

What You Must Know About the French Revolution: Literature / Les Must de la Révolution française: La littérature

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Rousseauism and Revolution: François Vernes' Adélaïde de Clarencé, ou Les Malheurs et les délices du sentiment : Lettres écrites des Rives Lémantines (1796), by Catriona Seth

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It may seem paradoxical to choose a never reedited text published by a little-known Swiss writer as a 'must' of the French Revolution, but I would argue that it deserves to be considered an emblematic work in more ways than one.

A mere glance at the title-page of François Vernes' 1796 novel indicates some of its essential aspects. The date is given both according to the traditional calendar and the revolutionary one: '1796, An 4^e de la République Française'. As the two ways of computing years do not overlap completely, the an IV or quatrième of the Republic stretched between the end of 1795 and the start of 1796; this means the book in fact came out somewhere between January 1st and September 22nd 1796. The double date is a salutary reminder of the upheaval in traditional norms during the revolutionary period and the problematic coexistence of two eras.

Another essential element present on the title-page is the indication of the editor's identity. With the abolition of privileges and the opening up of publishing, anyone could set up as a printer and editor. 'Chez l'Auteur, au Bureau de la *Décade philosophique*, Rue Thérèse, et chez les principaux Libraires' indicates as much. This would have been impossible under the Ancien Régime. The reference to the *Décade philosophique*, the paper run by people one could call moderate democrats also points to the increasing power and politicisation of the press during the period. The author, 'F. Vernes, de Genève', careful to indicate, by the presence of the comma, that 'de Genève' is not part of his name, but his origin (and to delete the latter part of his earlier signature, Vernes *de Luze* which could have been construed as aristocratic), bears a patronymic which would have been familiar to many contemporaries. Pastor Jacob Vernes (1728-1791), the author's father – François' earliest published work, a 1783 collection of poems, was signed 'Vernes, fils' –, was a friend of Rousseau and critic of Voltaire, a well-known protestant theologian and controversialist. The reference to Geneva lends weight to the Rousseau connection, harks back to a Republic more ancient than the French one and, as the developing tale within the novel shows, poses the question of national boundaries.

François Vernes, himself, as was frequent at the time, refers to his own earlier works on the title-page of his 1796 novel: '*Auteur de la Franciade, du Voyageur Sentimental, etc.*' This serves a dual purpose. It is a form of advertisement, the writer is, *de facto*, saying to his reader: if you enjoy this book, you might like to look out for other texts I have written. It is also a sort of guarantee: the author is not a novice. The 'etc.' after the two titles

makes it sound as though his literary production was huge[1]. One could also notice that *Franziade* is a title which suggests a glorification of France. As to the *Voyageur sentimental*, a 1786 text which rode shamelessly on the success of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, it is actually called *Le Voyageur sentimental, ou ma promenade à Yverdon*, referring to a lakeside town in Switzerland. Everyone was bound to have heard of the *Voyage sentimental* without necessarily knowing Sterne's name. By quoting the brief form of the title, Vernes may be hoping to profit from Sterne's literary reputation.

Returning to Vernes' own work, the title is obviously the most important single element on the page: *Adélaïde de Clarencé, ou Les Malheurs et les délices du sentiment: Lettres écrites des Rives Lémantines*. No-one could have any doubt that this is a sentimental novel, one in which 'les malheurs et les délices du sentiment' play a central role. The heroine's name is remarkable in itself. 'Clarencé' contains 'Clarens', the paradisiacal lakeshore village where Rousseau's Julie was to be found, and which the heroine herself visits in Vernes' fiction. This connection with *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is further enhanced by the reference to the 'Rives Lémantines', which creates an adjective for the banks of Lake Geneva, the Lac Léman. Vernes' sentimental and epistolary text obeys literary conventions of the time since, like Rousseau, the writer only claims to have collected the letters, they are 'recueillies par F. Vernes' whose afore-mentioned identity as a citizen of Geneva could lead the reader to expect a high degree of 'vraisemblance' if not of truth in the letters which follow.

So what does this two volume tale, a 'must' of the French Revolution, actually recount? Eusèbe G*****[2]'s 1839 *Revue des Romans. Recueil d'analyses raisonnées des productions remarquables des plus célèbres romanciers français et étrangers. Contenant 1100 analyses raisonnées, faisant connaître avec assez d'étendue pour en donner une idée exacte, le sujet, les personnages, l'intrigue et le dénouement de chaque roman*, offers the following plot-summary:

ADÉLAÏDE DE CLARENCÉ, ou *les Malheurs et les délices du sentiment*, 2 vol. in-8, 1796. — Adélaïde est fille d'un des premiers citoyens de Genève, entiché d'aristocratie, qui refuse de consentir à l'union de sa fille avec le chef d'un parti opposé au sien. Tout l'ouvrage roule sur les combats de l'amour avec la piété filiale. M. de Clarencé aime beaucoup sa fille ; mais il tient invariablement à ses opinions. Adélaïde respecte et chérit son père, mais elle aime avec passion. Elle résiste cependant aux séductions de l'amour, ainsi qu'à la force de l'autorité paternelle ; elle reste fille vertueuse et refuse constamment l'époux qu'on veut lui donner. Enfin, réduite au désespoir, elle se précipite dans l'Arve et y périt[3].

What the summary only suggests, is that the tale is a contemporary one: the baron de Clarencé is an aristocrat fond of his privileges. Adélaïde is in love with Versan, who is fighting for democratic rights. Many of the letters are dated, they range from early 1791 to November 1792, a little under two years in which hopes rose and were dashed on both sides of the political divide. Born in 1765, Vernes himself was not yet 26 in early 1791 and could almost certainly identify with the spirited push for democracy defended by his hero. In his novel, he is taking on essential current issues: much of Switzerland viewed the Revolution warily and indeed, in August 1792, the massacre of the Swiss guard at the Tuileries palace radicalised feelings. That same year, France attempted to invade Geneva. Émigrés had been flocking to the calm and relative neutrality of Switzerland since 1789. Vernes' novel portrays, among the secondary characters, a charming French noblewoman, Fanny de Vacluse, who has escaped with her children after a terrifying ordeal. She is duly reunited with her aristocratic husband who has to become a manual labourer in order to provide for his family. The novel thus takes on politically sensitive issues, shows street skirmishes on the barricades in Geneva and illustrates the fear of contagion felt by many Europeans who saw the effects of the events in France.

Letter 3 of part IV, for instance, from Adélaïde to her friend Clémentine, a character in some ways reminiscent of Rousseau's Claire in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, shows revolutionary events impacting on individual destinies.

Adélaïde's father is putting pressure on her to marry someone to whom he is close politically:

L'armée française borde les frontières de la Savoie ; tout menace d'une irruption prochaine ; si Genève se trouvait entraînée dans la prise de cette province, la chute du gouvernement suivrait de près, et mon père craint sans doute, que Versan à la tête d'un parti triomphant, ne réussît alors à écarter La Rivière, et à faire respecter ses prétentions. L'ordre de chose actuel, et la crainte d'un tel avenir, agissent évidemment sur son caractère, et y jettent une âcreté, une agitation nouvelles ; le retour de Versan ne contribuera pas peu à les augmenter, et je puis m'attendre à des efforts redoublés de sa part, pour m'amener à ses fins. Tandis que ce nouvel orage ne gronde encore que sourdement autour de moi, et avant que j'y sois tout à fait livrée, ouvre moi ton cœur, ma tendre amie, toi qui peut seule me guider dans mes perplexités, toi dont je mets la raison, la conscience, à la place des miennes, tant leur vois est troublée par celle d'un cœur égaré ; parle, que me conseilles-tu de faire, dans le cas où mon père voudrait forcer mon choix ... Ah ! je suis donc bien malheureuse, puisque je cherche les limites de mes devoirs, du pouvoir d'un père, moi que cette recherche n'eût besoin d'occuper jamais, et qui suivis toujours la route de la vertu, sans avoir demandé si c'était elle !

As characters go through exile and imprisonment, the feeling of history accelerating is striking. The political differences between Adélaïde's father and Versan mean that the liberating aspects of revolutionary upheavals do not apply to the young couple. On the contrary, new divides appear: social differences become less important than political choices.

The novel marks a culmination, but also the end of certain forms of rousseauism. Adélaïde's garden contains direct allusions to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and the characters' names are often quoted by Vernes' own heroes. They live in the same part of the world and seem to wish to model their existence on Julie and her 'petite société'. In July 1791, when all hopes still seem legitimate, Adélaïde recounts to her friend Clémentine a visit she has made:

Je reviens de Clarens ; jamais promenade ne m'a plus intéressée. Parcourir la demeure de Julie, c'est, en quelque sorte, entrer dans le temple de Gnide, et errer autour de ses autels. Tout y enchante les regards ; la nature y paraît plus fraîche, plus touchante, le ciel plus pur, le Léman plus calme et d'un plus bel azur ; la campagne plus riante semble y exhaler un parfum d'amour ; le cœur sensible contracte un sentiment de tendresse plus délicieux ; ceux qui ont aimé, y donnent des regrets au passé, et cherchent à vivre de leurs souvenirs ; ceux qui aiment, sentent mieux le présent, et demandent à Saint-Preux et Julie d'aimer et de sentir comme eux ; et ceux qui n'aiment pas encore, ou qui n'ont pu rencontrer l'objet qu'appellent leurs désirs, se livrent) une mélancolie qui n'est point sans charmes, ou se bercent d'illusions flatteuses, et soupirent dans l'attente d'un doux avenir. Néanmoins les prés, les fleurs et les bocages ne brillent pas ici de plus d'éclat que sur nos bords, mais c'est toi, Rousseau, c'est ton pinceau magique qui répandit ici la féerie du sentiment !

Rousseau is the writer of the Revolution, 'par excellence', with his *Social Contract*. He is also the ultimate reference for the sentimental novelist of the time. What Vernes' own fiction shows is that Lake Geneva may have delightful landscapes which attract tourists, in particular, readers of Rousseau, but that his tale is that of an utopian society and cannot serve as a pattern on which to model one's life.

At the end of Vernes' novel, Adélaïde, who wishes neither to disobey her father's wishes, nor to renounce her love for Versan, commits suicide, a bold and terrible move. Only death can preserve her virtue and, like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Virginie, death by water is a way of maintaining a form of unity which is threatened by surrounding events – natural disaster (the storm and shipwreck) in Virginie's case, political upheaval in Adélaïde's. There are three posthumous letters from Adélaïde. To her Father, she writes begging for forgiveness, stressing that she has remained virtuous, and asking that he do not mourn her as she is going from him into the arms of the eternal Father, at a time when suicide was considered by many to be a wicked and sinful act. To

Versan, she writes, not knowing whether he is dead or alive but fearing they will never be united: 'Aime-moi encore dans les malheureux à qui je tâchais d'être utile ; je te lègue le bonheur de les soulager. Aime-moi dans une patrie que tu peux servir et qui protégea ma jeunesse ; aime-moi dans une autre moi-même, dans cette amie si tendre ... Les larmes m'empêchent de poursuivre ... Adieu ! ... adieu !!!'. Expecting to be welcomed by white flags of clemency in the eternal kingdom, she then writes to her friend Clémentine, stating that even if her belief in an after-life were to be wrong, she will still live on in her friends' memories. Versan has the final word in the novel. He thinks he may soon leave this life and, whereas Julie died with the veil lifted from her heart, he is plunging into darkness: 'Je la vois, je la sens ; elle approche enfin cette mort désirée ; son voile heureux s'étend sur moi ; il enveloppe déjà mon cœur de son obscurité profonde. ...'. We are left with an unresolved question, not knowing what becomes of Versan after he has written the last letter to the dead Adélaïde.

The split between two worlds felt by Vernes' heroes thus points to irreconcilable differences between aesthetics and politics, a literary tradition and the beginnings of a new Europe, a fictional Revolution in the novel thus heralds a Revolution in fiction.

[1] Right at the end of volume 2, Vernes lists his publications in order, he says, not to be saddled by unscrupulous publishers with works which are not his.

[2] Girault de Saint-Fargeau, Pierre-Augustin-Eusèbe, *Revue des Romans. Recueil d'analyses raisonnées des productions remarquables des plus célèbres romanciers français et étrangers. Contenant 1100 analyses raisonnées, faisant connaître avec assez d'étendue pour en donner une idée exacte, le sujet, les personnages, l'intrigue et le dénouement de chaque roman*, Paris, Firmin-Didot frères, 1839.

[3] Vernes offers the following summary at the end of his novel : 'PREMIERE PARTIE. *Projet de correspondance d'Adélaïde et de Clémentine. Des Sociétés de Genève*, pag. 5. *Portrait de quelques hommes*, p. 9. *Portrait de quelques femmes*, p. 20. *D'Adélaïde*, p. 28. *De la physionomie*, p. 34. *Des Romans, de la musique, romances*, p. 43. *Dur vrai bonheur*, p. 58. *Prise d'armes*, p. 79. *Opinion de Versan*, p. 83. *Aveu d'Adélaïde*, p. 89. *De Genève*, p. 94. *Histoire de Fanny de Vacluse*, p. 100. *Des mariages bizarres* p. 121. *Bague de cheveux*, p. 125. *Entrevue de Versan et d'Adélaïde*, p. 130. *Du véritable Amour* p. 141. *Bal de Morges* p. 150. *Songe*, p. 163. *Eulalie*, 166. *De la Religion, ma Philosophie*, p. 179. *Querelle au bal*, p. 187. *Maladie d'Adélaïde*, p. 199. *Entrevue de Versan et d'Adélaïde malade*, p. 204. / SECONDE PARTIE. *Séjour d'Adélaïde à Cologny ; projet d'un cours de philosophie*, p. 211. *Histoire d'Aline et Colette*, p. 230. *Cours de philosophie*, p. 238. *Promenade sur l'eau, Histoire de Corali*, p. 271. *Du mariage*, p. 284. *Visite à Fanny de Vacluse, et son époux*, p. 299. *Rendez-vous d'Eulalie et Delarin*, p. 312. *Vers à Clémentine*, 323. *Histoire de la famille Nègre*, p. 327. / TROISIEME PARTIE. *Voyage aux Glacières*, p. 3. *Histoire de Delton*, p. 8. *Route de Cluse à Salenches ; Alphonsine*, p. 22. *Chamonix ; histoire de Sans-Souci*, p. 30. *Histoire de Delville*, p. 41. *Tableau des Glaciers*, p. 47. *Histoire d'Alméda*, p. 55. *Le Sourd et muet*, p. 68. *Clarens*, p. 77. *Meillerie*, p. 84. *Adélaïde au bain*, p. 105. *Duel*, p. 124. *Paris*, p. 137. / QUATRIME PARTIE. *Versan à Londres*, p. 170. *Lidelson*, p. 177. *Elisa*, p. 179. *Discours à Lidelson*, p. 186. *Fuite d'Adélaïde*, p. 231. *Son séjour à Aubonne*, p. 241. *Ses rendez-vous avec Versan*, p. 258. *Son départ de Genève, et sa mort*, p. 315.'

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