

Jacobinism as Heroic Narrative: Understanding the Terror as the Experience of Melodrama

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It has become strikingly more difficult in the past quarter-century to understand the French Revolution. We have been blessed with a generation of scholarship that can only be described, despite the pessimism of some, as a flowering.¹ While not necessarily reaching the number of a hundred, such blooms have spread their petals in a wide variety of directions, allowing us to know much more about the events, personalities, structures and transformations of the 1780s and 1790s. But all this additional information, taking the field of scholarship far beyond the simple verities of “classic” and “revisionist” interpretations, has made understanding, grasping the significance of the whole, ever-more tricky.²

As historiography has broadened and complicated its own picture, so it must lead us to a recognition of how broad and complex was the mental and cultural landscape within which revolutionary actors themselves struggled to understand events and their own place in them. Questions which once seemed relatively settled, such as the primacy

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¹ See the wide-ranging essays by David Andress, Laurent Dubois, Carla Hesse, Lynn Hunt, Colin Jones, Jean-Clément Martin and Sophia Rosenfeld in *French Historical Studies* 32 (2009), and essays by David A. Bell, Peter R. Campbell and Rebecca Spang online as Volume 1, Issue 1 of the *H-France Salon*, <<http://www.h-france.net/Salon/h-francesalon.html>>. The tenor of this debate is further discussed in David Andress, “Introduction: Revolutionary Historiography, adrift or at large? The Paradigmatic Quest versus the Exploration of Experience,” in *Experiencing the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford, 2013), 1-15.

² This was already a problem a decade after the Bicentenary, as documented perceptively by Rebecca L. Spang, “Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern is the French Revolution?,” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 119-47.

of a Rousseauist conception of “General Will” in the construction of radical revolutionary politics, are now disturbed by re-evaluation of strands of thought that relied on obedience to “Natural Law” as their guiding principle.³ Yet such attention to nature in the form of regularity is also itself further complicated by study of the ways in which the disruptive, seismic, volcanic forces of nature were also understood and deployed in revolutionary argumentation.⁴ It is little wonder that, even before this new wave of scholarship, Patrice Higonnet described Jacobinism – the nearest thing that the French Revolution had to a distinctive political movement – as “dauntingly ambiguous” in its character.⁵

The argument of this paper is that “Jacobinism” – a rather loose label at the best of times⁶ – is best thought of as an ongoing act of self-narration, the writing of a story in which, over time, the attitudes and actions we associate with the Terror came to seem right and proper. Rather than having foundational principles, as we might imagine essential to a modern political party, the ideas of Jacobinism were a coalescence out of their context, a device, and perhaps not even a conscious strategy, for men with certain pre-existing casts of mind to help themselves manage the complexity of their situation, to reduce it to comprehensibility. I shall argue that Jacobin, and ultimately “terrorist,” identity was, as much as it was anything else, a story written around certain tropes – victimization, heroic suffering, supposedly “natural” social relationships – which made the baffling complexity of revolution meaningful to the educated men who took it up: not least because it licensed them to write themselves into the story as its heroes and, indeed, to act out that role in a self-consciously theatrical public sphere.⁷

The overlap between narrative strategies and the public sphere in this period has already been clearly delineated. Sarah Maza’s classic work on judicial *mémoires* has demonstrated how adversarial and contestatory processes became venues for self-definitions and narratively-structured accounts that prioritised twin salient features that persisted into the Jacobin worldview.⁸ On the one hand, plot and conspiracy, nefarious conduct, the deliberate pursuit of advantage by underhand means, the manipulation of institutions, structures and the letter of the law to obtain criminal gains. On the other, virtue and innocence, but also a form of suffering heroism – sometimes in the represented client, sometimes in the authorial voice of the lawyer himself – self-consciously relating

³ A now-classic account of Rousseauist centrality is Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue; The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1986); complemented by the more “complicating” study of influence in James Swenson, *On Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Considered as One of the First Authors of the Revolution* (Stanford, 2000). Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the cult of nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago, 2009) is a direct challenge to such views.

⁴ See Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of Revolution; Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789–1794* (Ithaca, 2011).

⁵ Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue; Jacobins in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 324.

⁶ We may note, for example, that from early 1791, every significant political dispute of the Revolution had men on both sides who had been, or still were, “Jacobins.”

⁷ This argument differs from, but I think is complementary to, that of Marisa Linton, who in *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2013) positions Jacobinism as emergent from a potentially-coherent “ideology of political virtue” (p. 3), but producing in the revolutionary context a spiralling agony of doubt and savage betrayal. Whereas Linton looks from the expressed core of political ideas outwards to other contexts, I am looking from broader contexts inwards to their influence on the expression of ideas and purposes.

⁸ Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1993).

the emotional torment both of the original wrong, and of the effort to right it against the odds.⁹

This presence – that of what the critic David Denby calls the “victimized hero” – is central to what follows.¹⁰ It foreshadows the development of fully “melodramatic” plot structures in theatre and literature as we pass through the 1790s and, as I shall argue, is a central trope of the period itself for understanding how political actors positioned themselves.¹¹ It builds upon the real cultural presence of the material conception of sensibility – a historically-specific formulation that needs to be recognised.¹² For the revolutionary generation – or at least those amongst them who adhered to the psychological sensationism and physiological concepts of nervous sensibility that underpinned these ideas – having a vibrant, emotional, sentimental response to life was normal and natural; it was in fact a condition of understanding oneself to be a fully-functional human being, in a material sense, and not to have it was *prima facie* evidence of bodily and mental corruption.¹³ Those who were thus corrupted could only be the enemies of the good.

A critical component of a wider rereading of late-eighteenth-century culture in recent decades has been an international re-evaluation of the doctrines and attitudes produced by such beliefs: what is variously called the sentimental, sensibility, or, in William Reddy’s formulation, “sentimentalism.”¹⁴ For Reddy in particular, reading the culture of the period with an anthropologist’s eye, the vivid expression of personal emotional engagement – of sensibility – seemingly required of individuals at this juncture becomes a problem to be explained. This he does with reference to the notion that

⁹ Sarah Maza, “Domestic Melodrama as Political Ideology: the case of the comte de Sanois,” *American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 1249-64.

¹⁰ David J. Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760-1820* (Cambridge, 1994), 73.

¹¹ For recent discussions of revolutionary political theatricality, see Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 2002); and Susan Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy and the French Revolution* (Baltimore, 2005). These build on a well-developed historiography, which is nonetheless detached from the explicit consideration of political sensibility and its rhetorical implications. Two starting points are Angelica Goodden, “The Dramatising of Political Theatricality and the Revolutionary Assemblies,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 20 (1984): 193-212; and Susan Maslan, “Resisting Representation: Theater and Democracy in Revolutionary France,” *Representations* 52 (1995): 27-51. See also Jean-Claude Bonnet, “La ‘Sainte mesure’, sanctuaire de la parole fondatrice,” in *La Carmagnole des muses; l’homme de lettres et l’artiste dans la Révolution*, ed. idem. (Paris, 1988), 185-222; Patrick Brasart, *Paroles de la Révolution; les assemblées parlementaires, 1789-1794* (Paris, 1988), esp. 169-89; Pierre Frantz, “Pas d’entracte pour la Révolution,” in *Carmagnole*, ed. Bonnet, 381-99; Éric Négrel, “Le théâtre au service de la Révolution; une rhétorique de l’éloge,” in *Une Expérience rhétorique; l’éloquence de la Révolution*, ed. Éric Négrel and Jean-Paul Sermain [*Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 2002:02] (Oxford, 2002), 147-64.

¹² Scott S. Bryson, *The Chastised Stage; Bourgeois Drama and the Exercise of Power*, in *Stanford French and Italian Studies* no. 70 (Saratoga, 1991) offers a crucial perspective on the conscious use of theatrical devices to stimulate sensibility in the reformist quest to remake post-Enlightenment social *moeurs*.

¹³ Essential studies here are Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, 1998); and Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2002).

¹⁴ William M. Reddy, “Sentimentalism and its Erasure: The Role of Emotions in the Era of the French Revolution,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 109-52. The general model that Reddy proposes in this article is expounded at greater length in idem., *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001).

affective experience is culturally constructed – that a language of what he calls “emotives,” culturally-framed self-descriptions of individual emotional states, reinforces the perception of such states by individuals concerned and validates the acting-out of behaviours culturally associated with such states. The capacity to have emotional experiences is, therefore, tied inextricably to wider consensus views in society about what such experiences should mean.

In the particular context of the French Revolution, Reddy argues that “sentimentalism” nurtured a cultural expectation of the performance of a “natural” sincerity through emotional excess, and this was a key component in the emergence and acceleration of the Terror, an emphasis on the performance of the natural leading to a downward spiral of dramatic declamations and ever more paranoid questionings of the true value of others’ (and even one’s own) performances.¹⁵ However, Reddy’s account of this process, while indubitably valuable as a reflection on some of the processes at work in the Revolution, is not without its own ambiguities and contradictions. The broad background of his observations is structured by the intriguing comparisons made possible by ethnographic anthropology, and it is this which underpins his thesis of the inherently culturally-conditioned nature of emotional expression (and experience).¹⁶ But when Reddy addresses the historicised context of the sentimental, he is obliged to acknowledge that other individuals living in the same culture as the “sentimentalists” refused their engagement with emotive excess and, indeed, scorned and mocked it.¹⁷ He must also note, and indeed highlights, the abrupt manner in which the translation of the sentimental into the political was halted, or at least radically altered, by the experience of the Terror and its end in Thermidor.¹⁸ The study thus poses, without being able fully to answer, intriguing questions about the extent to which “sentimentalist” positions might have been a choice or at least a response to particular conditions, perceptions and dilemmas.¹⁹ Other accounts of sentimental discourse in transnational contexts during this era have highlighted this responsive quality, the intermeshing of consciously-adopted positions, acceptance of innovatory theories about physiology, psychology and perception, and the wrestling of authors (in more-or-less good or bad faith, according to different critics) with crucial questions of social and gender transformation, warfare, colonial exploitation, and the violence of slavery and revolt.²⁰

¹⁵ See, for example, Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 172, 190-99.

¹⁶ Reddy’s argument in *Navigation of Feeling* moves from a rejection of a purely psychological understanding (chap. 1) of individual states, via ethnography’s recognition of cultural conditioning of expression (chap. 2), towards a blend of philosophical observations on “speech acts” (chap. 3), eventually to a nuanced reading of exemplary studies, pp. 130-37, which is distinctly ethnographic in outline, before proceeding to the extended historical case-study of the second part of the book. For a discussion of the critical reception of these ideas, see Andress, “Introduction: Revolutionary Historiography,” 6-7.

¹⁷ Reddy, “Sentimentalism and its Erasure,” 127.

¹⁸ This is the central theme of Reddy, “Sentimentalism and its Erasure,” see esp. 144-52.

¹⁹ For a particular near-contemporaneous “melodramatic” political performance in the British context, analysed through the ambiguities of sentimentalist practice, see Siraj Ahmed, “The Theater of the Civilized Self; Edmund Burke and the East India trials,” *Representations* 78 (2002): 28-55, esp. 44-45.

²⁰ For a specifically historical examination of sensibility’s role in political upheavals and self-fashioning in North America, see Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2009). For cultural studies more focused in the literary arena, though branching necessarily into cultural history, see Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-century Britain and France* (Baltimore, 2006); and Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel*

Much of what is distinctive about what I am calling the Jacobin outlook is, therefore, grounded in pre-revolutionary cultural and political assumptions, but it becomes potently new, potently significant, in the new circumstances established so dramatically by the opening stages of the French Revolution.²¹ We may not be able to answer the question of *why* these ideas and expressions developed as they did for some individuals and not for others, but we can observe and acknowledge the significance of the fact that they did.

The heroic dimension of self-perception already highlighted in the *memoires judiciaires* of the previous generation intersected with a pre-revolutionary political and financial world where chicanery of various kinds was the norm, and so too was the expectation and assertion of conspiratorial machination and other forms of what we might colloquially term “melodramatic” explanation.²² Not only were the press and public accustomed to interpreting the normal run of public affairs through lenses of suspicion, but the politics of the 1780s gave them new spectacles, such as the Diamond Necklace Affair, the every salacious detail of which, both true and imagined, could only reinforce the merit of such perceptions.²³ The normality of the expectation of the nefarious extends into 1789 itself. The large-scale, multi-causal events of that summer, whether in Paris or in the provinces wracked by the “Great Fear,” all had a substantial freight of plot-mongering behind them.²⁴ One can see even in the private reflections of a relatively sober observer such as Thomas Jefferson that there was an assumption of conspiratorial comprehensibility – his account of why the Revolution continued to flounder in the autumn of 1789 relied almost exclusively on the idea that radicals were being financed to destabilise the country by its foreign enemies. A “faction ... of the most desperate views” was in play, made up of “persons of wicked and desperate fortune, who have nothing at heart but to pillage from the wreck of their country.”²⁵

Under the particular social and political conditions of the French Revolution, it is essential to ground the self-descriptions that Reddy’s work prioritises within a larger field of sentimental conjuncture – of plotting – concerning which we can apply and refine the term “melodrama” from its colloquial use above to a more direct and precise definition.²⁶

(Cambridge, 1996). Two other recent works engaging with some of these issues are Emma Barker, *Greuze and the Painting of Sentiment* (Cambridge, 2005); and Stephen Ahern, *Affected Sensibilities: Romantic Excess and the Genealogy of the Novel, 1680-1810* (New York, 2007). An analysis particularly concerned with the pervasive presence of remarkably extreme depictions of violence in texts of the period is Ian Haywood, *Bloody Romanticism: Spectacular Violence and the Politics of Representation, 1776-1832* (Basingstoke, 2006).

²¹ For a parallel discussion of how old-regime assumptions could explode into revolutionary life, see Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (New York, 2009).

²² See *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*, eds., Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser and Marisa Linton (Manchester, 2007), esp. Peter R. Campbell, “Perceptions of Conspiracy on the Eve of the French Revolution,” 15-41.

²³ See Maza, *Private Lives*, ch 4.

²⁴ See John Hardman, “The Real and Imagined Conspiracies of Louis XVI,” in *Conspiracy*, eds. Campbell, Kaiser, and Linton, 63-84; David Andress, “‘Horrible Plots and Infernal Treasons,’ Conspiracy and the Urban Landscape in the Early Revolution,” *idem*, 85-105.

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Papers*, ed. J.P. Boyd (Princeton, 1958), vol. 15, p. 359; despatch to Secretary of State Jay, 27 August 1789.

²⁶ The balance between colloquial, technical and more broadly contextual definitions of the term can be hard to retain even for specialists: Emmet Kennedy, Marie Laurence Netter, James P. McGregor and Mark

Melodrama has been given significant attention by historians in recent decades, largely focused on its politics as it emerged as a mature genre in post-revolutionary Europe, and was perceived as a conservative, individualising response to the threat of social upheaval.²⁷ As Julia Pryzbos notes, “melodramas always portray a harmoniously hierarchical social order,” in which “everyone is quick to fulfil the role to which they were assigned at birth.”²⁸ This, however, is only half the story, for melodrama is the close lineal descendant of the *drame bourgeois*, which authors of the pre-revolutionary decades had used to aspire to a social and moral upheaval of their own, a rejection of the stereotype of noble distinction in favour of the virtues of the ordinary man and woman, and a profoundly sentimentalist conception of the potential reformatory impact of stage acting on the individual spectator.²⁹

In his classic study of the “melodramatic imagination,” Peter Brooks noted that the melodramatic form – in both theatre and literature – involved “a search for a new plenitude, an ethical recentring,” which he associated with its underlying dynamic, an anxiety “created by the guilt experienced when the allegiance and ordering that pertained to a sacred system of things no longer pertains.”³⁰ While, read negatively, this can easily be assimilated to the cultural conservatism of the developed nineteenth-century form, it is arguably also applicable in a more positive, dynamic sense to the politics of the French Revolution within their now-acknowledged sentimentalist context.³¹ The anxieties, the quest for plenitude, these mark out the revolutionary project from its origins, just as the classic tropes of revolutionary politics – the appeal to nature, family and *patrie*, the

V. Olsen, *Theatre, Opera and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris, Analysis and Repertory* (Westport, 1996), note that plays which described themselves as “mélodrame” amounted to only 0.7% of those documented by this study, but as they observe, “The Revolution itself can be said to have been a veritable melodrama with its scenes of eternal love between its king and its nation, its nation and its representatives, the ensuing carnage, and the Terror, when one never knew if the denunciation of one’s neighbour would not make of oneself, tomorrow, the condemned person whom the charrette took off to the guillotine” (p. 63).

²⁷ For a recent recapitulation of this treatment, in the context of an exploration of the social performativity of melodramatic theatre-going, see Denise Z. Davidson, *France After Revolution: Urban Life, Gender and the New Social Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), esp. 82-102 and works cited therein. On historical attention to melodramatic forms in later nineteenth-century history, see Rohan McWilliam, “Melodrama and the Historians,” *Radical History Review* 78 (2000): 57-84.

²⁸ Julia Pryzbos, *L’entreprise mélodramatique* (Paris, 1987), 63, cited in Davidson, *France after Revolution*, 216 n. 23.

²⁹ See Bryson, *Chastised Stage*. On the emergence of the pioneers of *drame bourgeois* such as Michel-Jean Sedaine from the “low” forms of fair and boulevard theatres, see Robert Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy; Popular entertainment in eighteenth-century Paris* (Oxford, 1986), chapter 5. On the intriguing cross-generic experimentation of this form of writing, see Mark Ledbury, *Sedaine, Greuze and the Boundaries of Genre* (Oxford, 2000) (SVEC 380), and see therein pp. 3-9 for a historical-critical survey of work on the *drame*.

³⁰ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, 1976), 200.

³¹ Lynn Hunt’s work on the Revolution’s “family romance” offers a sidelight on how pervasive such connections can be as she reads the “birth” of melodrama through a combination of revolutionary politics and Freudian conceptualisations, while sidestepping the cultural circularity of such readings – for what is Freudianism but “a version of melodrama,” as Brooks himself notes? Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London, 1992), esp. 181-91; Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 201.

condemnation of hypocrisy, the call for unveiling and unmasking – are all part-and-parcel of the dramatising of *sensibilité* that foreshadows the melodrama.³²

In a political struggle that was consciously heroic, the sentimentally-constructed self-conception of the Revolution's leading actors – and many of its bit-part players – was driven towards becoming a melodramatic inflation of significance, a fervent and fervid assertion of transcendent meaningfulness. This gave the Jacobinism at the heart of this movement both its energetic core and its opacity to rational analysis as an ideology because Jacobinism was not a position, but a story. In that sense, the question of whether specific individuals believed it sincerely about themselves, accepted it as a depiction of others' reality, or adopted it as a cynical mask for self-preservation, is (as well as being literally unanswerable in many cases on the available evidence) beside the point of understanding how the narrative context could move so many in such strange directions.

The remainder of this paper will explore some brief case-studies of how a heroic sensibility could manifest itself in actual revolutionary circumstances. We begin at the very start of the Revolution, before, indeed, the word "Jacobin" had acquired a political meaning. The writings of Elisée Loustalot in the new weekly newspaper the *Révolutions de Paris* would do a great deal (despite his own early death in 1790) to establish the politicised tropes of the future movement in the public sphere. We can see this in his representation of the death of Louis Berthier de Sauvigny, killed on 22 July 1789 by a crowd for his asserted role, as chief administrator of the Paris region, in the famine-plot which had preceded, and precipitated, the storming of the Bastille. This text demonstrates vividly how the tropes of sentimentalist literary construction could be deployed to create a dramatic impact in the new forms of liberated revolutionary journalism.³³

The story opens with the arrested Berthier's efforts to bribe his way to freedom. Loustalot imposes an immediate moral: how could he have suspected, with his old-regime spirit, "that a being without bread could be incorruptible?" Next, the documents on Berthier's person are examined and provide "authentic title to his perfidious plots" to arm troops against the city, to destroy crops in the fields and to starve the Parisians.³⁴ This highly-questionable assertion allows Loustalot to present what follows as an unreservedly merited fate. As he progresses towards the actual killing, Loustalot intensifies his focus on the awfulness of what is happening, but it is tempered with the insistence on the victim status of those preparing to commit terrible acts: "vile tyrants!" he declaims, "it is your infamous projects, your treasons which excuse their delirium.... Alas! Amongst these thousands of the indigent, three-quarters have seen some of their

³² Views on the general tenor of revolutionary imagery can be found in Hunt, *Family Romance of the French Revolution*, along with her earlier *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984) and Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: corporeal metaphor in revolutionary France, 1770-1800* (Stanford, 1993). For a brief treatment of the history of revolutionary "unmasking," see James H. Johnson, "Versailles, meet Les Halles: masks, carnival and the French Revolution," *Representations* 73 (2001): 89-116. See also Richard Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances: representations of dress in revolutionary France* (Oxford, 2002).

³³ For the general context of Loustalot's work, see Jack R. Censer, *Prelude to Power: The Parisian Radical Press, 1789-1791* (Baltimore, 1976), esp. 25, 58, 66. Jeremy Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799* (Durham, N.C., 1990), 50, notes that Loustalot's contributions were so valuable to his publisher Prudhomme that he was paid a remarkable salary, equivalent to 25,000 *livres* annually. See also 32, 72-3, 99.

³⁴ *Révolutions de Paris, dédiées à la nation*, no. 2 (18-25 July 1789): 21.

family perish of exhaustion or penury!” And Berthier is “one of the principal authors of their ills... what fury, what madness does the presence of such an enemy not inspire!”³⁵

Now, embarked on a page which contains no fewer than eighteen exclamation marks, Loustalot depicts the killing. It is a curious mix of the generalising – as if it could be true that “ten thousand arms” seized him – and the personalising, a personalising that is also, once again, a sentimental legitimization of vengeance:

Already Berthier is no more; his head already is merely a mutilated mass separated from his body; already a man ... a man! ... O Gods! The barbarian! He tears his heart from his palpitating entrails. What am I saying? He revenges himself on a monster! This monster had killed his father.

And at this point Loustalot inserts a footnote: “M. Berthier had really killed, so one is assured, the father of the Dragoon who did this.”³⁶

Although clearly presented as if an eye-witness account, this presentation is evidently part of the author’s narrative decision-making. While consonant with other narratives we have of these events, this is essentially a fictive product. Forming in actuality part of an extended political narrative of the entire week’s events, written in clear retrospect, it is yet presented in breathless prose – almost to the modern eye like a live commentary – which is a hallmark of the literary sentimental, and especially the latter’s reliance on the fictive immediacy of the epistolary novel. In its structure, with its imploring of the deity, its repeated points of suspension, its “I can’t go on, I must go on” hesitations, it is above all else a narrative of authorial sensibility, intended, presumably, as such narratives were, to invoke shared feelings in its audience. Meanwhile, just as Loustalot constructs himself and his reader as what English sentimental literature dubbed a “man of feeling,” he is also constructing the crowd – the people, great object of Jacobin idolatry – as one great collective “man of feeling” too.³⁷ That sense of emotive collective identity will remain central throughout the years to come. What is, to us, a blatantly literary fictionalization of events can also be understood in the sentimentalist context as a quest for “truthful” presentation of their essential meaning.³⁸

Another example of a journalist takes us a further year into the revolutionary story, and presents us with an intriguing limit-case of the effort to use sentimental, heroic, melodramatic language as a route to political participation. François Robert emerged from complete provincial obscurity onto the Parisian authorial and political stage in 1790, it would appear almost entirely on the strength of his literary self-representation. As far as the evidence allows us to see, he was almost always unsuccessful in more material organising efforts, yet he became a fixture of the Paris Jacobins and ultimately a stalwart Montagnard member of the National Convention. If he only approached the giddy heights of true political distinction, he nonetheless made a long journey towards that summit, building the path out of his own words.

³⁵ *Révolutions de Paris*, no. 2, 23-4.

³⁶ *Révolutions de Paris*, no. 2, 24.

³⁷ See Denby, *Sentimental Narrative*, 74, on the “curious intermediary role between telling the story and being an actor within it” often adopted by sentimental narrators.

³⁸ It is ironic in this context to note that Marat, wedded to an even more bloodthirsty style, noted of Loustalot on his death that he “Kn[ew] nothing of the great forms of eloquence” capable of “inciting an ignorant, cowardly and corrupt people to break its tyrants’ yoke.” Popkin, *Revolutionary News*, 147.

Robert's journalistic career can be charted very precisely in the pages of the *Mercure national*, a newspaper he first contributed to, in the form of a brief letter, in January 1790, and which within a few months he was effectively co-editing.³⁹ Each stage in this process was moulded by very overt sentimental self-representation. His first letter described events in his home-town of Givet in the Ardennes, where locals had hosted a celebration for patriots from across the frontier in the Austrian Netherlands. The patriots pledged mutual aid before their guests left at 5 a.m., "as much as this departure seemed to affect their sensibility, so much was it beautiful and memorable for them." As six hundred locals escorted the Brabançons out of town, they cheered "long live the patriots, long live liberty: this touching spectacle, the concern for the fate of their arms, drew tears of joy from several..."⁴⁰

His first signed piece appeared two weeks later, a review of a pamphlet by the comte de Sanois, victim in one of the most celebrated of the previous decades' *causes célèbres*.⁴¹ Robert left no sentimental stone unturned: "an illustrious victim of ministerial despotism, a good Frenchman, an unfortunate spouse, an outraged father, a Patriotic Breton ... so well-known for his virtues and his calamities.... Frank, honest, sincere," the comte was "a Citizen in a time when it was almost a crime to be one."⁴² Robert contrasted the comte's manners with those of his wife and daughter, noting in a classic sentimentalist trope that they did not find "at the bottom of their hearts a sentiment of pity" in persecuting him. Robert's summing-up leaves his readers in no doubt of his own wishes for the sentimental side of national unity: "it seems that we no longer know any but a single family, dwelling in the same house, and submitting to the same rules ... there is no idea more suited to *fraterniser* all the French..."⁴³ Other reviews followed, in which again Robert used explicitly sentimentalist language to link individual suffering with the national cause.

Robert had come to Paris from Givet, where he had been the elected commander of the local National Guard, ostensibly to bring to the notice of the National Assembly the unjust machinations of the aristocratic clique that maintained control of local politics. At the end of May 1790 he exposed all of these in the pages of the *Mercure*, writing of their plot to profit from selling flour unfit for human consumption and their legal machinations to condemn those, including himself, who sought to take action against them:

No more was wanting than to have burned the printed *mémoires* of the commune, or rather their author [that is, Robert]: and there is the justice that the executive power has rendered to fathers stricken with grief, who still weep for the death of their children assassinated by the use of this flour, and who will soon be torn away by bailiffs from atop their tombs, to be dragged into dungeons, for failure to pay soon enough the costs of the judgment...⁴⁴

³⁹ For a general overview of Robert's life and career, see L. Antheunis, *Le conventionnel belge Francois Robert (1763-1826) et sa femme Louise de Kéralio (1758-1882 [sic, for 1828])* (Wetteren, n.d.)

⁴⁰ *Mercure national, ou journal d'état et du citoyen*, vol. 1, no. 6, 347-49, citations on 349.

⁴¹ See Maza, "Domestic Melodrama."

⁴² *Mercure national*, vol. 1, no. 8, 433-38, citation 433, 434.

⁴³ *Mercure national*, vol. 1, no. 8, 435, 437, 438.

⁴⁴ *Mercure national*, vol. 2, no. 7, 436-37.

All of which is, of course, squarely in the melodramatic, victim-heroic mould; yet Robert had been in Paris for at least four months by now, and though he had taken the opportunity to print a loyal address on behalf of his fellow National Guards in March, he had in the meantime also wooed and wed his co-editor, Louise de Kéralio, and endeavoured to set himself up with a second career lecturing in public law for a short-lived “polysophical society.”⁴⁵ Having in his March address sworn religious submission to the laws “in the name of my brothers in arms and my own,” pledging “to defend them at peril of our properties and our lives,” he seemed – to a cynical modern eye – more concerned in fact with reinventing himself as a commentator and Parisian activist.⁴⁶

There is little question that by this stage Robert was close to the peak of his personal political rise. He was later to play an active part in the emergence of the popular society movement in early 1791, but some of his public encounters had an air of inadvertent slapstick about them. When he was arrested in possession of a pile of inflammatory Cordeliers Club posters the day after the Flight to Varennes, his attempt to strike a defiant pose before the authorities descended into chaos as a misunderstanding over his use of the word “apprehend” caused several National Guards to believe he was mocking their cowardice, and they started a brawl in the guardhouse.⁴⁷ As Madame Roland recalled, when he petitioned his Girondin friends in power the following year for an ambassadorial position, they laughed at him behind his back.⁴⁸

Read with a critical eye, even some of Robert’s earliest literary efforts suggest why he might have been unsuccessful at striking the heroic pose off the page – sometimes he really tried too hard. In late March 1790, for example, he prefaced one of his long book-reviews with this anecdote in a letter that Louise de Kéralio, perhaps already smitten, uncritically reproduced:

I shall tell you what I underwent today around 11 a.m.. I had my soul and heart full of sublime ideas of liberty and equality, the lowest labourer was my equal, but by the same principle I believed myself the equal of every other citizen. It seemed to me that in a well-organised state, all distinctions are but imaginary and outrageous. Citizen, friend to all, the equal of all, I leave home on business, and traverse the superb garden of the Tuileries. I am a soldier of the *patrie*, at this mark they let me penetrate the public garden; there the son of the first citizen [i.e. the *dauphin*] is walking with women, men, National Guards, etc. I went closer to see the child; but would you believe it, mademoiselle, in the century and the *patrie* of equality, in a public garden, in a place belonging to all, the satellites of the young child stopped me, me, who wanted only to cross an alley of trees, and

⁴⁵ For the address, see *Mercure national*, vol. 1, no. 13, 825-28. For Robert’s other activities, see *Mercure national*, vol. 1, no. 13, 828. See also prospectus published separately, *Société polysophique ou école de sciences utiles et agréables. Prospectus* (Paris, [1790]) [BnF RZ- 2976]

⁴⁶ Censer, *Prelude to Power*, 14-15, gives a rather sanitised account of Robert’s political life and meeting with the Kéralios. For a summary of the couple’s early work, focused heavily on the more established reputation of Louise, see Leigh Whaley, “Partners in Revolution: Louise de Kéralio and François Robert, editors of the *Mercure national*, 1789-1791,” in *Enlightenment and Revolution: Essays in honour of Norman Hampson*, ed. M. Crook, A. Forrest and W. Doyle (London, 2004), 114-131.

⁴⁷ David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution* (Woodbridge, 2000), 153-54.

⁴⁸ Auguste Kuscinski, *Dictionnaire des conventionnels*, (Paris, 1916) [repr. Paris, 1973], 530.

did not let me take a step until the *august* child was far off. Judge after that if we are free and equal...⁴⁹

The kind of pomposity in person that such an account hints at may explain Robert's failure to rise much higher. Yet he was well enough regarded amongst his radical fellows to win election from Paris to the National Convention in 1792 (albeit possibly aided by Louise Robert's longstanding friendship with Robespierre). Later, dogged by debts and allegations of attempted profiteering, he resorted on several occasions to published appeals, in which the rhetoric of self-sacrificing heroism continued to echo:

Citizens, forget François Robert here as he is proud to forget himself for you, as he will glory in forgetting himself always; think only of comparing the facts, weighing them in your judgment, and you will conclude that the interest of the Republic, that your most pressing interest, lies in gathering closely around your representatives, in making them respected, for it is you, citizens, that you respect in them. They are your work, they exist through you and for you, they are only happy in your happiness, glorious in your glory, rich in your wealth, jealous only of your esteem, and of your trust.⁵⁰

What is most intriguing about Robert is that he came so close to being a major political figure before his underlying insignificance began to matter. In the maelstrom of the early revolutionary public sphere, the tropes of melodrama that he unhesitatingly deployed in print about himself as author and protagonist appear to have been able to stand in – almost successfully – for any genuine distinction of ideas or action.⁵¹ In this his case represents one end of a spectrum of routes to, and trajectories through, Jacobin prominence. Alongside it we might put that of the future Girondin *conventionnel* Louvet de Couvrai. He was the author of three novels in the late 1780s, works which represent an entirely typical combination of libertine sexuality and sub-Rousseauian sentimentalist entanglements. By Louvet's own account, the sentiments expressed in these works of fiction were held to be sufficient attestation of his revolutionary credentials, when in 1791 he was promoted to a place on the correspondence committee of the Paris Jacobins, and he seems to have blended sentimentalist conventions seamlessly into his own political life. He learned of the fall of the Bastille in 1789 while at Nemours with his lover (and future second wife – after he had pioneered divorce legislation), whom he had nicknamed after the heroine of his novels, Lodoiska. His response, again recorded by his own hand some years later, was profound:

⁴⁹ *Mercur national*, vol. 1, no. 13, 803-13, citation at 804-05.

⁵⁰ *François Robert, député de Paris, à ses concitoyens* (Paris, [September 1793]), 5-6. See also *François Robert, à ses frères de la Société des Amis de la Constitution, de la Société Fraternelle, et du Club des Cordeliers* (Paris, [May 1792, from internal evidence]), 2-4, in which he asserted that the source of his debts was largely down to the running-costs of the newspaper and (rather unchivalrously) also to "engagements" he signed for his father-in-law that the latter failed to honour. The charge of being a grocer followed him into the *Dictionnaire des conventionnels*, 530.

⁵¹ Robert's future career, embedded after Thermidor in Belgium, making and losing considerable sums in military provisioning before a long, slow decline into impoverished old age, demonstrated that he never did really escape what his biographer calls somewhat harshly his "atavistic mercantile instincts." Antheunis, *Conventionnel belge*, 89.

At that very moment, I put on the tricolour cockade which had been won at such a bloody price. How can I paint the emotional transports with which this cockade was given me and with which I adopted it? I was at the knees of my tender friend. With my tears I drenched her hands which I then placed upon my furiously beating heart!⁵²

While Louvet might recall such scenes of private melodrama, Maximilien Robespierre provides us with an example of the furthest end of this spectrum, where commitment to public life occupied almost the whole of his expression – and of course lifted him to the heights of power and subsequent infamy. One of the fundamental things about Robespierre’s performances, which often appear to the jaded modern reader as hideously over-the-top, is the fact that they did resonate very clearly with his audiences. Robespierre’s long months of lonely struggle to be heard in the National Assembly between 1789 and 1791 built him a reputation that made declamations about heroic virtue not merely credible, but compelling.⁵³

Thus for example, on 21 June 1791, in the immediate aftermath of the king’s “Flight to Varennes,” Robespierre addressed the Jacobin Club on events in the National Assembly.⁵⁴ Having lambasted the hesitant and compromising attitudes on display there, he perorated in his already well-established style:

Perhaps, in speaking to you with this frankness, I am going to draw down upon me the hatred of all the parties. They will certainly feel that they will never reach the end of their designs, so long as there remains amongst them a single just and courageous man who will continually unravel their projects and who, scorning life, fears neither steel nor poison, and would be only too happy if his death could be useful to liberty and the *patrie*.⁵⁵

In response to this, reportedly, “the holy enthusiasm of virtue seized hold of the entire assembly, and each member swore, in the name of liberty, to defend M. Robespierre even at peril of his life.” Georges-Jacques Danton joined in, personally raising the self-sacrificing stakes with a “formal engagement” to “carry his head onto the scaffold” or to

⁵² Information in this paragraph on Louvet is taken from Kathryn Norberg, “‘Love and Patriotism’: Gender and Politics in the Life and Work of Louvet de Couvrai,” in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, ed. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (Oxford 1992), 38-53 (quotation from 38). As the title suggests, this piece is concerned primarily with Louvet’s gender-politics, rather than his sentimentalism, which is largely taken for granted.

⁵³ For a variety of views on the career of Robespierre, see *Robespierre*, eds. Colin Haydon and William Doyle (Cambridge, 1999); John Hardman, *Robespierre*, (London, 1999); *Robespierre: figure-réputation*, ed. Annie Jourdan (Amsterdam, 1996); and the recent biography by Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, 2012).

⁵⁴ On this episode in general, see Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight*, (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

⁵⁵ F.-A. Aulard, *La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*, 6 vols, (Paris, 1889-1897), 2: 533. For an extended case-study of Robespierre’s self-conception, see David Andress, “Living the Revolutionary Melodrama: Robespierre’s Sensibility and the Construction of Political Commitment in the French Revolution,” *Representations* 114 (2011): 103–128.

prove that it should be “the traitors” whose heads “must fall at the feet of the nation, that they have betrayed.”⁵⁶

Camille Desmoulins, witnessing the speech and reporting its effects in his newspaper, noted, “I was moved by this to tears at more than one point,” and as Robespierre spoke of his own death found himself exclaiming “we shall all die before thee,” joined in this by “more than eight hundred persons [who] rose as one and, led like me by an involuntary movement, swore to rally around Robespierre, and offered an admirable *tableau* by the fire of their words, the action of their hands, of their hats, of all their faces, and by the unexpectedness of this sudden inspiration.”⁵⁷ While by *tableau* Desmoulins might merely have meant “picture,” the term was in contemporary usage as the label for an absolutely central element of sentimentalist aesthetics, the theatrical practice of immobilising the action on a striking point of emotive resonance, with the explicit aim of eliciting appropriate sentimental response in an audience – very much the effect spoken of here.⁵⁸ The revolutionary auditors have placed themselves inside the *tableau*, and live it as reality – one they were, so it reportedly felt, compelled to take part in by their own physical response to Robespierre’s heroic sentimental example.

In the cauldron of the Paris Jacobin Club, sensibility could emerge in such apparently spontaneous gestures, but it could also be conjured up in prepared addresses. Collot d’Herbois authored in June and July 1791 several afflicting reports to the Club on the fate of the Swiss soldiers who had “mutinied” in Nancy the previous year, calling into question the very nature of their alleged crimes. In a speech originally given in mid-June, and ordered printed and distributed by the Club on the 26th, Collot announced that “Forty-one soldiers, branded, have departed for the galleys of Brest ... All sensitive [*sensibles*] men are affected [*attendris*] by their fate and demand all the commiseration of which you are capable.” Collot offered a long recital of their woes, including notably the fact that some had not even been present at the fighting but were selected arbitrarily for punishment afterwards: “I afflict you cruelly, Messieurs, but it is the truth, it is the most desolating truth, I shudder to tell it.” Against this, he overtly positions the opportunity to rectify injustice as a chance for sentimental self-gratification: “if the fate of these unfortunate soldiers was not sufficiently touching [*attendrissant*], if every minute of their sufferings was not long enough for sensitive souls, I would congratulate you on this new occasion reserved to you for manifesting your sentiments.”⁵⁹

On 6 July Collot reported on a subsidiary affair, that of thirty soldiers implicated in a complex incident involving fleeing aristocratic officers, recalcitrant garrisons, and general confusion, which had resulted in them being held in chains for six months before receiving dishonourable discharges. This was the result of “odious manoeuvres, concerted in the offices of the ministry by Old Regime clerks” and of the calculated vengeance of the aristocratic officers who had been scorned during the turbulent events of the summer of 1790. The thirty men unjustly detained came from a detachment which Collot credited as having saved one general, Malseigne, from popular vengeance. Collot

⁵⁶ Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, 2: 533.

⁵⁷ Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes*, (orig. pub. 1910-67, repr. Paris, 2000), vol 7, 523 (footnote).

⁵⁸ See Denby, *Sentimental Narrative*, 75-78, 86; Emma Barker, *Greuze and the Painting of Sentiment* (Cambridge, 2005), esp. 11-12.

⁵⁹ Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, 2: 555-62, citations at 556, 560, 562

ended, as so many sentimental narratives did, with a personalisation of the broader case. Officers had saved from punishment one of the original party “from the caste of former nobles” by substituting another: “And which one, do you believe? A soldier who, by Malseigne’s own avowal, had saved his life. After having embraced him, had him eat with him, calling him his tutelary deity, this perfidious general promised him a recommendation, and that recommendation was such that it almost became for this soldier a death-warrant. O noble sentiments of gratitude!”⁶⁰

In a text like this, there is often cause to wonder if factual accuracy has been sacrificed to a higher, more poetic conception of truth. The perfidy here is surely too perfectly nasty to be real. And yet it clearly represents how the Jacobins wish to understand the revolution they are living through. It is the conception of political experience as melodrama, in which there is always a suffering hero to be singled out, always a villain who is not merely unpleasant, but positively, actively, destabilisingly evil. More broadly, it sits within the repeatedly-affirmed narrative context of the nation and the people as a family, close to nature, united by affective bonds, yet threatened with dissolution from the plots of the outcast enemy. This, in the post-revolutionary future of the stage melodrama, would become a conservative trope about the restoration of paternal and familial connections. Here, under revolutionary circumstances, the restoration of natural social bonds against the working of nefarious evil is a radical cause.

As France moved closer to the brink of Terror, passing through further epic dramas of betrayal – the 10 August 1792 “massacre” of patriots at the storming of the Tuileries, the flight of General Lafayette, raging conflict in the political class that led in April 1793 to the further treason of General Dumouriez (who had physically embraced Robespierre at the tribune of the Jacobin Club a year before),⁶¹ the purging of the Girondins and outbreak of “federalist” insurrection in June 1793, all against the background of perpetual royalist and Catholic counter-revolutionary upheaval – ardent revolutionaries grew ever-more focused on the heroic unity required to defeat their pullulating enemies, and melodramatic language took centre-stage.⁶² On 10 August 1793, provincial delegates for the Festival of Unity and Indivisibility declared to the National Convention that “Paris is no longer in the Republic, but the whole Republic is in Paris: we all have here but a single sentiment; all our souls are merged [*confondues*], and triumphant liberty gazes out over none but Jacobins, brothers and friends.” The preface to this declamation announced, “Yes, legislators, we are come to identify ourselves with you... Our sentiments are as pure as the liberty that inspires us.” Declaring that the delegates would now go to salute the Jacobin Club, the spokesman proclaimed “there we will again merge all our sentiments, all our souls in a bundle [*faisceau*, the Republican *fascis*] of unity whose name alone will be the horror of tyrants.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, 2: 590, 595.

⁶¹ See Address, “Living,” 118. Robespierre and Brissot had similarly embraced in January 1792.

⁶² This conflictual context could be very close and personal: Jean-Paul Marat on one occasion produced a pistol and threatened to blow his own brains out at the tribune, while by early 1793 physical clashes between Girondins and their “Montagnard” opponents on the floor of the Convention were not unknown. Peter France, “Speakers and Audience: the first days of the Convention,” in *Language and Rhetoric of the Revolution*, ed. John Renwick (Edinburgh, 1990), 50-68; see the discussion of this period in Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 148-68.

⁶³ Cited in Lucien Jaume, *Le Discours jacobin et la démocratie* (Paris, 1989), 118-19.

Yet amidst these evocations of the heroic collective nature of a melodramatic struggle, room could still be found for the sensitivity to pathos that was the reverse of that rhetorical coin. On 5 September 1793 the Jacobin Club and the Paris Commune would lead crowds to the Convention demanding stern, indeed merciless action against counter-revolution.⁶⁴ But only a few weeks earlier, on 14 August, a delegation from the Paris Commune petitioned the Convention about the prisons. They were not concerned with counter-revolutionary plots, nor as they would be in September with the detention of suspects. Rather, their sensibility had been moved by tales of abuse, and their response invoked almost every available cliché of the radical republican as a man of feeling:

The cries of humanity have resounded through all the sections of Paris. Free men are never deaf to the voices of the unfortunate; and it is for them, to destroy the excess of abuses of which they are the victims, that in the name of this city, we demand from your justice a law which, in ameliorating the treatment of prisoners, should ease their fate, should guarantee, in a location consecrated to remorse or unhappiness, the tender and sensitive sex from frightful seductions and brutal assaults that several have suffered there, should punish the greed of guards who are always too harsh and sometimes barbaric ...⁶⁵

The petition noted that “it is costly to sensitive [*sensibles*] souls to trace the *tableaux* which lacerate hearts and make nature suffer, but it is in the bosom of the representatives of a generous and magnanimous people that we deposit our solicitude...” This language runs through the long list of concerns over the internal management of the prisons, culminating thus, in an image worthy of a Greuze canvas (and echoing Robert’s language of 1790):

Is it this father torn from the arms of a cherished spouse and from his still-growing children, flung into a cell, or rather a tomb, who after having blessed and graven into his heart the rights of man and the citizen, would be reduced to learning that he lives in the century of liberty only by remaining piled up with other accused in an obscure prison, without a chair, with no bed but rotten straw, and without food save that which could injure his health?⁶⁶

Here, the elements of pity and identification with suffering that are so close to the core of sensibility jar with what we know of the aggressive and suspicious sans-culotte mentality, yet they clearly still form part of the self-awareness of the municipal petitioners.⁶⁷ In

⁶⁴ David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution* (London, 2004), 178-9, 205-9.

⁶⁵ *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*. Série 1, ed. J Mavidal and E Laurent, Paris, 1897-1913 [hereafter AP], vol 72, 143.

⁶⁶ AP 72: 144; see Denby, *Sentimental Narrative*, 75-78, 86; Barker, *Greuze and the Painting of Sentiment*, esp. 11-12.

⁶⁷ For an analysis of the “harder” dimensions of Parisian sans-culotte rhetoric in these same weeks, see Diane Ladjouzi, “Les Journées des 4 et 5 septembre 1793 à Paris; un mouvement d’union entre le peuple, la Commune de Paris et la Convention pour un exécutif révolutionnaire,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 3 (2000): 27-44; and for a contrasting analysis of the competing political visions involved see Christian A. Muller, “Du ‘peuple égaré’ au ‘peuple enfant’: le discours politique

other cases, the concerns that married protection with sacrifice, punishment with virtue, ran much closer to the surface.

The Convention received petitions as part of its regular daily business, as it also received reports almost daily from the many representatives on mission it had begun to send out in the spring of 1793, and who in that summer in particular were often at the heart of combat. In the southeast, the future Thermidorians Barras and Fréron were at this point locked in struggle with Federalist rebels, while penning firmly melodramatic accounts of their deeds, and those of the patriots around them, in a lengthy report that reached the Convention on 21 August. One town, Le Beausset, had sent 500 men to them, after having refused the blandishments of Federalist authorities in Toulon: “they answered only by seizing their arms, embracing their wives and their children, and setting off on a forced march, by night and day, to reach the representatives of the people.” They thus “devote themselves to the cause of liberty with the certainty of sacrificing their wives, their children and their property.” Amidst the horrors of civil war, though we may suspect that this is a patent exaggeration, it is just as likely to have appeared as a true and terrifying peril, though one which itself had to be talked up in uncompromising sentimental style: “Nothing is finer in ancient or modern history than this deed and this attitude. They burn to punish the massacres of which Toulon and Marseille have been the theatres. We are obliged to moderate their impatient ardour.”⁶⁸

After a further “rapid sketch of our operations,” Barras and Fréron promised, “We see only the Constitution to sustain, rebellion to extinguish, and the shades of our brothers to avenge: we shall perish beneath the walls of Marseille, or the Midi will be saved.” After a final note of the reported death of one colleague at the hands of a Federalist tribunal, they ended sombrely, “others in quantity are going to accompany his shade. Insolence and oppression are at their height: we are marching.”⁶⁹

It is hard not to take the writings of such men with a pinch of salt, yet if it is always open to us to suspect that their rhetorical form was consciously exaggerated, it is also necessary to acknowledge, on the one hand, that these men were indeed marching into combat and, on the other, that many with less tortuous future paths of loyalty were writing in the same terms. If we set aside the unanswerable question of what they, in their hearts, really felt at that moment, we are left with the material evidence that even this pair, later to turn their coats so dramatically, were invested at some level in the sentimental resonances of this moment.⁷⁰

Other letters arriving on the same day from the mountainous battleground of the western Pyrenees delved even deeper into an imagery (and an apparent reality) of martial heroism and self-sacrificing virtue. The representative Jean Féraud, accompanying an expedition under general Delalain, noted that in one engagement he had himself “fought

révolutionnaire à l'épreuve de la révolte populaire en 1793,” *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 47 (2000): 93-112.

⁶⁸ AP 72: 559. The letter is dated 26 July at its opening, but internal evidence indicates it was completed some time after 5 August – see AP 72: 556, 560.

⁶⁹ AP 72: 560

⁷⁰ We might also observe that, at least until some months after the fall of Robespierre, the “Thermidorians” did not regard themselves as having changed sides at all, but as having saved the Republic: see, classically, Bronislaw Baczko, *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre* (Cambridge, 1994); and more recently, Laura Mason, “The Thermidorian Reaction,” in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, ed. Peter McPhee (Chichester, 2013). 313-27.

for more than seven hours,” but reserved special praise for the general, who at a critical juncture, threw off his boots “which hindered activity in running amongst the rocks ... and for more than half an hour, barefoot, drove back the enemy across the precipices.”⁷¹ The general’s own report repeatedly praised Féraud, who had fought alongside him “sabre in hand,” and on one occasion, finding a village put to the torch by retreating enemies, and “having been told that ... an old man who could not, through his infirmities, leave his bed” was about to be consumed in flames, had gone in to save him. This was despite the fact that “they cried out to him that the house was full of gunpowder, and there was everything to fear.” Féraud threw himself “into the middle of the flames, and snatched from them the living prey they were going to consume.” In the same village, Féraud and the general had ensured the safety of the village church, finding a volunteer amongst their troops to cut down burning thatch, and had “calmed, as much as we could, the distress of women left there who feared that the Republic would avenge itself on them for the crimes of their husbands, and no harm was done to them.”⁷²

Delalain closed with a more general eulogy to his troops’ sentiments of humanity: “What gives a great contentment to my soul is the generosity with which our soldiers, even in the midst of combat, have treated the prisoners. They have given them their bread and their water ... their wounds have been bandaged with care.” This was juxtaposed unselfconsciously to his next, and final, sentence, indicating the capture of a refractory priest: “it is just that he should suffer the penalty decreed against these scoundrels who are the cause of all our misfortunes,” that is, death.⁷³ Féraud’s own report had ended on a similar tone to Barras and Fréron’s, indeed with an even greater commitment to self-sacrifice:

Be assured, citizen colleagues, that while I am exhausted by four months of treks and alerts, while I feel all the need of some days of rest to re-establish my truly ruined health, I shall always prefer my duty and the interest of the Republic to my own existence, and I shall take all my happiness, not in being well, but in doing well, in meriting your trust and your esteem, that I greatly prefer above my own life.⁷⁴

What we see in these few paragraphs is, I would argue, a core component of the spirit, the underlying mentality, of the Terror. These Jacobins had experienced the revolutionary process through a sensationist, sentimentalist mental and cultural apparatus, which I think we need to appreciate in ways which go beyond William Reddy’s discussion of the somewhat flat and static self-description of “emotives.” Sensibility shaped how revolutionaries understood what should be said about the great events of the time; it shaped how figures both great and small worked to craft their presence in the new political and media culture of the 1790s; it created the environment for expressions of

⁷¹ AP 72: 560-61.

⁷² AP 72: 562-63.

⁷³ AP 72: 563.

⁷⁴ AP 72: 561. Féraud, of course, would perish in tragic futility at the hands of the protesting *sans-culottes* of 1795, despite, in Carlyle’s words, “baring his bosom scarred in the Spanish wars” in an appeal for unity: Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* [orig. pub. London, 1837], Book 3, Chapter 7.5, consulted at <<http://carlyle.classicauthors.net/FrenchRevolution/FrenchRevolution156.html>> on 24 August 2009.

emotional unity and resonance that were clearly experienced as a transformative, heroic pathway to an epochal destiny; and in many cases it stimulated behaviour that was indeed, by any reasonable measure, heroic. Yet perhaps most significantly of all, in its melodramatic construction of narrative understanding, the revolutionary sensibility framed the enemies of revolution as an ever-present, conspiring, concealed nemesis, licensing the acceptance and justification of spiralling violence as a similarly heroic – and indeed self-sacrificing – response to a diabolical threat.

Revolutionary politics have often been seen, especially in the revisionist age, as carried away on a flood of words disconnected from reality. Heroic Jacobin sensibility may not be the golden thread that leads to the secret of understanding the French Revolution, but it needs to be woven back into the story we tell because it shows us that the most apparently bizarre exaggerations of rhetoric – and ultimately practice – can be connected to both lived experience and materially-grounded theories of human nature. To shy away from, and indeed later to mock, the political implications of taking sensibility seriously was an understandable reaction for the generations that came after 1794.⁷⁵ After more than two centuries, it is time to examine the story that revolutionaries told about themselves with more understanding, even if not necessarily with the sympathy that they would have expected to come naturally.

⁷⁵ Denby, *Sentimental Narrative*, 6, notes Daniel Mornet's 1929 condemnation of the men of the age as "bourgeois crybabies [*pleurnicheurs*]"; Pierre Trahard, *La Sensibilité révolutionnaire (1789-1794)* (Paris: Boivin, 1936), repeatedly and negatively compares the experience and language of the 1790s with the supposedly deeper and more rational revolutionary commitment of the Bolsheviks, see 17-19, 26-27, 92-93, 101-06, 176-77.