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Anne Quennedey, *L'Éloquence de Saint-Just à la Convention nationale. Un sublime moderne*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2020. 534 pp. Preface by Jean Dagen, references and index. €78.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-5425-9.

Review by Mitchell Abidor, Independent Scholar.

Early in her study of the oratorical skills of Louis Saint-Just, member of the Committee of Public Safety, Anne Quennedey carries out a remarkable feat of historical forensics. An orator is, first of all and before he even opens his mouth, a figure with a certain appearance, a certain manner of dress, of wearing his hair. And once he speaks, it is his tone of voice, the speed of his delivery, and his gestures that play a large part in determining the skill of the speaker. Quennedey, an ex-normalienne and president of the *Association pour la sauvegarde de la Maison de Saint-Just* in Blérancourt in the northern department of the Aisne, scours and examines a vast library of sources in order to determine how Saint-Just fared in these regards.

The various portraits that have come down to us are interrogated in an effort to determine which most likely resembles the young martyr of 9 Thermidor. Was he “tall” and “thin” and “spindly,” as the later writer Lamartine claimed, or was he “of average height, with a healthy form whose proportions expressed strength” (p. 213)? Lamartine never saw Saint-Just, and in this, as in so many areas touching on the terrorist (in the original sense of the word), it is politics rather than a concern for historical accuracy that dictated the portrayal. Lamartine, in Quennedey’s view, saw Saint-Just as tall in order to render the scene of his execution on 10 Thermidor more dramatic by heightening his fall. In reality, Saint-Just stood only five feet two inches, the same height as Napoleon, short by our standards but average height for men of the period.

Even Saint-Just’s cravats are subject to examination, with this accessory variously described by later historians as “high and voluminous,” “enormous” or, as Victor Hugo said, “Saint-Just inhabits his cravat” (pp. 212-213). And yet, Quennedey’s research reveals that not a single contemporary makes any mention of exaggerated cravat wearing.

Nothing escapes Quennedey’s examination, and the result is as well-rounded a picture of the physical Saint-Just as we can possibly wish for. Saint-Just, we learn, wore boots and not shoes, dressed with elegance but not ostentation, and owned jackets that were primarily blue or gray. This close questioning provides us with an image of Saint-Just the man, not just the orator and political figure. It also sets the tone for the volume to follow: Everything said by historians and memoirists regarding Robespierre’s ally must be examined with great care. If the matter of

cravats has yielded different answers, what must be the case with matters of greater importance, of questions that determined the life and death of the young French republic?

I have to step back here, for though I described this investigation into revolutionary haberdashery as having been carried out “early” in *L’Eloquence de Saint-Just*, that is technically not the case.

Within this volume there resides what are, in effect, two books of almost equal length. One is a history, critique, and analysis of the art of elocution as described in the manuals of rhetoric of antiquity, particularly the volume *On the Sublime* by Pseudo-Longinus. Quennedey bases her judgment of the oratory of Saint-Just on the criteria outlined by Pseudo-Longinus, and since it is fairly certain most contemporary readers are not familiar with his work, an exposition of his notions of successful oratory is needed. Whether it needs to take up nearly two hundred pages is quite another matter, and as I waded through this first section as if through molasses, I grew increasingly frustrated. In the end, whatever is necessary to understand Saint-Just as orator in relation to *On the Sublime*, as well as other texts contemporary to Saint-Just, is cited in the body of the second half of the book, that dealing specifically with Saint-Just. There might be an audience sufficiently knowledgeable or interested in both the history of the French Revolution and first century AD rhetoric, but one has a hard time imagining who might be part of it. Readers might, therefore, prefer focus on only the second half of *L’Eloquence de Saint-Just*.

Oratorical skill was essential during the Revolution for many reasons. The ability to attract and keep attention at the Convention or at the various clubs could lead to action, the essential goal of speech-making. In a period where the free press was more than flourishing and where opinions from all segments of the political spectrum could be read, the orator at the Convention or in the clubs, during the time of his discourse at the tribune, was the sole focus of attention, of the 749 members of the Convention and the 300 to 1,400 spectators listening in the galleries, depending on the hall in use. For that moment, other than boos or cheers, there was no competition of ideas, and a speaker who could hold the crowd was best placed to sway it. The skills Quennedey writes about, like the ability to improvise when necessary, to be clearly heard in general and even more during rowdy sessions, and to enunciate clearly, were essential in communicating one’s ideas. Saint-Just, unlike Robespierre and Marat on the left, along with numerous other *conventionnels*, did not have a journal of his own, and so his oratorical skills played a substantial role in his ability to impose his line on his comrades, his peers, and his enemies. And a strong speech would, on the vote of the Convention, then be printed, reaching an even broader audience. No less than sixteen of Saint-Just’s speeches and reports were printed as separate pamphlets or books.

Quennedey tells us that Saint-Just had a strong “presence as orator,” and in order to support this argument, she must again do battle with those who opposed and even despised Saint-Just. Once he has established his physical presence the orator’s actual speech patterns must be judged. This, for Quennedey has two aspects: “[T]he quality of the orator’s voice and his diction at the podium” (p.235). But the examination of these qualities also requires an examination of the acoustics in the chambers in which the speeches were given. Historians have determined the nature of the acoustics in the various chambers, so those writers who claim Saint-Just had a weak voice can be ignored, since a speaker with a weak voice would simply have been inaudible. The impact of Saint-Just’s orations is beyond question, so his voice must have been audible and strong, which is confirmed by those who attended his speeches. But those who heard him also spoke of his speech as being *voilé*, the definition of which Quennedey, acting here as a lexicographer, is less

than clear. In the end, Quennedey feels safe in concluding that “Saint-Just’s voice was strong and its clarity defective” (p. 235). Historians who opposed him were the ones who insisted his voice was “metallic” or “terrible.” That he was popular with his auditors is also attested to by those who heard him, one of whom spoke of “this fire that, in this young orator, announces the happiest of talents.” (p. 235)

Saint-Just’s gestures were also described in accordance with the politics of the viewer or later historian. Were his movements “robotic”? “Stiff”? And what are we to make of it when the member of the Convention Barras tendentiously describes Saint-Just “raising his right arm and letting it fall...like the blade of the guillotine” (p.255)?

If those who knew him well considered Saint-Just to be cheery and affable, those who saw him at the Convention or on his missions to the armies viewed him differently, one contemporary speaking of his “austere facial expression,” of his “scornful” gaze. Camille Desmoulins described his facial expression as “vain,” while another fellow conventionnel spoke of his “unbearable pride” (p. 380). Quennedey accepts that Saint-Just, this young man from the provinces who had risen so high and who was not yet twenty-seven when he was executed, was impetuous. The success of Saint-Just’s speeches need not be measured strictly by the reactions of those sitting in the Convention or of memoirists or later historians with a definite *part pris*. Newspapers reported his speeches with praise, and police reports of conversations overhead in popular quarters show that he had an audience among the *sans-culottes*, even in his condemnation of their greatest spokesman, Jacques Hébert, le Père Duchesne.

Quennedey casts a jaundiced eye on the accounts of Saint-Just’s political enemies in the Convention and on historians like Michelet and Lamartine, and she is right to do so. For all its genius and sweep, Michelet’s history, influential and highly regarded as a literary work, given the author’s antipathy for the most radical figures of the Revolution, resembles nothing so much as a Dickens novel. Michelet attributes a defined personality to a historical character when he first appears and then views everything done by that figure with that portrait in mind. Michelet’s hatred of the Committee of Public safety is expressed in his physical descriptions of its members and must be viewed with caution or, like Quennedey, simply dismissed. Michelet’s distaste for Saint-Just is unwavering and all-encompassing. He describes his physical appearance as repulsive. Michelet stressed Saint-Just’s stiffness when he spoke, how he moved and turned his body as if it were a single block, and how he had “a murderous gaze.” (pp. 234-235) His neckwear is revelatory in Michelet’s eyes: He describes Saint-Just’s neck as “seeming to be suppressed by his cravat” (p. 215) (a foreshadowing of Saint-Just’s fate, no doubt). Quennedey is surely correct when she writes that, in Michelet’s eyes, “almost all of Saint-Just’s speeches before the Assembly inspired terror” (p. 289) in the representatives who heard them. For Michelet, Saint-Just was a sanguinary monster. Early historians like Lamartine, Michelet, Quinet, and Taine all viewed Saint-Just, as “the incarnation of revolutionary violence” (p. 279).

There is much to be said for this methodology. It is obviously in the interests of those who oppose a figure to blacken everything about him. However much one might agree with Quennedey’s choice to combat those who wrote negative things about Saint-Just, there is an obvious danger in her method. She takes it as given that we cannot trust Saint-Just’s enemies, and this might be correct. The French Revolution was a time of extremes, and Saint-Just was one of the most extreme of its players. But let us transpose this situation to our own time: Are the thousands of negative descriptions of President Trump unworthy of being taken seriously? For those who

opposed the man and his policies they were the only descriptions that mattered. Positive ones were unworthy of attention.

How then can we judge the accuracy of descriptions from a distance of almost 225 years? Quennedey views Saint-Just and what is said about him with admiring eyes. For Robespierriste readers this will suffice, but Dantonists might feel differently.

As we have seen, critics of Saint-Just did not content themselves with criticizing the Terror of which he was a vital part and which, in fact, gets little mention in this volume. Hatred of Saint-Just the politician bled over (so to speak) into descriptions of his gestures, the timbre of his voice, his attire. But admiration of him could also tinge these same descriptions.

Saint-Just addressed the matter of eloquence and public debates directly, considering, as Quennedey writes, that “it was upon the orderly process of debates in the Assembly that, in the final analysis, depended the freedom of all” (p. 380). We are told that during his final year his “demand that discussions be carried out wisely was not abandoned by him, but was complemented by a new concern: that of ensuring that those he identified as supporters of the monarchy not be able to hinder the debates” (p. 384). In short, in Quennedey’s view, Saint-Just’s principal concern was that the debates take place under the best possible conditions “and with the awareness of the ease with which those who wish to stand in their way can arrive at their goal” (p. 388).

Quennedey ends by connecting Saint-Just to the antique notion of the sublime, writing that “the sublime is characterized above all by the potency of its effect on the reader or listener” (p. 332). But it is not enough to restrict an analysis of Saint-Just’s success or lack of same to whether he was aided by classical rules of oration. In calling for the harshest measures against those he viewed as the worst enemies of the Revolution he said, “Who is it that wants to smash the gallows? It is those who fear climbing its steps....Don’t halt in the Revolution: whoever stops halfway does nothing but dig his own grave. The monarchy is not one man alone, but rather all vices together; the republic is not one assembly alone, but the people and all virtues together.” (p. 339) Or even more clearly, “A revolution like ours is not a trial, but a thunder clap over all the wicked. There is nothing more for us to demand from them: they must be repressed and confounded” (p. #). Sublimity restricted to oratorical success might meet the criteria of Pseudo-Longinus, but it does not necessarily meet those of the real world. Demosthenes is supposed to have said that the key elements of the art of oratory are, “first, action; second, action; third, action.” Quennedey explains that this means that “all the other talents of the orator are nothing compared to the art of pronouncing a speech.” But let us take this further: a speech is meant to move its auditors to action, and nowhere in the pages of *L’Eloquence de Saint-Just* is there an analysis of the goals and end results of his speeches. Can a speech be called “sublime” or praised, that calls for the heads of the speaker’s enemies?

There is a case to be made for these acts of final justice, and many historians have made the case, but Quennedey does not venture into that territory. That aside, *L’Eloquence de Saint-Just* provides us with a sympathetic and humane portrait of a much-maligned figure.

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