ROUSSEAU AND THE
REPUBLIC OF VIRTUE

The Language of Politics in
the French Revolution

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ITHACA AND LONDON
The drive to display a self radiant with "virtue" provided the generative thrust of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's works. His two great discourses indict the loss of virtue in the modern world; his political writings trace the contours of the virtuous state; his tract on education instructs how one individual might be raised to virtue; his novel describes virtue as "sweetest sensuality"; and his autobiographical writings focus around the critical moment when he became "drunk with virtue."

The fictional construction labeled "Jean-Jacques Rousseau," a hero molded on virtue, is a cultural artifact knowable through the works in which it is depicted, through texts of contemporaries reacting to this personage, and, to a lesser degree, through its copious iconography. The mind of the author, the individual behind the persona, can be the subject only of speculation, however, and ultimately resists adequate explanation.

The arresting figure of "Jean-Jacques Rousseau" and the virtue associated with his name inform both the private writings and the public discourse of some revolutionary leaders: Robespierre, Saint-Just, and many of their lesser colleagues and rivals repeatedly produced texts in which the self-referential "I" claimed identification with the virtuous Jean-Jacques Rousseau and legitimacy because of this connection. They attributed galvanizing personal, moral, and political insights to the recognition of a powerful bonding with the persona of the virtuous Rousseau.
Preface

How is the function of Rousseau’s concept of virtue to be understood? In what way can we form an adequate representation of a word that has ceased to function in our own ideational and affective language?

For the word “virtue” no longer sits well in the academy. Despite the immoderate amount of ink which has been spent on Rousseau’s thought, what Raymond Trousson refers to as the “tidal wave” of recent scholarship, little serious effort has been applied to defining this indisputably central term. As Paul Valéry noted, “this word is dead; or, at least, is dying. Virtue is hardly even mentioned any more. It is no longer one of those immediate elements of the vocabulary living in us, the ease and frequency of which manifest the true demands of our temperament and our intellect.” To the extent it has been dealt with at all, it has been declared a redundant sign. “Remuneration,” “charity,” “devotion and sacrifice to the public goods”—these have been suggested as appropriate modern equivalents of the referent in question.

If the significance of virtue in Rousseau’s writings has eluded definition, its meaning in the utterances of his self-proclaimed revolutionary disciples is a subject that has been, by and large, broached only to be dismissed. Albert Soboul’s comment typifies an attitude prevalent until very recently: “Incapable of analyzing the economic and social conditions of his time, Robespierre, like Rousseau, like Saint-Just, believed in... appeals to virtue.”

As though semantic difficulties did not suffice to muddy the waters, partisan political interpretations of the Revolution have imposed further obfuscation in the form of a priori and posteriori definitions placed upon men and events. These have imparted confusion to such an extent that comprehension of questions as problematic as what Rousseau’s virtue signified and why the discourse of prominent revolutionaries cleaved to that meaning with such unflagging constancy is rendered difficult indeed. Moreover, because this subject is alien from a twentieth-century perspective, because virtue is dead or at least dying, there is a tendency to wish to assimilate it to the history of Catholicism and dechristianization, or to the emergence of middle-class values corresponding to bourgeois ascendency, or to the class struggle latent in Montagnard constitutions, or to the problem of individualism; in short, to something more familiar, more rational, and more understandable in contemporary terms.

The aim of this book, then, is to analyze a powerful and complex representational structure that emerged from a literary canon, to demonstrate how it was radically simplified into a folk saga, making it accessible to segments of the population otherwise little influenced by the literature of the Enlightenment and, finally, to explore what expression “Rousseauian virtue” found in revolutionary discourse. This study belongs in the realm of cultural investigation, a treacherous area, nonetheless richly rewarding for its dangers. Robert Darnton, in his introduction to The Great Cat Masquer, puts forth a cogent rationale for attempting to understand the emotional significance and intellectual content of a strange cultural relic from an earlier time. He pointed out that it is precisely where past preoccupations seem the most obscure—and certainly the revolutionary obsession with “Rousseau’s virtue” makes most modern commentators feel uncomfortable—that “we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning.”

2Albert Soboul, La Peine de Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Paris: Alcan, 1949), p. 144. Schmitt further drew attention to the wealth of referents implicit in Rousseau’s use of the word “virtue” in the Preuves Discours: “But what is there to be understood by virtue? No one of the passages cited permits us to guess definitively, and Rousseau, guided no doubt by the idea that ‘the principles of virtue are engraven in all hearts,’ believes he can obtain from all explanations.” Therefore, according to Schmitt, either the concept is rational or it is not. He goes on to define “virtue” in three different ways: as “moral wisdom,” in the Socratic sense, as Christian renunciation of the world, and as innocence. He concludes that “it would seem that Rousseau means to define virtue most frequently as the means to happiness, be it virtue-wisdom or virtue-innocence” (p. 145). Schmitt’s argument is in some sense valid even though he ignores the partialistic, aggressive virtue that permeates the discourse, as long as the phenomenon is regarded from outside Rousseau’s fusion with his own goodness (illuminated from within, however, “virtue” assumes a different set of shapes). Less Grodder defines one aspect of the term very succinctly as “a word that does not refer to moral stuborhhood, as such, but to devotion and sacrifice to the public good. Morals having been absorbed into politics, the one virtue that matters is thinking of oneself only as a part of the whole.” Rousseau’s Social Contract (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1985), p. 48.
3F. M. Zimmermann, “Virtue” dans La Nouvelle Hébète, MLN, 70 (March 1955), 871.
4Cracker, Rousseau’s Social Contract, p. 48.
Preface

For purposes of this book, the boundary between literature and politics has been ignored. That is to say, speeches, journalistic writings, and correspondence are all treated as segments of discourse, on the same level of explicability as any other prose. This subjection of political text to literary analysis is especially appropriate both in the case of Rousseau, who used nearly all the literary genres of his day as vehicles for extraliterary concerns, and, conversely, in that of his admirers, whose political writings also function as literature.

My "opaque" and esoteric subject—Rousseau's virtuosa self as a model for political discourse during the Revolution—is treated immediately adjacent to a much broader, more obvious, and more popular subject: the influence of Enlightenment thinkers in general and Rousseau in particular on the French Revolution. This subject has been treated most often from the political perspective of the historian, and the history of who said what about the Enlightenment's role in the Revolution would be, in effect, a recapitulation of political thought in Europe and America over the last two centuries. Great swings of the pendulum have marked attitudes toward this topic. Early critics of the Revolution, such as Burke and Carlyle, blamed the fermentation of ideas produced by the Enlightenment for inciting ignorant masses to dangerous excesses. Romantics such as Jules Michelet, on the other hand, credited Rousseau and the Encyclopedists with providing the ideas the people needed in order to move into the next phase of history, while Louis Blanc nuanced the attribution of responsibility by distinguishing between Voltaire as the patron of individualism and Rousseau as the prophet of fraternity. Hippolyte Taine's great flawed account, which, according to Alfred Cobban, "established for a time beyond challenge the belief that the propaganda of the philosophes was the cause of the Revolution,"[1] was superseded by the histories of Jean Jaures and Henri Seé, in which emphasis shifted from seeking intellectual "causes" for the Revolution toward documentary research into economic, political, and social factors. Thus historians had, by the beginning of this century, slowly moved away from conceptualizing the Revolution as a theory-driven entity.

Albert Mathiez, Alphonse Aulard, and Georges Lefebvre still further reduced the role of the writer in laying the groundwork for the Revolution. The divorce of literary text from political act reached its apogee in Daniel Pennu's admirable study Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française (1933). Mornet attempted to ascertain the relative importance of philosophic ideas in stirring up revolutionary sentiment, and he came to the conclusion that they played only a minor role. In a similar vein, Frank Kafker investigated the careers of former Encyclopedists during the Revolution and concluded that they were remote from political power during the Terror. Thus, the philosophes were found to be without influence on revolutionary events, in their writings and their persons alike. Peter Gay summarized that attitude by asserting that "the ideas of Voltaire, of the Encyclopedists, and of Rousseau played a relatively minor part in revolutionary speeches and thought."[2]

From this denial of continuity between discourse and revolutionary postulate, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction in the works of J. L. Talmon and Lester Crocker, both of whom found blueprints for modern totalitarian societies in the writing of eighteenth-century thinkers, especially Rousseau. This reading, in turn, produced reactions of dismay both from liberal admirers of Rousseau, indignant that he was being blamed for events and patterns of behavior which he had never imagined, and from Marxists, who objected to the word and the concept "totalitarian." Between the two poles, however, between the affirmation that Rousseau and some other eighteenth-century thinkers had somehow provided a model for the Revolution, the Terror, and subsequent manifestations of totalitarianism, and the denial of any connection between literature and events, the distance has begun to close. Within the past ten years a number of works have appeared in which the partisanship and moralism of earlier histories have begun to subside, and in which the following question is being considered more passionately: in what specific ways did the idealistic material of the Enlightenment contribute to structuring the texts of which the Revolution was made? From the rubris of 1789 to the Napoleonic Code civil, the Revolution now is itself seen as an intellectual construction inseparable from its discursive representations. There is no appeal from the texts to the Revolution for illumination; rather it is

CHAPTER TEN

The Widening Circle; The Narrowing Way

From the declaration of the Republic on September 21, 1792, until the fall of the Committee of Public Safety on 9 Thermidor, an 11 (July 27, 1794), the "republic of virtue" generated two seemingly antithetical discursive motions: at once an ever-widening spiral of social and political theoretical writings, stimulated by the necessity of creating a new constitution, and at the same time a narrowing definition of which inhabitants of France were worthy of being called "the people."

It was as if the fall of Louis XVI released great surges of authorial energy that had remained in check as long as the dynasty was still, however marginally, on the throne. France crossed the threshold into a new world with the removal of Louis, one where the people, at last, were sovereign, and the old forces of evil inherent in the monarchy were abolished. Henceforth France's history would be narrated by its elected representative body as conscious and rational author, never again by the convoluted whims of its numerous privileged ranks. "The people" had become both the collective hero and the narrator of a new history. With the seed of evil destroyed, however, evidence of continuing wickedness required constant reining of the definition of "the people."

The new constitution, which was presented on June 24, 1793, but never put into practice, was accompanied by Robespierre's version of the "Rights of Man and of Citizens" by a civil code, and by projects to establish a system of education. It was the society as a whole, the validity of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's great texts was at issue. Condorcet,

1Paris: chez citizen, Part 1; BN microfiche 61/06. Gérard Walter describes Billaud-Varenne as the "mind and the soul of the conspiracy of 9 thermidor." Walter recounts how Billaud-Varenne rose from obscurity, as late as 1792, to membership in the Committee of Public Safety on the strength of his rhetoric. He displayed mastery of the same Rousseauian political lexicon which Robespierre and Saint-Jean were able to command. His rationale for executions under the Terror, for example, followed the organicist model that Rousseau had shaped so memorably: "it is time to restore robust health to the body politic at the expense of its gangrenous members." Quoted in Walter, La Constitution du sept thermidor (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 73.
The Widering Circle; The Narrowing Way

the celebrated mathematician, friend and disciple of the Encyclopedists, had prepared a detailed plan for the reformation of education under the Legislative Assembly, one which, in its broad scope and democratic aspirations, offered a basis for pedagogical legislation on liberal, Encyclopedist lines. 2 Durand-Mailanne, deputy from Bouches-du-Rhône, attacked it as promoting the materialism, immorality, and atheism of the philosophes rather than following the wisdom of Rousseau, who had shown the unfortunate effects of the intellectual life upon virtue. Jacob Dupont, deputy from Indre-et-Loire and admirer of the Encyclopedists, denounced both Durand-Mailanne and Rousseau for equating ignorance with virtue:

Durand-Mailanne has dared to repeat, even after August 10, the sophisms and the paradoxes of the Geneva philosopher [a]id that the sciences and the arts corrupt morals: I ask Durand-Mailanne, in the presence of Brutus' image and that of Jean-Jacques himself, who armed the brave men of Marseilles against the kings and robbers? Was it the prejudice and ignorance of the sixteenth century or the philosophy and the enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth century? What is this so-called corruption of morals, then, so much exaggerated that according to our critics one would have to think that virtue and probity would soon be exiled from the land of liberty! I will confess that Durand-Mailanne's assertions seemed most strange to me, when he wanted to circumcribe within certain limits man's reason, or, following the example of the despot, give one direction rather than another to the thought and the hand of man, whereas, under the republican regime, man's thoughts and man's hand can go in all directions and take all possible forms in widening his domain.

As for teaching religion in the public schools, Dupont was absolutely opposed: "Nature and reason," he said, "these are the gods of man" (Jaurès, 8: 10-15).

Dupont's liberal, open-ended idea of education, inherited from

the philosophers, did not correspond to the Jacobin vision of an interventionist training which would totally regenerate mankind and lead to certain predetermined ends. It was the educational project of Michel Le Pelleter de Saint-Fargeau, former great noble elected to the Convention from the department of Yonne, which was to receive Jacobin endorsement and would eventually, after the assassination of Le Pelleter, be reformulated for presentation by Robespierre to the Convention.3 The project called for all children to be taken from their parents and raised by the state, free of charge, from the age of five until twelve for boys, and eleven for girls, "all children, without distinction and without exception, will be raised in common at the expense of the Republic and all, under the holy law of equality, will receive the same clothing, the same nourishment, the same instruction, the same care."

Le Pelleter, like Rousseau, saw in education the real source of national character, and believed that as long as children continued to be raised at home, they would develop as egotistical individuals with family ties, rather than as citizens completely devoted to the state. The attachment to family life had to be broken; "that will be formed a new race, laborious, regulated, disciplined, one which an impene-trable barrier will separate from the impure contact with our obsolete species."

Obligatory state boarding schools not only would separate the children of the rich from their corrupt families, they would benefit the poor as well. Just as Rousseau had described population growth leading to the degradation of primitive man, Le Pelleter saw the growth of the family as a source of its corruption among the poor. "The birth of a child is an accident," he said, and sometimes parents were consigned at the death of their child by the thought that "it is one less burden." "Useful and unfortunate citizens," he wrote, "perhaps soon this burden will cease to be one; perhaps, returned to financial ease and the delicious impulses of nature, you will be able to give children to the fatherland without regret" (Jaurès, 8:285).

Robespierre, presenting this project before the Convention, commented: "Man is good, coming from the hands of nature; whoever denies this must not think of educating man" (5:207). Hence, "if nature created man good, it is back to nature that we must bring him." It was in that perspective that the legislators were to consider Le Pelleter's proposals. The new government of France would do for the citizen what nature did for primitive man: permit him to couple without needing to concern himself with the upbringing of his offspring. Thus sexuality would be divorced from responsibility, in the name not of vice, as under the ancien régime, but of virtue, for the children would be raised to a higher level of morality simply by being separated from their parents and experiencing equality. "Treated all the same, nourished all the same, dressed all the same, taught all the same, these young students will know equality not as a specious theory but as continually effective practice."

Le Pelleter then applied himself to the practical application of such a program, including such details as diet (wine and meat must be excluded), and ways of making it financially feasible for the hard-pressed revolutionary government.

Le Pelleter's program, as opposed to Condorcet's plan, would represent a real break with the family patterns of the past. The child raised according to his scenario would have a fundamentally different experience of life from that of his parents and would have a relationship to the state that the older generation could never know. The problem of morally tainted stock passing its stigma on to the future would be solved. As the Gironldin leader Ducos expressed it in December 1792, "Using Plutarch's words, as long as you have not molded on the same form of virtue all the children of the Republic, it is in vain that your laws proclaim the holy law of equality" (Jaurès, 8:348).

Le Pelleter's ideas, however, regulated the life of the child only from five years until eleven or twelve. How was the Republic to mold the citizenry to virtue the rest of the time? In his Institution républicaine, Saint-Just addressed himself to this question. These fragments were apparently produced over a five-year span, from the early days of
the Revolution up to the very eve of Thermidor, since they contain references to situations that events of the Terror superseded, as well as remarks which must have had reference to the Terror. The bulk of the manuscript, however, appears to have been written in the winter of 1792-93. Composed during odd moments of a period of extreme tension, while Saint-Just was shouldering tremendous responsibilities as a member of the Committee of Public Safety and as a representative on mission, the institutions républicaines narrate a sort of Utopian daydream, a “pays des chimères,” a just Eden to be refurbished, interpolated with phrases that might be entries in an intimate journal. Thus the depiction of an ideal world is strikingly punctuated by anguished references to the actual situation.

Saint-Just’s peculiarly terse syntax, what Albert Camus called his “style guillotiné,” was not peripheral to his vision of France but was an integral part of it. He put forth his ideas in a series of somber aphorisms, as if the words caused him pain. Saint-Just, like Rousseau, labeled verboty the curse of the ruling class, the symbol of the vices of the ancien régime. The monarchy, “effeminately” garrulous, displayed its corruption in guises of words. The male republic of virtue would utter only ablitative pronouncements. What Rousseau had said about the difference between Sparta and Athens applied to the distinction between the monarchy and the republic: “Ever made to conquer, [the Spartans] crushed their enemies in every sort of war, and the blabbering Athenians feared their words as much as their bodies” (4: 356). The ideal republic would use speech like a sword. As Roland Barthes has remarked: “The Revolutionary script was like the eunuchy of the Revolutionary legend: it intimidated and imposed civic consecration of bloodshed.”

The laws themselves had to embody a lapidary ideal; “It is impossible,” said Saint-Just, “to govern without jaccasian. Long laws are public calamities. There must be few laws.” As for the verbal playfulness of the ancien régime, which Rousseau had so often denounced, Saint-Just recognized the “he who maketh jokes while at the head of state tends toward tyranny” (4: 503). To make a joke while in a position of power implies he existence of a hiatus between the thought and the word, a moment of nonengagement between the speaker and his listeners. But the object of the Revolution, as it


[188]

10The Widening Circle; The Narrowing Way emerges from the writings of Saint-Just, had been precisely the elimination of all distinctions between the ruler and the ruled; in fact, the elimination of all separate consciousness.

The stark language of the institutions, marked by the present tense, short phrases with few dependent clauses, and a paucity of adjectives and conjunctions, was the stylistic manifestation of the Phutarchian political aesthetic that Rousseau had done so much to popularize. Saint-Just’s style, a striking example of this aesthetic, by the fact of its very existence reproached the species vacuity of the aristocratic ideal.

Saint-Just used the word “institutions” as Rousseau had defined it in the political writings and the Lettre à d’Alembert: a group of idiosyncratic habits, traditions, and prohibitions enunciated by a “legislator” and in some unspecified way incorporated into the mental life of the people, thus setting it apart from all others.5 Saint-Just, seeing himself as the next great “legislator,” pronounced the “institutions” as statements of fact, as descriptions of real life in a dream world, as though that world already existed.6

The picture of Saint-Just’s perfect republic which emerges from the institutions bears little resemblance to eighteenth-century France.

5M. Alenou, in an article “Les institutions, le législateur et le peuple,” ACJ, states that “Saint-Just conceives the project of a total revolution. Republican ideology is a real centre which, by means of institutions, penetrates the ensemble of real connections between men and thus all levels of the social order.” Alenou concludes: “We are thus at the long way from... Rousseau. The institution is not merely the oblique way, it is not to be confused with manipulation, it does not play upon emotion and pleasure, it is founded upon setting the example and values” (p. 186). In addition, he comments: “It is... within the problem of the relations between legislator and people that Saint-Just formulates the notion of institutions... And above all, it is by this notion that he attempts to escape from this area and its constraints, and to break its magic circle” (p. 194). This, however, seems compatible with Rousseau’s prescriptions concerning the primacy of “institutions” over laws, and it is difficult to understand in what way Saint-Just’s concept is “a long way from Rousseau,” except in the fine details of what sorts of “institutions” would be appropriate to which peoples.

6Saint-Just remarked: “The most tender heart aided by the most lively imagination nobly conserves the first society so great has been the alteration in the human spirit.” François Thiersen comments: “We must not let ourselves be fooled by the word ‘hearts’. The alliance of this word with the verb concerne shows very well, on the contrary, that it is a question of knowledge and not the domain of sentiments.” “Saint-Just, esprit et conscience publique,” AHRB, no. 194 (1908), 121. But Thiersen is ignoring one of the basic principles of the republic of virtue: knowledge and sentiment are not separate faculties, as under the corrupt old regime, but are hierarchically tied in the heart of the good person.
It was rather like a stage-setting for a stylized tableau, inspired by Plutarch and Rousseau in his Spartan manifestation. It was a landscape dominated by the arresting moral posture, where Cornelia reigned at last undisputed and only the Gracchi had rights to the city. The atmosphere was one of austere exaltation, at once lofty and menacing, a France contemptuous of Caesar and intoxicated with Brutus. It was a world bathed in mysterious divine presence, in which the concerns of everyday reality would have seemed irrelevant if not tasteless. Most of the fragments dealt with the morality of the people; economic and political questions were treated secondarily and strictly from a moral perspective.

Three areas were accorded special importance: education, the office of censor of morals, and the question of adoption and inheritance. The last appears to have been a matter of great personal concern to the orphaned Saint-Just.

The description of education began with the “institutionalization” of breastfeeding, that practice which, since Rousseau, had become so intimately linked with the virtue of the whole family. “Children belong to their mother until the age of five, if she has nursed them, and to the republic after that, until death. The mother who has not nursed her baby comes to be a mother in the eyes of the fatherland” (p. 516-17). Thus Saint-Just’s state would ensure a proper republican beginning to the citizen’s life by reinforcing nature’s will with the force of national sentiment, or perhaps of law. Unlike Le Pellevier, Saint-Just would not turn the child back to the family at eleven or twelve, but would surrender him to the republic for life. He provided no other details of the children’s upbringing until the age of five, when they were to be segregated by sex, the boys being sent to “schools in the country” for their common education. There they were to dress in cloth, sleep eight hours a night on mats, eat only roots, fruits, legumes, dairy products, and bread, and drink only water. They might not be petted or struck. They would learn to read, write, and swim. Above all, they must learn to be still. “Chil-

\[190\]

\[191\]

\[192\]

\[193\]
Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue

evil-doers; instead it purged instead of those who refused to accept its virtue. The idler was banished, as were the official "convicted of leading a bad life" and the desecrator of tombs. In this way evil was constantly flushed from the body politic, leaving it cleansed of impieties. The same thinking led Saint-Just to purge the foreigners, for it was he who introduced corruption into France. It was the alien, who, "from vicissitude to vicissitude has led us to his ends," and who, Saint-Just said elsewhere, "troubles our repose." According to Saint-Just, it is "the foreign influence which forms traitors, or has the Gracchi killed, causes crime to be honored and virtue proscribed" (p. 590). The good state would expel all elements which resisted the fusion in virtue with the body politic.

The second key institution of the republic of virtue would be a class of "censors" or "magistrates to provide the example of morals." Saint-Just described this institution in two fragments. "In every revolution," he wrote, "it is necessary to have a dictator to save the State by force, or censors to save it by virtue" (p. 590). The censors would be chosen from the men who had reached the age of sixty: "Men who have always led blameless lives will wear a white sash at the age of sixty. They will present themselves for this purpose in the temple on the day of the festival of old age, to be judged by their fellow citizens. If no one accuses them, they will take the white sash. Respect for old age is a cult in our society" (p. 596).

These "men of the white sash" were charged with performing various services in the community; for example, "they kept incessant fires burning in the temple." Their principal function, however, was supervising the morals of public officials, army officers, and elected representatives. They were to rid high office of corruption. These awesome figures preserved their ends in a Saint-Justin silence; "It is forbidden for censors to speak in public" (p. 591).

Saint-Just's Institutions stand halfway between literature and political rhetoric. After Thermidor a project for a decree was found among his papers, one proposing the establishment of a class of censors. Saint-Just restored the arguments he had put forth in the Institutions but now declared: "The Committee of Public Safety has charged me with presenting the following decree" (p. 598). He then went on to dictate the terms of an actual law, establishing censors in each district in France. "This censorship is exercised upon the government," he stipulated, "and cannot be exercised upon the incorruptible people." The articles of the decrees are either paraphrases of the Institutions or word-for-word transpositions. Only the matter of white-sashed sexagenarians is omitted. It is not possible to ascertain, at this point, whether the Committee of Public Safety had charged Saint-Just with such a decree or whether it belonged to the private world of his imagination.

On July 13, 1793, a few months after Saint-Just had probably written most of his Institutions, Robespierre presented the Convention with his version of Le Pelletier's plan for education. He began by declaring the importance of the subject. "The National Convention owes three monuments to history," he declared, "the Constitution, the code of civil laws, and public education." It is to be noted that none of these three objects had been achieved under the old regime, the first being traditional rather than transcribed, the second being particular rather than general, and the third being the concern of the church and not of the state. "Let us give them the perfection of which they are susceptible!" he continued. "For the glory of conquests and victories is sometimes ephemeral, but beautiful institutions remain and they immortalize nations." Thus, once more: education was seen as an "Institution," in its particular Rousseauian sense, with all the overtones of creating a way of life that would be the envy of the ages. In reference to Le Pelletier's plan, Robespierre remarked: "I confess that what has been said up until now does not correspond to the idea I have formed for myself of a complete plan for education. I have dared to conceive vaster thoughts; and considering to what point the human species is degraded by the vice of our former social system, I am convinced of the necessity of operating a total regeneration, and, if I may express myself in this way, of creating a new people."

Robespierre's Rousseauian argument has two interesting characteristics here: both origins and ends are absolute. Robespierre does not present himself as wishing to consolidate the ideas of Le Pelletier, to be part of an on-going group enterprise concerned with national education; he is impelled to negate Le Pelletier's text in order to substitute, in toto, his own. His aims, too, are not reform or improvement of existent humanity but the creation of a "new people." He addresses the distinction between "education" and "instruction." The latter, concerned with intellectual achievements, was adequately dealt with by Le Pelletier, in Robespierre's opinion, and in
any case was of secondary importance. “Education,” on the other hand, “must be common to everyone and universally beneficial.” The Committee has entirely neglected it. Before the question of instruction, Robespierre placed priority upon the necessity for “institutions.” “For my part, I believed we had to lay foundations for the institutions of the public before instruction. The latter profits a few people, the former is for the good of all. Instruction propagates useful knowledge, institutions create and propagate necessary habits” (10: 31). Thus Robespierre, while modifying Le Pelletier’s script, incorporated it into a bold new program for France, one designed to move from the page into the lives of the people, destroying the “aristocratic” mentality inherent in family life and substituting for it a new consciousness, one derived from institutions generating a virtuous race.

The National Convention met as usual on January 21, 1793, the day that Louis XVI was executed and the day after Michel Le Pelletier had been assassinated. News of the two killings contrasted in disquieting ways, from the perspective of the republic of virtue. Saint-Just, Robespierre, and Marat had repeatedly issued warning notices that acts of government were by their very nature suspect, and that popular sovereignty was best expressed by the spontaneous uprising of the people against disloyal deputies. Marat, whose publications pushed each credo to its limit, had just stated that while popular sovereignty was the sacred principle of the Republic, “there is only one case where the people can exercise the act of sovereignty, in applying it to the Declaration of Rights” by declaring that all laws “the people” judged not in accord with it would be met by armed resistance.5

In that light, the ceremonial execution of Louis XVI by the government and the spontaneous assassination of Le Pelletier by an enraged citizen seemed to reverse the proper order of things. An effort was needed to relocate the radiating center of virtue firmly back in the Mountain. The Convention, meeting on January 21, rather than seeming triumphant at having destroyed the monarchy, was, according to the Moniteur, seized with an epidemic of suspicion. As the session began: “Rivière and Chabot denounced Chabran.

Jeanbon Saint-André denounced a poster of Valadié’s. Garran denounced a poster exhorting the people to save Louis. Goupilleau announced that he was almost executed in a café. Carrier denounced Thibaut.” Petion, presiding, at length attempted to stem the flood of accusations. He said it was a pity that the deputies “only greeted each other with a suspicious air and that trust was banished from the assembly” (BR 23: 55). He was interrupted and the denunciations and countercharges continued.

Marat, who had written of his wish that Louis’s death, “far from troubling the peace of the state, would serve only to affirm it” (OM, p. 271), published a dispassioned text after he witnessed the uproar at the assembly. “Vain hope! The very evening of the victim’s inhumanity, [disputes] broke out with fury over the nomination of a new president…. Men don’t change their hearts… so it is not a matter of living in peace with them, but of declaring an eternal war upon them” (OM, p. 273).

Newspaper accounts from the weeks following Louis’s execution indicate that it neither unified nor purified France. Rohan was accused of treason, and Buzot complained that the Committee of General Security was arresting too many people on vague grounds. The Abbaye was again filled with prisoners. “It is very important that the individual liberty of the citizens be respected,” Buzot said, “and the Committee of General Security harms it every day. Nobody dares to speak his piece frankly anymore, everyone is afraid of being sent to the Abbaye where memories of September 1 [an allusion to the massacres] await him” (BR 23: 404). His words were greeted with “violent muttering.”

Robespierre held that “the punishment of the tyrant made the principles of equality real. Since then a great number of those who used to blaspheme against the republic have been reduced to rendering homage to it, as hypocrisy renders homage to virtue, by adopting its forms and stammering its language” (5: 944).

Jacobin language had undergone a narrowing corresponding to Jacobin orthodoxy. The speeches and publications of the following months show an ever-shrinking vocabulary repeating, with hypnotic regularity, certain key words: “virtue,” “people,” “pure,” and “mass,” were contrasted with “vice,” “enemies,” “corrupt,” and “individuals.” I have not attempted to find synonyms for these words in translating because the sparse lexicon is an integral element of revolution.

Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue

ary Rousseauvian virtue.10 A more varied, supple style might be more palatable to the modern reader but it would betray the profound significance of Jacobin discourse, its exact correspondence with feelings of political virtue, no: elegance or aesthetic felicity. Robespierre refused to be satisfied that the wicked had ceased to pose a threat, however, even when they spoke the prescribed language.

All the vices engendered by tyranny have not disappeared with the tyrant: the corrupt minority of the nation struggles against the wholesome majority, not without advantages because they are the most educated, the most scheming, the cleverest in the art of speaking and swaying the public…. They favor with all their power the rich exquisites and the enemies of equality. Liberty would have long been established among us if individuals were as pure as the mass of the nation. [5: 394–5]

Robespierre presented the virtuous people as the reality of France, and it was his duty to speak for it and to denounce its enemies. During the trial of the king he had described "the people," as that entity appeared to him; never a throng of individuals, it constituted but one single, uncorrupted being. "Look at le peuple, when they speak to him of his rights and his interests, see if he is not grave and attentive. See how afflicted he seems, when he notices that his delegates are deliberating on public safety with scandalous levy" (5: 148 [December 14, 1791]).

In February 1793, however, Robespierre declared that the "enemies of the people" were disguising themselves as the "people." Shortages of food and other basic necessities occasioned riots and looting of grocers' and butchers' shops. In an effort to appease the hungry, proposals were made to restrict hoarding, to regulate prices and trade, and even to limit the legal significance of property.11 Robespierre expressed opposition to direct measures of reducing

10Bartles comments on a paradox of revolutionary discourse: "This writing, which shows all the signs of inflation, was nonetheless exact. Never has language been at the same time more unadorned and less false" (Déjà vus de Toussaint, p. 76).

11Restrictions on the rights of property discussed by Robespierre at this time were, according to Albert Soboul, less an expression of ideology than a response to specific emergencies: "These Rousseauist themes were brought forward by Robespierre in the spring of 1793, under the pressure of events: the 'force of things, Saint-Just will say, let us call it the logic of facts, the necessities of war, the imperatives of revolutionary defense, and not an abstract ideological view." Jean-Jacques Rousseau et le jacobinisme," JECS, p. 490.

[196]

The Wandering Circle: The Narrowing Way

the drastic disparity between the rich and the poor, on the grounds that it was precisely this gap which ensured the superior virtue of the impecunious classes:

It is much more important to make poverty honorable than to proscribe opulence. Fabrics'threaded cottage has nothing to envy in Caesar's palace. For my part, I would rather be the son of Aristides, raised at the expense of the Republic, than the heir apparent of Xerxes, born in the fifth of royal courts, to occupy a throne decorated with the degradation of peoples and glittering with public misery. [April 23, 1793]

He made it clear that the poor did not wish to own "the treasures of Caesar. For pure and elevated souls there are more precious goods than those. The riches which lead to so much corruption are more harmful to those who possess them than to those who are deprived of them" (4: 117).

According to the Moniteur, inflation and shortages were rampant. The government seemed loath to take strong measures to protect the poor, who were suffering acutely from high prices, the scarcity of basic provisions, and the irritating systems of distribution which involved endless waiting before the baker's and the grocer's. Owen Hutton states categorically that "ultimately when death and diseases came in 1794 all the poor were to be affected by the total failure of French Revolutionary legislation on poor relief."12" Fights erupted in the working-class neighborhoods of Saint-Antoine, Saint-Marceau, and Saint-Martin, where throngs of men and women broke into shops and took merchandise, often leaving behind, as was customary, what they considered to be a fair price for the items commandeered.

In Robespierre's texts, these uprisings were subject to conflicting interpretations. Since he had consistently stated that le peuple were always pure, "closer to nature and less depraved than the vile exquisites" (4: 116), he could not reconcile with his beliefs the notion that they would break into grocery stores. The people with whom Robespierre described himself as identified so compellingly took the Bastille, they took the king from the Tuileries, they even, in their justifiable rage, took the prisoners from the Abbaye and killed them.

They did not take sugar and coffee. The solution to the problem had to be that those who snatched foreign luxury items from the stores were not le peuple. This was the conclusion Robespierre advanced:

What is there in common between the people of Paris and a mob of women, led by valets of the aristocracy, by disguised valets; a gathering of the sans-culottes took absolutely no part in, in which the citizens of the Saint-Antoine and Saint-Marceau suburbs had no part whatsoever? Is it the people, it is patriots who dared to cry "Long live Louis XVIII [the imprisoned Dauphin], the hell with the Jacobins, the hell with the Mountain and the Paris deputies? Overturn the Bastille, destroy royalty, conquer traitors and destroy traitors, that's what patriots do, those are the exploits of the people of Paris: everything else belongs to the people's enemies. [5: 344 (April 6, 1793)]

For the first time Robespierre's text denounced crowds of working-class Parisians, or those alleged to be so described. The virtuous people whose every impulse Robespierre said he discovered by looking into his own heart was now defined as distinct from those who looted shops. "The people can put up with hunger," he commented, "but not with crime; le peuple is able to sacrifice everything except its virtues" (10: 360).

Robespierre stated that he, like the people, like Rousseau, was fated to suffer for his virtue. Persecution was inextricably wed to exemplary goodness, as in the case of his mentor. "Oh thou, true and sublime friend of humanity, who was persecuted by envy, intrigue and despotism," he apostrophized, "immortal Jean-Jacques" (4: 141). Callier (commissioner of national accounting) wrote to him (25 prairial, year II), telling him that his enemies were attempting to prove that "Robespierre was not always in agreement with himself. The enemies of Jean-Jacques did the same," Callier reminded Robespierre, "and they went so far as to slander the first apostle of the rights of man" (4: 151).

125Sohoul saw the moment of disengagement between the idealized "people" of the Jacobins and the sans-culotes societies as being a critical juncture for the Revolution. To understand the evolution of revolutionary institutions, one cannot overemphasize the importance of this attitude on Robespier's part. For the first time the insouciance of the essentially Jacobin revolutionary government and sans-culote democracy was affirmed. It did not suffice to restrict its activity of the societies more and more. To force them to dissolve, they had to be destroyed." Montesson populaires du gouvernement révolutionnaire en les I (1793-1794) (Paris: Flammarion, 1932), pp. 43-45.

The Widening Circle; The Narrowing Way

Virtue increasingly manifested itself in Robespierres's texts along an axis that swung from suffering violence to inflicting it on those steeped in evil. These two modes of goodness, one passive, the other active, were opposite sides of the same coin. "I have come to the point of suspecting that the true heroes are not those who triumph," he wrote in his Lettres à ses confréres (5: 136), "but those who suffer." "It is only too true that intrigue never forgives frankness... that persecution will always be the seal which will mark pure and tested virtue in the eyes of the centuries to come" (4: 68).

Jacques-Bré Hébert, who as Père Duchesne vulgarized to the point of caricature certain aspects of the Rousseauian thought of the Jacobins, expressed the same line of reasoning in characteristically crude form: "Good citizens must expect persecution, I... The more virtuous a man is, the more enemies he has. For... the people as a whole is always pure, it may be misled, but its intentions are good." 14

Albert Mathiez devoted a chapter of Auteur de Robespierre to a correspondent named François-Victor Aigoin whose letters illustrate the curious double-edged virtue which he professed to share with his mentor. On the one hand, Aigoin, who had named his son after Robespierre and asked the Inconceivable to tell him all his thoughts and "even his dreams," insisted that Robespierre answer his frequent and rather demanding letters on the grounds that he deserved to be loved because he was unhappy: "Would it be that you care for me less?" he asked, after a long silence, "I cannot believe that for I am not happy." 15 Unhappy virtue was recognized as a form of entitlement among disciples of Rousseauian virtue and it specifically allowed the destruction of vice. "Virtue may do anything in order to triumph over vice," Aigoin assured Robespierre, "the slave is allowed to do anything in order to kill tyranny" (p. 69).

Hence the difficulties Robespierre encountered in creating an adequate textual representation of the economic demands of the Paris working people, for instance. To satisfy the poor would have been to ruin them, for a contented people, enjoying the indulgent pleasures of consumerism, drinking coffee with sugar, would no
Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue

longer be the "suffering animal" with whom it was happiness to identify, and would no longer be justifiably violent.

Terrorously, in every text, Robespierre showed himself in constant touch with the goodness of France, of the people, a goodness which he said he found in his own heart. He was able to compare that intolerable model with the corrupt specimens of real humanity he encountered every day. "Liberty would have been long since affirmed among us if individuals were as pure as the mass of the nation" (5: 304), he had noted as early as 1793, and this anomaly continued to exist. France was not uniting into one pure cohesion of cells in a virtuous body politic. On the contrary numerous insurrections against the Revolution had broken out in various parts of France, the Vendée had risen, Lyons was ceding from the Revolution, Toulon had surrendered the English, and even in Paris every other day was marked by skirmishes in the streets. Rather than recommending efforts to effect compromise formations between these warring groups, Robespierre urged the movement toward purification.

Already in 1792 Robespierre had explained the basic conceptual framework of the Terror: in the beginning, he said "the nation divided into two parties, the royalists and the defenders of the people's cause." After destroying the royalists, however, "the so-called patriots divided into two classes; the bad citizens and the men of good faith" (5: 17). This antithetical pattern marked Robespierre's discourse until Thermidor. Each purification left France still divided between the pure citizens and the wicked ones, the latter ever disguising themselves under new masks. Thus it became clear, in the spring of 1793, that the Convention would have to be cleansed of the deputies from the Girondins, either by expulsion or execution. Buonarroti, who claimed to be a disciple of Robespierre, described the efforts to unseat the legally elected representatives of the Girondins as necessary to establish flawless morality. Philippe Buonarotti wrote: "At that time, the most powerful enemy remaining to combat was immorality and the greatest, the only means they had to establish the true Republic solidly was the purity and the virtue of the National Convention. Thus it was to preserve that purity and that virtue and above all the opinion that people should have had of them that those who presided over the destiny of France had to devote themselves."18

18Quoted in Mathieu, Auteur de Robespierre, p. 430.

The Widening Circle; The Narrowing Way

As we have seen, however, those who were loosely associated under the label "Girondine" had also exhibited pretensions of their own to virtue. Roland had long been referred to as "the virtuous" Roland because of his reputation for integrity in financial matters. This was not at all the definition of virtue which Robespierre and his colleagues approved. "The so-called 'virtue' of Roland," said Robespierre, "is far from that impetuous passion which shoulders in the breasts of true patriots." Vergniaud, on May 10, rose to denounce the particular definition of virtue which was being used to denigrate him and his friends. He attacked what he called the "Spartan virtue" of the Jacobins, which, he claimed, was leading them ever deeper into violence. "By chasing after an ideal perfection, a chimeric virtue," he said, "you are acting like beasts" (Jaurès: 8: 135).

Armed men from the sections of Paris entered the National Convention of May 31, and the representatives of the nation voted to expel twenty-two members of the Girondine. This expulsion was written about in Jacobin journals in a specific way: the virtuous people of France had rid themselves of a foreign substance within the body politic, just as they had when they executed Louis XVI, the "alien in our midst." It was impossible for the "free Frenchman" to quibble with himself. Clearly, what looked like internal dispute had to be understood as external attack. "We have no civil war," the Journal de la Montagne proclaimed, "what we have to support is the foreign war. Dissidents identify with enemies of the state. The free Frenchman can have no internal dissensions" (Jaurès: 8: 196).

In July 1793, Marat, "the people's friend," was stabbed by Charlotte Corday. Again, as in the murder of Le Pelletier, the assassination was associated with discordant vibrations. Marat was himself a disciple of Rousseau.17 The motto of his journal, L'Amy du Peuple, "vivam impendere vero," to dedicate one's life to the truth, was Rousseau's own, and he too depicted himself as constantly persecut ed for his virtue, haunted underground like an animal for his goodness. As for his incitements to murder, they were always in the name of virtue. His self-representation, like those of Robespierre and Saint-Just, was never guilty of egoism, enjoyment, or avarice. He

17In Jean-Paul Marat (1957; New York: Blom, 1966), Louis Gottschalk discusses Marat's debt to Rousseau (p. 18) and points out that Marat was the author of two novels, Les Aventures de Jeanne Coma Polumont and Les Lettres polonaises, which were initiations of La Nouvelle Heloise.
Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue

was stunned at being accused of venality: “I am perhaps the only
author since Jean-Jacques who must be excluded from such a
suspicion,” he said (OM, p. 44). He claimed he was glad to be called
a “spleenetic madman” because that was “the invertebrate with which the
Encyclopedist charlatans gratified the author of the Contrat social”
(OM, p. 234).

After his assassination, his embalmed heart was suspended over
the lectern at the Jacobin Club, and he became the object of a cult as
a “martyr of virtue.” On the other hand, in counterrevolutionary
circles, Charlotte Corday herself was portrayed as the incarnation of
avenging morality, heroically dispatching, in the name of virtue, the
one who had urged the assassination of others, in the same cause.
André Chénier, shortly before he was executed, composed an ode to
Charlotte Corday in which he praised her: “One less scoundrel
crawls in the mud. Virtue applauds you,” and further, “Oh virtue,
the dagger, only hope of the earth, is your sacred arm. . . .” Thus
the word “virtue” was becoming more and more intimately associated
with martyrdom, on the one hand, and on the other, with assassination.

Robespierre joined the Committee of Public Safety on July 27,
1793, and commented on the continuing penetration of the good
state by evil: “Called to the Comité de Public Safety against my
inclination, I saw things there I would never have dared suspect. I
saw on the one hand patriotic members who sought in vain the good
of their country, and on the other hand, traitors who plotted within
the very heart of the Convention, against the interests of the coun-
try” (110: 65 [August 11, 1793]). In the same week the Convention
deeded that “collèges and faculties of theology, medicine, arts, and
law are suppressed on the entire surface of the Republic” (Moniteur
August 8). On September 5 the Convention voted Terror the “Order
of the Day.” The Committee of Public Safety ordered the Théâtre de
la Nation (formerly the Comédie française) to be closed and had all
the actors arrested.

In some notes of Robespierre’s dating from that September, he
reflected upon events and men: “What is the point?” he asked. “The
execution of the Constitution of favor of the people. Who will be our

Pain et les autres... un soldat de mes armes tue dans cette forge. / La verge s'appuclante, De sa
main l'andon / En étoile, belle héritière, entend l'angoisse vois. / O venge, le poignard,
son esprit de la terre / Est ton arme sacrée. ;” Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Pléiade, 1958),

2031

The Widening Circle: The Narrowing Way

enemies? Vicious men and the rich. We must proscribe mercenaries
who lead the people astray” (Jaurès, 8: 258).

Thus in September 1793, at the end of the Republic’s first year,
“le peuple” had come to be defined by Jacobin leadership as the
totality of inhabitants of France less the royal family, monarchs,
aristocrats, vicious men and the wealthy, actors and mercenary writ-
ers. Another vast category, however, was about to disappear from the
ranks of the people: women.