Rousseau and Tacitus: Republican Inflections in the Shelleys’ *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*

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I

The title-page of the Shelleys’ *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* (hereafter *HSWT*) announces the two lengthiest of its three principal parts and testifies, tacitly, to its three-year gestation. The first, by Mary Shelley, “History of a Six Weeks’ Tour,” recounts the journey “through a part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland” from July to September 1814, that she (then Mary Godwin), Percy Bysshe Shelley and “Jane” (afterwards, and hereafter, Claire) Clairmont recorded in journals at the time. The second, “Letters descriptive of a sail round the Lake of Geneva, and of the Glaciers of Chamouni.” is an epistolary record in separate letters by Percy and Mary of the trio’s residence outside Geneva, at Sechéron then Montalègre, two years later, between May and August 1816. Possibly for strategic reasons, the patently atheistical final part, “Lines, written in the Vale of Chamouni” (Percy’s “Mont Blanc”), goes unmentioned on the title-page. On the final page, “Lines” are appended with a date, “June 23, 1816.” This marks not the late July visit to Chamonix, Mont Blanc and its vicinity which prompted the poem but, with slight inaccuracy (as Gavin de Beer notes [*SC* 4: 692]), the beginning of the week-long “sail” with Byron which took in the Castle at Chillon, Clarens and Rousseau’s *bosquet de Julie*, Vevey and Gibbon’s house at Lausanne (*HSWT* 108). The volume was prepared for the press by the Shelleys in Marlow between August and October 1817, and published anonymously in London in November of that year. *HSWT* conveys the spirit
of travellers “acting a novel, being an incarnate romance,” as Mary Shelley referred to the 1814 elopement escapade twelve years later (Clemit, “[The English in Italy]” 148). But this innocuous description, reminiscent of that of the reviewer who called it “the simplest and most unambitious journal imaginable of a Continental Tour” (Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine 412), belies the careful shaping of the original diary and letters for publication along with its subtle mix of literary allusion, travel narrative, historical reference and political commentary, to which attention has recently been drawn (Bennett 23-30; Moskal, “To speak”; Moskal, “Travel writing”).

This essay seeks to excavate a further, relatively unexplored, dimension of its discourse—its classical, particularly Roman, orientation, and to integrate this with its Rousseauvian emphasis. A feature only obliquely registered in the title-page is the way that, in its component parts, and as a whole, the volume functions as a commentary on the resumption of monarchical rule on the continent. Each of the years 1814 and 1816, either side of that in which the Bourbon Restoration was ratified in the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna and Napoleon defeated at Waterloo (9 and 18 June 1815), mark a distinct perspective from which to examine the Emperor’s legacy and the revolutionary events in France and elsewhere that had led to his assumption of power. Moreover, publication in England occurred during a year, 1817, that marked the culmination of a domestic political crisis brought about, in part, by the effects of the Napoleonic wars upon the British economy, and, coincidentally, within days of the leaders of the Pentrich Rising, Brandreth, Turner and Ludlam, being publicly hanged and beheaded for high treason in Derby (Examiner [9 November 1817] 515, 716-17). But, beyond the events of the three and a half years during which it was composed and published, the volume
recalls Europe’s pasts in such a way that the continent becomes a palimpsest, a constantly overwritten surface beneath which lie episodic memories that republicans must recover so as to sustain precedents for an alternative to the Restoration. The records of classical, feudal and eighteenth-century struggles between liberty and tyranny, and, relatedly, between imperial, invading armies and those resisting them, are inscribed insistently in *HSWT* in the form of ruins, monuments and vistas. These elements are in constant, critical dialogue with each other, and with the present.

II

A marked feature of *HSWT* is its allusions to ancient Rome and its empire. Paris, which under a new Constitutional Charter issued on 4 June 1814 had seen the Bourbon royal family reinstated in the form of Louis XVIII (Gildea 61 and 477), is refigured provocatively at the start as the classical republican capital. The narrator elides the origin of the “gate of St. Denis,” commissioned by Louis XIV in the 1670s to celebrate military victories that led to French aggrandizement, instead using that triumphal arch to express concern that “it may at present be disfigured by the Gothic barbarism of the conquerors of France” (*HSWT* 12). To liken the invading Allied armies of March 1814 and July 1815 to the Goths who sacked Rome in the fifth century identifies the narrator’s perspective with the defeated Paris of Napoleon, a regime that notably projected itself as Roman. Furthermore, Moskal’s remark that Mary Shelley “excised, amplified and completely re-wrote” her original 1814 journal entries “transmuting them into a work of 1817” (Moskal, “Introduction” 3) is evident in the wording “Gothic barbarism” derivative of the
vocabulary of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, a work read by Mary and Percy in 1815, 1816 and 1817 (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 648-9). Britain and, since September 1815, the “Holy Alliance” of Austria, Prussia and Russia, are figured, in an echo of Gibbon, as “barbarian.” explicitly so in the description of the latter’s Cossack soldiers that had recently invaded France as “these barbarians” (*HSWT* 19). Royal architecture is grounded by the narrator, with conscious irony, in an earlier, likewise imperial, but distinctive polity: “When I saw this gate, it was in its splendour, and made you imagine that the days of Roman greatness were transported to Paris” (*HSWT* 12). Classical models worthy of defense and preservation, and with now Napoleonic overtones, are discerned in monuments that have a kingly, Bourbon origin.

In a similar anterior manoeuvre, the Roman occupation of Gaul, as well as more recent military excursions and incursions, shadow the party’s itinerary. As noted by de Beer, “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 . . . and the Allied armies retraced their steps along the same route after Napoleon had fallen.” Moreover, as de Beer observes, Percy Shelley “was deeply attracted and influenced by topographical associations of places with past events,” and, it should be added, by such associations with individuals, as in the case of “Langres and Julius Caesar” (*SC* 3: 363-64, 373). The “ancient fortifications” (*HSWT* 30) surrounding the latter town marked the settlement of Andematunum, capital of the Lingones, a Celtic tribe referred to in Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, Lucan’s *Civil War* (1.398) and throughout Tacitus’s *Histories*. They are a reminder of the cycle of historical fortune whereby a former province of Rome had within living memory temporarily assumed imperial supremacy in Europe. But pointedly it is the landlady’s
“warm praise” bestowed upon his wives, “the Empress Josephine and Marie Louise,” not
the Emperor himself, that is recorded at Guignes, where the party sleep “in the same
room and beds in which Napoleon and some his Generals had rested” (HSWT 17).
Witnessing desolated towns and landscapes prompts the narrator’s criticism of male
imperial ambition and its concomitant, military action. Hence the distress of the
inhabitants of Nogent “has given a sting to my detestation of war, which none can feel
who have not travelled through a country pillaged and wasted by this plague, which, in
his pride, man inflicts upon his fellow” (HSWT 19). The expression “the plague of war”
is something of a literary commonplace to be found, for example, in James Macpherson’s
The Highlander: a Poem in Six Cantos (1758) 3.34 and, more to the point, in respect of
the Shelleys’ recent shared reading, Wordsworth’s The Excursion 1.539. But there may
also be a verbal echo here of Virgil’s Aeneid 10.55-6, “quid pestem evadere belli/ iuvit”
(“What has it availed to escape the plague of war”), as well as a more general reference to
Lucretius’s melancholy reflection on the human causes of war in De Rerum Natura
5.1423-35. If so, Roman inflections in the vocabulary used in HSWT to describe
landscapes and peoples are reinforced. In entering Besançon, the narrator remarks of the
scene that “before us arose an amphitheatre of hills covered with vines” (HSWT 32, my
emphasis) while “borderers” (HSWT 70), applied to their German fellow-travellers on the
journey down the Rhine from Mainz to Cologne, may allude to that river’s function as a
“long-established frontier” in Tacitus’s Germany XXIX 3.5

Before examining Tacitus’s contribution to a critical history of Europe in HSWT
and other writings of the period 1814-17, a sketch is required of the use Percy Shelley
made of his works in the polemics against Christianity. Shelley ordered Tacitus from his
bookseller in December 1812 (Jones 1: 344) and noted that he had read him in a letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg of November 1813 (Jones 1: 380). This interest, as Kenneth Neill Cameron suggests, probably reflects his recent introduction to Thomas Love Peacock (SC 4: 266). But a quotation adapted from *Annals* forms an epigraph to the *A Letter to Lord Ellenborough* published in June or July 1812 before he met Peacock (Murray, *Prose*, 61, 357) and it is likely that awareness, if not reading, of Tacitus dates from the period of his formal education at Eton. The first direct reference in *HSWT* is to a reading that took place on the shore of Lake Lucerne on 24 August 1814: “S*** read aloud the account of the Siege of Jerusalem from Tacitus” (51). As has been widely noticed, this is juxtaposed in a journal entry with Percy Shelley embarking on his “Romance,” “The Assassins” the following day (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 19). The second occurs in an observation made during the visit to the Castle of Chillon in which the party visited “a dark cell . . . supported upon two unornamented arches”:

> Across one of these arches was a beam, now black and rotten, on which prisoners were hung in secret. I never saw a monument more terrible of the cold and inhuman tyranny, which it has been the delight of man to exercise over man. It was indeed one of those many tremendous fulfilments which render the “pernicies humani generis” of the great Tacitus, so solemn and irrefragable a prophecy. (*HSWT* 130)

The Latin quotation, which may be translated as “ruin of the human race,” has not been identified in Tacitus’s writings and, on the face of it, appears to be an inaccurate quotation possibly deriving from more than one source. As noted by Reiman, it may
originate in part from “odio humani generis” (“hatred of the human race”) a phrase used by Christians to describe the grounds on which Nero persecuted them after the fire of Rome in *Annals* XV 44 (*SC* 7: 37). Unsurprisingly, it had led to a reputation for Tacitus amongst Christian writers before the end of the sixteenth century, as “the most wicked of writers” (Budé qtd. in Burke 149). Tacitus’s account, translated by Gibbon in the celebrated fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the first volume of *Decline and Fall* (Gibbon 1: 527-8), had been published by Shelley in the original Latin in *A Refutation of Deism* (1814) (Murray, *Prose*, 96n3). In turn, Gibbon’s calm, analytical treatment of it—“The most sceptical criticism is obliged to respect the truth of this extraordinary fact, and the integrity of this celebrated passage of Tacitus” (Gibbon 1: 529)—guaranteed that this volume of *Decline and Fall* offended all shades of Christian belief in late eighteenth-century Britain (Womersley, “Introduction,” xxxii-xl). But, as well as Tacitus and his treatment by Gibbon, Shelley may have had in mind another source, this time from within the contemporary resurgence of anti-Tacitean polemic. Shelley’s “pernicies” may be rooted in a recollection of William Paley’s translation of “exitiabilis superstio,” in the same passage from *Annals*, as “pernicious superstition” (Gibbon’s rendition is “dire superstition”). Paley uses this phrase several times in *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (first published in 1794)—a work cited in *A Refutation of Deism*—to identify, disdainfully, “[t]he name and character which Tacitus has given to Christianity” (Paley 2: 330). His father cited from another of Paley’s works in an attempted reconciliation, comically recounted by Hogg, following their expulsion from Oxford for refusing to answer questions concerning the authorship of their pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (Hogg 1: 304-11). The misquotation in *HSWT* by which the language of
Tacitus’s detractors is conjoined with his own, is accompanied by references to Tacitus in
A Refutation of Deism, “On Christianity” (Murray, Prose, 252), and a manuscript
translation of Histories V 3-6 (Murray, Miscellaneous, 324-39) which A. A. Markley
conjectures was intended for insertion in an untitled manuscript fragment in Mary
Shelley’s hand known as “History of the Jews” (Markley lxii-lxxvi and 340-41 note d).9
They indicate that one rationale for the adoption of Tacitus in the Shelleys’ writings of
1814-17 was that he was a target in recent defences of Christianity mounted most
typically and popularly by Paley. In the context of such debate, it is notable that Shelley’s
word “great” in the passage from HSWT cited above echoes the judgement that Tacitus
was “the greatest and most penetrating genius, perhaps, of all antiquity” in Hume’s essay
“Of Miracles” (Hume 123).

There is one further dimension to Shelley’s faulty memory in relation to the above
passage that is relevant to HSWT. The closest echo of the above attribution to Tacitus is
to be found in “ô pestem perniciemque generis humani!” (“O the plague and pestilence of
mankind”) (Lipsius, Traité, 416; Lipsius, “On Constancy,” 119). This phrase is applied to
Julius Caesar, in light of the destructive wars consequent upon his insatiable lust for
empire, by the Flemish scholar Justus Lipsius (Joest Lips) in his dialogue On Constancy
(1584). The melancholy of the speaker in On Constancy, who writes during a period of
religious civil war in Flanders at the end of the sixteenth century, is consonant with the
anti-war sentiments of the earlier “History” section of HSWT. The judgment on Caesar
occurs in a chapter in which the narrator is counselled against succumbing to frustration
at human misfortune. Such counsel embodies what has been identified as “an ethical
Tacitism” in the writings of Lipsius, an authoritative editor of Tacitus in his time, who
promoted him as teaching “the stoic virtue of constancy, constantia” (Burke 156). I have found no direct reference to Lipsius in the Shelleys’ writings but it is notable, in the context of the 1816 sail round Lake Geneva, that he is referred to in Gibbon’s Memoirs (76) and in a note to Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage: Canto the Fourth (Byron 2: 258).

Moreover, though Greek and Roman materialism in the Shelleys’ writings has been explored usefully (Turner, Phillips, Hamilton), less attention has been paid to the Stoic cosmology that informs the neutral accounts of divinity in HSWT. Examples may be found in “Letter IV” from Chamonix where ‘S.’ remarks: “One would think that Mont Blanc, like the god of the Stoics, was a vast animal, and that the frozen blood for ever circulated through his stony veins” (167), and in the “awful doubt, or faith so mild,/ So solemn, so serene” that the wilderness of the mountain “teaches” in “Mont Blanc” (ll. 77-8).

III

The anti-Christian cause and a stoical outlook were not the only reasons for the Shelleys to invoke Tacitus. As we have seen, HSWT reminds its readership of the hope, followed by disillusion, which characterized the revolutionary decade in Europe that began in 1789, and prompts reflections on absolute rule, first under Napoleon, and now under the Restoration order. Tacitus was renowned for offering models with which to consider those who wield political power, particularly emperors or kings but also those who serve them. In some instances, such as the final sentence of the biography of his father-in-law (Agricola XLVI 4), his brand of history by example is apparently a means to future good:
“Agricola, whose story here is told, will outlive death, to be our children’s heritage” (Tacitus I 115). But his attitude to the one-man rule of the principate has frequently been seen as open to more than one interpretation. As Ronald Syme puts it: “At first sight and on the surface he is hostile to the monarchy . . . One layer deeper, and something different is disclosed. For peace and stability, the rule of one man cannot be avoided” (2: 547). Nevertheless, Tacitus’s apparent willingness to accept the necessity of absolute rule in his own time and place, Rome in the first century AD, does not exclude the insinuation into his prose of the contrasting values of the earlier Republic evident in the following survey of “the ancient and the modern character” in Histories II 38:

The old greed for power, long ingrained in mankind, came to full growth and broke bounds as the empire became great. When resources were moderate, equality was easily maintained; but when the world had been subjugated and rival states or kings destroyed, so that men were free to covet wealth without anxiety, then the first quarrels between patricians and plebeians broke out. Now the tribunes made trouble, again the consuls usurped too much power; in the city and forum the first essays at civil war were made. Later Gaius Marius, who had sprung from the dregs of the people, and that most cruel of nobles, Lucius Sulla, defeated liberty with arms and turned it into tyranny. . . . The same divine wrath, the same human madness, the same motives to crime drove them on to strife (The Histories I-III 223).
The baleful consequences of a combination of the empire becoming “great” with a “greed for power” that led Marius and Sulla to “defeat liberty” and “turn it into despotism,” speak in the starkest terms to the early nineteenth century. Percy Shelley’s “Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte,” a sonnet written in 1815 and published in the Alastor volume (1816), addresses that recently deposed Emperor within the terms of a Tacitean scorn for the opportunity to establish a genuine republic that he wastes: “I did groan/ To think that a most unambitious slave,/ Like thou, shouldst dance and revel on the grave/ Of Liberty. Thou mightst have built thy throne/ Where it had stood even now” (ll. 1-5). But Shelley’s sonnet closes by referring to other, more “ingrained” forces traceable to the human “greed” and “madness” mentioned by Tacitus, with which republicans now have to contend: “I know/ Too late . . . / That virtue owns a more eternal foe/ Than force or fraud: old Custom, legal Crime,/ And bloody Faith the foulest birth of time” (ll. 10-14). To subject Napoleon to withering Tacitean treatment within his Empire would have been provocative, given the exclusion of Tacitus’s works from the educational curriculum in France during his reign for fear, presumably, of subjecting his rule to the very kind of critique that Shelley’s sonnet insists upon (Rose 63). But the provocation of Shelley’s Tacitist sonnet to a domestic audience is its assertion that the values associated with the victorious Allies, whose Act concluded the Congress of Vienna, are far worse than the “force or fraud” of the French Emperor.

As well as reflecting on empire, the account of a war in which there are no real winners in Histories speaks to recent continental memory. During the brief lull in hostilities between Otho and Vitellius in AD 69, Tacitus remarks in Histories II 45 that, “vanquished and victors alike burst into tears, cursing, amid their melancholy joy, the fate
of civil war” (The Histories I 235). This lamentation could serve as a verdict on the conflict across Europe for more than two decades since January 1793 that, since the terms of its pervasiveness transcended place, allowed it to be characterized if not as “civil” then, for Europeans, universal. Perhaps with this in mind it was a reading of Tacitus in Montalègre in August 1816, that led Percy Shelley to at least meditate his poem, “Otho,” based on the sympathetic account in Histories II 47 of that Emperor’s noble attempt through suicide to end the civil wars. Otho’s suicide speech is premised on an attempt to look beyond himself and the present moment to the future interests of his people:

Vitellius began civil war; it was he who initiated the armed contest between us for the imperial power; but we shall not contend more than once, for it is in my power to set a precedent for that. I would have posterity thus judge Otho . . . I require neither vengeance nor solace. Others may hold the power longer than I; none shall give it up more bravely. Would you have me suffer so many of Rome’s young men, such noble armies, to be again cut down and lost to the state? Let me carry with me the thought of your willingness to die for me; but you must live (The Histories I-III 237, 239).

It was possibly in August 1816, Michael Erkelenz infers, rather than a year later, as Mary Shelley supposed (in her edition of The Poetical Works 3: 70-1), that Shelley drafted this unfinished poem—in the same notebook as a draft of “Mont Blanc.” Shelley’s interest in Otho seems to be founded in his alertness to Tacitus’s divided judgement in Histories II 50 where he is referred to thus: “By his two bold deeds, the one most outrageous, the
other glorious, he gained with posterity as much fame as evil reputation” (*The Histories* I-III 243). In “Otho,” Cassius, an earlier model of a tyrannicide and suicide, is denied his customary appellation “last of the Romans,” and addressed with the following words:

I wrong thee not—thou wouldst if thou couldst feel

Abjure such envious fame—great Otho died

Like thee—he sanctified his country’s steel,

At once the tyrant and tyrannicide,

In his own blood—a deed it was to bring

Tears from all men—though full of gentle pride,

Such pride as from impetuous love may spring

That will not be refused its offering.—

How Otho died, I tell.

Geoffrey Matthews, who allows for an 1816 date though argues 1817 to be more likely, reads these lines as a reflection of the preoccupation with Reform at Marlow during the latter year: “Shelley saw a parallel here with his own oppressive times . . . and a faint hope that England’s rulers might themselves find the magnanimity to surrender power in order to spare their people the horrors of revolution” (Matthews and Everest 567). Matthews’s view as to why Shelley would feel it was appropriate to invoke Roman values of disinterestedness in the aftermath of the Restoration is pertinent. In fact its essence is still valid even if one accepts Erkelenz’s inference of an 1816 date and his
view that the poem was composed when Shelley was reading Tacitus intensively in Geneva, perhaps with Byron (Erkelenz xxvi-xxvii). A further coincidence of Tacitus and the values of “[p]atriotism, as it existed in the antient republics” is found in the following passage, on virtue, in a manuscript draft of “Speculations on Morals and Metaphysics” that Murray suggests may also date to August 1816 (Murray, Miscellaneous, 491): “All the theories which have refined and exalted humanity, or those which have been devised as alleviations of its mistakes & evils, have been based upon those elementary emotions of disinterestedness which we feel to constitute the majesty of our nature.” Amongst the examples of such “majesty” cited here is Tacitus’s account of the former slave Epicharis who “sustained the rack silently, in the torments of which she knew that she would speedily perish, rather than betray the conspirators to the tyrant” (Murray, Miscellaneous 217), that is, Nero. His source is Annals XV 57 where she shielded “men unconnected with her and all but unknown” and thereby “set an example which shone the brighter at a time when persons freeborn and male, Roman knights and senators, untouched by the torture, were betraying each his nearest and dearest” (The Annals XIII-XVI 307). In Epicharis, a woman and emancipated slave, is thus found a true majesty lacking in those men entrusted with political power. Tacitus’s Otho and Epicharis thereby offer examples of nobility from opposite ends of the social and political spectrum by which to reflect on recent strife on the continent as well as tension in England in the years 1816-17. Through such self-sacrifice, the possibility of a different kind of polity is envisaged.

Shelley’s poem “Otho” suggests that Tacitus’s celebrated subtlety and latitude led him to see such exempla as ripe for exploitation by the writer of fiction, not just the historian, in a manner advocated by both Rousseau and Godwin. As we have seen,
HSWT’s assessment of the inverse relationship between imperial power and freedom, as well as its critical, analytical approach to the Christian religion, invite broad parallels with Gibbon’s account of Rome’s demise. But David Womersley’s caution that *Decline and Fall* “is different from while being thoroughly informed by the Tacitean perspective on Roman history” (*Transformation* 80) may perhaps be used to show how HSWT seems to reveal an alternative, perhaps unexpected, pathway from Lake Geneva to Tacitus, one that is marked out, as will by shown, by Rousseau rather than Gibbon. For an explicit hostility surfaces during the visit to Lausanne where Gibbon is said to have “had a cold and unimpassioned spirit.” Indeed the volume turns on the different kinds of remembrance prompted by *Decline and Fall* and *Julie*. At the end of the account of the Lake Geneva tour, the narrator comments: “I never felt more inclination to rail at the prejudices which cling to such a thing, than now that Julie and Clarens, Lausanne and the Roman Empire, compelled me to a contrast between Rousseau and Gibbon” (138). Whereas his “companion” (Byron) gathers a wreath of acacia out of respect to the memory of Gibbon, the narrator (“S.”) refuses to do so, “fearing to outrage the greater and more sacred name of Rousseau” (137-8). Earlier at *le bosquet de Julie* the narrator tells of trees that “will afford a shade to future worshippers of nature, who love the memory of that tenderness and peace of which this was the imaginary abode” (132). This site of memory has a distinct valence from Pierre Nora’s account of the function of *lieux de mémoire* in shaping national identity (Nora 1989). We learn that the inhabitants of Clarens “are impressed with an idea, that the persons of that romance had actual existence” (131). Thus its origins in fiction constitute *le bosquet de Julie* as a virtual memorial shrine that nevertheless exercises a significant collective appeal. Indeed, for
“S.,” the vitality and endurance of the place make it the repository of memories of human experience that, though lived in the imagination of their creator Rousseau rather than in a way that is historically verifiable in an orthodox sense, nevertheless invite an identification that is the opposite of the “cold and unimpassioned spirit” attributed to Gibbon.

The superior authenticity of the sites associated with Julie makes them become, in HSWT, the object of a reverence that is collective rather than individual and feminine as well as masculine, so that a clear contrast is opened up with the solitary homage to Gibbon by the male companion of “S.” at Lausanne. Moreover the volume uses Julie as a means of reminding its readership of its earlier refusal to disavow entirely the Napoleonic inheritance. Napoleon’s second wife, Marie Louise praised earlier in a passage referred to above in “History” (17), is now congratulated for displaying “the common sentiments of human nature” by staying at Meillerie: “A Bourbon dared not even to have remembered Rousseau” (118). Her enlightened rule of the Duchy of Parma, granted to her under the terms of the Treaty of Fontainebleau (March 1814), included legislation for the civil liberties of women. Added to the convenient fact of her estrangement from Napoleon after 1814, she may thus be distanced from him personally yet identified with a political order which, even as it was corrupted by the Emperor himself, had nevertheless yielded civic benefits. Marie Louise’s willingness to participate in popular Julie worship establishes Rousseau as an ancestor not of Napoleon himself but of those aspects of his regime which came to symbolize an attempt to govern in accordance with what The Social Contract identified as “the will of the people”: “She owed this power [i.e. those ‘common sentiments’ referred to above] 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” (118-19). By contrast, the word “cold,” used disparagingly of Gibbon at Lausanne, is echoed in the phrase “the cold maxims of the world” which compel “S.” “to repress tears of melancholy transport” (132) after the visit to the bosquet de Julie.

The favoring in HSWT of Rousseau over Gibbon, the writer of fiction over the historian, has implications for the poem with which the volume ends, as will be suggested in a moment. But in the context of Tacitus’s writings the notion that fiction and history are mutually exclusive categories needs qualification, especially in the light of the tragic turn given to them by dramatists and poets since the Renaissance, and of the dissolution of the boundaries between those two genres promoted by Rousseau and Godwin.15 Tacitus, then, occupies a place in HSWT which speaks to the volume’s inclusiveness in generic terms. In this regard, it is tempting to think of Shelley as continuing a seventeenth-century English tradition of reading Tacitus as supporting a republicanism that sought either to limit the powers of monarchy or to do without it altogether. Blair Worden’s comment that “Tacitus supplied vivid images of tyranny which the evils of Stuart rule were often held to reflect” (446) is tangible in Milton’s A Defence of the People of England (1658), a work it seems very likely Shelley had read before the 1814 elopement,16 where Tacitus is identified as “a firm opponent of tyrants” (167). Rousseau’s interest in Tacitus may be located, in part, within this English republican tradition beginning with Milton. For, as Victor Gourevitch notes in his edition of the Discourses, Rousseau takes from Algernon Sidney’s Discourses Concerning Government (1698) “a very slightly paraphrased citation” (“they call a most miserable servitude peace”) from Histories IV 17 (Rousseau, Discourses 366).17 This is part of a
wider commitment to Tacitus that dates from Rousseau’s visit to Geneva in 1754 when he made a translation of *Histories* I not published until after his death (Touchefeu 275). In the “Epistle Dedicatory” to the second *Discourse* he portrays Tacitus as integral to the life of his father, a “virtuous Citizen . . . living off the work of his hands, and nourishing his soul with the most sublime Truths. I see Tacitus, Plutarch, and Grotius before him amidst the tools of his trade” (Rousseau, *Discourses*, 120). Moreover, though the event is not recorded in “History,” Claire Clairmont noted in her journal of the 1814 tour, after passing through Môtiers where Rousseau’s house had been stoned after the publication of *Letters Written from the Mountain*: “Shelley set me a task to translate from one of Rousseau’s *Reveries*” (SC 3: 350). It is not known which of the “Walks” Claire was made to translate but her knowledge of French, superior to that of her travelling companions, would have made her equal to the task. Moreover there is a Tacitean dimension to this work of Rousseau’s: the source of his phrase “they omit nothing servile in order to command” in the “Sixth Walk” (Rousseau, *Reveries*, 84), is, as noted by Touchefeu (275), to be found in Tacitus, *Histories* I 36. That Rousseau was a presence, if only a shadowy one, in the 1814 tour is an extension of Newman Ivey White’s point that the ultimate destination of that Swiss journey, the chapel commemorating William Tell by the lake of Uri (White 1: 352-3, 357; *HSWT* 49), corresponded to that of the protagonist of Godwin’s novel *Fleetwood* (1805) (71-2). For, as Pamela Clemit points out, the figure of Macneil in that novel, who is said to have known Rousseau, represents Godwin’s view of Rousseau’s “potential as an agent of social change” (“Self-analysis” 175). Although only hinted at in its “History” section, rather than explicitly present as elsewhere, Rousseau permeates *HSWT* as a participant in a tradition of political thought, including
Milton, Sidney and Godwin, that is severely critical of the institution of monarchy. Moreover it is in a Swiss environment made famous by Rousseau that Shelley seems to have found nourishment in Tacitus’s analyses of the failings of those given absolute political power.

IV

HSWT seeks to promote alternative values to imperial ambition and consequent violent conflict. These derive from locations within Switzerland associated with individuals whom Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley identify as heroic for their championing of liberty. However, in themselves, these histories of human resistance make Switzerland continuous with, rather than distinct from, the struggle narrated elsewhere in HSWT. Paradoxically, only within its natural history, that is, the non-human, indeed often downright inhuman, qualities of the Alpine environment noted in the fourth section of “Mont Blanc,” are the foundations for a libertarian redemption laid. The volume is thus governed by an overall structural tension between its three main parts, “History,” “Letters” and “Lines,” but also within them, in which sites both peopled and uninhabited secrete associations that, once discovered, allow the struggle between liberty and tyranny to be renewed. However, the constant regeneration of this struggle is in clear tension with the disillusion with war and imperial power to which the volume as a whole testifies: permanent peace in the form of “silence and solitude” are only found in its last two pages, that is, in the fifth and final section of “Mont Blanc.” An answer to the question of whether liberty and peace—both within cultures and individuals—are fundamentally

19
incompatible, a question that arises in reading Tacitus and Rousseau and is addressed also in *Frankenstein* and *Valperga* as well as some 1818-19 poems by Percy Shelley, is thereby deferred. Yet the shape of *HSWT* and the Swiss environment it traverses encourage an affirmative answer based on a dialectical understanding of the relationship between present and past, both recent and distant. In “History” the myth of liberty surrounding the thirteenth-century figure of Wilhelm Tell is mentioned in the context of the visit to Uri. In the course of “Letters” the contradictions in the history of Geneva since the Reformation whereby it is both a site of liberty and persecution are exposed. The Rousseau of the *Reveries* figures in the background to “History.” In “Letters,” he is repeatedly invoked as a model to be remembered and honoured in terms of the fictional history invented in *Julie*. In a way that looks forward to the final lines of “Mont Blanc,” Rousseau’s imaginative creations “cast a shade of falsehood on the records that are called reality” (*HSWT* 128). As well as the historical comparison between Roman and post-Napoleonic Europe, and the contrast between the Swisslands of Rousseau and Tell, as opposed to the Geneva of the post-Reformation burghers, the volume counters the records of the “reality” of what happened with “imaginings” of a historically-informed kind.
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**Notes**

I am grateful to The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, for kind permission to quote from Bod. MS. Shelley adds. c. 4, fol. 193v and to Pamela Clemit as well as the journal’s anonymous readers for invaluable comments on an earlier version of this essay. My cordial thanks to Patrick Vincent for his generosity in showing me some of the geographical sites mentioned here. Translations from Tacitus and Virgil are from the Loeb editions listed in the References.

1 Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Godwin were married in December 1816.

2 On the suggestion that care was taken in preparing *HSWT* for publication, see Reiman in *Shelley and His Circle* (hereafter *SC*) 7: 41-43.
It was published by Thomas Hookham and Charles Ollier, the latter a friend of Leigh Hunt, who had begun to publish Percy Shelley earlier in 1817. It is reprinted in the Woodstock facsimile edition cited here. On Ollier’s first publications of Percy Shelley’s works and the approximate date of publication of *HSWT*, see Robinson 186-87 and 218-19n42.

Moskal’s impressive edition of part of *HSWT* shows alertness to this orientation as in her annotation on the reference to Lucan’s *Civil War* in *HSWT* 25-6 (Moskal, *Introduction*, 8: 23 note a).

“[F]or the greatness of the Roman nation has projected the awe felt for our Empire beyond the Rhine, and beyond the long-established frontier” (*Tacitus* I, 177).

Peacock was introduced to Shelley by Hookham in “October or early November 1812” (Joukovsky 1: lv).

For an edition of “The Assassins,” see Murray, *Prose*, 124-39. Alan Weinberg makes an interesting case for *The Assassins* being continued not in 1815, as Murray suggests, but after Percy and Mary returned from Switzerland in autumn 1816, “possibly with a view to its inclusion with other early material” in *HSWT* (21).

The following is an example of Paley’s use of the phrase to undermine Tacitus which no doubt goaded Shelley: “Had not Christianity survived to tell its own story, it must have gone down to posterity as a ‘pernicious superstition’; and that upon the credit of Tacitus’s account, much, I doubt not, strengthened by the name of the writer, and the reputation of his sagacity” (Paley 2: 336).
The plausible “late 1815 dating” offered for “History of the Jews” by Markley (lxxiv) offers grounds for narrowing the date of the translation, posited in Murray as between 1814 and 1816 (Miscellaneous 512).

10 On Lipsius’s stoicism and its connection with Tacitus, see also Burke (“Tacitism, scepticism” 492).

11 For a recent identification of the importance of stoicism to Mary Shelley, see Vargo.

12 The source of poems by Percy Shelley cited in this essay is Matthews and Everest.

13 My transcription of this passage in Bod. MS. Shelley adds. c. 4, f. 193 is “cleaned-up,” that is, unlike Murray’s, it does not record cancellations.

14 Pamela Clemit notes that Émile is the source referred to in the following sentence from Godwin’s “Essay of History and Romance”: “Ancient history, says Rousseau, is a tissue of such fables, as have a moral perfectly adapted to the human heart” (Godwin, Fleetwood 297 note b).

15 See note 14, above.

16 Shelley had ordered “Milton’s Prose works” from Thomas Hookham on 29 July 1812 (Jones 1: 319).

17 The phrase appears in the Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men (1755), the “second” Discourse (Rousseau, Discourses 177). Sidney echoes Milton’s view that Tacitus writes against tyrants in the following comparison between the Republic and the principate: “And if we find that in the space of three hundred years, whilst the senate, people, and legally created magistrates governed Rome, not one worthy man was put to death, not above five or six condemned to fines by the beguiled people, and those injuries repair’d by the most honourable satisfaction that could be given; so that
virtue continued ever flourishing; the best men that could be found were put into the chief commands, and the city was filled with more excellent men than were ever known to be in any other place: And on the other side, if the emperors so soon as the government was changed, made it their business to destroy the best, and so far succeeded in their design, that they left none; and never failed to advance the worst . . . Of this we need no better witness than Tacitus” (180). Sidney is mentioned twice in the draft of Shelley’s essay “A Philosophical View of Reform” (SC 6: 971, 973).

18 On this topic see Clemis (Frankenstein) and Rossington.