H-France Salon
Volume 16, Issue 5, #8

Surviving the Revolution: Marie-Joseph Chénier

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The Revolution gave us two poets from the Chénier family: the one, André Chénier, of greater literary fame, exemplified by the poem *La Jeune Captive*, written in prison; the other, Marie-Joseph-Blaise, a celebrated Jacobin laureate in the Parisian sections whose fame did not survive the Romantic period. When André Chénier went to the guillotine on 25 July 1794, three days before Robespierre, his brother Marie-Joseph's life changed forever. Marie-Joseph was not only a writer and dramatist, but also a legislator who was deeply involved in the actual politics of revolution, while André had been an ordinary citizen (even if he had taken up his pen against the Revolution). Yet while Marie-Joseph physically survived the political turmoil of the French Revolution, his brother, imbued with a deep commitment to literary justice and poetic ideals, did not. Marie-Joseph Chénier, as the focus of this article, presents a case of an artist's and politician's survivor guilt stemming from the loss of his brother during the Terror. By the second half of 1794, he was publicly blamed for callousness over André's death, and vilified as his brother's butcher. He was abandoned by many friends over that event and little could efface the accusation that André had spat, in verse, at the Jacobins before he died, "Toi Vertu, pleure si je meurs."[1]

The Revolutionary Playwright

Marie-Joseph (b. 11 February 1764) was the youngest of four brothers. The two elder brothers, Constantin Xavier (1760-1837), who became a diplomat like his father, and Louis Sauveur (1761-1823), a "lieutenant-colonel de cavalerie," had grown apart from the two younger ones. There were also three daughters, but only one, Hélène, reached adulthood.[2] Marie-Joseph and André grew close during their childhood spent together at the home of their aunt near Toulouse. All four boys went to the College de Navarre and the elder two joined the military as did Marie-Joseph for a short time after his education – though he soon abandoned it in favor of his writing. André only survived his time in a regiment for six months before returning to Paris. In 1768 their father became consul general of France in Morocco, and, in 1773, their mother returned to Paris to supervise the younger boys' education.[3]

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[1] This line in the poem known as "Comme un dernier rayon, comme un dernier zéphre," was not directly aimed at Marie-Joseph. During his imprisonment, André Chénier also wrote lines of adoration to his brother in Odes XIV, "Mon frère, que jamais la tristesse importune, ne trouble ses prospérités!" L. Becq de Fouquières, *Poésies de André Chénier* (Paris: Charpentier, 1893), 452.

[2] Hélène Christine de la Tour Saint Ygest (1758-1797); Elizabeth Sophie (1756-1762) and Marie Adélaïde (1760-1763) died young.

[3] Louis de Chénier returned to Paris in 1784 after being retired from his African post.

After the outbreak of the Revolution, Marie-Joseph Chénier established himself in French theatre as the voice of popular sentiment in Paris and as "the Jacobin" of the two poets among the brothers Chénier. He championed just political causes and the ordinary victims of elitist royalist or ecclesiastical abuse. His republican radicalization can be traced roughly to the time he withdrew his play *Charles IX* from the theatre on 27 April 1791.[4] He then offered *Henri VIII*, a play that he had written earlier. Focused on Anne Boleyn, it was described as one of the rare pieces where the author let himself be carried away with tenderness and passion. It had the hallmark of grandeur – even an unkind critic observed that this was the least bad of the early theatre of Marie-Joseph.[5] His next play, *Caius Gracchus*, went on the bill in February 1792 and was a prodigious success. It was a drama without action, but succeeded by staging political debates and because of the haranguing of the speaker at the tribune. There was even a scene between Danton and Robespierre at the Jacobin Club.[6]

From 1792, Marie-Joseph's plays became more provocative and independent of Jacobin confines. Several of his plays reflected issues arising from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. He detested religious fanaticism as much as Voltaire, but also pointed out that the Jacobins were not immune to similar corruption. "It is in *Fénélon,"* wrote Antoine-Vincent Arnault, of the Académie française and the editor of his complete works, "that one clearly sees towards which goal Chenier flattered himself to be able to direct the Revolution, and at which point he thought it ought to stop … to religious fanaticism had succeeded another no less intolerant and no less bloody."[7] Dechristianization had served to increase a taste for the romantic: it suited Chénier's penchant for justice to present a girl who had suffered at the hands of the Church. With *Jean Calas*, the poet returned to contemporary allusion and philosophical prediction of the sort that had won him fame with *Charles IX*. He put ordinary bourgeois men on stage of the sort that many in the audience knew well, and he tried to adopt a strategy of representing truthfully the workings of the world of Paris. From 1793, Marie-Joseph also wrote several hymns for the Revolution's numerous festivals.

Losing André

With his work on the theatrical and political stage (he was elected in September 1792 as a deputy to the National Convention for the Seine-et-Oise), Marie-Joseph renounced the political inclinations of his family. This was particularly so in regard to André, who, having taken up his pen against the Revolution in the royalist *Journal de Paris*, was hiding in Versailles.[8] But political disagreements, no matter how serious, did not dictate all familial and personal relationships. The Chénier family had a wide and politically varied social network that operated in the background throughout the revolutionary years. Marie-Joseph spent much of his

[4] Debuted 4 November 1789 with the actor François-Joseph Talma playing Charles IX.
[5] Marie-Joseph Chénier, *Poésies précédées d'une notice et accompagnées des notes par Charles Labitte* (Paris: Charpentier, 1842). "Si une versification artificielle, et prolixe en gâte souvent le style, il y a dans le rôle d'Anne de Boulen des vers faciles, des passages touchants, quelques accents de sensibilité qui vont au cœur."
[6] Act II.
[7] The story, of a young girl imprisoned for fifteen years in the bowels of a cloister and delivered by a priest, was fashionable. *Œuvres complètes de MJC*, 1827, préface de M. Arnault. "C'est dans Fénélon qu'on voit clairement vers quel but Chénier s'était flatté de pouvoir diriger la Révolution, et à quel terme il pensait qu'elle devait s'arrêter. ... Au fanatisme religieux en avait succédé un autre, non moins intolérant, non moins sanguinaire."
[8] Francis Scarfe, *André Chénier: His Life and Work, 1762-1794* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 281–2.

adolescence in his mother's salon rubbing shoulders with Marie-François-Denis, le comte de Pange, and other counter-revolutionary literary figures of the emigration like Jacques Delille, author of the famous poem, *La Pitié*.[9] His Greek mother navigated complex political, literary, and diplomatic worlds and celebrated being both French and foreign. She remained a constant influence in the dramatist's life.[10]

During the Terror, Marie-Joseph attempted to save not one, but two of his brothers, Sauveur and André, from the guillotine, as well as his royalist father who was threatened with imprisonment. Marie-Joseph did manage to save Sauveur. Having led a brigade under General Dumouriez, Marie-Joseph's older brother had been imprisoned at Beauvais in late spring 1794, but, importantly, had no significant political enemies. By contrast, Marie-Joseph did not succeed in freeing André, who had been arrested on 7 March 1794 for being in the house of a suspected ultra-royalist aristocrat (Madame Pastoret at Passy) and taken to Saint-Lazare prison.[11] Marie-Joseph's attempts to manage André's imprisonment were thwarted by his father's actions. An outraged Louis Chénier demanded his son's immediate release, which led to André being brought to trial. Marie-Joseph sought to leave well enough alone because he was aware that André could hardly be found innocent. André had written vociferously in print in favor of the cause of the counter-revolution, and therefore he could not be pardoned by the Jacobins. The proceedings had a certain show trial character and, despite his brother's best efforts behind the scenes, André was sentenced and executed on 25 July 1794.

Despite Marie-Joseph's position in the Convention, his friends in high places were unable to save André. While it was true that there was a "non-bureaucratic operation of power through a system of personal relations" during the Terror as Marisa Linton has argued,[12] those networks were often powerless to control judicial processes once set in motion. Furthermore, Marie-Joseph could not plead for his brother's life without being accused of expecting special treatment as a deputy that his royalist-leaning family did not deserve. He was judged by a public that insisted that being a good republican involved jettisoning family members who did not embrace republican or Jacobin values. Most other deputies were not in situations where they needed to save their ultra-royalist brothers from the guillotine, so his was an extreme example of a revolutionary politician's republicanism being applied to his own flesh and blood. Failing to save his brother perhaps explains Chénier's hardened attitude towards royalists and émigrés in 1795 when he accused the tribunals of being scared of punishment and not feeling, "the vigor

[9] *Œuvres Posthumes de M. J. Chénier membre de l'Institut, précédées d'une notice sur Chénier par M. Daunou, membre de l'Institut* (Paris: Guillaume Libraire, 1824-27), Tome III, *Tableau de la Lit*, 20. "Dans la poésie didactique, c'est encore à M. Delille que l'époque doit sa fécondité. Il a répandu dans trois poëmes originaux cette richesse de style qu'il avait déployée en traduisant l'Énéide et le Paradis perdu. Le poëme de l'Imagination surtout suffirait pour fonder une haute renommée."

[10] She was, for instance, the inspiration for the mother-figure of Démariste in *Timoléon*.

[11] Former guests from his mother's salon included his muse for *La Jeune Captive*, Anne Françoise-Aimée de Franquetot de Coigny.

[12] Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 44.

necessary to render justice."[13] This also reflects a notion of self-sacrifice that Linton identifies as "fundamental to the revolutionary cause."[14]

Living With Loss and Guilt

Marie-Joseph Chénier served in the National Convention until 26 October 1795, then as a deputy to the Council of Five Hundred and later in the Tribunate. He threw himself into his political duties, but his enjoyment of the intellectual sport of the Revolution's debates had disappeared. The glaring injustice with which lives were interrupted during this time created misery that was due to the survivors not being able to forget a formerly happier life with close-knit family who were easily remembered or reconstructed in vivid imaginary detail. Because these ties were so abruptly cut short, survivors such as Chénier suffered more acutely and often in isolation from constant flashbacks and memories that we now categorize as some degree of PTSD when those definitions and diagnoses did not exist.

Chénier's disillusionment with his own political ideals – possibly a direct consequence of his trauma – explains in large part why he offered no play to the stage for a decade between *Timoléon* in 1794 and *Cyrus*, a stinging attack on Napoleon, in 1804. Following a previous withdrawal of his play *Caius* (deemed too moderate) after just a few sessions in 1794, *Timoléon*, set to Étienne Méhul's music, was also proscribed. Marie-Joseph, outraged at the insinuation that he could be a counter-revolutionary, burnt the full script of his play in front of the assembled Committee of Public Safety (the play only survived because Mme de Vestris kept her copy). Yet the words that really offended him were those of the ultra-Jacobin Jullien de la Drôme, who said, "If in Corinthe there is only one Timoléon, there are in Paris as many enemies of royalty, as many Timoléons as there are sans-culottes. It would be an insult to offer them such a play."[15] Chénier was further criticized for making Timothane (the usurper and brother of Timoléon) someone "full of respect for the memory of his father, and whose filial piety made him unable to resist the supplications of his mother, and he respected his brother …."[16]

Emotional family ties were seen as weaknesses in a revolution and the boundaries of those affiliations were defined by Jacobin peer pressure.[17] At the same time, following André's execution, the play also fueled insinuations that Marie-Joseph had somehow – through his silence – contributed to his death. His 1797 poetic work *Épître sur la calomnie* was an eloquent reply to the false accusations that he had conspired to bring about his brother's fall:

> Ces reptiles hideux, sifflant dans la poussière,

[13] Marie-Joseph Chénier, *Rapport et Décrets sur le prompt jugement des Emigrés trouvés sur le territoire de la République; l'expulsion des individus rentrés après déportation; et les peines portées contre ceux qui provoquaient l'avilissement de la Représentation nationale ou le retour à la royauté etc*, 12 Floréal an III, au nom des comités de Salut Public, de sureté générale et de législation réunis.
[14] Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 272.
[15] *La Décade Philosophique*, 30 Floréal an II.
[16] *Ibid.*, 10 Vendémaire, an II.
[17] Marie-Joseph Chénier was not the only Jacobin to be conflicted. The painter Jacques Louis David was a close friend of his brother André Chénier through school friends at the College de Navarre and it is recorded that André suggested the best pose for Socrates in his famous painting "The Death of Socrates." Bette W. Oliver, *Surviving the Revolution: A Bridge Across Time* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013), 56.

> En vain sèment le trouble entre son ombre et moi :
> Helas! Pour arracher la victime aux supplices,
> De mes pleurs chaque jour fatigant vos complices,
> J'ai courbé devant eux mon front humilié :
> Mais ils vous ressemblaient, ils étaient sans pitié.
> Si le jour ou tomba leur puissance arbitraire,
> Des fers et de la mort je n'ai sauvé qu'un frère,
> Qu'au fond des noirs cachots Dumont avait plongé,
> Et qui deux jours plus tard périssait égorgé.[18]

Chénier was not a well man by the end of the Revolution. While we cannot attribute his altered health solely to survivor guilt and self-neglect (or possibly even a sense of self-loathing), these were contributing factors. Being an obsessive writer, lobbyist, and committed politician in the revolutionary years was not conducive to robust health. Pierre Daunou, a member of the Académie française wrote in the "Notice" to Chénier's *Œuvres completes*:

> The alteration of his health was noticeable in 1799 when he resisted with most honourable energy the last gasps of anarchy, and the efforts of the usurper. His robust constitution with the care of M. Portal his doctor and friend had struggled for more than ten years against the progress of a serious and complicated illness that perhaps would have ceded to efforts of nature and of art had Chenier submitted to a uniform and strict regime. But, duped by constant activity … he ignored for a long time his state.[19]

Marie-Joseph did not emerge from the Revolution emotionally happy or financially successful, though his artistic output earned him a place in the Académie française.[20] His political service under the Empire similarly continued to carry the imprint of an enduring sense of survivor guilt. In May 1806, he wrote to Napoleon beseeching him to give him another role due to his situation that included "devoirs sacrés" toward his mother, debts that had piled up and made worse by excessive interest, and "tant de chagrins ne contribuent pas à rétablir."[21] This frenetic activity brought about his early death aged forty-six on 10 January 1811. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1814/15, posterity would remember his *Tableau de la littérature* (commissioned by Napoleon who took pity on his destitution) much longer than his theatre. He did not live long enough to see the publication in 1819 of André's *Œuvres completes*.

Chénier's loss of his brother shows how much human disruption cut across political affiliations. These existential dilemmas led William Reddy to claim, "For a few decades emotions were deemed to be as important as reason in the foundation of states and the conduct of politics."[22] Marisa Linton writes of the "whole dimension of revolutionary life below this level [those who dominated government] – the personal and the emotional and

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[18] *Œuvres Posthumes de M. J. Chénier, 1824-27*, *op. cit*. Tome VI, 9–10.
[19] *Œuvres Posthumes de M. J. Chénier op. cit*.,Tome I, xvii-xviii.
[20] Marie-Joseph-Blaise Chénier became a member of the Académie française in 1803. When Chénier died in 1811, Chateaubriand was elected to take his place.
[21] The letter is reproduced in full, *Œuvres Posthumes de M. J. Chénier op. cit*.,Tome I, xxxi.
[22] William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 143.

informal – which needs to be grasped in order to understand how revolutionaries approached the business of politics."[23] We must try to discover how much the Revolution's mundane reality, even for those in privileged political positions, was more vulnerable, more exposed to corruption (and feelings of guilt) and generally filled with unpleasant sentiments than many were prepared to admit. Given that unpleasantness, the tendency of writers during the revolutionary decade to retreat into their art is unsurprising. For Marie-Joseph, as for his brother André on the other side of the revolutionary divide, "L'art d'écrire … il les éclaircit par la justesse; il les étend par la précision. Il présente en première ligne ce qui touche de plus près les hommes mémorables: l'histoire, qui raconte les grandes actions; l'éloquence, qui les célèbre; et la poésie, qui les chante."[24] Marie-Joseph Chénier was not the only artist to suffer loss, grief, and guilt during the Revolution, but there is much evidence to suggest that, even though he himself survived the revolutionary decade, his creativity, career, and health were greatly impacted by the traumatic experience of revolution.

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H-France Salon
ISSN 2150-4873
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[23] Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 14.
[24] *Œuvres Posthumes de M. J. Chénier, op. cit.*, Tome III; *Tableau de la Littérature, op. cit.*, 27.