European republican traditions, it is also - through proximity to Coppet - associated with an intellectual circle whose legacy for the Shelleys remains insufficiently examined. In his *Histoire des Républiques Italiennes du Moyen Âge*, the Genevan-born historian and member of the *Groupe de Coppet*, Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi offers a systematic reading of the origins and development of republican government from the fall of Rome until the end of the eighteenth century. In functioning as a palimpsest on which past conflicts are inscribed, Geneva may be seen as a literal and figurative staging-post on the Shelleys’ journey towards the analysis of the history of republics in Europe in their subsequent writings.

**Fugitive Narratives: ‘History of A Six Weeks’ Tour’**

The journey begun on 28 July 1814 was more than the elopement of Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin not least because Jane (later ‘Claire’) Clairmont who accompanied them ‘as interpreter’, saw it as the fulfilment of her Swiss destiny. Marion Stocking’s comment, ‘When Claire Clairmont left England in 1814, she had not the slightest idea of returning’, is supported by the sharp disappointment registered when plans to settle near Brunnen were aborted, ‘All because the stove did not burn rightly & there were too many Cottages’. Though deleted in her journal, the phrase ‘which I love [to] consider my own country’ after ‘Switzerland’ and her gratification at the ‘very nice’ companion who ‘informs me of my Relations at Geneva’ testifies to her wish to authenticate her Swissness (though in fact while her mother’s father descended from a family who became citizens of Geneva in the early eighteenth century, the identity of her father - whom she

---

7 Barruel concedes Rousseau’s key role in the anti-Christian conspiracy: ‘However inconsistent, error is inculcated by the Sophister of Geneva, with all the powers of genius, and many have lost their faith by his works, who would have resisted all other attacks’, Abbé Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, trans. R. Clifford, 4 vols, London, T. Burton & Co., 1797-8, vol. 1, p. 282.


12 *Ibid.*, p. 28. Material in square brackets in this and subsequent citations is inserted by the editor.

supposed to be Swiss - remains unclear)\(^{14}\). Nevertheless her wish to find endorsement of republican values is expressed in her approval of a voiturier’s explanation of the superiority of the Swiss to the French: ‘Ah! it is because we have no king to fear!... & have no priests that eat up [ou]r patrimony\(^{15}\). If the journey was an act of youthful transgression against their surviving parents by Mary and Jane (Mary Jane Godwin pursued the latter to Calais in a vain effort to force her home), for Mary it was also a flight consciously modelled on actual and anticipated journeys to the Continent by her mother in the 1790s. On their return journey, Percy read aloud from Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* (1796)\(^{16}\) and they were familiar with Godwin’s *Memoirs* (1798) which records her having meditated a journey to Switzerland in the final year of her life\(^{17}\).

*Six Weeks’ Tour* notes that at Neuchâtel the party ‘resolved to journey towards the lake of Uri, and seek in that romantic and interesting country some cottage where we might dwell in peace and solitude.’ By the time they were in sight of it not only did Mary, particularly, find their domestic arrangements unsatisfactory, as Claire noted, but they had run out of ‘that indispensible article money’\(^{18}\). Uri had in fact been their objective since 2 August and they had decided, in Paris, to walk there\(^{19}\). The association of the canton of Uri with the foundation of Swiss independence and liberty in opposition to imperial interests had one recent, celebrated literary expression in Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell* (1804) which implicitly drew a parallel between medieval Habsburg and modern Napoleonic occupation\(^{20}\). But for these young fugitives there were precedents closer to home for seeing Switzerland as a shelter for authentic republicans escaping the abuses of monarchical and republican tyrannies alike. Though ultimately unsuccessful in their efforts to get an audience with Helen Maria Williams in Paris (she was away at the time), Shelley was ‘Secure that my statement of our history & situation cannot fail to interest’

\(^{15}\) Stocking, ed, *Journals of Claire Clairmont*, p. 28. Material in angled brackets inserted by the present writer.
\(^{16}\) *1817*, p. 62.
\(^{18}\) *1817*, p. 45.
\(^{19}\) Shelley wrote on 2 August, ‘She [i.e. Mary] promised that I should be permitted to read & study those productions of her mind that preceded our intercourse. I shall claim this promise at Uri’, and on 7 August, ‘We talk over our plans, & determine to walk to Uri’, Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, eds, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, 2 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, vol. 1, p. 8-9 and p. 11.
her. Williams’s endorsement of Napoleon’s plans to establish a Helvetic Republic in her *Tour in Switzerland* (1798) suggests that she believed him to be the means of restoring to health a republicanism that had become corrupted by aristocratic self-interest. *Tour*, written after Williams’s flight from the Jacobin Terror in Paris in 1794, frequently deploys descriptions of the landscape to reinforce its libertarian argument as in her description of the location of Tell’s chapel: ‘No place could surely be found more correspondent to a great and generous purpose, more worthy of an herofical and sublime action, than the august and solemn scenery around us.’ *Six Weeks’ Tour* invokes the formative role of nature in memorializing Tell’s actions in similar terms:

Brunen is situated on the northern side of the angle which the lake makes, forming the extremity of the lake of Lucerne. Here we rested for the night, and dismissed our boatmen. Nothing could be more magnificent than the view from this spot. The high mountains encompassed us, darkening the waters; at a distance on the shores of Uri we could perceive the chapel of Tell, and this was the village where he matured the conspiracy which was to overthrow the tyrant of his country; and indeed this lovely lake, these sublime mountains, and wild forests, seemed a fit cradle for a mind aspiring to high adventure and heroic deeds. Yet we saw no glimpse of his spirit in his present countrymen. The Swiss appeared to us then, and experience has confirmed our opinion, a people slow of comprehension and of action; but habit has made them unfit for slavery, and they would, I have little doubt, make a brave defence against any invader of their freedom.

The final sentence of this passage draws on the comparative method of Williams’s *Tour* evident in its sub-title, *A View of the Present State of the Governments and Manners of those Cantons with Comparative Sketches of the Present State of Paris*. *Tour* is contemptuous of the current corrupt and despotic state of the nominally ‘democratic’ cantons of Uri and the Grisons. While the grandeur of the natural environment reminds the reader of past ideals and achievements, in equal measure the present is contrasted with a future in which Napoleon will at last realize true democracy in the Swiss cantons through the installation of the Helvetic Republic:

The security of these governments has arisen from the experience that private and insulated injustice have caused no general murmur, and they have cherished, like other governments, the false principle, that because they are in motion, they shall therefore never cease to move. The French revolution has displayed the fallacy of this belief; the great changes which have lately taken place in Italy, are said to have had a far more powerful influence on Switzerland, than all those by which they were preceded; since the revolution itself only overthrew an absolute monarchy, which admitted of few points of comparison with the constitutions of Switzerland; but the subversion of those aristocracies, which have always been represented as happy models of a part of the Swiss governments, have awakened new ideas in that country, of which the effects are already sensibly perceived. Should a spark from the blaze of French liberty fall on those combustible materials, it

---

23 Williams, *Tour*, vol. 1, p. 141.
24 *1817*, p. 49-50.
25 ‘It would be inconclusive reasoning to assert that because the democracies of Uri and Grisons are despotic, and corrupt, the representative government of France, must necessarily be infected with similar vices’, Williams, *Tour*, vol. 2, p. 42-3.
26 For an account of why the imposition of the Republic was short-lived (1798-1802) and the cantons succeeded in resisting French reforms, see Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?*, p. 9ff.
may kindle into a flame; and if it be the policy of the French Republic to give itself a moral as well as a geographical frontier, its friendly intercourse with Switzerland will probably mould the various governments of that country into forms of nearer similitude to its own. Williams sees the prospect of the effective annexation of Switzerland by France as an extension of Napoleon’s liberation of Italy from the Austrian yoke. And, however easy it might have been, with the hindsight of twenty years, to dismiss such a reading as propaganda, *1817* expresses a similar impatience with the conservatism of the Swiss confederation and treats Napoleon not unsympathetically. As Jeanne Moskal has suggested, the statement, ‘The Swiss appeared to us then, and experience has confirmed our opinion, a people slow of comprehension and of action’ in the passage cited above from *Six Weeks’ Tour* is ‘no doubt prompted by the 1816 visit to Geneva: there may be a reference to the Swiss cantons’ voluntary adoption in 1815 of a constitution less enlightened than that imposed on them by Napoleon in 1803’.28

As Newman Ivey White pointed out long ago, the 1814 journey continued Shelley’s frequenting of places associated with the hero of Godwin’s novel *Fleetwood* (1805) begun in Merionethshire and Ambleside in 1812-13. Indeed, this lends a specific nuance to the opening of Mary Shelley’s essay, ‘The English in Italy’ (1826) in which the generation of young travellers flooding into Europe after the peace of May 1814 are described as ‘acting a novel, being an incarnate romance’. Fleetwood’s meeting with Ruffigny is framed within a series of contrasts: of Switzerland, ‘the country of freedom, of independence, moderation, and good sense’, with the artifice and corruption of Paris in the age of Louis XV; of a life in Uri modelled on virtue and restraint associated with Tell and Ruffigny’s ancestor Walter Fürst, with the ‘opulent republics of Zurich and Berne’; of the philanthropists Ruffigny, ‘a republican of the old model’, and Macneil, with the misanthropic Casimir Fleetwood. While Macneil, a confidant of Rousseau, reveres him as ‘a man of exquisite sensibility’ he also sees him as one who ‘lived...toward the close of his life in a world of his own, and saw nothing as it really was’. In warning Fleetwood against being ‘too much alone’, Macneil’s rebuke seems to advert to the Rousseau of *Confessions* and *Reveries*: ‘I hear people talk of the raptures of solitude; and with what tenderness of affection they can love a tree, a rivulet, or a mountain. Believe

---

me, they are pretenders; they deceive themselves, or they seek, with their eyes open, to impose upon others". Fleetwood’s ‘deep reverie’ on the lake of Uri earlier in the novel, brought on by the sound of bells tolling in Tell’s chapel, would seem to be a case in point:

I thought of William Tell, and the glorious founders of the Swiss liberty; I thought of the simple manners which still prevail in the primitive cantons; I felt as if I were in the wildest and most luxuriant of the uninhabited islands of the South Sea. I was lost in visions of paradise, of habitations and bowers among the celestial orbs, of things supernatural and remote, of the unincumbered spirits of the virtuous and the just, of the pure rewards and enjoyments of a happier state. I had forgotten Switzerland, and M. Ruffigny, and the world, and myself.

Such lake-induced oblivion echoes Rousseau’s Fifth Walk alluded to, as de Beer suggests, in Claire’s recollection of being set by Shelley the task of translating ‘from one of Rousseau’s Reveries’, prompted by them having recently passed through Môtiers. In the Fifth Walk, Rousseau relishes his stay on St. Peter’s Island in the middle of Lake Bienne: ‘I wanted them to make this refuge a perpetual prison for me, to confine me to it for life,...so that being unaware of all that went on in the world I might forget its existence and that it might also forget mine’. But in Reveries the island functions not as a retreat so much as a pretext to reflect on the nature of true happiness which, he argues, consists in the suspension of all awareness of time:

But if there is a state in which the soul finds a solid enough base to rest itself on entirely and to gather its whole being into, without needing to recall the past or encroach upon the future; in which time is nothing for it; in which the present lasts forever without, however, making its duration noticed and without any trace of time’s passage; without any other sentiment of deprivation or of enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear, except that alone of our existence, and having this sentiment alone fill it completely; as long as this state lasts, he who finds himself in it can call himself happy, not with an imperfect, poor, and relative happiness such as one finds in the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, perfect, and full happiness which leaves in the soul no emptiness it might feel a need to fill. Such is the state in which I often found myself during my solitary reveries on St. Peter’s Island, either lying in my boat as I let it drift with the water or sealed on the banks of the tossing lake; or elsewhere, at the edge of a beautiful river or of a brook murmuring over pebbles.

36 Ibid., p. 72.
40 Ibid., p. 68-9. Cf. St Preux’s response to the mountains after his excursion in Letter XXIII: ‘all in all, the spectacle has something indescribably magical, supernatural about it that ravishes the spirit and the senses; you forget everything, even yourself and do not even know where you are’, Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers who live in a small Town at the Foot of the Alps, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vache, Collected Writings of Rousseau, vol. 6, series editors, Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly.
While the solitude extolled in the Fifth Walk is not incompatible with dependence on other beings, both human and animal, for pleasure\(^\text{41}\), in Fleetwood the propensity of the Swiss landscape to foster a dangerous solitude is pronounced. Godwin’s novel anticipates the preoccupations in Shelley’s writings with the corrupting effects of self-analysis on the part of ostensibly virtuous solitary males\(^\text{42}\). There is thus a fine line between, on the one hand, the Swiss landscape inducing a forgetfulness that amounts to a disease of mind and, on the other, it providing the conditions in which a critical view of civil society and its history can take place.

Godwin had provided another pretext for seeing Switzerland as a place of refuge and of contradictions to be ascribed, in part, to gender difference, in St Leon (1799)\(^\text{43}\). After St Leon’s demise, his wife Marguerite, modelled on Wollstonecraft, removes the family to the canton of Soleure (visited by Shelley, Mary, and Jane on 21 August 1814)\(^\text{44}\), in order to live within their reduced means. Marguerite willingly embraces the kind of existence advocated by Wollstonecraft in Letters (1796) in which the excesses of civil society are tempered by nature: ‘Let us at length dismiss artificial tastes, and idle and visionary pursuits, that do not flow in a direct line from any of the genuine principles of our nature! Here we are surrounded with sources of happiness. Here we may live in true patriarchal simplicity’\(^\text{45}\). Moreover the future she envisages for her son Charles combines austerity with enlightened education: ‘There is no character more admirable than the patriot-yeoman, who unites with the utmost simplicity of garb and manners an understanding fraught with information and sentiment and a heart burning with the love of mankind. Such were Fabricius and Regulus among the ancients, and such was Tell, the founder of the Helvetic liberty’\(^\text{46}\). However the novel exposes such patriarchal virtues traditionally associated with Switzerland to be illusory. St Leon feels alienated in an environment which renders his noble status inconsequential and is driven to solitary pursuits, notably walks in the Alps, which fuel a misanthropy that prevents him from partaking in domestic affections. Equally forceful, is the corruption and injustice of the cantons evident in the banishment of the family after a storm destroys their home and livelihood\(^\text{47}\).

As a corrective to the solitary masculine tendencies associated with the Swiss landscape in Godwin’s fiction, Shelley, Mary and Jane envisaged constituting a female-centered


\(^{41}\) On this and other aspects of the Fifth Walk, see Butterworth’s interpretative essay, in Reveries, p. 189-200.

\(^{42}\) See White, Shelley, vol. 1, p. 635: ‘Chapter iv [i.e. xv] of Volume II of Fleetwood opens with a description of the dangers of living entirely to oneself that is notably suggestive of Shelley’s Alastor, written four years later.’ See also op. cit., vol. 1, p. 700-1.


\(^{44}\) Feldman and Scott-Kilvert, eds, Journals of Mary Shelley, vol. 1, p. 18.


\(^{46}\) Ibid., p. 78-9.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., p. 80-7.
community at Uri. At Troyes, Shelley wrote to his wife Harriet urging her to come to Switzerland where he would procure her ‘some sweet retreat...among the mountains’ \(^{48}\), and a few days later they tried unsuccessfully to adopt a little girl they met en route \(^{49}\). The creation of an unorthodox mountain community dedicated to virtue was further inspired by reading Barruel’s *Memoirs* in Lucerne \(^{50}\). This seems to have precipitated the inception of Shelley’s uncompleted romance, *The Assassins*, about a sect of that name described by Gibbon as ‘odious’ in *Decline and Fall* \(^{51}\). Though set in the ‘solitudes of Lebanon’ \(^{52}\), *The Assassins* draws, as has been noted, on the sublimity of the Alpine scenery registered in 1817 \(^{53}\). But as well as synthesizing European and Middle Eastern geography, it implicitly draws together modern and classical republican history. Where Barruel identifies the mountains of Switzerland as a locus of eighteenth-century Illuminist conspiracy \(^{54}\), Shelley’s Assassins mature their plans in the aftermath of the fall of Rome. 1817 records Shelley reading the account of the siege of Jerusalem in Tacitus’s *Histories* to Mary at Brunnen \(^{55}\). As with Barruel’s *Memoirs*, Shelley’s reading of Tacitus’s *Histories* subverts its author’s designs. Tacitus emphasizes Titus’s achievement in sacking the city by reference to the heroic resistance of a population whose ‘women were as determined as the men’ \(^{56}\), and his triumphalism entails disparagement of the enemy:

Most people held the belief, that according to the ancient priestly writings, this was the moment at which the East was fated to prevail: men would now start forth from Judaea and conquer the world. This enigmatic prophecy really applied to Vespasian and Titus; but men are blinded by their greed.

---


\(^{49}\) On 16 August, Mary wrote: 'adventure with Marguerite Pascal - whom we would have taken with us if her father would have allowed us & certainly I never beheld so lovely a child', Feldman and Scott-Kilvert, eds, *Journals of Mary Shelley*, vol. 1, p. 15. De Beer sees this attempted adoption in the context of other such attempts by Shelley (SC, vol. 3, p. 372).

\(^{50}\) They read Barruel on 23 and 25 August (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert, eds, *Journals of Mary Shelley*, vol. 1, p. 18-19). The entry for the latter date records: ‘write part of Shelleys Romance’.


\(^{54}\) See Barruel, *Memoirs*, vol. 4, p. 495: ‘In vain did the Swiss Cantons in some sort forget the dignity of their ancestors; they were silent under the humiliating treatment of their brethren at Aix, the butchery of their troops at Paris, and the violation of the most sacred treaties even on their own territories. They bore with resignation the insults perpetually offered to them by the Jacobin dictators, who would sometimes deign to mingle assurances of fraternity and promises of peace with their outrages. While the armies of the Sect were ravaging the neighbouring countries, it would lull the credulous Swiss into a fatal security by the cant of fraternity and affection; but in the mean time the adepts were labouring in the mountains. Weishaupt had many converts in those parts; and a swarm of Illuminées flocked thither from the University of Göttingen, all ready to prosecute the views of the Sect’.

\(^{55}\) 1817, p. 51.

The common people applied to themselves the promise of grand destiny, and even defeat could not convince them of the truth.57

In *The Assassins* the small band of Christians who withdraw from Jerusalem just before its fall are just such ‘common people’ for whom a ‘grand destiny’ is, it turns out, justifiably promised; it is Tacitus’s history which is proved to be ‘blinded’ by its ‘greed’ for Roman imperial glory. The Assassins’ aim ‘to labour in unconstrained equality to dispossess the wolf and the tiger of their empire and establish on its ruins the dominion of intelligence and virtue’58 is a Rousseavian alternative to the Roman republic, the fall of which is prefigured, in Shelley’s story, in the ruins of Jerusalem. The reference to Lucan’s *Pharsalia*59 - ‘The latest and the noblest of her poets and historians had foretold in agony [Rome’s] approaching slavery and degradation’60 - reinforces the fact that Shelley is providing, in part, an account of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The precedent for reading the Swiss landscape in revolutionary terms in Williams and Barruel is thus taken, in *The Assassins*, a stage further, in the direction of Rousseau. And the immunity of the sect to the ‘calamitous revolutions’61 going on around them parallels the motives of Shelley, Mary and Jane in finding a retreat Uri.

Mary Shelley’s attempt to write a biography of Louvet suggests another way in which the Swiss excursion of 1814 was underwritten by Rousseavian models. On returning to London in September 1814, Mary began an intensive reading of memoirs by those involved in the French Revolution, including the aggressively misogynist and reactionary *Female Revolutionary Plutarch* by Stewarton, in which flight and exile figure prominently.62 These studies culminate with her starting to write a life of the journalist and novelist Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray (1760-97), the Girondin deputy who denounced Robespierre in October 1792 and was proscribed in May 1793. His translated memoirs, – *Narrative of the dangers to which I have been exposed since the 31st of May 1793* – which Wollstonecraft helped Joseph Johnson to publish, and Godwin read, in 179563, are not just a gripping account of survival against the odds nor simply an

57 Ibid., p.241.
59 Murray suggests the passage referred to is *Pharsalia* vii 385-459. Ibid., p. 388.
61 Ibid., p. 130.
63 Louvet’s *Quelques Notices Pour l’Histoire et Le Recit de Mes Perils Depuis Le 31 Mai 1793* (1795) was published as *Narrative of the Dangers to which I have been exposed since the 31st of May, 1793* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1795). WG’s Journal records him reading it in August 1795 (Pamela Clemit and Gina Luria Walker, ‘Introduction’, *Memoirs*, p. 21 note 1). For Wollstonecraft's part it in its publication, see Gregory Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 123. Mary read Louvet’s *Narrative* in October and November 1814 (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert, ed, *Journals of Mary Shelley*, p. 38, 44), and on 12 November she wrote, ‘Finish Louvets memoirs...begin the life of Louvet – to write it – ’ (op. cit., p. 44). Claire also read it at the same time and her appreciation is telling in terms of the feminist dimension of their journey to Switzerland in 1814: ‘Sit up till eleven reading Louvet’s Memoirs. I never remember be more interested in any book - So many fine instances of individual republican spirits displayed - so many generous Women - such constancy in misfortune’ (Stocking, ed, *Journals of Claire Clairmont*, p. 56-7).
indictment of Robespierre’s persecutory regime; but a fugitive narrative whose destination, the borders of Switzerland and France, carries weighty political significance. In the dénouement Louvet leaves his pregnant wife Lodoïska in Paris and escapes to a cave in the Jura: ‘De l’impenetrable asile, de la cavern profonde où je m’étais jeté sur les âpres montagnes qui de ce côté limitent la France, je voyais et je touchais pour ainsi dire l’antique Helvétie.’ Switzerland is an ancestral refuge for true republicans, as the desire to identify with Rousseau in the following passage confirms:

Alors je me rappelle que ce fut ton sort, ô mon maître, ô mon soutien, sublime et vertueux Rousseau. Toi aussi, pour avoir bien mérité du genre humain, tu t’en vis persécuté. Toi aussi, pour avoir été l’ami du peuple... Ciel! que d’efforts ont été tentés pour rendre odieux ce titre qui, malgré tant de forfaits, restera toujours honoré! Toi aussi, pour avoir été l’ami du peuple, tu fus méconnu, détesté, maltraité par lui. Dans des contrées voisines, à quelques vingt lieues d’ici à Neuchâtel, on te jetait des pierres! En de telles extrémités pourtant tu m’as donné l’exemple de porter encore le poids de la vie; mais qui t’en imposait le devoir? tu n’avais que Thérèse, et c’est Lodoïska que j’attends.

Gregory Dart has commented that Louvet ‘was able to give his enforced exile a republican pedigree, distracting attention from the fact that in moving backwards and forwards across the border with Switzerland, he had transformed himself, if only briefly, into an émigré’. The identification with Rousseau’s persecution and, through Julie, with non-institutionally-sanctioned love (Lodoïska was married when she met Louvet) suggest that Mary Shelley was compelled by Louvet’s memoirs because they offered a model through which to pay homage to the synthesis of political companionship and passionate attachment in her parents and a model too for her own relationship with Percy. The book’s ending, ‘Fini dans nos cavernes, le 22 juillet 1794, quelques jours avant la chute de Robespierre’ is self-consciously prophetic, willing the memoir to be interpreted as the triumphant survival and justification of the life of one who has successfully resisted the chaos of the Terror.

Letters written During a Residence of Three Months in the Environs of Geneva, in the Summer of the Year 1816: Geneva and Meillerie as Lieux de Mémoire

To demonstrate the tension between the vestigial claims of memory and history in modern French consciousness, the historian Pierre Nora has identified what he calls ‘lieux de mémoire’ or ‘sites of memory’:

Our interest in lieux de mémoire where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound

---

65 Louvet, Quelques Notices, p. 196.
66 Dart, Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism, p. 130.
67 Louvet, Quelques Notices, p. 203.
68 Cf. Louvet’s role in Dart’s interpretation of Wollstonecraft’s ‘shift from political commentary to autobiography in the Letters of 1796 very much in terms of a deliberate attempt...to wrest meaning and value from the unaccountable chaos of revolutionary history’, Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism, p. 103.
up with the sense that memory has been torn - but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory.69

While Nora’s concept has been subject to useful critique70, its articulation of the tension between the claims of memory and history is valuable in analysing conflicting accounts of the republican past in Geneva in the early nineteenth century. Nora argues, ‘what makes ... lieux de mémoire is precisely that by which they escape from history. In this sense, the lieu de mémoire is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations’71. The form of Letters, in which personal recollection and historical observation are combined, heightens the different ways in which ‘history’ is opened up - that is, both shaped and challenged - by collective memory. This is particularly apparent in ‘Letter II’:

But while I still dwell on the country around Geneva, you will expect me to say something of the town itself: there is nothing, however, in it that can repay you for the trouble of walking over its rough stones. The houses are high, the streets narrow, many of them on the ascent, and no public building of any beauty to attract your eye, or any architecture to gratify your taste. The town is surrounded by a wall, the three gates of which are shut exactly at ten o’clock, when no bribery (as in France) can open them. To the south of the town is the promenade of the Genevese, a grassy plain planted with a few trees, and called Plainpalais. Here a small obelisk is erected to the glory of Rousseau, and here (such is the mutability of human life) the magistrates, the successors of those who exiled him from his native country, were shot by the populace during that revolution, which his writings mainly contributed to mature, and which, notwithstanding the temporary bloodshed and injustice with which it was polluted, has produced enduring benefits to mankind, which all the chicanery of statesmen, nor even the great conspiracy of kings, can entirely render vain. From respect to the memory of their predecessors, none of the present magistrates ever walk in Plainpalais72.

Here the struggle in late eighteenth-century Geneva between the negatifs and répresentants is situated within a broader historical perspective that subordinates the ‘temporary bloodshed and injustice’ of the 1790s to the larger significance of the ‘enduring benefits to mankind’ bequeathed through the revolution in Geneva of 1792 by Rousseau’s writings73. Byron’s reported comment that the obelisk commemorating Rousseau was ‘probably built of some of the stones with which they pelted him’74 makes it a site materially constituted out of a conflictual past. Instead of erasing civic conflict,

72 1817, p. 101-2. ‘Letter II’ is signed ‘M’.
the monument ensures that it is preserved for posterity, as evidenced in the magistrates’ refusal to walk in Plainpalais ‘out of respect to the memory of their predecessors’. Their refusal ensures the remembrance of the democratic project inaugurated by Rousseau that they wish to be forgotten. And notwithstanding the ‘chicanery’ and ‘conspiracy’ which brought about the settlement of 1816, 1817 insists that one of the ‘enduring benefits’ of the revolution is an attentuation of class divisions associated with the ancien régime:

There is more equality of classes here than in England. This occasions a greater freedom and refinement of manners among the lower orders than we meet with in our own country. I fancy the haughty English ladies are greatly disgusted with this consequence of republican institutions, for the Genevese servants complain very much of their scolding, an exercise of the tongue, I believe, perfectly unknown here.76

In ‘Letter III’, another Rousseauvian site of memory, Meillerie, similarly functions as a means of both endorsing aspects of the aftermath of 1789 and of emphasizing the pervasive force of Rousseau’s legacy:

We here heard that the Empress Maria Louisa had slept at Mellerie, before the present inn was built, and when the accommodations were those of the most wretched village, in remembrance of St. Preux. How beautiful it is to find that the common sentiments of human nature can attach themselves to those who are the most removed from its duties and its enjoyments, when Genius pleads for their admission at the gate of Power. To own them was becoming in the Empress, and confirms the affectionate praise contained in the regret of a great and enlightened nation. A Bourbon dared not even to have remembered Rousseau. She owed this power to that democracy which her husband’s dynasty outraged, and of which it was however in some sort the representative among the nations of the earth. This little incident shews at once how unfit and how impossible it is for the ancient system of opinions, or for any power built upon a conspiracy to revive them, permanently to subsist among mankind77.

The Empress’s tribute to Rousseau is seen here as a way of affirming the democratic foundations of Napoleon’s régime while acknowledging its excesses. Rousseau is thus the presiding genius of 1817 whose spirit continues to enable the demise of the ancien régime to be foretold even in the aftermath of the Restoration of 1816.

**Sismondi and the Shelleys**

For the Shelleys, Switzerland continued to prompt reflections on the historicizing process through the figure of Sismondi whose Histoire they read in the winter of 1818-19, in Naples.78 Clarissa Campbell Orr has identified the ‘celebration of the specific individuality of each Republic and their common history of ‘liberty’’ in Histoire as

---

75 An ironic allusion to Barruel’s Memoirs is suggested by the use of this word.

76 *1817*, p. 103.


78 See MWS to Maria Gisborne, 22 January 1819: ‘We are very studious here, and we are all reading “Sismondi’s Histoire des Republiques Italiennes du moyen âge,” which since we have visited many of the towns, the history of which he treats of, is exceedingly interesting’, Betty T. Bennett, ed, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 3 vols, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, 1980-8, vol. 1, p. 85.
embodies a ‘Swiss aristocratic and Protestant liberalism’. Histoire’s ‘Swissness’ is evident in its critique of the modern ‘nation-state’. For the medieval Italian communes offer a model of government which corresponds to the definition of the origins of the cantons offered by Carl Schorske: ‘Each local entity became associated with others in a unity of difference alienating only as little power as was necessary to defend and preserve each member’s particularity’. The Quarterly Review suggested that Histoire conveyed an impression (perhaps unintentionally) of implied and covert censure on the principles and conduct of the Gallic emperor, but the real enemy in Histoire is not Napoleon but violent revolution of any kind (Sismondi’s family fled to England after the Genevan revolution of 1792). That part of the story it tells is of the survival of the Swiss confederation in the period 1796-1818 is implicit in Sismondi’s ‘Post-Scriptum’ to the Introduction of Histoire (in the edition which the Shelleys read):

Les vingt-deux ans que j’ai consacrés à la composition de cet ouvrage, forment une période pendant laquelle l’Europe a subi les plus violentes révolutions. Constamment tourmentée par la grande lutte qu’avoient excitée en elle le désir de la liberté des peuples, et la résistance des princes, elle a vu toute ses institutions détruites à plusieurs reprises, et les diverses doctrines politiques tour à tour proclamées et proscrites. Il doit m’être permis de remarquer avec quelque orgueil, que, pendant ces convulsions mêmes, je n’avais suivi qu’une seule direction, je n’ai tenu qu’un seul langage, et que les principes politiques que j’ai professé dans le premier volume, se retrouvent sans altération dans le seizième.

Sismondi’s expression of constancy to a single set of political principles based on the relationship between liberty and virtue gives a sense that the evolution of Histoire is a still point in a disoriented, revolutionary world. It is just such a model of an interpretative order beyond the chaos of the present state of Europe which Sismondi supplies to the Shelleys. His history offers a perspective, free of the constraints of loyalty to any one nation, by which Europe’s recent past may be surveyed with vigilant attention to the values of liberty. Sismondi may thus be seen as a formative influence on what we might call the historical poetics of works such as A Defence of Poetry and Valperga. Equally, his reference to the Genevan presence in Italy in Considérations (1814) reminds us that much of Shelley’s ‘Pisan Circle’ of 1820 had been constituted in Geneva.

Michael Rossington,  
School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics,  
Newcastle University

---

79 Campbell Orr, ‘Romanticism in Switzerland’, p. 147.  