

Drastic Description, the French Revolution, and Modern Identity

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Lynn Hunt has aptly described the French Revolution as a „great talking machine.“ Almost from the very beginning, the revolution was taken to be an epochal event; it generated extensive and hyperbolic comment. At the end of July 1789, the English Whig leader, Charles James Fox, confidently declared the fall of the Bastille to be „much the greatest event“ that „ever happened in the world.“ Edmund Burke said much the same thing: the revolution was „the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world,“ though he broke with his friend Fox over its benefits.¹ Although many contemporaries believed they were seeing in France a gradual installation of rational rule by law which had already been accomplished in Britain or Holland or the United States, the French Revolution quickly drew attention to itself as something quite different. The slogans scratched in pamphlets and painted on walls-- „LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY, OR DEATH“--indicated the conviction that the world could be remade on the basis of ideas, what Francois Furet has called the „illusion of politics.“ But the absolutist either/or also demanded that people in France and beyond take sides, particularly since these ideas, again following Furet, required violence to realize themselves. Europeans talked constantly about the revolution, its transformative potentialities, and its judgemental character. It divided people even at home: „I side w/ Father--against Mother + Ferdinand,“ and against the revolution, confessed Regina Beneke, a young woman in Hamburg, in 1794.² And it continued to divide them right up to the eve of the invasion of Russia when Count Pierre Bezukhov and Vicomte de Montemorte clashed over Napoleon at Anna Pavlovna's soiree in the opening pages of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. That people talked so much is one signal that events were not self-evident or familiar. Edmund Burke considered the revolution in France to be something „out of nature“ precisely because it overruled „common maxims“ and „matters of fact.“ This recognition of the revolution's pretensions is precisely why Novalis considered Burke's anti-revolutionary book to be so revolutionary.

The drastic dimension to social description is perhaps the most fundamental outcome of the French Revolution. Of course, drastic description was as much due to thinking about events in terms of revolution as it was due to the revolutionary nature of events themselves. And it is this mobilized landscape which drastic description puts into view that I want to explore here. Once set in motion, the „great talking machine“ left the world looking very different because it created new words and new vocabularies. That Carlyle, writing almost a half century after the French Revolution, felt the need to fashion neologisms appropriate to his subject: „SANS COLLUTISM“ („What think ye of *me*?“), a „New-Birth of Time,“ and „the Death-Birth of a World“ is indicative of its shock.³ To detractors who objected to his semantic „impurities,“ Carlyle answered: „If one has thoughts not hitherto uttered in English Books, I see nothing for it but that you must use words not found there, must *make* words . . . revolution *there* [is] as visible as anywhere else!“⁴ We can argue with Carlyle and his critics about whether the French Revolution required new words to be comprehended,

but it seems clear that many contemporaries insisted on the difference of difference implied by familiar oppositions: past and present, modern and premodern, nation and empire, West and non-West. They relied increasingly on what I refer to as drastic description to indicate fundamental discontinuities between past and present, to separate and accent the incommensurability of national traditions, and to seal these newly recognized differences in the temporal and spatial enclosures of modernity and the West. This dramatization of difference at the turn of the nineteenth century adds up to what I want to call the conceit of modernity. The modern point of view is organized around a series of ruptures which enable the assertion of its anachronistic nature. Again and again, it drew attention to itself as something completely new. Modern time is the relentless iteration of this imagined rupture. „What think ye of *me*?”

That both Fox and Burke employed the phrase „in the world” („the greatest event . . . in the world,” „the most astonishing . . . in the world”) is noteworthy because it refers back to a basically spatially oriented conception in which surprise remained geographic, on the order of a lost continent or buried treasure. In this age of exploration, eighteenth-century Europeans continually travelled to new places and made startling discoveries, but these wonders augmented rather than overturned systems of knowledge. They could still be understood by means of the comparisons, correspondences, and taxonomies that Foucault described in *The Order of Things*. Although Fox and Burke used the verb „happen,” signalling that they were talking about events rather than discoveries, their vocabulary betrayed an epistemology that strived to assimilate occurrences and incidents into authoritative patterns across space. Their words were not particularly sensitive to the potential of fundamental change over time. They were prepared for outside catastrophes, not internal revolutions. But the accumulating evidence of the French Revolution in the years after 1789 steadily broke apart the „storehouse of experiences” that Europeans believed they had assembled and made more and more plausible the notion that new time might erupt and break apart the sturdy connections established between past, present, and future. In an astonishingly short period of time, political observers rejected older cyclical attributes of revolution and reconceived of the future as the relentless production of the new. Whereas in 1797 the French essayist Chateaubriand published explanations of the French Revolution in terms of prior upheavals, he conceded in a new preface in the 1820s that it lacked all precedents. And like Chateaubriand, who for a time lived in England in exile and on his return to France felt at home neither in the Revolution nor in the Restoration, contemporaries reported on the disjunction between their own recently remembered pasts and the present they were living. Sometimes they did so with exuberance, sometimes with melancholy.

The sheer life force of the revolutionary era challenged scientists as well. They became increasingly alert to temporal changes in living organisms and to massive ruptures in the earth’s history, alterations which they came to see as occurring in a disparate, non-mechanical, and seemingly disorganized way. It is at this juncture that the new science of biology provocatively, controversially imagined for the first time the evolution of living forms, which involved both extinction and new appearances. In Michel Foucault’s words, life „left the tabulated space of order and [became] wild once more. The modern history of nature and of society exposed „the irruptive violence of time.”⁵ This violence could not be seen or discussed, opposed or embraced, without

a more drastic description of time. „In time,” rather than „in the world” came to serve as the most appropriate medium in which to conceive of revolutionary events. Since the French Revolution as an ensemble of events is itself the product of these new sightlines, the revolution cannot be their sole cause. Foucault himself did not attempt an explanation for the epistemological shift at the turn of the nineteenth century, but the shift came quickly and the revolution itself made it all the more authoritative.

I propose to examine three elements of drastic description: the emphasis on the discontinuities that not only separated the past and the present around 1800 but the ongoing disassociation between lived experience and anticipated developments over the next two centuries; the emphasis put on the variety and autonomy of cultural formations and their potential as alternatives to the present; and finally, the emphasis on the special knowledge that Europeans believed they gained as a result of comprehending history in antagonistic, oppositional terms.

To examine these issues, I want to introduce a single letter written by Dorothea Schlegel, the wife of the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, to a friend in Cologne, in December 1809, just after what seemed to be Napoleon’s decisive, third defeat of Austria. The form of the letter itself is interesting because it illustrates the energetic production of unauthoritative, vernacular historical commentaries in this period. Letters frequently upheld a subjective point of view, and very much participated in the spread of revolutionary ideas.⁶ On a more metapolitical level, the implied correspondence between author and reader is also the basic unit in the common understanding of events as history and of individuals--you and me--as contemporaries who inhabit the same time zone. And finally the exchange of letters indicates the multiple transnational circuits by which Europeans interpreted historical events and along which they identified historicity, tradition, and difference: the circuits by which news of the revolution was learned, debated, and passed on, trips to Paris to report on the revolution, the perilous movements of French armies and the terrified flight of refugees, and surveys of ruins along rivers and borders in a way to rethink the imperatives of French empire. On the move both figuratively and physically, contemporaries of the French Revolution dramatically rearranged parameters of time and space in the years 1789-1815 and they did so on a vast transnational, even trans-Atlantic stage. The letter perfectly captures the *news* of the period of the French Revolution.

„Time has now become so fluidly rapid,” Dorothea Schlegel wrote in 1809 as French soldiers reoccupied Austria: „It is not possible to keep up; between one mail day and the other lies an entire historical epoch. I feel like I am watching the most diabolical card tricks.” Again and again, over the previous fifteen years, French armies had appeared across the border, forcing luckless refugees to pack up and flee, or to make unwanted accommodation with new rulers. Like many of her contemporaries, Schlegel felt radically cut off from the past and stranded in the revolutionary present.⁷ Unsettled as she was, however, Schlegel took comfort in the antique landscape of the faraway Rhine Valley she had visited some time earlier. „Towers, spires, capitals, and columns”--all „evoked memories” of „past greatness,” she continued. Thanks to these recollections, she „forgot the present,” at least for a time. Dorothea Schlegel then went on to contrast the ruins along the Rhine with others she had seen along the Danube, which were „confusing” and „raw” and kept her from forming a meaningful picture of

this other past, a border of both western geography and western comprehension that I will get back to. She concluded the letter by thanking her correspondent, the young art collector, Sulpiz Boisserée, for reminding her that „monuments and art objects“ still existed amidst the present-day destruction of war and revolution.⁸ Schlegel makes a number of assumptions about time and place and about legibility in general.

Let me first begin with Schlegel's sense of time, which „has now become so fluidly rapid.“ Every day, she reports, comes with new surprises, so much so that events appear to be „the most diabolical card tricks“ and crumple up lines of continuity so violently that from one letter to the next one previous historical epoch has been destroyed and another created, the Holy Roman Empire dismantled, the Napoleonic empire established. The recourse to fantastic imagery to bring into view the eventfulness of the revolution and its wars had become quite commonplace. Elsewhere Schlegel refers to feeling like a child frightened by the fairy tale in which „the giant with his seven-league boots“ „catches up with the poor refugees underfoot again and again.“ „One makes sense of the day with the sayings of old women,“ admitted another observer, Ernst Moritz Arndt.⁹ What these expressions of astonishment indicate is the massive sense of disproportion which the French Revolution introduced to previously authoritative schemes of temporality once so familiar, one might say, to old men. Contemporaries repeatedly reported on the fact that everything is becoming so different--*„alles wird so ganz anders,“*¹⁰ asserted the historian Johannes von Müller at one end of the revolution; „Basta! Everything is going to be different,“ agreed Rahel Varnhagen at the other.¹¹

The stress on the disjunctures and discontinuities of the present day appeared repeatedly in the years around 1800 and placed new stress on historical writing. It was in the period of the French Revolution that a modern conception of historical time established itself, one in which „anticipation of the future worked without deferring primarily to the authority of remembrance.“¹² This heightened sense of firstness might well be experienced as disaster; Schlegel herself recognized the impress of the diabolical and the gigantic, and feels trampled. In any case, it implied the growing incommensurability of experience and event, which invited drastic description.

While many of the historians of the day conceded that they did not know what was going on or what was going to happen next, and basically discarded many of the templates by which they had imposed continuity on time, they continued to write furiously, making up new characters—the *sans culottes*—and adding new scenes, curbside. „The pen quivers in the hand of the historian who takes hold of it in order to try to portray the scenes of a year [1793] which seem to have surpassed human powers of description and feeling and which future generations will hardly believe actually took place,“ wrote Wilhelm von Schirach, editor of Hamburg's influential *Politisches Journal*, who found no other formula than to repeatedly, if inelegantly reiterate: „Never before:“ „Never before“ has „such a monstrosity been so wicked.“¹³ Even after seventeen revolutionary years, Joseph de Maistre, a deeply conservative Savoyard exile in Russia, could still write: „Nothing resembles this epoch, and history does not provide any datum or analogy as an aid to judgment.“¹⁴ Similar statements abound. What was so remarkable about this revolution were the sharply drawn ideological battles which contested over the fundamental moral, social, and political constitution

of society. All at once it was possible to recognize brand new creatures: the new man whom the Republic of Virtue wanted to fashion, or the „last man” whom the revolution’s opponents, fearing extinction, believed they had become.¹⁵ What is more, the French Revolution introduced the role of street crowds and fashioned a national and quickly an international stage for its politics. „Never before,” repeated the *Politisches Journal* in Hamburg, „was the spirit of the times so subject to passions and preconceived ideas;“ „everyone has his party,“ complained the editors. And each reader has „his own opinion and his own prejudices.”¹⁶ The future had never looked so open-ended.

That the revolution failed to find a resting point or to bring itself to the conclusion, not after Thermidor 1794 (Robespierre’s fall) or after Brumaire 1799 (Napoleon’s rise) or after the general European settlement with the Peace of Amiens in 1803 or after the emperor’s coronation in 1804 or even after the more radical reconstruction of Europe after 1806, further unsettled observers. In the end, the ideas of the ancien regime had lost their legitimacy, but the convictions of the revolution also had lost much of their credibility. It was precisely the „disillusions“ in the experience of „newly conquered liberty“ that placed postrevolutionary society in a condition of „permanent moral insecurity.”¹⁷ Thus the French Revolution gave way to more general sense of uncertainty in the face of perpetual revolution as the condition of political and social life tout court. This might help explain the paradox that the drastic description of the revolution proliferated after Thermidor when it became apparent that political contests would continue unabated and their resolution would be indefinitely postponed. Even after Waterloo, the partial successes of the Restoration did not diminish the dread of unprecedented events in the future.

Thus Hegel conceded (in a letter rather in print) in 1819: „I am just fifty years old, and have lived most of my life in these eternally restless times of fear and hope, and I have hoped that sometime these fears and hopes might cease. But now I must see that they will go on forever, indeed in moments of depression I think they will grow worse.”¹⁸ At the same time, Friedrich (now) von Gentz saw stretched before him an „Illiad of storms and battles and adversities.“ He spoke repeatedly of fiends and leviathans overtaking him. Napoleon had died, he wrote in 1824, that much was certain, but „the revolution had incorporated itself into every monster; the revolutionary spirit has travelled around the world in a thousand forms.”¹⁹ Concerning unrest in Spain, Chateaubriand insisted on the fundamental ideological connections between far-flung places: „The fate of Europe hangs in the balance,“ he maintained: „If the revolution triumphs in Spain, all will be lost. It is necessary to win there, and win completely, or to perish among the ruins.”²⁰ Revolution constituted, in Shelley’s words, „the master theme of the epoch in which we live.”²¹ What did Thomas Carlyle and Robert Southey talk about when they last met? More than a half-century after the storming of the Bastille, the topic was, Carlyle remembered, „the usual one: steady approach of democracy, with revolution (probably explosive) and a finis incomputable to man; steady decay of all morality, political, social, individual; this once noble England getting more and more ignoble and untrue,“ until it „would have to collapse in shapeless ruin, whether for ever or not none of us could know.”²² This drastic description confirmed how little deference the present paid to the knowledge and experience of the past.

The attention to the „irruptive violence of time” provided the evidence of untimely deaths and sudden transformations. Revolutionary breaks separated incommensurable epochs and thus permitted a far-ranging periodization of the historical record which undermined neat developmental schemas. The accent fell on the difference between „now” and „then,” which was constantly replayed so that historians increasingly took the measure of distinct time periods whose cultural specificity could be understood in the particular customs and mores of past people. The common plain of experience on which the ancient Greeks, the Renaissance Italians, and eighteenth-century Frenchmen encountered each other broke apart, depositing the Greeks, Italians, and French into their own self-enclosed worlds that were separated not simply by time but by time that made a definitive cultural difference. Thinking about the past became an almost unsolvable problem of transmission so that each of its periods could appear like a „foreign country.” History as it „actually” was, as Ranke put it, was not so much consumed with accuracy but with an alertness to the singularity of various cultural traditions in the past. Only now, at the turn of the nineteenth century, did it become possible to think about yesterday as quaint or rustic. Thus Chateaubriand remembered the „old-time games“ by the „fireside“ and the „meager resin-torch“ that lit up „village evenings.“²³ The world „old-fashioned” emerges as a new-fashioned word at this time; it confirms the dramatization of history as a series of breaks and ruptures.

The French Revolution continued to detonate in modern history. This is obviously so because of the string of revolutions from 1830 to 1848 to 1871 to 1917. It is also obvious because of startling scientific and technical discoveries and the process of early industrialization. It was already apparent at the beginning of the nineteenth century that economic development had reconfigured social conditions and molded new social actors whose demands for economic justice indexed general unsettlement. Someone like Thomas Paine moved in less than a generation from a defense of old liberties during the American Revolution, to a ringing endorsement of universal rights during the French Revolution, to a bitter analysis of the social violence of poverty a few years later. But the French Revolution also continued to detonate because contemporaries increasingly organized time around rupture and turned their attention to temporal change, social antagonism, and cultural difference.

It is extremely difficult to get outside of these dramatic conceptions of time since they seem so right to us. Although fundamental transformations had roiled earlier centuries, modern testimony insists on seeing it as had Johannes von Müller: „everything is becoming so different.“ It is the signature phrase of the modern. Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century and Walter Benjamin, Herbert Fischer, and Eric Hobsbawm in the twentieth all follow the logic of this emplotment, even if they differ on particulars.²⁴ Historical scholarship repeatedly organizes itself around ruptures which release new time. 1789 is the first event for which these claims were made, but other candidates subsequently included 1848 and the literary modernism of Flaubert and Baudelaire, the new perspectives that emerged „on or about December 1910,” at least according to Virginia Woolf, the destruction of the Belle Epoque in World War I, or the civilizational break represented by the Holocaust.²⁵ In everyday speech, we pass along the cliché that „life is getting more complicated” or „everything is speeding up” and thereby perform the basic self-knowledge of modernity. Or else we talk about the

losses that are the price of progress: simpler times when life was more predictable, when one could leave one's bicycle unlocked. Already the Nazis used this phrase to signal Weimar's corruption. Indeed, Raymond Williams takes note of an „escalator“ of historical perspective in which successive generations in the modern era dated the ruin of rural England to their childhoods or just before.²⁶ This recognition of old ways of life is in fact a new way of looking at things that is only indirectly to stolen bicycles or marred countrysides. The French Revolution detonated even in places not touched by the revolution because contemporaries increasingly organized even their private lives according to the serrations of abrupt departures and sudden arrivals.

The domestication of revolutionary time is worth exploring. In this „century of memoirs,“²⁷ contemporaries became more self-conscious of breaks and discontinuities in their own personal lives. Letters, memoirs, and diaries are themselves very much genres of dislocation, and they described lifetimes as drastically as historians and statesmen had described the revolution. For many individuals, of course, the revolution had in fact dramatically disrupted their lives—Chateaubriand is a great example—and they were anxious to give a report on their adventures. But the historicization of the self is more general. Increasingly, people saw their lives in terms of distinct stages from childhood to old age and they reported on the movement from one stage to the next as much in terms of irreparable loss as steady development. Perhaps the most important evidence for the layeredness of historical experience for the self was the evocation of lost childhood. Childhood came to stand for a vast inventory of lost treasures, even as the child was regarded as an early version of the immanent self. Thus the exploration of the past was the means to define oneself, or as Carolyn Steedman puts it, „the dislocation is the loss that provides the aetiology of the self.“²⁸ The figure of the lost child monitored the historicity of the self. Nostalgia for a lost childhood expressed the degree to which individuals had become aware of the singularity of their own particular itineraries and thus had the means to construct their own identities. The loneliness that Alexis de Tocqueville imagined for his heirs, who, he claimed, no longer could rely on collective attachments of custom and habit and had to make their way on unmarked roads, could also imply the descreteness of being alone.²⁹

The descriptions of the road ahead that Tocqueville or Carlyle or Hegel have left are drastic. They repeatedly draw out images of dispersion or shipwreck in which the wreckage of society swirls around the survivors. At the very end of his life, Tocqueville lovingly caresses the „old house“ and „old family.“³⁰ But the objects of his nostalgia are less interesting than the verbs, which presume the changeable quality to all aspects of social and political life, preclude any return to a past state of being, and thus instate the actions of history. Lamentations for a long-gone happiness sounds saccharine and sentimental, but provide the basis for thinking formally about history as a sequence of distinct cultural periods. And so the „dust“ that Tocqueville saw everything around him fall into was much more interesting and eloquent, because it contained clues to other worlds and other existences that were not enclosed by the present. In other words, the ruins that observers saw scattered about themselves were the presence of absences that previous historical interpretations had not found interesting. The historical worldview turned landscape into a rendition of archeology and exposed past life worlds that had never been there before. The second aspect to

drastic description is the reconfiguration of the ruin as the telling evidence for distinct cultural traditions.

Let me get back to Schlegel's letter, because she too talks about dust, the ruins along the Rhine. While Schlegel is writing under the duress of military defeat and French occupation, she counterposes her anguished displacement by the events of the revolution with her imagined connection to faraway ruins along the Rhine, the „towers, spires, capitals, and columns“ that „evoked memories“ of „past greatness.“ The fact that the present is in ruins has the effect of exposing the ruins of the past. What exactly is going on here? The towers, spires, and columns that Schlegel conjures up are the remains of castles, churches, and abbeys; some of these have been destroyed by French armies, for the most part, however, they are the quite specific, long moldering evidence of Germany's medieval past. Schlegel is not interested in a sublime aesthetic of ruins, which certainly would have been familiar to readers at the time; in fact, she deliberately contrasts ruins on the Danube, which she cannot read and which she dismisses, with those on the Rhine which to her signify „past greatness,“ which is contrasted to the melancholy present. The specific geography and, I would argue, the particular history of the ruins is now what has become important: not ruins, but German ruins. Schlegel sets up a homology of Germany versus France, past versus present, but she does more than that. She also experiments with a new parameter of difference by opposing national memory to imperial forgetfulness, and counterposes the historical possibilities embedded in the past to the eternal present of the empire. Napoleon's empire and the French occupation of Austria is not, for Schlegel, a further, powerful installment of universal Francophone culture, but is now regarded as the profound jeopardy of cultural dispossession.

In a letter some months earlier, in October 1809, Schlegel had another take on the immobility and demoralization she saw around her. Her great fear was that her sons would go into exile to the United States and „leave behind their mother's grave in a wasteland inhabited by barbarian hordes.“³¹ Schlegel saw history at work on an international scale, and it appeared as a dangerous force that menaced both her home and her grave. Schlegel's reference to her unvisited grave indicates that what is at stake in the global operations of war and empire is memory, either her oblivion in the empire or her memorialization in a place not occupied by the French, a national culture her sons would have consequently not abandoned, but rather cherish and preserve. She associates the idea of Germany with her own tended grave, just as the idea of Germany has, to her mind, rescued the ruins on the Rhine from the forgetful, eternal present of the French Empire. It is the national form that gives Schlegel her idea of home, and makes the distant ruins on the Rhine familiar while sites closer at hand on the Danube remain strange to her. And it is the imperial form which threatens the distinction of national culture, the com-memoration of the past, and the cultivation of self. To resist French empire, she creates a new circuitry up and down the Rhine which exposes the particulars of the German past.

The invention of a thickly textured, countervailing past was well served by drastic, flamboyant description which conjured up the ghosts of ruins. „The Gothic topos of the haunted house resonates with half-repressed memory of . . . cultural defeats,“ notes Katie Trumpener, who links „particular haunted places“ with the „compression and concretization of historical time,“ the tumbledown Irish and Scottish

castle in the aftermath of English conquest, for example, or the abandoned Tory house in republican New England. Ghosts told stories in the forgetful present about the hurtful past by way of unsanctioned details.³² They scribbled across the clean slates of victory. This reanimation of the past is the second element of the drastic description that characterized the nineteenth century. To be sure, ruins were part and parcel of the European landscape and a special objection of affection for eighteenth-century landscapers. But the ruin in the garden of the ancien regime had no particular provenance and told no particular story. It was often set against a waterfall or an overgrown grove and embellished the story of the transience of all things.³³ It evoked the cycle of death and birth, degeneration and regeneration, and thus the operation of harmonious wholes. But seen through the lenses of historical periodicity, ruins looked very different. Taken out of natural time, reconfigured in historical time, the ruins of the past could be taken as particular evidence of political and religious confrontations, of defeats and occupations, and of undeveloped political and national alternatives. History was thereby reconstituted as a scarred field of difference which comprised different horizons separated as much by the unnatural break of political defeat as by the accident of natural disaster. The fragmentary nature of the ruin, „the accidents and particularities of its broken profile, became the marks of its individuality and therefore autonomy.“³⁴ Ruins were repositioned so that they were no longer the wreckage of inevitable forces, whether of nature or history, but the telling evidence of former wholes. And they evoked not obsolescence, but cultural survival. In this view, they acquired a „half-life“ that earlier observers had not imputed. They spoke through history in a way that the silence of nature’s reclamation had not permitted.

The fragment had stories to tell that the present did not know about and that could be conjured up and placed against the imperatives of the moments. In the context of the French Revolution, ruins were particularly useful in order to suggest alternatives to the fact of French empire, which advertised itself as the culmination of history. If there was no going back to the pre-revolutionary period before 1789, other cultural traditions could be set in motion as alternatives to France. For their otherness to be evoked, however, it was necessary to pay particular attention to the specifics of time and place, to provenience. A good example of the growing authority of contextual, historical methods is the site of Pompeii, which was discovered in 1748, but only much later, in the nineteenth century, excavated with an eye toward understanding the customs and manners of the Stabian cities in the year 79, rather than plundered for exemplary art objects as had been the case in the eighteenth century. „Attention,“ the art historian Hugh Honour argues, „shifted from the eternal to the transient; from the merits of works of art . . . to the clues“ of former lifeways, or as Stephen Bann puts it, from specimens to recovered relics.³⁵ Careful scholarship that was attentive to context would not only recover the specificity of other lifeways, which made Germany, for example, different from France, but also the specific reasons for French dominance over Germany, all of which worked to recover German autonomy. Germany could now be envisioned as separate from and equal to France; more precisely, Germany’s medieval ruins could now be regarded as cultural entities separate from and equal to French Classicism. The method of archeology stripped away the authority of older developmental schemas in which German culture was peripheral and superseded. The credibility of context and the poignancy of the

fragment was a dramatic revision of the past, which suddenly appeared as a rich record of dispossession and possible repossession.

To make the case for the particulars of the nation was not easy. The nation existed in broken form only, imperiled by French ransackers, French armies, and French epistemologies. German Romantics struggled to find the fragments of Germany; Sulpiz Boisseree collected German masters and cataloged Gothic ruins along the banks of the Rhine, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm retrieved the remnants of fairy tales in the highlands of Hessen. It was particularly important to keep the fragments in context because only then could the case of „here” be made against „there” and that of „then” against „now.” It was the particulars that gave difference its edge.

The evidence of alternative lifeworlds existed in fragmentary form only. Only the fragment could tell a jagged, irregular, rich story of dispossession and possible repossession. It was the fragment that provided the best evidence of the presence of an absence. However, since this invention of the past rested on ruins, it demanded a whole new class of experts, historians and archeologists, to establish with precision the provenience of time and place and to interpret the particular case. New institutions such as archives and museums were predicated on organizing fragments in terms of provenience in order to make them talk. The past became loquacious, and offered new, increasingly familiar relationships to cultural time zones that eventually offered people national homes. Precisely the opposition of nation to empire, quite explicitly elaborated on at the beginning of the nineteenth century, created alternative histories and enabled oppositional stances. Seen in this way, „die Geschichte,” writes Wolfgang Mommsen, „diente gleichsam als Reservoir der Mobilisierung des „Anderen” gegen eine missliebige Gegenwart.”³⁶ At the same time, since the projected lifeways of the past were always collective, they continually worked to delimit individuals in terms of the time zone that had fashioned them. Provenience privileged the national form.³⁷

If the fragment testified to the half-life of another culture that survived, it also recalled the powerful forces that had destroyed the former whole and that might yet destroy the ruin. Indeed, the ruin of the ruin, and thus the evidence of alternatives to the present, is one of the nightmares of modernity. The fragment that is at the source of the production of alternative historical narratives leaves its imprint on those narratives. Although the nation is often described as possessing an account of itself that works to create a sense of permanence and naturalness, this is not without considerable effort. The nation is repeatedly evoked in terms of the perils it faces, the catastrophe it has endured, and the forgetfulness its people are threatened with. Put another way, the new home of the nation always had something unsettled about; it recalled the contingency of its claims, the strain of recovering its historical origins, the historicity of its premise. The high value put on cultural authenticity indexes the effort to maintain the authority of the nation. Hopeful, exhortative, suspicious all at once, the national idea expressed itself repeatedly in the conditional tense. And it is this state of alarm that produces the energy to override other regional or religious identities, often violently. Common disasters and especially war nourish *and* threaten national feeling, and they are deployed in a way that contributes to the drastic dimension of social description. The historical ruin expressed two things, then: continuity and rupture. On the one hand, continuity established the claim for the persistence of an entity against something else,

Germany against France, for example. On the other hand, rupture provided evidence for lapse and cessation. Expressed in this way, history trembled.

The stress on provenance had the additional consequence of making the particulars of cultural custom, domestic traditions, and household interiors, the signifiers of the specificity and periodicity of the historical case. The nation was in the details. As James Chandler argues in his book, *England in 1819*, it was at the „convivial table“ and around the „domestic hearth“ that the historical became legible.³⁸ Once the rural, the old-fashioned, and the homespun came to be recognized as markers of national identity, rather than outposts of economic development, the national form was open to a far-reaching democratization. The pastoral aesthetic in England is a good case in point. Indicted for being nostalgic, which it was, and for leaving huge parts of Britain, the North, for example, the scenes of the vanishing countryside quickly embodied the very essence of Englishness. These could be deployed against revolutionary France or the unfair play of striking workers and thus were not politically innocent. Yet „the histories, poems, and pictures“ of rural life depended on making the ordinary cultural telling, thereby validating the experience of common people. This literary enfranchisement introduced a new and unsettling political roominess. Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, were criticized precisely because they had found a „vein of poetry“ to „accommodate“ the „common people.“³⁹ As Chandler argues, the politics of literary representation to make the case of the nation opened the way for the politics of electoral representation. In the end, it was the idea of the nation that created bounded intimacies among ordinary people, enfranchised them as national exemplars, and facilitated the exchange of emotional empathy and social solidarity across translocal boundaries, a remarkable development really. Provenience and periodization worked together to make local contexts culturally eloquent and politically potential.

The drastic dimension to social description was evident in the emphasis placed on temporal discontinuity, on the ceaseless eruption of the new, and on the cultural variedness of specifically local artifacts which were increasingly regarded as parts of incommensurate national traditions. The world looked extremely different from this perspective and held out the possibility of new, national homes as well as the continuing dangers of displacement and exile. History, written with a sensitivity to the particulars of time and place, was necessary to create both effects. It made collective subjects circumstantial, but also imagined their animation.

The alertness to historical change had the final effect of making historical self-awareness, the anxiety about mutability and revolution, stand as the fundamental distinction between Europeans and non-Europeans. Schlegel circles around this theme as well by distinguishing legible ruins along the Rhine from illegible ones along the Danube, which she found „raw“ and „confusing.“ Schlegel is concerned to rescue memory of the nation from the eternal present of empire, but she also sets up an opposition between the Rhine and the Danube, between memory and forgetfulness. Both places have ruins, yet Schlegel recognizes only the historical depth of the Rhine, while the sights along the Danube, which she identifies as near Budapest, are „tartarisch wild,“ the remnants of a power that „dominates the land but does not give it form.“ The Danube is no longer contained in Schlegel’s opposition between German history and French empire, but in a more fundamental East-West divide between

savagery and civilization, between the Oriental tartary of prehistory and the European refinement of historical form. The reference to the Danube that Schlegel smuggles in thus anticipates the ways in which history in the nineteenth century was constituted in opposition to a non-historical „other“ in the form of the the non-West, the traditional, and the „premodern.“

When Heidegger asserted more than a century later that „what distinguishes the essence of the modern age“ is „the fact that the world becomes picture,“ he means that historical consciousness is new. The awareness of being dispossessed and of living in a disenchanted world becomes the register of history, the marker of modernity, and ultimately—it is presumed—the destination for all people. It is at this point that Europe assumes itself to be „the scene of the birth of the modern.“ At once, history before 1800 is flattened out as historically unself-conscious and, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown, the rest of the world is analyzed in the terms of the European history—in the register of disenchantment—that it too will ultimately experience, but has not yet.⁴⁰ The master narrative of disenchantment were literary and historiographical gestures that inevitably colonized the stories of others.⁴¹

The French Revolution detonated in this way as well: it made revolution—and more specifically, knowledge of revolution and of the displacement of tradition—the key experience of being European. For Hegel the disenchanted discovery of history was the foundation of interiorized subjectivity and consciousness. This self-consciousness—the ability to see history, to name developments, to participate in the mutual recognition of historical processes—argued Hegel, was the attribute of Europeans, while Africa, in Hegel’s notorious paragraphs in the *Philosophy of History*, remained undeveloped in „a succession of contingent happenings and surprises.“ While Hegel relied on prevailing Enlightenment distinctions between savagery and civilization, the dramatization of historicity in the years after the French Revolution put additional weight on what seemed to be different in Europe, which was the identification of cultural consciousness with historical understanding. Germaine de Stael, too, counterposed history to empire in ways that relied on making the non-West non-historical. Napoleon’s empire represented a trespass on France, on Paris, and on de Stael’s own memories of home. Napoleon was born in Corsica, she explained, „practically within Africa’s savage sway“ and thus without the claims to *patrie* that situated and entitled de Stael.⁴² Identified as African, Napoleon is not only not French, but is without history. It is very telling how, again and again, the national work of the resistance to empire in the years around 1800 produced the opposition West/non-West. For Hegel this opposition is the very index to the historical self-consciousness that the French Revolution has achieved and the Europe/non-Europe divide in 1800 is only the next installment of earlier conflicts between Greece and Persia and Christianity and Islam. Here Hegel’s freedom serves as a justification for the non-freedom of others.

It is interesting that contemporaries around 1800 not only set themselves apart from the non-West but displaced their fears of political extinction onto the colonial world they themselves oversaw. In some ways, this was already a sign of the „empire striking back.“ For the French writer Chateaubriand, the French Revolution was horrific not so much for creating ruins—killing a king or washing up emigres such as himself on foreign shores—but for destroying the evidence of the past. He returned repeatedly in his memoirs to the tombs of the French kings at the abbey at St. Denis,

which Jacobin revolutionaries had plundered in August 1793. This profanity becomes part of the larger disaster of modernity, for the demolition at St. Denis is also what is at work in North America, where European colonists were in the process of destroying the graves of Native Americans and thereby effacing „the proofs of their existence and of their annihilation.“⁴³ Not only did the colonists drive out the Indians, as Chateaubriand recognized, but they denied the connections between indigenous peoples and the historical monuments they left behind. Non-western histories were repeatedly emptied out, so much so that the colony stands as the very incarnation of the absence of history. The architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel, for example, described a Prussia at its monuments--precisely the dispossession that was the premise of the Louvre--as a place that would be „unfamiliar, naked, and shorn, like a new colony in a previously uninhabited land.“ In much the same way, revolutionary events pushed the ships of observers such as Chateaubriand along „an unknown coast,“⁴⁴ an interesting image in which the revolution and, more precisely, its annihilation of the evidence of the past threatened to make colonials out of metropolitans. Behind these words--“naked and shorn,“ or „unknown coast“--is knowledge of European empire, a faint acknowledgement of the cultural violence it entailed, and also, more robustly, the suspicion that to lose history, to ruin the ruin, was to enter a colonial relationship. The revolution threatened to bring colonial dispossession home, which is why Europeans invested in the notion of historical depth and retrieved their identities through historical trajectories and also hardened the opposition between the primitive and civilization, between East and West. (Did Europeans thereby successfully „decolonize“ themselves, setting themselves further apart from those who apparently did not?)

To this day, the historical imagination remains caught in the double move of digging down in Europe and levelling across elsewhere. Twenty years ago, the anthropologist Johannes Fabian challenged the European habitation of the contemporary and its denial to non-Europeans: this is precisely what happened in 1800. The French Revolution contributed to a profound reorganization of global difference in which historical consciousness is premised on alertness to revolutionary change, impelling Europeans to share their histories as contemporaries, and inviting them to imagine political alternatives while denying both contemporaneity and subjectivity to non-Europeans.

Of course, Hegel could have seen plenty of evidence that would have suggested to him that political subjectivity was not a European attribute. As Susan Buck-Morss details in her recent article „Hegel and Haiti“ events in Haiti were widely discussed throughout Europe and Toussaint L'Ouverture was very much an outsized figure.⁴⁵ Moreover, the French war with Spain prompted a surge of republican movements across the western hemisphere. Buck-Morss simply calls Hegel stupid, and there is plenty of evidence that Hegel became increasingly allergic to the variety of popular sovereignties that became visible after the Revolution. He thought all the Germanic fantasies of *Deutschtum* were *Deutsch-dumm*. But I think the East/West divide rests less on hegemonic notions of European superiority or on Europeans' fears in the wake of the revolution of becoming culturally dispossessed and thus colonial subjects themselves, then it does on the emphasis that historical self-consciousness placed on disenchantment. This alertness to loss becomes the premise for new knowledge, which

was regarded as distinctly European. It is precisely the worldwide extension of the „principle of the disenchantment of the universe” to which subaltern studies objects because, writes Chakrabarty, it is „not the only principle by which we world the earth.”⁴⁶ There is considerable power in the ability to name a thing „tradition” and to imagine, even assert its passing. It makes any number of (scoffing) assumptions about immutability, nature, and the gods.

The writing of modern history as „European history” continues to orient itself according to rupture and thereby to seal off vast areas of time as premodern and vast areas of space as non-historical. This is as much disregard for the heteronomy of others as it is recognition of the violence of what happened to non-European populations around the globe after 1800. Drastic description both elides and enables. Yet *pace* Chakrabarty, I think the register of disenchantment also opened up new ways to think about enchantment and to „world the earth,” which was part of the project of European Romanticism. As I have tried to show, the idea of periodization and the separateness of national development facilitated thinking about the particulars of the past as potential alternatives to the present. It puts into views locquacious ruins and admonitory ghosts. History writing thus uses situations of boundedness--this time, this place, this trajectory--in order to create and recreate political subjectivity, to resist empire and postulate nationhood. To construct a bounded subject is to create agency, responsibility, and judgement, a myth-making role for history that we need to cherish. To inhabit a myth is to enter a world of action. I believe we need historical subjects and political action, just as we also need a more critical acknowledgement of the premises and excisions and violence that goes along with creating subjects, which would carry us a great deal further than Hegel’s poor choices.

Endnotes

1. George Woodcock, „The Meaning of Revolution in Britain,” in Ceri Crossley and Ian Small, eds., *The French Revolution and British Culture* (Oxford, 1989), p. 5. Fox’s quote comes from a letter to Fitzpatrick on 30 July 1789.
2. 71. Charlotte von Stein to Charlotte Schiller, 6 Mar. 1790, in Jäckel, ed., *Das Volk braucht Licht*, p. 82; Anne-Charlotte Trepp, *Sanfte Männlichkeit und selbständige Weiblichkeit: Frauen und Männer im Hamburger Bürgertum zwischen 1770 und 1840* (Göttingen, 1996), pp. 271-72.
3. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), Part I, Book VI, Chapter I; Part III, Book VII, Chapter VI.
4. John Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 30. In fact, Carlyle anticipates this charge in *The French Revolution*, Part III, Book V, Chapter I.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, pp. 277, 132. See, in particular, the argument of Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago, 2002), but also Wolf Lepenies, *Das Ende der Naturgeschichte: Wandel kultureller Selbstverständlichkeiten in den Wissenschaften des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1976).
6. Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge, 1993); and Nicola Watson, *Revolution and the form of the British novel, 1790-1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions* (New York, 1994).
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8. Letter to Sulpiz Boisserée dated end of December, 1809, Dorothea von Schlegel, *Dorothea von Schlegel und deren Söhne Johannes und Philipp Veit. Briefwechsel*, 2 vols. (Mainz, 1881), pp. 1: 396-99.
9. Dorothea Schlegel to August Wilhelm Schlegel, end of October 1810 in Josef Körner, ed., *Krisenjahre der Frühromantik: Briefe aus dem Schlegelkreis*, 3 vols. (Brünn, 1936), p. 2: 168; and Ernst Moritz Arndt, *Geist der Zeit in Sämtliche Werke* (Magdeburg, 1908), p. 1:53.
10. Johannes von Müller to his brother, 20 May 1797, in Johannes von Müller *Briefe in Auswahl*, Edgar Bonjour, ed. (Basel, 1954), p. 212. See also letter of 2 July 1796, p. 208.
11. Rahel to Markus Levin, 29 Mar. 1815 in Varnhagen, *Briefwechsel*, p. 4: 80.
12. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, pp. 275-76; Rudy Koshar, *Germany’s Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1998), p. 18.

13. "Schilderung des Robespierre," *Politisches Journal*, August 1794, p. 856.
14. Joseph de Maistre to M. le Chevalier de Rossi, 26 Apr. 1804, in Joseph de Maistre, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1884), p. 10:106. See also Mohamed-Ali Drissa, „La Représentation de la Révolution dans *Les Considérations sur la France* de Joseph de Maistre,“ in Simone Bernard-Griffiths, ed., *Un Lieu de Mémoire Romantique: La Revolution de 1789* (Naples, 1993), pp. 289-309; and Steiner, „Aspects of Counter-Revolution,“ in Geoffrey Best, ed., *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy, 1789-1989* (London, 1988).
15. Catherine Boulot, Jean de Cayeux, and Hélène Moulin, *Hubert Robert et la Révolution* (Paris, 1989); Roland Mortier, *La Poétique des ruines en France: Ses origines, ses variations de la Renaissance à Victor Hugo* (Geneva, 1974), pp. 158-62.
16. *Politisches Journal*, December 1794, pp. 1266-67; November 1800, pp. 1095-96.
17. Biancamaria Fontana, *Benjamin Constant and the Post-Revolutionary Mind* (New Haven, 1991), pp. xv, 132-33.
18. Quoted in Sheehan, *German History*, p. 392.
19. Gentz to Brinkmann, 8 Nov. 1824, in Gentz, *Briefe*, p. 2: 341.
20. Chateaubriand to de Caraman, Paris, 3. Aug. 1823, in *Correspondance Générale de Chateaubriand*, Louis Thomas, ed. (Paris, 1911), p. 4: 353.
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22. Seamus Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England, 1789-1832* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 41. See also Hedva Ben-Israel, *English Historians and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1968); and Stanley Mellon, *The Political Uses of History: A Study of Historians in the French Revolution* (Stanford, 1958).
23. Chateaubriand, *Memoirs*, p. 6: 223.
24. On Hegel, see Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (New York, 1992), p. 293; Marx, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1990), p. 261; Walter Benjamin, „The Storyteller,“ in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn, trans. (New York, 1969), p. 159; Herbert Fischer, Modris Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, 1989), p. 291; and Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York, 1995). See also Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), part I, book I, chapter II: „The world is all so changed; so much that seemed vigorous has sunk decrepit, so much that was not is beginning to be!“
25. Dolf Oehler, *Ein Höllensturz der Alten Welt: Zur Selbstforschung der Moderne nach dem Juni 1848* (Frankfurt, 1988).
26. See Elisabeth Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation: Britain, 1815-1850* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 6, 146-47.
27. Mme de Fars Fausselandry, *Memoirs de Madame le vicomtesse de Fars Fausselandry; ou Souvenirs d'une octogenaire* (Paris, 1830).
28. Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Cambridge, 1995), p. ix.
29. Bruce James Smith, *Politics and Remembrance: Republican Themes in*

Machiavelli, Burke, and Tocqueville (Princeton, 1985), p. 243. They do not resemble their fathers,” he wrote; „nay they perpetually differ from themselves, for they live in a state of incessant change of place, feelings, and fortunes. The mind of each is therefore unattached to that of his fellows by tradition or common habits; and they have never had the power, the inclination, or the time to act together.“

30. Letter of 4 May 1858, cited André Jardin, *Tocqueville. A Biography*, Lydia Davis, trans. (New York, 1988), p. 377.
31. Dorothea Schlegel to Sulpiz Boisserée, 23 Aug. 1809, *Dorothea von Schlegel und deren Söhne Johannes und Philipp Veit. Briefwechsel*, 2 vols. (Mainz, 1881), pp. 1: 374-75.
32. Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, pp. 149, 111; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Oldtown Folks* (Boston, 1869), pp. 165-66. See also Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, 1997).
33. Günter Hartmann, *Die Ruine im Landschaftsgarten: Ihre Bedeutung für den frühen Historismus und die Landschaftsmalerei der Romantik* (Worms, 1981). See also Ingrid G. Daemmrich, „The Ruins Motif in French Literature,“ Ph.D (Wayne State University, 1970); Laurence Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire: The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature* (Pittsburgh, 1977); Roland Mortier, *La Poétique des ruines en France: Ses origines, ses variations de la Renaissance à Victor Hugo* (Geneva, 1974); and Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (New York, 2001).
34. Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven, 1990), p. 25.
35. Hugh Honour, *Romanticism*. (New York, 1979), p. 208.
36. Wolfgang Mommsen, „Der Historismus als Weltanschauung des aufsteigenden Bürgertums,“ in *Bürgerliche Kultur und politische Ordnung* (Frankfurt, 2000).
37. Rudolf Stadelmann, „Die Romantik und die Geschichte,“ in Theodor Steinbüchel, ed., *Romantik: Ein Zyklus Tübinger Vorlesungen* (Tübingen, 1948).
38. The duty of the observer, wrote Irving Washington, was to „cope with the people in all their conditions, and all their habits and humours.“ See Washington Irving, „Rural Life in England,“ *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, vol. viii in Richard Dilworth Rust, ed., *The Complete Works of Washington Irving* (Boston, 1978), p. 50. In general, James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago, 1998), here pp. 148-50.
39. Quoted in Butler, *Romantics*, p. 62.
40. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*.
41. See Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, but also the post-colonial critique of Stephen Greenblatt and the „new historicism” surveyed in Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London, 1996), pp. 163-75.
42. Staël, *Ten Years*, p. 138.
43. Chateaubriand, *Memoirs*, p. 1:231.
44. Chateaubriand, *An Historical, Political, and Moral Essay on Revolutions*,

Ancient and Modern (London, 1815), pp. 4-5.

45. Susan Buck-Morss, „Hegel and Haiti,“ *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000), pp. 821-65.
46. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, p. 111.

Just before the French Revolution, the economic situation was so bad that a loaf of bread would cost a peasant a week's worth of wages! The poor population of France was starving to death while the nobility continued to live a life of luxury. These atrocities snowballed into the French Revolution. Let us learn about it. Just before the French Revolution, the economic situation was so bad that a loaf of bread would cost a peasant a week's worth of wages! The poor population of France was starving to death while the nobility continued to live a life of luxury. These atrocities snowballed into the French Revolution. Let us learn about it. Suggested Videos. The French Revolution ended the system of absolute monarchies of the European countries, which was based on the principle that all powers resided in the king, who was the source of all power by divine right; such right was the legal and philosophical basis of his sovereignty. The French Revolution separated these powers, making the legislative power belong to an Assembly or Parliament; the executive power to the king and his ministers, or in a government in the republics; and the judicial power in the courts of justice. In short, it would seek to eliminate the monarchy or let it be absolute to Modern nationalism has its roots in the French Revolution. The revolutionaries proclaimed principles they held to be universal, among these were the sovereignty of the nation and the rights and duties of citizenship. The revolutionaries celebrated the fact that the Revolution had occurred in France. Jacobins = the most radical and ruthless of the political groups formed in the wake of the French Revolution, and in association with Robespierre they instituted the Terror of 1793-4. A petition drive became unruly causing troops controlled by the National Assembly to fire on the crowd, killing 50 people.