

The Regicides, Albert Camus

Kings were put to death long before January 21, 1793, and before the regicides of the nineteenth century. But Ravaillac, Damiens, and their followers were interested in attacking the person, not the principle, of the king. They wanted another king and that was all. It never occurred to them that the throne could remain empty forever. 1789 is the starting-point of modern times, because the men of that period wished, among other things, to overthrow the principle of divine right and to introduce to the historical scene the forces of negation and rebellion which had become the essence of intellectual discussion in the previous centuries.

Thus they added to traditional tyrannicide the concept of calculated deicide. The so-called freethinkers, the philosophers and jurists, served as levers for this revolution.¹ In order for such an undertaking to enter into the realms of possibility and to be considered legitimate, it was first necessary for the Church, whose infinite responsibility it is, to place itself on the side of the masters by compromising with the executioner—a step that developed into the Inquisition and was perpetuated by complicity with the temporal powers. Michelet is quite correct in wanting to recognize only two outstanding characters in the revolutionary saga: Christianity and the French Revolution.

¹ The kings themselves collaborated in this by allowing political power gradually to encroach on religious power, thus threatening the very principle of their legitimacy.

In fact, for him, 1789 is explained by the struggle between divine grace and justice. Although Michelet shared the taste for all-embracing abstractions with his intemperate period, he saw that this taste was one of the profound causes of the revolutionary crisis.

Even if the monarchy of the ancien regime was not always arbitrary in its manner of governing, it was undoubtedly arbitrary in principle. It was founded on divine right, which means that its legitimacy could never be questioned. Its legitimacy often was questioned, however, in particular by various parliaments. But those who exercised it considered and presented it as an axiom. Louis XIV, as is well known, rigidly adhered to the principle of divine right.²

² Charles I clung so tenaciously to the principle of divine right that he considered it unnecessary to be just and loyal to those who denied it.

Bossuet gave him considerable help in this direction by saying to the kings of France: "You are gods." The king, in one of his aspects, is the divine emissary in charge of human affairs and therefore of the administration of justice. Like God Himself, he is the last recourse of the victims of misery and injustice. In principle, the people can appeal to the king for help against their oppressors. "If the King only knew, if the Czar only knew . . ." was the frequently expressed sentiment of the French and Russian people during periods of great distress.

It is true in France, at least, that, when the monarchy did know, it often tried to defend the lower classes against the oppressions of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. But was this, essentially, justice? From the absolute point of view, which was the point of view of the writers of the period, it was not. Even though it is possible to appeal to the king, it is impossible to appeal against him in so far as he is the embodiment of a principle.

He dispenses his protection and his assistance if and when he wants to. One of the attributes of grace is that it is discretionary. Monarchy in its theocratic form is a type of government which wants to put grace before justice by always letting it have the last word. Rousseau in his Savoyard curate's declaration, on the other hand, is only original in so far as he submits God to justice and in this way inaugurates, with the rather naive solemnity of the period, contemporary history.

From the moment that the freethinkers began to question the existence of God, the problem of justice became of primary importance. The justice of the period was, quite simply, confused with equality. The throne of God totters and justice, to confirm its support of equality, must give it the final push by making a direct attack on His representative on earth. Divine right to all intents and purposes was already destroyed by being opposed and forced to compromise with natural right for three years, from 1789 to 1792.

In the last resort, grace is incapable of compromise. It can give in on certain points, but never on the final point. But that does not suffice. According to Michelet, Louis XVI still wanted to be king in prison. In a France entirely governed by new principles, the principle that had been defeated still survived behind prison walls through the mere power of faith and through the existence of one human being.

Justice has this in common with grace, and this alone, that it wants to be total and to rule absolutely. From the moment they conflict, they fight to the death. "We do not want to condemn the King," said Danton, who had not even the good manners of a lawyer, "we want to kill him." In fact, if God is denied, the King must die. Saint-Just, it seems, was responsible for Louis XVI's death; but when he exclaims: "To-determine the principle in virtue of which the accused is perhaps to die, is to determine the principle by which the society that judges him lives," he demonstrates that it is the philosophers who are going to kill the King: the King must die in the name of the social contract.³ But this demands an explanation.

³ Rousseau would not, of course, have wanted this. It must be remembered, before proceeding with this analysis and in order to set its limits, that Rousseau firmly declared: "Nothing on this earth is worth buying at the price of human blood."

The New Gospel

The Social Contract is, primarily, an inquiry into the legitimacy of power. But it is a book about rights, not about facts, and at no time is it a collection of sociological observations. It is concerned with principles and for this very reason is bound to be controversial. It presumes that traditional legitimacy, which is supposedly of divine origin, is not acquired. Thus it proclaims another sort of legitimacy and other principles.

The Social Contract is also a catechism, of which it has both the tone and the dogmatic language. Just as 1789 completes the conquests of the English and American revolutions, so Rousseau pushes to its limits the theory of the social contract to be found in Hobbes. The Social Contract amplifies and dogmatically explains the new religion whose god is reason, confused with nature, and whose representative on earth, in place of the king, is the people considered as an expression of the general will.

The attack on the traditional order is so evident that, from the very first chapter, Rousseau is determined to demonstrate the precedence of the citizens' pact, which established the people, over the pact between the people and the king, which founded royalty. Until Rousseau's time, God created kings, who, in their turn, created peoples. After The Social Contract, peoples create themselves before creating kings.

As for God, there is nothing more to be said, for the time being. Here we have, in the political field, the equivalent of Newton's revolution. Power, therefore, is no longer arbitrary, but derives its existence from general consent. In other words, power is no longer what is, but what should be.

Fortunately, according to Rousseau, what is cannot be separated from what should be. The people are sovereign "only because they are always everything that they should be." Confronted with this statement of principle, it is perfectly

justifiable to say that reason, which was always obstinately invoked at that period, is not particularly well treated in the context.

It is evident that, with *The Social Contract*, we are assisting at the birth of a new mystique the will of the people being substituted for God Himself. "Each of us," says Rousseau, "places his person and his entire capabilities under the supreme guidance of the will of the people, and we receive each individual member into the body as an indivisible part of the whole."

This political entity, proclaimed sovereign, is also defined as a divine entity. Moreover, it has all the attributes of a divine entity. It is, in fact, infallible in that, in its role of sovereign, it cannot even wish to commit abuses. "Under the law of reason, nothing is done without cause."

It is totally free, if it is true that absolute freedom is freedom in regard to oneself. Thus Rousseau declares that it is against the nature of the body politic for the sovereign power to impose a law upon itself that it cannot violate. It is also inalienable, indivisible; and, finally, it even aims at solving the great theological problem, the contradiction between absolute power and divine innocence.

The will of the people is, in fact, coercive; its power has no limits. But the punishment it inflicts on those who refuse to obey it is nothing more than a means of "compelling them to be free." The deification is completed when Rousseau, separating the sovereign from his very origins, reaches the point of distinguishing between the general will and the will of all.

This can be logically deduced from Rousseau's premises. If man is naturally good, if nature as expressed in him is identified with reason,⁴ he will express the preeminence of reason, on the one condition that he expresses himself freely and naturally. He can no longer, therefore, go back on his decision, which henceforth hovers over him. The will of the people is primarily the expression of universal reason, which is categorical. The new God is born.

4 Every ideology is contrary to human psychology.

That is why the words that are to be found most often in *The Social Contract* are the words absolute, sacred, inviolable. The body politic thus defined, whose laws are sacred commandments, is only a by-product of the mystic body of temporal Christianity. *The Social Contract*, moreover, terminates with a description of a civil religion and makes of Rousseau a harbinger of contemporary forms of society which exclude not only opposition but even neutrality.

Rousseau is, in fact, the first man in modern times to institute the profession of civil faith. He is also the first to justify the death penalty in a civil society and the absolute submission of the subject to the authority of the sovereign. "It is in order not to become victim of an assassin that we consent to die if we become assassins." A strange justification, but one which firmly establishes the fact that you must know how to die if the sovereign commands, and must, if necessary, concede that he is right and you are wrong. This mystic idea explains Saint-Just's silence from the time of his arrest until he goes to the scaffold. Suitably developed, it equally well explains the enthusiasm of the defendants in the Moscow trials.

We are witnessing the dawn of a new religion with its martyrs, its ascetics, and its saints. To be able to estimate the influence achieved by this gospel, one must have some idea of the inspired tones of the proclamations of 1789. Fauchet, confronted with the skeletons discovered in the Bastille, exclaims: "The day of revelation is upon us. . . . The very bones have risen at the sound of the voice of French freedom; they bear witness against the centuries of oppression and death, and prophesy the regeneration of human nature and of the life of nations." Then he predicts: "We have reached the heart of time. The tyrants are ready to fall." It is the moment of astonished and generous faith when a

remarkably enlightened mob overthrows the scaffold and the wheel at Versailles.⁵ Scaffolds seemed to be the very altars of religion and injustice.

⁵ The same idyl takes place in Russia, in 1905, where the soviet of St. Petersburg parades through the streets carrying placards demanding the abolition of the death penalty, and again in 1917.

The new faith could not tolerate them. But a moment comes when faith, if it becomes dogmatic, erects its own altars and demands unconditional adoration. Then scaffolds reappear and despite the altars, the freedom, the oaths, and the feasts of Reason, the Masses of the new faith must now be celebrated with blood. In any case, in order that 1789 shall mark the beginning of the reign of "holy humanity"⁶ and of "Our Lord the human race,"⁷ the fallen sovereign must first of all disappear. The murder of the King-priest will sanction the new age which endures to this day.

⁶ Vergniaud.

⁷ Anarchasis Cloots.

The Execution of the King

Saint-Just introduced Rousseau's ideas into the pages of history. At the King's trial, the essential part of his arguments consisted in saying that the King is not inviolable and should be judged by the Assembly and not by a special tribunal. His arguments he owed to Rousseau. A tribunal cannot be the judge between the king and the sovereign people. The general will cannot be cited before ordinary judges.

It is above everything. The inviolability and the transcendence of the general will are thus proclaimed. We know that the predominant theme of the trial was the inviolability of the royal person. The struggle between grace and justice finds its most provocative illustration in 1793 when two different conceptions of transcendence meet in mortal combat. Moreover, Saint-Just is perfectly aware of how very much is at stake: "The spirit in which the King is judged will be the same as the spirit in which the Republic is established."

Saint-Just's famous speech has, therefore, all the earmarks of a theological treatise. "Louis, the stranger in our midst," is the thesis of this youthful prosecutor. If a contract, either civil or natural, could still bind the king and his people, there would be a mutual obligation; the will of the people could not set itself up as absolute judge to pronounce absolute judgment. Therefore it is necessary to prove that no agreement binds the people and the king.

In order to prove that the people are themselves the embodiment of eternal truth it is necessary to demonstrate that royalty is the embodiment of eternal crime. Saint-Just, therefore, postulates that every king is a rebel or a usurper. He is a rebel against the people whose absolute sovereignty he usurps. Monarchy is not a king, "it is crime." Not a crime, but crime itself, says Saint-Just; in other words, absolute profanation.

That is the precise, and at the same time ultimate, meaning of Saint-Just's remark, the import of which has been stretched too far:⁸ "No one can rule innocently." Every king is guilty, because any man who wants to be king is automatically on the side of death. Saint-Just says exactly the same thing when he proceeds to demonstrate that the sovereignty of the people is a "sacred matter."

⁸ Or at least the significance of which has been anticipated. When Saint-Just made this remark, he did not know that he was already speaking for himself.

Citizens are inviolable and sacred and can be constrained only by the law, which is an expression of their common will. Louis alone does not benefit by this

particular inviolability or by the assistance of the law, for he is placed outside the contract. He is not part of the general will; on the contrary, by his very existence he is a blasphemer against this all-powerful will. He is not a "citizen," which is the only way of participating in the new divine dispensation. "What is a king in comparison with a Frenchman?" Therefore, he should be judged and nothing more.

But who will interpret the will of the people and pronounce judgment? The Assembly, which by its origin has retained the right to administer this will, and which participates as an inspired council in the new divinity. Should the people be asked to ratify the judgment? We know that the efforts of the monarchists in the Assembly were finally concentrated on this point.

In this way the life of the King could be rescued from the logic of the bourgeois jurists and at least entrusted to the spontaneous emotions and compassion of the people. But here again Saint-Just pushes his logic to its extremes and makes use of the conflict, invented by Rousseau, between the general will and the will of all. Even though the will of all would pardon, the general will cannot do so. Even the people cannot efface the crime of tyranny.

Cannot the victims, according to law, withdraw their complaint? We are not dealing with law, we are dealing with theology. The crime of the king is, at the same time, a sin against the ultimate nature of things. A crime is committed; then it is pardoned, punished, or forgotten. But the crime of royalty is permanent; it is inextricably bound to the person of the king, to his very existence. Christ Himself, though He can forgive sinners, cannot absolve false gods. They must disappear or conquer. If the people forgive today, they will find the crime intact tomorrow, even though the criminal sleeps peacefully in prison. Therefore there is only one solution: "To avenge the murder of the people by the death of the King."

The only purpose of Saint-Just's speech is, once and for all, to block every egress for the King except the one leading to the scaffold. If, in fact, the premises of The Social Contract are accepted, this is logically inevitable. At last, after Saint-Just, "kings will flee to the desert, and nature will resume her rights." It was quite pointless of the Convention to vote a reservation and say that it did

not intend to create a precedent if it passed judgment on Louis XVI or if it pronounced a security measure. In doing so, it refused to face the consequences of its own principles and tried to camouflage, with shocking hypocrisy, its real purpose, which was to found a new form of absolutism. Jacques Roux, at least, was speaking the truth of the times when he called the King Louis the Last, thus indicating that the real revolution, which had already been accomplished on the economic level, was then taking place on the philosophic plane and that it implied a twilight of the gods. Theocracy was attacked in principle in 1789 and killed in its incarnation in 1793. Brissot was right in saying: "The most solid monument to our revolution is philosophy." 9

9 The religious Wars of the Vendee showed him to be right again.

On January 21, with the murder of the King-priest, was consummated what has significantly been called the passion of Louis XVI. It is certainly a crying scandal that the public assassination of a weak but goodhearted man has been presented as a great moment in French history. That scaffold marked no climax¹ far from it. But the fact remains that, by its consequences, the condemnation of the King is at the crux of our contemporary history. It symbolizes the secularization of our history and the disincarnation of the Christian God. Up to now God played a part in history through the medium of the kings. But His representative in history has been killed, for there is no longer a king. Therefore there is nothing but a semblance of God, relegated to the heaven of principles.¹

¹ This will become the god of Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte.

The revolutionaries may well refer to the Gospel, but in fact they dealt a terrible blow to Christianity, from which it has not yet recovered. It really seems as if the execution of the King, followed, as we know, by hysterical scenes of suicide and madness, took place in complete awareness of what was being done. Louis XVI seems, sometimes, to have doubted his divine right, though he systematically rejected any projected legislation which threatened his faith.

But from the moment that he suspected or knew his fate, he seemed to identify himself, as his language betrayed, with his divine mission, so that there would be no possible doubt that the attempt on his person was aimed at the King-Christ, the incarnation of the divinity, and not at the craven flesh of a mere man. His bedside book in the Temple was the Imitation.

The calmness and perfection that this man of rather average sensibility displayed during his last moments, his indifference to everything of this world, and, finally, his brief display of weakness on the solitary scaffold, so far removed from the people whose ears he had wanted to reach, while the terrible rolling of the drum drowned his voice, give us the right to imagine that it was not Capet who died, but Louis appointed by divine right, and that with him, in a certain manner, died temporal Christianity.

To emphasize this sacred bond, his confessor sustained him, in his moment of weakness, by reminding him of his "resemblance" to the God of Sorrows. And Louis XVI recovers himself and speaks in the language of this God: "I shall drink," he says, "the cup to the last dregs." Then he commits himself, trembling, into the ignoble hands of the executioner.

The Religion of Virtue

A religion that executes its obsolete sovereign must now establish the power of its new sovereign; it closes the churches, and this leads to an endeavor to build a temple. The blood of the gods, which for a second bespatters the confessor of Louis XVI, announces a new baptism. Joseph de Maistre qualified the Revolution as satanic. We can see why and in what sense. Michelet, however, was closer to the truth when he called it a purgatory. An era blindly embarks down this tunnel on an attempt to discover a new illumination, a new happiness, and the face of the real God. But what will this new god be? Let us ask Saint-Just once more.

The year 1789 does not yet affirm the divinity of man, but the divinity of the people, to the degree in which the will of the people coincides with the will of nature and of reason. If the general will is freely expressed, it can only be the universal expression of reason. If the people are free, they are infallible. Once the King is dead, and the chains of the old despotism thrown off, the people are going to express what, at all times and in all places, is, has been, and will be the truth. They are the oracle that must be consulted to know what the eternal order of the world demands. *Vox populi, vox naturae.*

Eternal principles govern our conduct: Truth, Justice, finally Reason. There we have the new God. The Supreme Being, whom cohorts of young girls come to adore at the Feast of Reason, is only the ancient god disembodied, peremptorily deprived of any connection with the earth, and launched like a balloon into a heaven empty of all transcendent principles. Deprived of all his representatives, of any intercessor, the god of the lawyers and philosophers only has the value of a demonstration. He is not very strong, in fact, and we can see why Rousseau, who preached tolerance, thought that atheists should be condemned to death.

To ensure the adoration of a theorem for any length of time, faith is not enough; a police force is needed as well. But that will only come later. In 1793 the new faith is still intact, and it will suffice, to take Saint-Just's word, to govern according to the dictates of reason. The art of ruling, according to him, has produced only monsters because, before his time, no one wished to

govern according to nature. The period of monsters has come to an end with the termination of the period of violence. "The human heart advances from nature to violence, from violence to morality."

Morality is, therefore, only nature finally restored after centuries of alienation. Man only has to be given law "in accord with nature and with his heart," and he will cease to be unhappy and corrupt. Universal suffrage, the foundation of the new laws, must inevitably lead to a universal morality. "Our aim is to create an order of things which establishes a universal tendency toward good."

The religion of reason quite naturally establishes the Republic of law and order. The general will is expressed in laws codified by its representatives. "The people make the revolution, the legislator makes the Republic." "Immortal, impassive" institutions, "sheltered from the temerity of man," will govern in their turn the lives of all men by universal accord and without possibility of contradiction since by obeying the laws all will only be obeying themselves. "Outside the law," says Saint-Just, "everything is sterile and dead." It is the formal and legalistic Republic of the Romans. We know the passion of Saint-Just and his contemporaries for ancient Rome.

The decadent young man who, in Reims, spent hours in a room painted black and decorated with white teardrops, with the shutters closed, dreamed of the Spartan Republic. The author of *Organt*, a long and licentious poem, was absolutely convinced of the necessity for frugality and virtue. In the institutions that he invented, Saint-Just refused to allow children to eat meat until the age of sixteen, and he dreamed of a nation that was both vegetarian and revolutionary. "The world has been empty since the Romans," he exclaimed. But heroic times were at hand. Cato, Brutus, Scaevola, had become possible once more. The rhetoric of the Latin moralists flourished once again.

Vice, virtue, corruption, were terms that constantly recurred in the oratory of the times, and even more in the speeches of Saint-Just, of which they were the perpetual burden. The reason for this is simple. This perfect edifice, as Montesquieu had already seen, could not exist without virtue. The French Revolution, by claiming to build history on the principle of absolute purity, inaugurates modern times simultaneously with the era of formal morality.

What, in fact, is virtue? For the bourgeois philosopher of the period it is conformity with nature² and, in politics, conformity with the law, which expresses the general will. "Morality," says Saint-Just, "is stronger than tyrants." It has, in fact, just killed Louis XVI. Every form of disobedience to law therefore comes, not from an imperfection in the law, which is presumed to be impossible, but from a lack of virtue in the refractory citizen. That is why the Republic not only is an assembly, as Saint-Just forcibly says, but is also virtue itself. Every form of moral corruption is at the same time political corruption, and vice versa.

² But nature itself, as we encounter it in the works of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, conforms to a pre-established virtue. Nature is also an abstract principle.

A principle of infinite repression, derived from this very doctrine, is then established. Undoubtedly Saint-Just was sincere in his desire for a universal idyl. He really dreamed of a republic of ascetics, of humanity reconciled and dedicated to the chaste pursuits of the age of innocence, under the watchful eye of those wise old men whom he decked out in advance with a tricolor scarf and a white plume. We also know that, at the beginning of the Revolution, Saint-Just declared himself, at the same time as Robespierre, against the death penalty.

He only demanded that murderers should be dressed in black for the rest of their lives. He wanted to establish a form of justice which did not attempt "to find the culprit guilty, but to find him weak" — an admirable ambition. He also dreamed of a republic of forgiveness which would recognize that though the

fruits of crime are bitter, its roots are nevertheless tender. One of his outbursts, at least, came from the heart and is not easily forgotten: "it is a frightful thing to torment the people." Yes indeed, it is a frightful thing. But a man can realize this and yet submit to principles that imply, in the final analysis, the torment of the people.

Morality, when it is formal, devours. To paraphrase Saint-Just, no one is virtuous innocently. From the moment that laws fail to make harmony reign, or when the unity which should be created by adherence to principles is destroyed, who is to blame? Factions. Who compose the factions? Those who deny by their very actions the necessity of unity. Factions divide the sovereign; therefore they are blasphemous and criminal. They, and they alone, must be combated. But what if there are many factions? All shall be fought to the death.

Saint-Just exclaims: "Either the virtues or the Terror." Freedom must be guaranteed, and the draft constitution presented to the Convention already mentions the death penalty. Absolute virtue is impossible, and the republic of forgiveness leads, with implacable logic, to the republic of the guillotine. Montesquieu had already denounced this logic as one of the causes of the decadence of societies, saying that the abuse of power is greatest when laws do not anticipate it. The pure law of Saint-Just did not take into account the truth, which is as old as history itself, that law, in its essence, is bound to be transgressed.

The Terror

Saint-Just, the contemporary of Sade, finally arrives at the justification of crime, though he starts from very different principles. Saint-Just is, of course, the anti-Sade. If Sade's formula were "Open the prisons or prove your virtue," then Saint-Just's would be: "Prove your virtue or go to prison." Both, however, justify terrorism the libertine justifies individual terrorism, the high priest of virtue State terrorism. Absolute good and absolute evil, if the necessary logic is applied, both demand the same degree of passion. Of course, there is a certain ambiguity in the case of Saint-Just.

The letter which he wrote to Vilain d'Aubigny in 1792 has something really insane about it. It is a profession of faith by a persecuted persecutor which ends with a hysterical avowal: "If Brutus does not kill others, he will kill himself." A personality so obstinately serious, so voluntarily cold, logical, and imperturbable, leads one to imagine every kind of aberration and disorder. Saint-Just invented the kind of seriousness which makes the history of the last two centuries so tedious and depressing. "He who makes jokes as the head of a government," he said, "has a tendency to tyranny."

An astonishing maxim, above all if one thinks of the penalty for the mere accusation of tyranny, one which, in any case, prepared the way for the pedant Caesars. Saint-Just sets the example; even his tone is definitive. That cascade of peremptory affirmatives, that axiomatic and sententious style, portrays him better than the most faithful painting. His sentences drone on; his definitions follow one another with the coldness and precision of commandments. "Principles should be moderate, laws implacable, principles without redress." It is the style of the guillotine.

Such pertinacity in logic, however, implies a profound passion. Here, as elsewhere, we again find the passion for unity. Every rebellion implies some kind of unity. The rebellion of 1789 demands the unity of the whole country. Saint-Just dreams of an ideal city where manners and customs, in final agreement with the law, will proclaim the innocence of man and the identity of his nature with reason. And if factions arise to interrupt this dream, passion will exaggerate its logic.

No one will dare to imagine that, since factions exist, the principles are perhaps wrong. Factions will be condemned as criminal because principles remain intangible. "It is time that everyone returned to morality and the aristocracy

to the Terror." But the aristocratic factions are not the only ones to be reckoned with; there are the republicans, too, and anyone else who criticizes the actions of the legislature and of the Convention. They, too, are guilty, since they threaten unity. Saint-Just, then, proclaims the major principle of twentieth-century tyrannies. "A patriot is he who supports the Republic in general; whoever opposes it in detail is a traitor."

Whoever criticizes it is a traitor, whoever fails to give open support is a suspect. When neither reason nor the free expression of individual opinion succeeds in systematically establishing unity, it must be decided to suppress all alien elements. Thus the guillotine becomes a logician whose function is refutation. "A rogue who has been condemned to death by the tribunal says he wants to resist oppression simply because he wants to resist the scaffold!" Saint-Just's indignation is hard to understand in that, until his time, the scaffold was precisely nothing else but one of the most obvious symbols of oppression.

But at the heart of this logical delirium, at the logical conclusion of this morality of virtue, the scaffold represents freedom. It assures rational unity, and harmony in the ideal city. It purifies (the word is apt) the Republic and eliminates malpractices that arise to contradict the general will and universal reason. "They question my right to the title of philanthropist," Marat exclaims, in quite a different style. "Ah, what injustice!

Who cannot see that I want to cut off a few heads to save a great number?" A few "a faction? Naturally and all historic actions are performed at this price. But Marat, making his final calculations, claimed two hundred and seventy-three thousand heads. But he compromised the therapeutic aspect of the operation by screaming during the massacre: "Brand them with hot irons, cut off their thumbs, tear out their tongues." This philanthropist wrote day and night, in the most monotonous vocabulary imaginable, of the necessity of killing in order to create.

He wrote again, by candlelight deep down in his cellar, during the September nights while his henchmen were installing spectators' benches in prison courtyards men on the right, women on the left "to display to them, as a gracious example of philanthropy, the spectacle of the aristocrats having their heads cut off.

Do not let us confuse, even for a moment, the imposing figure of Saint-Just with the sad spectacle of Marat "Rousseau's monkey, as Michelet rightly calls him. But the drama of Saint-Just lies in having at moments joined forces, for superior and much deeper reasons, with Marat. Factions join with factions, and minorities with minorities, and in the end it is not even sure that the scaffold functions in the service of the will of all. But at least Saint-Just will affirm, to the bitter end, that it functions in the service of the general will, since it functions in the service of virtue. "A revolution such as ours is not a trial, but a clap of thunder for the wicked."

Good strikes like a thunderbolt, innocence is a flash of lightning "a flash of lightning that brings justice. Even the pleasure-seekers "in fact, they above all are counterrevolutionaries. Saint-Just, who said that the idea of happiness was new to Europe (actually it was mainly new for Saint-Just, for whom history stopped at Brutus), remarks that some people have an "appalling idea of what happiness is and confuse it with pleasure." They, too, must be dealt with firmly. Finally, it is no longer a question of majority or minority. Paradise, lost and always coveted by universal innocence, disappears into the distance; on the unhappy earth, racked with the cries of civil and national wars, Saint-Just decrees, against his nature and against his principles, that when the whole country suffers, then all are guilty.

The series of reports on the factions abroad, the law of the 22 Prairial, the speech of April 15, 1794 on the necessity of the police, mark the stages of this conversion. The man who with such nobility held that it was infamous to lay down

one's arms while there remained, somewhere in the world, one master and one slave, is the same man who had to agree to suspend the Constitution of 1793 and to adopt arbitrary rule.

In the speech that he made to defend Robespierre, he rejects fame and posterity and only refers himself to an abstract providence. At the same time, he recognized that virtue, of which he made a religion, has no other reward but history and the present, and that it must, at all costs, lay the foundations of its own reign. He did not like power which he called "cruel and wicked" and which, he said, "advanced toward repression, without any guiding principle."

But the guiding principle was virtue and was derived from the people. When the people failed, the guiding principle became obscured and oppression increased. Therefore it was the people who were guilty and not power, which must remain, in principle, innocent. Such an extreme and outrageous contradiction could only be resolved by an even more extreme logic and by the final acceptance of principles in silence and in death. Saint-Just at least remained equal to this demand, and in this way was at last to find his greatness and that independent life in time and space of which he spoke with such emotion.

For a long time he had, in fact, had a presentiment that the demands he made implied a total and unreserved sacrifice on his part and had said himself that those who make revolutions in this worldâ "those who do good" can sleep only in the tomb. Convinced that his principles, in order to triumph, must culminate in the virtue and happiness of his people, aware, perhaps, that he was asking the impossible, he cut off his own retreat in advance by declaring that he would stab himself in public on the day when he despaired of the people.

Nevertheless, he despaired, since he has doubts about the Terror. "The revolution is frozen, every principle has been attenuated; all that remains are red caps worn by intriguers. The exercise of terror has blunted crime as strong drink blunts the palate." Even virtue "unites with crime in times of anarchy." He said that all crime sprang from tyranny, which was the greatest crime of all, and yet, confronted with the unflagging obstinacy of crime, the Revolution itself resorted to tyranny and became criminal. Thus crime cannot be obliterated, nor can factions, nor the despicable desire for enjoyment; the people must be despaired of and subjugated.

But neither is it possible to govern innocently. Thus, evil must be either suffered or served, principles must be declared wrong or the people and mankind must be recognized as guilty. Then Saint-Just averts his mysterious and handsome face: "It would be leaving very little to leave a life in which one must be either the accomplice or the silent witness of evil." Brutus, who must kill himself if he does not kill others, begins by killing others.

But the others are too many; they cannot all be killed. In that case he must die and demonstrate, yet again, that rebellion, when it gets out of hand, swings from the annihilation of others to the destruction of the self. This task, at any rate, is easy; once again it suffices to follow logic to the bitter end. In his speech in defense of Robespierre, shortly before his death, Saint-Just reaffirms the guiding principle of his actions, which is the very same principle that leads to his condemnation: "I belong to no faction, I shall fight against them all." He accepted then, and in advance, the decision of the general willâ "in other words, of the Assembly.

He agreed to go to his death for love of principle and despite all the realities of the situation, since the opinion of the Assembly could only really be swayed by the eloquence and fanaticism of a faction. But that is beside the point! When principles fail, men have only one way to save them and to preserve their faith, which is to die for them. In the stifling heat of Paris in July, Saint-Just, ostensibly rejecting reality and the world, confesses that he stakes his life on the decision of principles.

When this has been said, he seems to have a fleeting perception of another

truth, and ends with a restrained denunciation of his colleagues Billaud-Varenes and Collot d'Herbois. "I want them to justify themselves and I want us to become wiser." The style and the guillotine are here suspended for a moment. But virtue, in that it has too much pride, is not wisdom.

The guillotine is going to fall again on that head as cold and beautiful as morality itself. From the moment that the Assembly condemns him until the moment when he stretches his neck to the knife, Saint-Just keeps silent. This long silence is more important than his death. He complained that silence reigned around thrones and that is why he wanted to speak so much and so well.

But in the end, contemptuous of the tyranny and the enigma of a people who do not conform to pure reason, he resorts to silence himself. His principles do not allow him to accept things as they are; and, things not being what they should be, his principles are therefore fixed, silent, and alone. To abandon oneself to principles is really to die and to die for an impossible love which is the contrary of love. Saint-Just dies, and, with him, all hope of a new religion.

"All the stones are cut to build the structure of freedom," said Saint-Just; "you can build a palace or a tomb of the same stones." The very principles of The Social Contract presided at the erection of the tomb that Napoleon Bonaparte came to seal. Rousseau, who was not wanting in common sense, understood very well that the society envisioned by The Social Contract was suitable only for gods. His successors took him at his word and tried to establish the divinity of man. The red flagâ "a symbol of martial law and therefore of the executive under the ancien regimeâ "became the revolutionary symbol on August 10, 1792.

A significant transfer about which Jaures comments as follows: "It is we the people who are the law. . . . We are not rebels. The rebels are in the Tuileries." But it is not so easy as that to become God. Even the ancient gods did not die at the first blow, and the revolutions of the nineteenth century were intended to achieve the final liquidation of the principle of divinity. Paris rose to place the King under the rule of the people and to prevent him from restoring an authority of principle. The corpse which the rebels of 1830 dragged through the rooms of the Tuileries and installed on the throne in order to pay it derisory homage has no other significance. The king could still be, at that period, a respected minister, but his authority is now derived from the nation, and his guiding principle is the Charter. He is no longer Majesty.

Now that the ancien regime had definitely disappeared in France, the new regime must again, after 1848, reaffirm itself, and the history of the nineteenth century up to 1914 is the history of the restoration of popular sovereignties against ancien regime monarchies; in other words, the history of the principle of nations. This principle finally triumphs in 1919, which witnesses the disappearance of all absolutist monarchies in Europe.³ Everywhere, the sovereignty of the nation is substituted, in law and in fact, for the sovereign king. Only then can the consequences of the principles of 1789 be seen. We survivors are the first to be able to judge them clearly.

³ With the exception of the Spanish monarchy. But the German Empire collapsed, of which Wilhelm II said that it was "the proof that we Hohenzollerns derive our crown from heaven alone and that it is to heaven alone that we must give an accounting."

The Jacobins reinforced the eternal moral principles to the extent to which they suppressed the things which, up to then, had supported these principles. As preachers of a gospel, they wanted to base fraternity on the abstract law of the Romans. They substituted the law for divine commandments on the supposition that it must be recognized by all because it was the expression of the general will. The law found its justification in natural virtue and then proceeded to justify natural virtue.

But immediately a single faction manifests itself, this reasoning collapses and we perceive that virtue has need of justification in order not to be abstract.

In the same way, the bourgeois jurists of the eighteenth century, by burying under the weight of their principles the just and vital conquests of their people, prepared the way for the two contemporary forms of nihilism: individual nihilism and State nihilism.

Law can reign, in fact, in so far as it is the law of universal reason.⁴ But it never is, and it loses its justification if man is not naturally good. A day comes when ideology conflicts with psychology. Then there is no more legitimate power. Thus the law evolves to the point of becoming confused with the legislator and with a new form of arbitrariness. Where turn then? The law has gone completely off its course; and, losing its precision, it becomes more and more inaccurate, to the point of making everything a crime.

The law still reigns supreme, but it no longer has any fixed limits. Saint-Just had foreseen that this form of tyranny might be exercised in the name of a silent people. "Ingenious crime will be exalted into a kind of religion and criminals will be in the sacred hierarchy." But this is inevitable. If major principles have no foundation, if the law expresses nothing but a provisional inclination, it is only made in order to be broken or to be imposed. Sade or dictatorship, individual terrorism or State terrorism, both justified by the same absence of justification, are, from the moment that rebellion cuts itself off from its roots and abstains from any concrete morality, one of the alternatives of the twentieth century.

* Hegel saw clearly that the philosophy of enlightenment wanted to deliver man from the irrational. Reason reunites mankind while the irrational destroys unity.

The revolutionary movement that was born in 1789 could not, however, stop there. God, for the Jacobins, is not completely dead, any more than He was dead for the romantics. They still preserve the Supreme Being. Reason, in a certain way, is still a mediator. It implies a pre-existent order. But God is at least dematerialized and reduced to the theoretical existence of a moral principle. The bourgeoisie succeeded in reigning during the entire nineteenth century only by referring itself to abstract principles. Less worthy than Saint-Just, it simply made use of this frame of reference as an alibi, while employing, on all occasions, the opposite values.

By its essential corruption and disheartening hypocrisy, it helped to discredit, for good and all, the principles it proclaimed. Its culpability in this regard is infinite. From the moment that eternal principles are put in doubt simultaneously with formal virtue, and when every value is discredited, reason will start to act without reference to anything but its own successes. It would like to rule, denying everything that has been and affirming all that is to come.

One day it will conquer. Russian Communism, by its violent criticism of every kind of formal virtue, puts the finishing touches to the revolutionary work of the nineteenth century by denying any superior principle. The regicides of the nineteenth century are succeeded by the deicides of the twentieth century, who draw the ultimate conclusions from the logic of rebellion and want to make the earth a kingdom where man is God.

The reign of history begins and, identifying himself only with his history, man, unfaithful to his real rebellion, will henceforth devote himself to the nihilistic revolution of the twentieth century, which denies all forms of morality and desperately attempts to achieve the unity of the human race by means of a ruinous series of crimes and wars. The Jacobin Revolution, which tried to institute the religion of virtue in order to establish unity upon it, will be followed by the cynical revolutions, which can be either of the right or of the left and which will try to achieve the unity of the world so as to found, at last, the religion of man. All that was God's will henceforth be rendered to Caesar.

The end