

H-France Review Vol. 12 (February 2012), No. 31

Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of Revolution: Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789-1794*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2011. xv + 231 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4942-0.

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

Sent to crush rebellion in Toulon in 1793, the *conventionnel* Joseph Fouché urged the Committee of Public Safety to “exercise justice as per nature’s example,” that is, to destroy the city totally. “Let us strike like lightning so that even the ashes of our enemies disappear from the soil of liberty.” This was not mere rhetorical embellishment, argues Mary Ashburn Miller in her sparkling and controversial book, but indeed the way Fouché (and Jacobins in general) had wedded the imagery of the natural world to the need to legitimize violence. Language was not only shaped by history but shaped political action itself: “revolutionary actors self-consciously engineered political language” (p. 3).

Miller’s book is in part a skillful investigation of why the use of imagery from the natural world should have been so common during the French Revolution. There are few surprises here, but her investigations of the impact of scientific understandings of the natural world on self-consciously enlightened bourgeois are insightful and instructive. The vocabulary of a natural world oscillating between chaos and calm drew its potency from the broader intellectual context of the Enlightenment, in particular scientific breakthroughs and renewed interest in natural features such as the volcanoes of the Auvergne, and memories of recent catastrophes such as the earthquakes in Lisbon in 1755 and in Messina and Calabria in 1783.

Miller has pieced together a mass of fascinating, often surprising material, including some striking iconography, to support her argument that the revolutionary language of nature was highly charged and changed across time. Whereas the Abbé Fauchet had commemorated the victims of the Bastille in August 1789 by recalling that “[despotism] menaced us unremittingly with its lightning bolts,” in August 1792, Marie-Joseph Chénier delivered a eulogy to new revolutionary martyrs who had in turn “crushed [royalty] by lightning” (p. 83). Nature had changed sides and by 1794 was being summoned by Robespierre to rain down its thunderbolts on the guilty. The awesome power of volcanoes and earthquakes, of thunder and lightning, the capacity of the natural world to create a new equilibrium by its own internal regeneration, all this was seductive to men equally struck by their own capacity to recreate the world. As a writer for the Committee of Public Safety mouthpiece the *Feuille du Salut Public* expressed it in September 1793, “Everything moves, clashes, collides in nature; it is in this movement that life, equilibrium, harmony are born. The political world resembles the material world in this regard.”

The use of the dramatic language of the natural world was not just one of the methods chosen to express the violence being experienced; for Miller, the violence was legitimized, even encouraged by the inherently violent language of nature chosen by the revolutionaries. “And nature provided a way of exonerating or even encouraging revolutionary violence, of limiting opposition to ‘natural’ acts” (p. 18). This is the most provocative element of Miller’s thesis. She concentrates in particular on a few horrific acts of collective violence which were “excused” by revolutionary leaders, notably the massacre of La Glacière in Avignon in October 1791 and the

September 1792 prison massacres in Paris. There are also particularly powerful discussions of the imagery of the Mountain (the source of enlightenment, purity and courage) with the *Marais* or Swamp (the fetid home of reptilian slipperiness). Somewhat strangely, she argues that all the Jacobins' enemies were described as being from the swamp. Others will insist on the equally hostile but quite distinct attitude to the Girondins.

The argument is original and controversial and should enliven graduate seminars and scholarly debate for years to come. Like so much recent American scholarship on the French Revolution, Miller assumes that mass violence is the result of warped ideologies rather than conflicts over vested interests. We have moved from William Doyle's conclusion that "It was resistance that made the Revolution violent" to a view that it was the Jacobins' choice of words that did so.[1] The issue goes to the heart of contemporary debates about historical understanding: is language a means of expressing our understandings of the world we experience, or does it also shape, even determine, our understanding of that experience? Is the whole world a text? Or are language and the world it describes in constant interaction?

Miller seems shocked by the widespread acceptance that violence was "a necessary and natural part of the Revolution" (p. 4) and that Robespierre could have confronted his opponents in the Convention with the question "Did you want a revolution without revolution?" (This was at a time when his opponents were seeking to assign the responsibility for the September massacres to him and to have him exiled or killed when in fact, as Miller herself notes, Girondins themselves had initially accepted, even encouraged, the massacres.) But the difficulty for the French revolutionaries—as for all successful revolutionaries—is that their power was ultimately the result of popular violence, on 14 July 1789 and 10 August 1792. Like other revolutionaries before and since, the Jacobins would grapple with how to circumscribe "legitimate" insurrection. It was not simply a matter of excusing violence, as Miller argues, but rather of deciding which "popular" acts could genuinely be seen as "of the people." The polarized responses of political leaders to the killing of the Étampes mayor Jacques Simonneau in 1792 are an example of this difficulty (one of many examples where revolutionary authorities punished violent acts).

So language, not threats to survival, explains the violence of 1792-94. Miller makes few references to the extent of counterrevolution or to the scale of the external military threat, the usual contextual reasons given for the reluctant decisions of the Convention to put in place draconian measures it would decide as a policy of "terror until the peace." She employs the common use of natural imagery of gunpowder as "revolutionary thunder" to explain why the Convention would encourage ordinary people to collect saltpeter "instead of planting Victory Gardens, as Americans would during the Second World War" (p. 94). The parallel seems a forced one.

An intriguing passage in the book concerns the Convention's debates on the draining of swamps (*étangs*) used by nobles to stock fish, skillfully linked by Miller to the hostility in Jacobin imagery toward pestilential political swamps. Here is one example of where Miller is able to link the study of political language to actual social conditions. It is not entirely convincing since Robespierre actually prepared two contradictory speeches to be delivered according to the direction of the political wind (or water).[2] Elsewhere, it would have been fascinating had Miller reflected on the agitated language of nature and popular upheaval and its possible links with the impassioned reports from provincial administrators about the environmental impact of large-scale illegal tree-felling and clearing of "wastelands," particularly in the south.[3]

Miller's research relies heavily not only on an evidently close reading of a range of revolutionary material—from plays to speeches—but also on a major digital archive capable of being word-searched. Of course, this can raise methodological uncertainties, that such searches

simply identify word uses without a sense of their importance compared with others: a word search for Christ would also have resulted in a disconcerting number of positive responses, especially in imagery of Mount Sinai. Here, the case of Maximilien Robespierre is revealing. Once again, the young man has to carry a heavy load. While Miller notes (p. 202) that he referred to popular violence as “volcanic” only four times, he is repeatedly cited for his metaphors of lightning striking the heads of the guilty. In particular, three of his major speeches from 1794—that on revolutionary government (5 February/17 Pluviôse Year II), the Festival of the Supreme Being (7 May/18 Floréal) and his final speech to the Convention (26 July/8 Thermidor) constitute core evidence for Miller’s argument. But what does a fuller consideration of these three speeches in fact suggest about the sources of Robespierre’s understandings of a chaotic world?

In his speech of 5 February, Robespierre did refer several times to the “stormy” circumstances in which the Republic found itself, but that was the limit of his natural allegories. Instead, the speech was studded with classical references, from Agis and Lycurgus of Sparta to Philip of Macedon and Miltiades and Aristides of Athens. In particular, he drew directly on Cicero’s account of the Catiline conspiracy, when Cicero had acted decisively and uncompromisingly against a conspiracy in first-century BC Rome by Lucius Sergius Catilina’s aristocratic faction.^[4] This was a juxtaposition of the vices and virtues, the latter under conspiratorial threat, which seems to have become embedded in Maximilien’s subconscious when a boy at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. His speech on the Supreme Being on 7 May included a hymn of praise to economic and intellectual progress. The mastery of lightning ranked with La Pérouse’s voyages and David’s canvases: “everything has changed in the physical world; everything must change in the moral and political world.” But the speech had many more references to the perfidy of Albion, the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and, again, the lessons of antiquity. Similarly, in his meandering, fatal last speech to the Convention on 8 Thermidor (26 July), he noted that his enemies had claimed that France was “marching over volcanoes,” but otherwise the speech was a diatribe against conspiracies past and present, enlivened with many classical references. It is therefore not surprising that earlier generations of historians were as interested in the classical roots of revolutionary discourse as is Miller in those from the natural world.^[5]

Perhaps the strongest evidence for Miller’s thesis is the alacrity with which Thermidorians abandoned the “natural” language of violent revolution. Just as the image of “the Terror” and of Robespierre as its Cromwell or Catilina was invented within days of the executions of 9-10 Thermidor, so the language of volcanic popular eruptions and thunderbolts of punishment was dropped. The Jacobin Club itself was soon described as “a volcano whose crater is extinct.”

This is a finely produced book, distinguished too by Mary Ashburn Miller’s lucid and engaging prose. Readers will be divided over whether her thoroughly fresh and original approach to understanding revolutionary violence is compelling, or indeed whether the natural world was even the most important of the wells from which Jacobins drew their understandings of the times of triumph, destruction and uncertainty in which they lived. But everyone who reads this book will think better about the complex and distinct languages of the French Revolution.

NOTES

[1] William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 394.

[2] Reynald Abad, *La Conjuration contre les carpes. Enquête sur les origines du décret de dessèchement des étangs du 14 frimaire an II* (Paris : Fayard, 2006), p. 164; *Papiers inédits trouvés chez Robespierre*,

Saint-Just, Payan, etc. supprimés ou omis par Courtois, précédés du rapport de ce député à la Convention nationale, 3 vols (Geneva : Mégarotis, 1978), vol. 2, p. 19.

[3] She cites, but does not discuss, the work on environmental history of Andrée Corvol and this reviewer, and does not refer to successive assemblies' deep concerns about the effects of hillside clearings.

[4] "Second Oration against Lucius Catalina: Addressed to the People", *M. Tullius Cicero. The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero, literally translated by C.D. Yonge, B.A.* (London, 1856). See Thomas E. Kaiser, "Conclusion: Catilina's Revenge—Conspiracy, Revolution, and Historical Consciousness from the ancien régime to the Consulate," in Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser and Marisa Linton, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2007).

[5] For example, see Claude Mossé, *L'Antiquité dans la Révolution française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989); Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries: A Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965 [1937]). Most recently, see Maxime Rosso, "Les Réminiscences spartiates dans les discours et la politique de Robespierre de 1789 à Thermidor," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 349 (2007), pp. 51–77, and Marisa Linton, "The Man of Virtue: the Role of Antiquity in the Political Trajectory of L.A. Saint-Just," *French History* 24 (2010), pp. 393–419.

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ISSN 1553-9172

