

Acts of Virtue and Terror:
Performative Speech, the French Revolution, and Romantic Literary Culture, 1789-1820

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(English)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2014

Date of final oral examination: 12/07/2011

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, especially my advisor, Professor Theresa M. Kelley. The idea for this project took hold in her “Romantic Terror” graduate seminar at the UW-Madison, and her patience, enthusiasm, and feedback helped keep me going through the research and writing process. I would also like to thank the UW-Madison Graduate School for granting a University Dissertation Fellowship to help fund my research. Clara Burke, Jennifer Moore, and Gwendolyn Blume provided support and assistance when I needed it the most—sending you all love and Gail Ambrosius Chocolates. Finally, my love and gratitude goes out to my grandmother, Allison Rubinstein Levy, and my parents, Thomas and Diane Citti.

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Introduction

Reading the Virtue-Terror Chiasmus in Romantic Literature

On February 5, 1794, Maximilien de Robespierre, standing before the National Convention, delivered “On the Principles of Political Morality,” a speech intended to justify the Terror as political policy and respond to criticism that the Jacobins were as oppressive as the *ancien régime*. In this speech, Robespierre describes key political principles that seek to modernize classical republican virtue by aligning it with a terror designed to protect the common good. Inverting Montesquieu’s claim that a republic’s main principle is virtue and despotism’s main principle is fear or terror, Robespierre instead insists that terror, too, can be an instrument of republican nation-building, provided it is properly aligned with public virtue:

If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the mainspring of popular government in revolution is virtue and terror both: virtue, without which terror is disastrous [fatal], terror, without which virtue is powerless [impotent]. (115)

(“Si le ressort du gouvernement populaire dans la paix est la vertu, le ressort du gouvernement populaire en révolution est à la fois la vertu et la terreur: la vertu, sans laquelle la terreur est funeste; la terreur, sans laquelle la vertu est impuissante”; *Discours*).

By evoking a political virtue, what Craig Nelson calls “the holy grail of eighteenth-century

moderns” (63), Robespierre was participating in and transforming familiar late eighteenth-century political discourse. Just as Montesquieu insisted on virtue’s centrality to republican government, Rousseau spoke of the “Reign of Virtue” achieved through citizens’ willful conformity to the law that is supposed to represent the common good. Here, Robespierre verbally and publically pairs civic virtue with the idea of terror as a deliberate political strategy used to obtain and maintain political legitimacy. While Robespierre did not invent this connection and was not alone in justifying the Terror in this manner, in this speech and others he articulates a political and ideological formulation that reverberated through the end of the Terror in 1794, and, arguably, beyond. This pairing of virtue and terror is integral to understanding the ideology that propelled the Terror. It is also, I contend, integral to understanding the ways romantic European literature grappled with the legacies of both Revolutionary and Enlightenment thought.

In this study, I argue that Robespierre’s linkage, which makes literal the relationship between civic virtue and political terror, is restaged in a literary and rhetorical fashion by romantic writers who responded to the Revolution with varying degrees of enthusiasm, dismay, and ambivalence. That these authors were influenced by the Revolution is a given, but what has been overlooked is the extent to which their texts absorb and refract the linguistic and ideological inversions that characterized revolutionary and counter-revolutionary discourse. Approaching the virtue-terror connection as a literary problem adds to understandings of the ways performative speech can enact totalizing moral and political principles within both Enlightenment and French revolutionary discourse.

To examine the relationship between virtue and terror is to begin to trace the intersections between speech and action, law and violence, and self and community in revolutionary discourse romantic literature as a whole. Rather than examine virtue and terror separately, I make this

vexed crossing between virtue and terror the site of my analysis. In his speech to the Convention, Robespierre uses chiasmus, a figure of speech that comes from the Greek *χιασμός* or crossing, as signaled by the Greek term *χ* (chi).¹ Explains David Quint:

the operation of chiasmus is to move a term from one side to the other; in a perfect chiasmus the two sides exchange terms and may be themselves interchangeable. The reversal chiasmus effect is thus also a kind of *double cross*: it sets up a binary opposition only to break it down; it gives one value to one side of an opposition only to load it with the value to which it had been initially been opposed [sic]. The effect is irony, paradox, or the peculiar sense of saying two things at the same time: sometimes overtly, sometimes more surreptitiously. (274)

Paul de Man calls chiasmus “the crossing that reverses the attributes of words and things” (*Allegories of Reading* 38). Milton’s Satan was an avid user of chiasmus, most notably his insistence on making “heaven of hell and a hell of heaven,” suggesting a dislocation that reverses the natural order of the world.² Like Satan, Robespierre’s chiasmus appears at a moment of reversal, during that time of “popular government in revolution,” and yet his chiasmus is a rhetorical figure of social and legal order. Robespierre declares that the Revolution needs terror and virtue “*à la fois*,” which can be translated as “both” but more precisely as “at the same time.” By equating virtue and terror as forces that must be employed simultaneously, Robespierre’s chiastic inversion suggests that his political strategy is both a form of equipoise and a guarantee of equipoise. Virtue regulates terror, and terror enforces virtue, creating an equilibrium he believes necessary for the Revolution to achieve its goals of establishing and legitimizing the

¹ “Chiasmus.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

² For a discussion of Milton and chiasmus, see, for example, Jeffrey Bilbro, “The Form of the Cross: Milton’s Chiastic Soteriology,” *Milton Quarterly* 47.3 (2013): 127-148. Print.

French republic. That Robespierre enacts this chiasmus through speech signals the importance of verbal utterance and public performance in creating and legitimizing a civic identity that functions on the levels of both virtue and terror.

In this dissertation, I argue that the virtue-terror chiasmus operates more broadly as a linguistic and ideological border-crossing metonymic for the larger theoretical intersections that characterized European intellectual thought from the trial of Louis XVI through the Terror. European romantic writers, active in eighteenth-century intellectual and political culture and responding to the early Revolution and Terror, insist that virtue is necessary within the public sphere, and yet find their work replicating the totalizing terrors of this love-driven virtue that Robespierre's chiastic double cross makes literal. After establishing how the virtue-terror chiasmus functions in Robespierre's key speeches, I turn to works by Edmund Burke, William Wordsworth, and Germaine de Staël, examining how they employ virtue in order to argue that their performative engagement with this eighteenth-century moral principle enacts the virtue-terror chiasmus—that is, they show the ways a love-driven, sentimental, nation-sustaining, legitimating and authorizing virtue can cross into a totalizing and dehumanizing terror. Like Robespierre, these authors use (or depict the use of) this particular eighteenth-century understanding of political, classically-inflected virtue as an instrument of argumentation: to defend their positions, to fight against perceived enemies, or to show the weaknesses of conceptual language itself. Each of these texts takes up the revolutionary interest in performative speech and explores the ways speech can be used to authorize and legitimize as well as to critique and categorize. While scholarship on revolutionary discourse and romanticism draws out the contradictory attachments to death that emerge from seemingly positive social values such as

liberty, love and justice, few sustained explorations of the virtue-terror chiasmus exist.³

Virtue

In my analysis, I approach virtue as a multi-layered and historical-political idea that was central to eighteenth-century visions of political society. The predominance of virtue in public debate and political theory in Europe during the late 1790's and early 1800's provides an important context for the authors who use this term in their writing and speaking. The word *virtue* appears in both revolutionary discourse and discourse against the Revolution. Virtue became one of the ruling principles of the Revolution; those who opposed the Revolution and those whose support of the Revolution waned after the Reign of Terror also evoked virtue to achieve their own political and rhetorical ends.

Just how virtue should be defined, along with its place in social and political life, was repeatedly up for debate in this Revolutionary-era writing and speechmaking. The late eighteenth-century conception of virtue includes interpretations of classical republican theories of civic virtue, as well as the universalizing political virtue found in Montesquieu, Rousseau and the *Encyclopédistes*. Additionally, the Scottish Enlightenment centrally located virtue within a moral philosophy that posited an innate sympathetic connection between individuals that enabled social relations to occur. In most of these accounts, virtue is realized through action; it is often associated with sincerity, the passions and sensibility. Many accounts assume that citizens

³ Oliver Marchart, one of the few readers who have identified this linking as a chiasmus, uses it to begin to interrogate the relationship between theater and melodrama in revolutionary French culture. He mentions briefly this “strange chiasmus between terror and virtue, between enactment and justification” (82). While Marchart is correct in identifying the tension between doing and justifying that doing, a tension I explore in detail as the tension between performance and legitimacy in my chapters, his argument centers on the temporal slide between political and theatrical staging in public spaces during the French Revolution. Marchart’s work is typical of much literary scholarship on the authors I study in that he notes a connection between virtue and terror but does not make it the focus of sustained analysis.

naturally possess benevolence toward one's fellow-citizens and would willingly sacrifice their individual desires for the good of the collective. For others, virtue strengthens and undergirds the relationship citizens have to one another and to the law, often to the point that the self merges with the law. Such an understanding reflects the often contradictory late eighteenth-century need for political unity. The French Enlightenment's idea of political virtue as both the realization of political unity and the force that creates this unity has the potential to become a totalizing formulation that insists on the effacement of difference.

My understanding of the role of political virtue builds from scholars who have established its centrality to late eighteenth-century thought. Though she may overstate the direct line of influence between Robespierre and Rousseau, Carol Blum draws important connections between political virtue and political identity in revolutionary thought, arguing that Robespierre and Saint-Just followed the Rousseauian playbook for how to be virtuous—namely, to theatrically present oneself as driven by pity and prone to self-sacrifice. Marisa Linton, in *The Politics of Virtue in Revolutionary France*, expands the discussion of virtue by providing the first comprehensive intellectual history of the term as it was conceived of in 1789. Importantly, she shows how virtue was attributed to ordinary people, supporting the burgeoning belief that, by way of their virtue, ordinary people could become legitimate and active members of the body politic and share collective sovereign power as citizens. Linton also sees appeals to virtue as a rhetorical strategy used in political speech to attain and maintain political legitimacy, an important concept that I take up in my analysis.⁴

⁴ In *The Age of Virtue: British Culture from the Restoration to Romanticism*, David Morse provides a broad survey of the understanding of *virtue* in the eighteenth century. He touches on the French Revolution only briefly, and devotes one chapter to a survey of a dozen romantic authors, arguing that the romantics rejected virtue as an outmoded concept. My project argues the opposite, stressing the prevalence of virtue within romantic writing.

Terror

My other key term is terror, which I employ in this project in very specific ways. I argue that the terror that becomes linked to virtue is revolutionary terror, a Robespierist, proto-totalitarian, ideologically-driven need for unity; it is a totalizing and dehumanizing terror that acts as a precursor to totalitarian terror that became familiar in the twentieth century. My understanding of terror in this study is drawn from Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: terror emerges as politically imposed fear and violence, driven by an ideology that requires death to form a cohesive and just society; it merges people into a homogenous mass that marches toward a teleological human destiny; it seeks isolation and unity, and works for and against cohesion and dissolution.⁵ I argue that each author's use of virtue reveals a dimension of Arendt's understanding of total terror. I also refer to Michel Foucault's theorizing on Bentham's Panopticon and on disciplinary power more generally to help illuminate the late eighteenth-century insistence on transparency and visibility as a form of social control that performs the work of terror.

The terror that emerges in these texts does not always chop off heads; it is often more insidious and figural, a terror that totalizes through the tools available to it. This totalizing and revolutionary terror takes on different shapes in different texts: For Robespierre, terror is justice that calls for self-sacrifice; the virtuous self merges with the virtuous republic, a form of citizenship that can be realized only through death. For Burke, terror is exposure to the dehumanizing forces of law, both literal and figurative. In Wordsworth's text, terror seeks to create a community of isolated individuals. For Staël, terror is the erasure of the female,

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Part 3, p. 306-474.

spontaneous voice from the public sphere. As these examples illustrate, only the case of Robespierre calls for actual death. What provokes terror also differs in each instance, though each manifestation of terror stems from evocations of virtue.

Marisa Linton's recent *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* helps to explain the historical context for crossing from virtue to terror; as with her earlier book on virtue, she underscores the centrality of political virtue within eighteenth-century political culture. In *Choosing Terror*, Linton focuses on primary and secondary documents to better understand what she calls "politicians' terror," that is, the personal and political choices politicians made in order to succeed while also confronting political realities. She addresses political virtue as a means to attain legitimacy and the problems with authenticity that arise when moving between public and private faces. She focuses on historical documents rather than literature, and is mainly concerned with what the virtue-terror connection means for the public and personal lives of French Revolution politicians, rather than what it might mean for literature in general or for writers not actively engaged in politics.

The French Revolution as Discursive

My argument expands on the extensive body of scholarship establishing the French Revolution as a discursive event. While he has been criticized for projecting a "monolithic" discourse of the Revolution (Outram 121), François Furet was among one of the first to offer such a reading of the Revolution, arguing that in its "symbolic universe," human action was placed at the center of an ideology that was discursive and based on power (*Interpreting the Revolution* 63); Keith Michael Baker followed suit, adding to the conception of revolutionary political culture as made through discourses "through which individuals and groups in any

society articulate, negotiate, implement and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole” (*Inventing the French Revolution* 4). Marc Redfield writes of how “The French and American revolutionaries presented themselves ideologically as the first fully modern identification of statehood with the living will of a national people, of a nation in action, declaring itself, founding itself in and through this declaration” (73). Lynn Hunt, Madelyn Gutwirth, and Mona Ozouf have expanded this discourse to include visual culture, such as political cartoons and propaganda, arguing that the images embedded on coins celebrating the festivals of the Revolution were rhetorical instruments designed to persuade and enforce revolutionary principles (Hunt, *Politics, Culture, Class* 24). These critics focus on the ways language and speech were used to shape and enact ideology; there were also, of course, forms of print such as the pamphlet wars that worked to further and counter the Revolution in British public debate (Crafton 43). In response, censorship and control not only of speech but also of imagination increased in England and in France during this period with the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act in England in 1794 and 1798 and the “speech crime” trials in the revolutionary tribunals during the Terror.⁶ In addition, the Revolution literally changed language, bringing new words into lexical exchange: Gracchus Babeuf, a journalist, coined the word *terroriste* in his newspaper in 1793 (Rubin and Rubin 4); Edmund Burke first used the English word *terrorist* in his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*. Thomas Paine first used the term *counterrevolutionary* in the introduction to the second part of the *Rights of Man* (1792) (Thomas 3-9).

⁶ See, for example, John Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793-1796* and G. Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.

In short, the French Revolutionary period was a noisy one, and a lot of talk was talk about words—what they mean, what they can do, and how they might be threatening or misleading. Of course, such concerns about the reliability and stability of language were present in eighteenth-century thought prior to the French Revolution. For example, Thomas Hobbes describes the ability to manipulate words for one’s own purpose: “Words, by which some men can represent to others, that which is Good, in the likeness of Evil, and Evil, in the likeness of Good” (*Leviathan* 119-20). John Locke was also troubled by the potential for words to be misused, and expressed concern about the slippery relationship between words and things in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Yet certain words, such as virtue, were understood to be discernable to certain late eighteenth-century audiences and to carry agreed-upon meanings; these words were, in this sense, considered legitimate and thus capable of enforcing political and social principles despite the vexing knowledge of their instability. Caroline Weber, through analyzing texts by Robespierre, Rousseau, Saint-Just, Desmoulins and de Sade, reads this mistrust and frustration with language to understand how totalizing discourses stem from the revolutionary desire to articulate a monolithic policy of the general good and eliminate difference and opposition. She argues that this totalizing drive made the revolutionaries suspicious of “the potential of language to undermine their homogenizing project” and face the “impossibility of maintaining strict boundaries between figurative and literal reference, between otherness and sameness, between multiplicity ... and unity” (17, 58, xvii). Like Weber, I take up the problems of speech and absolutism in Revolutionary discourse and trace paradoxical pairings that emerge in political and literary texts that participate in this discourse. However, I extend this attention to English writers and texts seemingly unrelated to the Revolution. I also draw out the

intellectual and conceptual history behind specific words—*virtue* and *terror*—that do the terrifying work of homogenizing and totalizing.

In this study, I use the term “performative” to help understand the ways this double-cross between virtue and terror is necessarily enacted through speech and must be seen in relation to the rhetorical situation that encompasses the speaker’s identity and the speaking context. The virtue-terror chiasmus is speech-based and rhetorical because it is a performative construction in that the words are actions and create action, and the late eighteenth century conceived of political virtue and political terror as actions. In this way, the virtue-terror chiasmus is an enactment, a speech-act in the sense laid out by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*: “by saying something, we do something” (109). Austin differentiates between constative and performative utterances: Constative utterances describe or state “facts” and can be identified as statements that are true or false. Performatives, on the other hand, make something happen by being uttered, such as making a promise or pronouncing a couple married. Performatives can take two forms: illocutionary acts, “such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc., i.e. utterances which have a certain (conventional) force,” and perlocutionary acts, which he describes as “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading” (109). Illocutionary acts center on the action being performed while perlocutionary acts center on the effect of these actions on the audience. As Sandy Petrey, notes, revolutionary discourse consists primarily of performative speech: “The French Revolution is replete with ... performative speech, language that does not say what it is but transforms it. From the self-conversion of the Third Estate into the National Assembly in 1789 to the restoration and re-restoration of the Bourbon regime in 1814-15, the years of the Revolution were a continuous illustration of the power of words to enact what their

users willed” (*Two Hundred Years of Rethinking* 3). In *The Rhetoric of Terror*, Marc Redfield identifies “the war on terror” as “*the* exemplary speech act of sovereignty for our era” that has its origins in the French Revolution (51). He provides a lineage for understanding terror that, “like our modern notions of aesthetics, literature, democracy, human rights, revolution, and so much else in American and Western European political and cultural life,” can be traced back to romanticism (80). Stressing the importance of performativity, Redfield calls Robespierre and Edmund Burke “skewed doubles” who, by insisting on totalization in the face of uncertainty, enact the double bind of declaring “a war on terror, by way of terror” (89). I argue that Robespierre has many skewed doubles who replicate the virtue-terror chiasmus, from Burke to the writers of literary works only tangentially connected to the Revolution.

I focus on performative utterances to argue that each of the authors reveals the ways virtue can be used to perform a social and public identity, which means seeking authority and creating authority at the same time. I follow Angela Esterhammer and Alexander Dick in their discussions of performance and performative speech in romantic literature and culture. They identify romanticism as “a performative culture” in that “it grants efficacy to verbal utterances; it is conscious of (if not obsessed with) various forms of social and political representation; it cultivates performance, on and off the stage, as constitutive of identity” (*Spheres of Action* 6). Esterhammer elaborates on what it means for speech to be “constitutive of identity”: “the identity of an individual or group can be called performative if that identity is established by the very process of practicing it—so that doing and being, or saying and being, or becoming and being, are indistinguishable” (*Romantic Performative* xii). In the texts I analyze, there are numerous incidences of speech working to create or sustain certain identities and/or realities made possible through those identities. Speech act theory also suggests that for performative utterances the

speaker must have authority to speak, a question of legitimacy that both evoking virtue and evoking terror seek to solve. Gender as well as one's status in relation to the law threatens this legitimacy. Sincerity is also important to Austin's conception of speech acts, an idea that connects speech to virtue as authentic action and to the problematic demand for transparency in revolutionary terror.

Reading the Virtue-Terror Chiasmus in Romantic Literature

This study focuses on European intellectual history and on British and French literature and political writings. Given my emphasis on performance and speaking, I look at a range of texts including speeches, letters, and essays alongside a drama and a novel. Marie-Hélène Huet's work on theatricality and the French Revolution has shown that the revolutionaries were troubled by literary and political representation and its inadequacies.⁷ Each text I examine has a performative element through which the key tensions between political virtue and total terror emerge. I situate my readings in necessary historical context, but my approach is primarily literary and philosophical. Contemporary political theory—especially twentieth-century writing on power and totalitarianism—informs my understanding of the ways the virtue-terror chiasmus functions in the romantic texts I examine.

Each of the authors I study was involved in the Revolution in some manner: Robespierre most intimately, of course, as one of its leaders and as its chosen spokesperson; Burke, who set the tone for the debate about the merits of the Revolution and the potential for bringing similar reforms to England; Wordsworth, who spent time in Revolutionary France, where he witnessed

⁷ Marie-Hélène Huet, *Mourning Glory: The Will of The French Revolution and Rehearsing the Revolution: The Staging of Marat's Death, 1793-1797*.

the euphoria of the Revolution and the disturbing beginnings of the Terror, fathering an illegitimate child in the process.⁸ Staël, the daughter of Jacques Necker, Director of Finance under King Louis XVI, was an extremely influential figure in European politics. While she supported the Revolution initially, she was deeply disappointed by the Terror and, through years of political exile, remained a constitutional monarchist. Each of these authors—as political figures, as intellectuals, as writers—was embedded in the eighteenth-century debates about the role of virtue in politics and what it meant that the Revolution could—and did—transition into the Terror.

The first chapter covers a range of spectrums and intellectual histories, beginning with Aristotle up until the Revolution, that informed and shaped late eighteenth-century understandings of virtue and its role in political society. Over the course of these debates, in which virtue is enacted and evoked, virtue becomes associated with a number of terms important to late eighteenth-century political culture: namely, sentimentality, sympathy, sincerity, and benevolence. The second half of this chapter provides an overview of key contemporary theories of terror, namely Hannah Arendt’s conception of total terror and Michel Foucault’s writings on disciplinary power; these theories inform my readings of the literature in the subsequent chapters.

My second chapter close reads key speeches by Robespierre to the National Convention, including “On the Trial of the King” (December 1792) and “On the Principles of Revolutionary Government” (December 1793). Robespierre employs political virtue as a force that worked to decriminalize the Revolution; above all else, Robespierre insists that he speaks the truth, which, through the very act of speaking to legitimize and secure his own ethos as the embodiment of the

⁸ Osborn, “Introduction,” *The Borderers*.

Revolution, became synonymous with both virtue and death. His performative speech portrays him as an allegory that kills and must be killed; such a death is the only way to achieve absolute representation, consummating the utopian laws of history through which the Revolution is expected to realize the quasi-Rousseauist “reign of virtue.”

The third chapter turns to counterrevolutionary discourse by focusing on Edmund Burke’s *Reflections* (1790). Burke uses his political writing to fight against what he perceives as ideologically-driven catachreses and to distinguish between his traditional political virtue, propelled by moral sentiment, from the “false” political morality of the revolutionaries. However, his choice to figuratively represent the violence against the Queen within his text causes him to replicate the very terror he uses his virtue to condemn. Burke’s confrontation with terror by way of a love-driven virtue is a “skewed” replication of Robespierre’s own sacrificial, performative turn from a founding and authorizing virtue to a self-destroying and totalizing political terror. In Burke’s essays, Arendt’s formulation of total terror as the elimination of “space between people” becomes especially acute; for Burke, terror is the end of an obscurity that had previously protected individuals from the dehumanizing forces of the law.

My fourth chapter takes as its subject William Wordsworth’s only drama, *The Borderers* (1797), in which Wordsworth restages the Terror as a psychological drama such that the uncomfortable affinity between terror and virtue becomes the problematic center of the play. I begin by tracing Wordsworth’s shifting views of the French Revolution and Terror as seen through the relationship between speech and foundational violence in *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793) and Book Ten of *The Prelude* (1805). I then turn to the critically neglected *The Borderers*. Set on the border between England and Scotland during the thirteenth century Baronial Wars, *The Borderers* portrays a young man, Mortimer, being manipulated by the older,

Robespierre-like Rivers into causing an innocent man's death. After considering the theoretical significance of borders and lawless states as places of social and semiotic uncertainty, I argue that Wordsworth portrays Rivers as a figure of deliberately insincere speech and intentional catachresis who evokes a civic-minded and benevolent virtue to create a community of individuals unified by a political, totalizing terror. This troubling inversion of the romantic celebration of community exposes the inner contradictions of a Rousseauist and Robespierist conception of the general will in which the particular and the general are fused, and reveals a reciprocal relationship between Enlightenment and Revolutionary virtue and crime.

My final chapter, on Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), argues that Staël stages the virtue-terror chiasmus to critique Revolutionary virtue as a concept based on exclusion and censorship of the female voice. In the novel, Corinne, a half-English, half-Italian artist famous in Italy for her public improvisations, begins a travel- and conversation-filled relationship with Oswald, a melancholy Scottish peer, whose love ultimately leads to the end of her career and her untimely death. Rather than reading Corinne's concluding silence as a positive sign of continuity, I argue that Corinne's silencing is a terrorist act. Corinne embodies a public, civic virtue made possible through her improvised performances; this virtue, which resembles the Revolutionary ideal in its transparency and sincerity, cannot be tolerated by the totalizing counter-discourse of virtue she encounters in Scotland, and is silenced by an Arendtian terror that suppresses mental, verbal and physical spontaneity. As in the case of Robespierre, Burke, and Wordsworth, the virtue-terror chiasmus hinges on performative speech: Corinne, as a woman, crosses the "borders of legitimacy" that determine the authority of a speaker and finds that this crossing only leads to death.

This study, by drawing connections between Revolutionary discourse and romantic

literature, not only contributes to romantic scholarship but also sheds light on dangerous consanguinities between moral certainty, performative speech, and political terror—a romantic concern that remains a hallmark of modernity.

Chapter One

Defining Virtue / Defining Terror

This chapter traces the common understandings of virtue in late eighteenth-century intellectual and political history in order to address the ways the authors and texts I examine enact virtue. I draw on French, English, American and Scottish writers to compare the views of virtue's role in the making of political society, especially in the founding and maintenance of a republic. The first half of this section explores the ways virtue emerged from Greek and Roman political culture and then came to be considered integral to social and political relations in late-eighteenth-century Europe; the second half of this section addresses the emergence of terror from the basic idea of fear to a political instrument intended to enact violence in order to promote legitimacy and generalized conformity to laws. Along the way I address sympathy and sentiment, two key terms essential to late eighteenth-century thought and which help bridge the gap between political virtue and revolutionary terror.

Eighteenth-Century Virtue in the European Context

It should be noted that while some commonalities can be drawn, there is no single definition of virtue both prior to and during the late eighteenth century; in fact, just what virtue meant and the role it should play in politics and social intercourse was the subject of much debate during this period. As J.M. Pocock observes, “ ‘Virtue’ is a word with a long history and a great many meanings” (*Virtue, Commerce and History* 41). The revolutionaries and those responding to the Revolution were influenced by a range of texts and authors whose ideas were

read and transmitted broadly. Each of the authors absorbed these ideas in different ways and through different mediums and contexts. In the chapters, I address the ways the individual authors respond to, adapt and interpret these texts, including misreadings; sometimes, the authors I examine never read these texts and simply absorbed a version of these ideas “in the air.” My purpose here is to provide an overview and background to help establish key ideas and associations that come with eighteenth-century European conceptions of political virtue.

Most scholars of the period agree on the importance of virtue in late eighteenth-century England and France. Craig Nelson calls virtue “the holy grail of eighteenth-century moderns,” and says, “What heaven is for Christians, virtue was for those educated in the values of the Enlightenment” (63). Because I am interested in the understanding of virtue not just among the Revolutionary radicals, I will be discussing the general history of political virtue as it shaped eighteenth-century understanding. Revolutionary virtue was very much fashioned by the French Enlightenment thinkers, but, as Baker notes, “the French Revolution cannot simply be ascribed to the work of Rousseau or Voltaire, of philosophes or Jansenists, of reforming administrators or reactionary parliaments, or of any other writers, traditions or practices to which its putative origins have been traced by one or another historiographical school” (*The French Revolution* 288). Rather, he says, the Revolution “was a radical political invention, the elements of which were derived from many sources, and the consequences of which were anticipated by none of the political actors involved” (*The French Revolution* 288). Therefore, in this chapter I will provide an overview of the key thinkers who influenced the late eighteenth-century conception of virtue without ascribing one particular idea to all writers.

The virtue evoked in these works, while harkening back to the *arête* of the Greeks and the *virtus* of the Romans, was very much a product of the eighteenth century. Marisa Linton, an

historian who provides essential background on virtue's importance to eighteenth-century France up to the Revolution, emphasizes the stability that eighteenth century culture associated with virtue: "Virtue provided a source of moral authority in a world beleaguered with uncertainties. It was the means by which mankind could forge a moral pathway, and establish some kind of moral certainty, in the face of an unknown and unknowable universe" (*Politics of Virtue* 9). For some of the most influential political philosophers of the eighteenth century, virtue was the end goal of political progress: for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau posits his idea of the general will and the social contract in order to create "the reign of virtue" (*Discourse on Political Economy* 140) and the Baron de Montesquieu considers virtue the essential quality of a republic (*Spirit of the Laws* 42). What is striking about the prevalence of virtue in eighteenth-century thinking is that it crossed partisan divides. As Linton notes:

The rhetoric of virtue was not confined to political radicals or future revolutionaries. On the contrary virtue was part of a broad conception of politics, spanning a number of political perspectives—and in this lies its greatest power. It was an official and acceptable language, which was radical at one end of its spectrum, and could be used to make opposition legitimate, but which could used to defend virtuous monarchy. (*Politics of Virtue* 18)

It is this slipperiness in meaning that makes virtue a complex term. As Linton notes, it was very popular to refer to virtue and to use it to justify and defend various political positions. And yet the meaning of the word was also cohesive enough and recognizable enough that people could use it as a "language" or a "rhetoric"—a common linguistic currency that enables speakers to engage their audiences and associate themselves with a long history of civic goodness and self-

effacing devotion to common good, a rhetorical goal that reflects the increased popularity of classical ideas about politics and government.

The conceptions of virtue that emerged during the late eighteenth century were not monolithic, but certain themes do emerge. First, virtue in this period is *political*, and, while not always secular, is concerned primarily with the relationship between moral character and the citizen's place in participatory government. Generally speaking, in the eighteenth-century interpretation of republican virtue, individuals involved in politics are expected to act sincerely and selflessly, subsuming private interests that may conflict with the public interest or the general good. Virtue was implied "a commitment to achieve the public good, the common interest, through widespread citizen participation and decision-making" (Fruchtman 67). It is assumed that anyone who enters the public sphere does so out of interest in the common good rather than for personal gain (Linton, *Politics of Virtue* 2). In most of these accounts, virtue is realized through action. Many accounts assume that citizens naturally possess benevolence toward one's fellow-citizens and the willingness to sacrifice individual desires for the good of all. Often, virtue is about strength; in others it is about sincerity. Virtue strengthens and undergirds the relationship citizens have to one another and to the law. This account of virtue also signals the late eighteenth-century desire for and impulse toward political unity. It also reveals the progression from virtue as a quality possessed only by a limited group of leaders or a single authority to being seen as embodied by the "the people," who, by way of their virtue, become legitimate and active members of the body politic and share collective sovereign power as citizens.

One of the primary starting points for the revolutionary conception of virtue is classical Greece and Rome (especially Rome). Baker writes of the importance of classical republicanism

to the language and ideology of the Revolution, arguing that classical republicanism not only informed the Revolutionary thinkers but also shaped political ideas in England and among constitutional monarchists (*The French Revolution* 288). Pocock provides an overview of the merging of the Greek idea of *arête*—that is, “civic excellence,” defined as “some quality respected by other citizens and productive of authority and leadership over them”—into the Roman *virtus*:

virtus became assimilated to the Greek *arête* and shared its conceptual development. . . *arête* has been refined, by Socrates and Plato, to mean the moral goodness which alone qualified man for civic capacity . . . *Arête* and *virtus* alike came to mean, first, the power by which an individual or group acted effectively in a civic context; next, the essential property which made a personality or element what it was; third, the moral goodness which made a man, in city or in cosmos, what he ought to be. (*Machiavellian Moment* 37)

Virtus in this context is the defining quality necessary for effective civic engagement; it also defines a person’s character. Focusing on Roman virtue in particular, Joy Connolly lists the characteristics of Roman virtue as “individual liberty guaranteed by law, the beliefs that the end of political rule is the common good and that the community stands and falls on the civic virtue of its citizens, [and] a strong notion of collective identity expressed in terms of cultural solidarity and common love for the fatherland” (1).

Aristotle presents virtue as focused on action and justice. Building from Socrates and Plato, Aristotle claims that all men strive toward happiness, of which *arête*, which can be defined as “virtue” or “excellence,” is an integral part (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1:4, *The Art of Rhetoric* 22). In *The Art of Rhetoric* Book 22, he identifies virtue as composed of “justice, courage, self-

control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, mildness, wisdom (both practical and speculative)” (xxxviii). In *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 B.C.E), Aristotle says that happiness is “an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue” (1:13) and that examining the nature of virtue reveals the nature of happiness (1:13). He divides virtue into two kinds, intellectual and moral, with intellectual virtue encompassing philosophical and practical wisdom and moral virtue encompassing liberality and temperance (1:13). While intellectual virtue can be taught and develops over time, moral virtues are natural in that they are in accordance with our natures and are perfected through habit, which, in this case, he identifies as the repetition of good acts (2:1). He connects this development of moral virtue to the development and maintenance of the virtuous citizen through the law, saying that “legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one” (2:1).

In some ways, Aristotle conceives of virtue as performative. He emphasizes that attaining intellectual virtue and maintaining moral virtue is a matter of *action* in specific situations and contexts; one’s character is defined by the actions one takes in relation to other people: “by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2:1). Aristotle says that virtue is concerned with “passions and actions” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6), but that the virtuous choice is always the intermediate one; it is these moderate choices between the extremes (and extremes are always vices) that define the virtuous character (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2:6). The virtuous path is the “mean” between the extremes of deficiency and excess: it is possible to feel “fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and

too little . . . but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6). In Book V of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that justice a “complete virtue” because it functions in relation to another person. He says that “‘in justice, every virtue is summed up.’ Further, it is the most complete virtue because it is the use of complete virtue; it is complete because he who possesses it is able to use virtue also in relation to another, and not only as regards himself” (92). Because justice is complete virtue (“the whole of virtue”) then its inverse, injustice, is the “whole of vice” (93). He emphasizes that “bad” actions such as adultery or theft cannot be committed moderately and therefore virtuously (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2:6); thus, he acknowledges, “it is no easy task to be good” (2.9). In some ways virtue here is rhetorical, in that Aristotle emphasizes the correctness and appropriateness of one’s actions in relation to one’s situation, intent, and audience.

While the Greek idea of *arête* was important to eighteenth century thought, thinkers in both England and France tended to focus on ancient Rome rather than Greece in shaping their understandings of virtue’s role within a republic (Connolly 13). Marcus Tullius Cicero’s writings on law, justice and virtue helped to influence late eighteenth-century thinking on virtue. In *De Inventione*, Cicero calls “virtue is a habit of mind, consistent with nature, and moderation, and reason” (2.157-159), and works from the four classical cardinal virtues as established in Plato’s *Republic*: temperance, courage, justice and wisdom. “Prudence is knowledge of things that are good or bad or neither. Its parts are memory, understanding and foresight” (*De Inventione* 2.160). Justice is “the habit of mind that preserves the common utility while also giving to each what is his due” (*De Inventione* 2.160). “Fortitude is a deliberate encounter of danger and ending of labour. Its parts are magnificence, confidence, patience and perseverance” (*De Inventione*

LIII). In *The Republic*, Cicero emphasizes the importance of equity in maintaining the bond of law that keeps a community together: since “the justice embodied in the law is the same for everyone, by what right can a community of citizens be held together when their status is unequal? . . . legal rights at least must be equal among those who live as fellow-citizens in the same state. For what is a state other than an equal partnership in justice?” (1:49-50). In “On Moral Ends,” he portrays a dialogue in which he responds to different ideas of virtue, especially as it relates to human happiness. He writes, “Virtue cannot be secured at all unless it takes the primary objects of nature to pertain to the supreme good. We are seeking a virtue that does not abandon our nature but protects it” (4.41). Cicero also focuses on virtue in relation to oration; in *Da Oratore*, he claims that “Eloquence is one of the greatest virtues” (3.55).

Joy Connolly supports the reading of Roman virtue as based on action and performance. She also describes it as regulatory: the Roman writers believed that virtue should be directed toward “regulating the *res publica*, especially the microcosm of the law court, the guardian of justice and equality before the law. Virtue is fully incarnated not in the individuals’ mastery of selfhood in isolation but in interactive, communicative performances in the civic context” (11). This is the conception of virtue that the Enlightenment embraced: a virtue linked to justice and one that is enacted in public spaces in order to serve the public good. This “Roman coupling of virtue and performance” (Connolly 13) as well as the Aristotelian emphasis on action demonstrate how the late eighteenth-century conceived of virtue in terms of action and performance—as a matter of speech as action that could be tied to individual identity. As Brian W. Dotts notes: “virtue was democratized as individuals began to see themselves as actors and no longer simply being acted upon as objects. Individuals could now take responsibility in determining who they became” (67).

Renaissance Virtue: Machiavelli, Political Virtue, and Power

Writing in Florence during the Renaissance, Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli—responding in many ways to the Roman conception of virtue—offers a pragmatic understanding of virtue as any action that will maintain a ruler’s power. In *The Prince* and, especially, in *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy*, he looks to the Roman authorities to develop his ideas about republican liberty. However, Machiavelli approached classical Roman virtue differently than the French revolutionaries, who, as Louis Althusser explains, turned to Rome for “examples of political virtue, hatred of tyranny, love of liberty, equality and fatherland, incorruptibility, the sense of duty: let us say, moral *virtues*, moral forms of conduct in respect of politics and, therewith, a moral ideology of politics” (51). Machiavelli rejects the idea of a moral-political virtue, instead saying, “if one considers everything carefully, doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one’s ruin, whereas doing other things that seem vicious may strengthen one’s position and cause one to flourish” (*The Prince* 55). He privileges politics over morality by centering his political philosophy on *virtú*, rather than virtue, which “has nothing moral about it, for it exclusively designates the exceptional political ability and *power* of the Prince” (Althusser 51). Machiavellian *virtú* does not directly translate into virtue but should be read as ability, skill, energy, determination, strength, spiritness, courage, and/or prowess with “overtones of ‘ruthlessness’” (Skinner and Price 104). This *virtú* emerges when a ruler faces fortune (*fortuna*), which Machiavelli understands as unforeseen events or forces that may affect him positively or negatively (*The Prince* 62). The “good” ruler must focus on retaining power, and therefore “must be prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain

him, and . . . not deviate from right conduct if possible, but be capable of entering upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary” (*The Prince* 62). In Machiavelli’s formulation, to do “good” as a ruler means maintaining power using whatever means are necessary given the specific time and circumstances of action (*The Prince* 85). This willingness to act “treacherously, ruthlessly, or inhumanly” could be read as villainy in certain contexts, although Machiavelli distinguishes between necessary cruelty and the wanton seizure of one’s subjects’ property or the terrorizing of its women (*The Prince* 64). Unwarranted violence, he suggests, might jeopardize the important appearance of benevolence that he says must be maintained in order to stay in one’s subjects’ favor (*The Prince* 65).

Virtue in the French Enlightenment

Marisa Linton describes the ways France in the middle of the eighteenth century looked to past models to re-imagine the possibilities for the present. She writes that “a kind of intellectual ferment began in the climate of ideas . . . Most of the ideas which contributed to this change of climate has their origins in earlier periods; but they were taken up anew, reappropriated and remodeled into the polemical tools whereby society and politics of the *ancien régime* could be considered and criticized” (*The Politics of Virtue* 51). She identifies the “refashioning of virtue [as] a central part of this transformation” (*The Politics of Virtue* 51). Indeed, political virtue emerges as an important idea by the middle of the eighteenth century and becomes the receptacle for a number of ideas important to the Enlightenment, such as the relationship between citizens and law, the tensions between the public good and commerce, and the fundamental nature of republican law-making and justice.

Voltaire

Voltaire's writings on virtue speak to his interest in civil liberties and his rejection of Catholic doctrine. His poem, "The Nature of Virtue," begins "The spacious earth resounds fair virtue's fame, / The pulpit, bar, and stage, of her declaim" (*Works of Voltaire* 188), signaling the prevalence of this idea in contemporary discourse. In many of his writings, he seeks to differentiate a proper understanding of virtue from the many other ideas being propagated during this period.⁹ In *Philosophical Dictionary*, published in 1764, Voltaire defines virtue as active beneficence, which he understands as love, kindness and care toward one's fellow man. Written as dialogues with Marcus Brutus and between "The Honest Man" and "The Excrement," Voltaire posits an idea of virtue that "[consists] only of doing good to those dependent on you" (309). He also rejects the Cardinal and divine virtues, arguing that the actions they demand (believing, hoping) are not forms of "active" goodness (309). In his formulation, beneficence is a matter of meeting the needs of others in the ways that one can: "I am needy, you are generous. I am in danger, you help me. I am deceived, you tell me the truth. I am neglected, you console me. I am ignorant, you teach me" (309). This understanding of virtue is inherently social: "We live in society; really, therefore, the only things that are good for us are those that are good for society" (309). Because Voltaire's virtue is defined based on relationship to others, a man full of traditional vices can be virtuous if his actions harm no one but himself; this virtue, because it is based on action, can also be relative and changeable: even a man known for his evil deeds—

⁹ For example, he responds to Mandeville's and Shaftesbury's ideas of virtue in "The Nature of Virtue" (See Irwin Primer, ed., *Mandeville Studies: New Explorations in the Art and Thought of Dr. Bernard Mandeville*).

“Nero, Pope Alexander VI., and other monsters of this species”—can be virtuous momentarily if he performs a kind action for someone (309).

Montesquieu

Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* (*De l’Esprit des lois*) significantly informed the late eighteenth century’s conception of morality and politics, especially in terms of the classical republican idea of civic virtue. Montesquieu identifies three forms of government—republics (which could be democracies or aristocracies), monarchies, and despotisms—and identifies the overriding principles that shape or “move” each one.

Montesquieu refutes Hobbes’ ideas that fear primarily drives people to join societies. In Book III of *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu writes that republics are moved by virtue, aristocracies by honor, and despotisms by fear. He insists that the virtue that concerns him is political and defined as “love of the homeland [*patrie*] and of equality” (25); he distinguishes political virtue from individual moral virtues by saying that political virtue is moral in that “it points toward the general good” (25). He identifies the “desire for true glory, self-renunciation, sacrifice of one’s dearest interests, and all those heroic virtues we find in the ancients” with the virtue found in a republic (25). Marisa Linton notes that Montesquieu did not believe that classical republican virtue could be replicated today, arguing that “his primary purpose in depicting the ‘republic of virtue’ in *De l’Esprit des lois* was not in order to call for its renewal, but to use it to practical effect, as a model of how politics ought to be, against which he could delineate the weaknesses of the actual political system” (*Politics of Virtue* 64). Armstrong Kelly supports this contention, noting that “It never crossed Montesquieu’s mind that France had an aptitude for virtue. Yet in 1792 the most powerful state in Europe, with few of the habits of

antique virtue, became republican” (33). The influence of Montesquieu on Robespierre is clear; Burke also approved of most of Montesquieu’s ideas, especially his praising of England as a model of a monarchy based on honor (Courtney 30).

Diderot, Romilly and the *Encyclopédie*

The *Encyclopédie Diderot et d’Alembert*, published in France between 1751 and 1772, provided influential definitions of key words in the Enlightenment. The entry on virtue (“vertu”), written by Jean-Edme Romilly (1765), provides a solid overview of the Enlightenment’s understanding of the central role virtue should play in political society (17: 176–182). The entry on virtue is found under “political science,” but Romilly also directs the reader to entries on natural law, morality and duty, and vice, which is defined in terms of totality: “all that is contrary to natural laws and duties” (“Vice,” 17: 235). In his entry, Romilly conceives of virtue as the necessary merging of politics and morality: the virtue he posits is universal, comes from God and manifests itself in respecting and remaining bound to the laws. He defines virtue as “*the constant observation of the laws imposed on us, by whatever point of view man considers himself*” (17: 176–182). Again, one sees an insistence on absolutism in this definition as well: the “constant” following of laws despite individual preference and without questioning the justice of these laws. In this definition, virtue is both natural and habitual (“a happy habit”). He demonstrates a strong belief in the natural goodness of human beings, arguing that those who commit evil acts do so because they have been deceived into believing they are doing good, and he connects virtue to human happiness, saying that there is an “evident and innate bond between happiness and virtue” (“Virtue,” 17: 176–182). He defines the state as a “collection of its citizens”; these citizens “willfully” follow laws because they “love” them (17: 176–182).

When once the public good is no longer that of individuals, when there is no longer a homeland and citizens, but only men together who seek only to hurt each other, when there is no longer love of moderation, temperance, frugality, in a word, when there is no longer any *virtue*, then the best laws are powerless against general corruption. (17: 176–182).

He equates the love of the law with virtue, saying, “Consult, thus, before all things, the general will, the greatest good of humanity; the closer you approach it, the more sublime will be your *virtue*, and vice versa, etc.” (“Virtue” 17: 176–182). Here, Romilly does not identify what constitutes the “best laws” or explain how an individual might negotiate any internal opposition to the law. According to Romilly, virtue comes from the human heart and makes citizens willingly follow the law, which is more effective than forcing them to adhere: “one obeys laws only if one loves them; the forced obedience of bad citizens, far from being adequate, as it is in your principles, is the greatest vice of the state; when one is just only because of laws, one is not just even with them: if you would give to laws an empire as respectable as it is sure, make them reign over hearts, or, what is the same thing, make individuals virtuous” (17: 176–182). Romilly sees virtue as part of the progression toward human advancement and perfectability, arguing that the repeated acts of virtue only encourage more good acts and illustrate the ideas that “*one must advance unceasingly or one goes backward*” (“Virtue,” 17: 176–182). Referring to ancient Greek virtue, Romilly explains how the concept of the general good functions in representative government: “One may say with Plato that an individual represents the state, as the state each of its members; now, it would be absurd to say that what makes for the perfection and happiness of man, is useless to the state, for the latter is nothing other than the collection of its citizens, and it

is impossible for there to be in the whole an order and harmony that is not in the parts that compose it” (“Virtue,” 17: 176–182).

Diderot’s contributions to the *Encyclopédie* include his definition of “natural right” (1755), which theorizes the general will as the basis for morality and the key to human happiness. According to Diderot, the will of an individual cannot be trusted to be morally correct; the general will, on the other hand, “is always good: it is never wrong, it never will be wrong” (“Natural Rights,” 5: 115–116). The general will is the will of mankind; acting in the general interest of mankind assures that one is acting rightly and staying within “the limits of your species” (“Natural Rights,” 5: 115–116). The general will helps to determine one’s natural rights as a human being, and Diderot urges his readers to “never lose sight of it; otherwise you will see the notions of benevolence, justice, humanity, and virtue blurred in your understanding. Say often to yourself: I am a man, and I do not have any other truly inalienable rights than those of humanity” (“Natural Rights,” 5: 115–116). Diderot wavered between deism and atheism in his writing, and in his introduction to his translation of Shaftesbury’s *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue* (1745), he argues that virtue and religion are distinct, and that virtue is more important (Schneewind 466–467). He also associates virtue with perfection and self-love in his entry on “Passions” (1765) in the *Encyclopédie* (12: 142–146).

Rousseau

Jean Jacques Rousseau, a veritable “friend of virtue,” as Joseph R. Reiser titled his book on the subject, was one of the key figures in forming late eighteenth-century ideas about the relationship between morality and politics. He was read in France and became available to an English readership in 1751 (Williams 45). Through his writings, he established a “reputation as

the most profound and articulate spokesman for virtue of the eighteenth century” (Linton, *Politics of Virtue* 80). However, as this account of the intellectual background on virtue attests, Rousseau did not invent the eighteenth century concept of political virtue wholesale. For example, Diderot and Rousseau were friends from the late 1740s to the early 1750s, and, as many have noted, they drew ideas from one another in turn (Pannabecker 6). Diderot even wrote a short ode to Rousseau when in the *Encyclopédie* entry defining “Encyclopedia” (1755): “O Rousseau, my dear and worthy friend, I have never been capable of refraining from praising you; and in doing so, I have felt my thirst for truth and my love of virtue grow” (5: 640).¹⁰ As Jean-Claude Bourdin shows, Rousseau borrowed the idea of the “general will” from Diderot, changing the concept over time (85). While Diderot sees the general will in abstract, moral terms, Rousseau considers the general will an active political principle that shapes and defines a republic. Virtue is central to his conception of the general will.

Rousseau too looked upon the classical republic for his ideas about virtue (though he was less interested in Athens than in Sparta and Rome); in *Emile*, Rousseau calls Rome “the seat of glory and virtue [*vertu*] if ever were enthroned on earth” (332). As Reisert notes, Rousseau emphasizes virtue in his works on individual development, such as *Emile*, and on collective development, such as *On The Social Contract* and on *The Discourse on Political Economy* (10).

In *Emile*, Rousseau communicates an understanding of virtue on the individual level, especially in relation to education. Because society is corrupt, Emile must be educated outside of it; here, Rousseau suggests that virtue is learned rather than natural. His conception of virtue in Emile is a strenuous one: Emile is told that “The word *virtue* comes from the word *strength*, and strength is the foundation of all virtue . . . [A virtuous man] is he who knows how to vanquish his

¹⁰ However, the friendship between them did not last (Reisert 80).

own affections; because then he follows his reason, his conscience; he does his duty” (*Emile* 103). Virtue is an act of self-will, of adhering to duty and following reason rather than passions. In *Emile*, Rousseau explains the role social institutions play in socialization, saying that they do the work of creating people who identify with the large community rather than see themselves as individuals: “to exchange his independence for dependence, to merge the unit in the group, so that he no longer regards himself as one, but as a part of the whole, and is only conscious of the common life” (8). At the same time, he identifies “self-love” as the “source of all our passions ... anterior to every other, and of which all the others are in a sense only modifications” (*Emile* 212-213). However, this self-love can be directed toward the general good; in fact, expanding self-love to others “transform[s] [it] into virtue, a virtue which has its root in the heart of every one of us” (*Emile* 203). Rousseau connects this universal capacity for virtue to love of justice and the wider love of humankind.

Rousseau’s conception of virtue as a political principle is most evident in his *Discourse on Political Economy*, which first appeared in the fifth volume of the *Encyclopédie Diderot et d’Alembert* (1775). Contrary to Hobbes who was able to situate absolute power in the monarch, Rousseau endowed the whole of the citizenry with this collective power. In this essay, Rousseau conceptualizes a moral general will that functions as the source of law and leads to the establishment of “the reign of virtue,” that is, the “conformity of the particular wills with the general wills” (*Political Economy* 140). This essay provides the foundations for revolutionary political philosophy, especially in terms of the idea of virtue as love of homeland, adherence to duty and as the realization of the general will of the people. It should be noted that Rousseau was not a political revolutionary; he was not writing for the betterment of France but for small already-established republics (Linton, *Politics of Virtue* 82).

According to Rousseau, the ideal state is led by the collective will of all its members. He uses the metaphor of the human body to represent the interdependence of the various parts of this political whole: the body politic, he says, is a “corporate being possessed of a will; and this general will” is predisposed toward “the preservation and welfare of the whole and every part, and is the source of the laws” (*Political Economy* 132). The general will dictates the “morality of all human actions” (*Political Economy* 132) and always tends toward justice; in fact, the general will is a reflection of divine will: “the voice of the people is in fact the voice of God” (*Political Economy* 133). The state as imagined in *Political Economy* depends on and seeks out unity in the name of self-preservation, and any failure of communication between the parts leads to the state’s dissolution (*Political Economy* 132).

Rousseau configures virtue as the state of being in which all the particular wills that make up a state conform and function as the general will. In this way, virtue is the unification of the particular into the general. “If you would have the general will accomplished, bring all the particular wills into conformity with it; in other words, as virtue is nothing more than this conformity of the particular wills with the general will, establish the reign of virtue” (*Political Economy* 140). Virtue itself is a form of conformity in that a citizen’s particular feelings and desires are mirrored in and inseparable from the general will. This general will is virtuous because it is inherently moral; Rousseau believes that what is done in the name of the general will be just and reflect the general good.

The general will—and therefore virtue—is subject to law, which is meant to establish equality among citizens and promote justice. “It is law alone that men owe justice and liberty. It is this salutary organ of the will of all which establishes, in civil right, the natural equality between men” (*Political Economy* 136). Law also dictates when violence and severity is

necessary on the part of the leaders. Laws can be severe if they are based on the general will: “To be just, it is necessary to be severe; to permit vice, when one has the right and the power to suppress it, is to be oneself vicious” (*Political Economy* 142). However, severity should not be used as a means to make citizens conform; he stresses that this severity must be lawful (*Political Economy* 142). He condemns leaders who resort to terror as “little minds” (*Political Economy* 137) unable to inspire love of country and adherence to duty that comes with respecting and cultivating the general will.

In order for citizens to feel this love for their country that enables them to conform to the general will, the state must provide protection and security to its citizens. All of these principles rely on one another; there must be a state based on freedom and individual rights in order to have a healthy body politic, a healthy collective: “Do we wish men to be virtuous? Then let us begin by making them love their country: but how can they love it, if their country be nothing more to them than to strangers, and afford them nothing but what it can refuse nobody?” (*Political Economy* 143). Again, the goal is to unify citizens through a shared sense of responsibility and compassion. The parts and the whole are inseparable in this metaphor of the state; the instinct is toward self-preservation and the people—the citizens—wish to protect and love the state because the state is themselves. It is, therefore, a form of self-love. The conformity general will requires is made possible by this feeling of love, as “we voluntarily will what is willed by those whom we love” (*Political Economy* 142). Patriotism is self-love directed toward positive and productive purposes, and often results in virtuous and heroic behavior (*Political Economy* 142).

Late eighteenth-century French thinkers, then, inherited an idea of political virtue as both the realization of political unity and the force that creates this unity. The Enlightenment’s pressure on sincerity and submission of the individual to the common good suggests that no

separation between one's private and public self exists. This problematic formulation, which implies that the public and private are essentially the same, attempts to override difference, a totalizing drive that helps makes the virtue-terror chiasmus possible. To associate love with law is equally problematic in that it not only insists on the infallibility of law and of human consensus, but collapses love of law and love of self as if there is no difference between them. This dismissal of difference and dissent also carries gender implications: the universalistic conception of virtue leaves little room for women in the public sphere. However, this exclusion does not preclude late eighteenth-century women from the pervasive and totalizing discourse of virtue. In my chapter on Germaine de Staël I address gender and civic virtue explicitly, arguing that Staël attempts to introduce a performative female virtue into the public sphere, but the disciplinary and totalitarian nature of Enlightened civic virtue overrides Corinne's particular, individuated one.

Moral virtue is often opposed to vice. Because I am interested in political virtue, I will not be discussing vice at any length in this project. The enemy of eighteenth-century political virtue is corruption: that is, the privileging of individual interest over the general good, such as being motivated by monetary or personal gains rather than genuine good will toward one's fellow citizens and toward one's nation. Again, such an enemy suggests that the divisions between public and private interest are not as distinct as Enlightenment thinkers seem to believe.

The English and Scottish School: Virtue, "Moral Feeling," and Sympathy in Politics

The English and Scottish Enlightenments also contributed to late eighteenth-century understandings of virtue. In Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, published

in 1755, virtue resembles the current *Oxford English Dictionary* definition while emphasizing potency and action: “moral goodness; a particular moral excellence; medicinal quality; medicinal efficacy; efficacy; power; acting power; secret agency; efficacy, without visible or material action; bravery; valour; excellence; that which gives excellence; one of the orders of the celestial hierarchy” (“virtue”). Many Scottish Enlightenment thinkers reacted against Locke’s political and moral theory, placing an innate “moral sense” at the center of their philosophies while stressing the role of sympathy and sentiment. Gertrude Himmelfarb explains that the British embraced “moral philosophy” rather than *philosophes*, who, with the exception of Montesquieu and Rousseau, valued reason above all (25). Himmelfarb notes that:

‘Benevolence,’ ‘compassion,’ ‘sympathy,’ ‘fellow-feeling,’ a ‘natural affection for others’—under one label or another, this moral sense (or sentiment, as [Adam] Smith preferred), was the basis of the social ethic that informed British philosophical and moral discourse for the whole of the eighteenth century. (33)

The Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of virtue in relation to sympathy and sentiment are especially relevant to my argument about the ways love, virtue and corporeality are linked, and how sentimental attachment and feeling is often the bridge that leads virtue to terror.

Generally speaking, Scottish thinkers were not afraid of commerce and supported the idea that the public good is served when citizens attend to their private interests. As Pocock notes: “The ideals of virtue and commerce could not therefore be reconciled to one another, so long as ‘virtue’ was employed in the austere civic, Roman and Arendtian sense . . . [that was] highly active in the eighteenth-century debate; but now it was perceived that such a virtuous citizen was so much of a political and so little of a social animal as to be ancient and not modern, ancient to the point of being archaic” (*Virtue, Commerce and History* 48). Mandeville’s *Fable of*

the Bees was an important addition to British, Scottish and Continental discussions of the role of virtue in public spheres. The poem satirizes the idea that “Bare virtue” is socially desirable; instead, Mandeville argues that vices help encourage moral, social and economic prosperity, and therefore should be indulged. Mandeville’s poem fits into the larger contestation between virtue and commerce that also characterized debates about virtue in the late eighteenth century. A brief overview of English and Scottish thinkers follows.

Locke

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke argues that what constitutes virtuous action is a matter of agreement among people, rather than an idea innate and self-evident (chapters 3 and 4). In addition to the law of God and the law of “politic societies,” people follow “the law of fashion, or private censure, and those to which men variously compare their action, and it is by their conforming to one of these laws, that they take their measures, when they would judge of their moral rectitude, and denominate their actions good or bad” (28: 255). He explains that people have given up their physical power in order to join together in society; therefore, they exert what little power they have left in determining what actions merit approval or disapproval (28: 10). Locke was not a moral relativist, however, asserting that it is reasonable to be virtuous and follow God’s law because it leads to happiness and reward (28: 11). In terms of his discussion of government, he supported the idea of natural law, arguing that the best form of government should correspond to nature and to reason (28: 11).

Shaftesbury

According to Janet Todd, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury is “often considered the founder of, or the prime influence on, sentimental philosophy of the moral sense school” (24), though he argues for an understanding of virtue as shaped by both rationality and sentiment (1: 2). In “An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit” (1699), Shaftesbury explores the relationship between virtue and religion (1:1), defining virtue as “a certain just disposition, or proportionable Affection of a rational Creature towards the moral Object of Right and Wrong” (1:1); it is a particular human trait that is innate, God-given and based on the knowledge of moral action paired with the proper use of reason and the affections (1:2). Shaftesbury makes clear the central role virtue plays in the securing and maintenance of social and private happiness:

Virtue, which of all Excellencys & Beautys is the chief, and most amiable, that which is the Prop and Ornament of human Affairs; which upholds Communitys, maintains Union, Friendship and Correspondence amongst Men; that by which Countrys, as well as private Familys, flourish and are happy . . . that *Single Quality*, thus beneficial to all Society, and to Mankind *in general*, is found equally Happiness and Good to each Creature *in particular*, and is *that* by which alone Man be happy. (2)

In this definition, Shaftesbury moves between the particular and the general, emphasizing the ways virtue meets both needs through the primacy it places on happiness and on the good. Virtue is a “Single Quality” shared by all people in varying degrees that holds together relations between private individuals and between citizens of nations. Earlier in his essay, he cautions against the idea that custom, religion, law or fashion can alter the nature of virtue, claiming that “if there be any thing which teaches men to persecute their friends thro Love” or “to commit any sort of Barbarity, or Brutality, as amicable or becoming” it is “not, nor ever can be Virtue” (1: 2). Virtue has an “immutable independent Nature” that cannot change based on the mutability of

customs or social practices (1: 2). By arguing that virtue is innate and unchanged by social institutions such as religion and law Shaftesbury challenges the earlier ideas of Locke and Hobbes. He also argues that virtue can play an important role in politics in that it works in the “Interest of every-one” and is a quality that should be encouraged (1:3). It is relevant to note that Diderot produced a translation of Shaftesbury, attracted to Shaftesbury’s claim that religious belief was not essential to moral goodness along with the overall stress he placed on a naturally-occurring virtue (Linton, *Politics of Virtue* 53).¹¹

Paine

A. Owen Aldridge establishes Paine’s relationship to the other key figures of the English, Continental and American debate about the role of political virtue in fashioning political society:

According to the classical Whig conception in both England and the colonies a virtuous citizenry was the essence of the republic. Paine’s friends, such as Jefferson, and many of his opponents, including John Adams, believed in man’s essential goodness . . . Paine followed Rousseau in the belief that man is inherently virtuous, but that he is corrupted by government or by society. Paine’s opinion that virtue in an individual is neither hereditary nor unchanging indicates that he would not have sided exclusively with either Shaftesbury or Mandeville as he has been pressed. (Aldridge 151)

Paine believed that government was an “evil” made “necessary by the inability of moral virtue to govern the world” and should be directed toward providing “freedom and security” (*Common Sense* 7). Paine repeats that virtue is not “hereditary” and must be maintained to be effective

¹¹ Marisa Linton also notes that Rousseau had a copy of Diderot’s translation of Shaftesbury, and so was possibly familiar with his ideas from the book as well as from conversations about natural virtue with Diderot (Linton, *Politics of Virtue* 56).

(*Common Sense* 7). As Jack Fruchtman, Jr., notes, “For Paine, political leaders acquired social virtue only when all people were properly cared for, when the needs of the poor became the responsibility of government to alleviate, when everyone participated in creating the community’s good health” (Fruchtman 8). In this way, virtue depends on maintaining social responsibilities and is realized through these actions.

Hutchenson, Smith, and Hume

Francis Hutchenson’s *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1726), was, according to its full title, composed in defense of Shaftesbury’s ideas against Mandeville’s.¹² Like Shaftesbury, Hutchenson believed that “moral goodness” is innate and God-given and that “the Person whom we imagine perfectly virtuous, acts immediately from the Love of others” (5: 4). Virtue is also action-based: “The Word Moral Goodness, in this Treatise, denotes our idea of some quality apprehended in Action, which procures approbation, and Love toward the Actor, from those who receive no Advantage by the Actor” (5 : 4). Serving the “Good of others” will naturally lead to “promote our own greatest private Good” (5: 4). Hutchenson claims that mankind’s benevolence and “good wishes” extend even to “rational Agents, capable of moral Affection, in the most distant planets” should they exist (5: 5). In addition, the potency of oratory depends on this virtue: “Upon this moral Sense is founded all the power of the Orator. The various Figures of Speech, are the several Manner which a lively Genius, Warm’d with Passions suitable to the Occasion, naturally runs into, only a little diversify’d by Custom: and they only move the hearers, by giving a lively Representation of the Passions of the Speaker,

¹² Hutchenson’s *Inquiry* was translated into French in 1749.

which are communicated to the Heavens, as we observed above of one Passion, viz. Pity” (6: 6). Here, virtue is aligned with passion and feeling; as O’Neill notes, Hutcheson’s “system of ethics places morality on a nonrational, instinctive footing rooted in a constant and uniform human nature” (24).

Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) is especially important in understanding the relationships between sympathy, virtue and universal benevolence. He identifies the “real essence of virtue” as the “keen and earnest attention to the propriety of our own conduct” (2: 3) depending on the situation and occasion. Hence, prudence, which he defines as “[w]ise and judicious conduct” directed toward the common good, is the most “perfect virtue” (4: 1). Virtue is cultivated through our relationships with others, and those who spend time with “the wise and the virtuous” will, at the very least, develop a respect and understanding of virtue, a connection Smith attributes to “the natural disposition to accommodate and to assimilate” (2: 1). Smith believes in “universal benevolence” in which we feel affections for others; he defines affection as “habitual sympathy” (1: 1). This sympathy comes about through our natural concern for others, which arises in part from the imaginative identification with other people’s feelings. To experience “fellow-feeling for the misery of others” through the imagination “we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them” (1: 1). To connect with another person and to at least partially understand their feelings and sensations requires this imaginative identification; Smith notes that such identification can take place in relation to other passions, not just misery (1: 1). This universal fellow-feeling means recognizing that the individual is part of a series of greater and more

important systems. For this reason, the “wise and virtuous man” should also be willing to sacrifice his private interest “to the public interest of his own particular order or society” which, in turn, should be subsumed “to the greater interest of the state or sovereignty, of which it is only a subordinate part” and so on until “the great interest of the universe” has been fulfilled (1 : 1).

According to Himmelfarb, “[e]ven Hume, who had a notably unsentimental view of human nature, believed in a ‘sentiment,’ a ‘moral sense,’ a ‘moral taste’ common to all men” (34). In *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume defines virtue as “whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation” and vice whatever gives the feeling of disapproval (290). Some virtues are “natural,” others “artificial”: the natural virtues are not socially constructed while the artificial ones have been developed out of utility—to foster social relations and promote the common good (298). He says that morality is “something real, essential and founded on nature” (296) and emphasizes that “Sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions” (389).

Sentimentality and Virtue

Related to ideas of sympathy are other key ideas and literary tropes of the period: sensibility, sentiment and sentimentality, all of which are tied to the eighteenth century conception of political virtue. Janet Todd defines sensibility—“perhaps the key term of the period” from the 1740s-1770s—as “the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering” (7). While often concerned with private individuals, sentiment and sensibility can be viewed as political; for example, in *The Politics of Sensibility*, Markman Ellis argues that the literature of sensibility moves the reader for political ends and provokes social reform.

Sentiment and sentimentality's reliance on the body as both a source of this feeling and as a means to express this feeling links the emotionally demonstrative and reactive body to the eighteenth-century conception of political virtue. The sentimental faculty was seen as "physically based, a quality of nerves turning easily to illness and described in contemporary medical treatises in terms of movements within the body" (Todd 7-8). The trope of sentiment connected the emotional reactions as seen through the body to morality: Christopher John Murray writes that "the idea that the individuals' knowledge, feelings, and identity are built from physical sensations received through the bodily senses" (905). As Ildiko Csengei explains, "eighteenth-century sensibility was a cultural phenomenon that pertained to all aspects of human existence, addressing especially the meeting point of mind, body and morality" (4). This relationship between political virtue and corporeality will appear in the texts I examine.

Sentiment and sentimentality shaped European literature of the late eighteenth century. The most famous work of sentimental fiction in England was Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). While Marivaux, Charles Pinot Duclos, Crébillon Fils and the Abbé Prevost all wrote novels based on sensibility and virtue, it wasn't until the translation of Richardson's novels in the mid-1700's that literary representations of sensibility and virtue became extremely popular (Linton, *Politics of Virtue* 74). While such novels were not overtly political and tended to focus on female, private virtue, Linton suggests that they taught readers that "ordinary people are capable of virtuous sentiments and actions, even more so than the 'great' because they are less liable to the corruption of wealth and status" (*Politics of Virtue* 79). I mention them here because they reflect the interest in sensibility on both England and France; such tropes of sentiment and female virtue in relation to the philosophical arguments about

political virtue and the role of the individual in the public sphere will arise in my discussion of Germaine de Staël in my fifth chapter.

Theories of Political Terror: From Politically Expedient Fear to Total Terror

In this section, I provide a brief overview of key thinkers in European intellectual history—Machiavelli, Montesquieu and Hobbes—to emphasize important dimensions of terror that the Revolution inherits and transforms. Then, I discuss two key theorists, Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, who inform my understanding of how terror functions in these texts. Moving from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers to twentieth-century thinkers shows how terror becomes the deliberately-employed and ideologically-driven use of fear to achieve political aims. Foucault’s writings on surveillance and panopticism helps to show how this terror is disciplinary, meaning that normalizes through total visibility.

The ancient meaning of terror revolves around fear and dread as a state of being or as the source of that feeling: in the English language, the word terror is used to denote a “state of being terrified or extremely frightened” before 1325, (*a*1325 or earlier), “state or quality of causing intense fear or dread” in the fourteenth century, (14th cent.) and a “thing or person that causes terror” in the late sixteenth century (1587) (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Its etymon is the classical Latin *terror*, which means “fact or quality of inspiring dread, person or thing that causes dread, extreme fear” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Machiavelli’s writings emphasize the relationship between terror and fear, acknowledging that such choices often stem from political necessity. Machiavelli connects terror (*terrore*) with fear (*paura*), and regards them as political instruments used by the sovereign that are sometimes useful and other times damaging to the civil order. In *Discourses*, Machiavelli

addresses the question of whether it is better to be loved or feared, suggesting that fear can form the basis for the relationship between a subject and a ruler successfully, as in the case of Hannibal (146). As Erica Benner notes, in Machiavelli's perspective, "It is appropriate to feel 'fear of the laws' if the meaning of fear is close to respect" (385). Machiavelli seems to acknowledge that terror and fear can be used to obtain power, and in some circumstances, to sustain it: to "renew" their power, leaders sometimes turn to "the same terror [*terrore*] and alarm [*paura*, or fear] in men's minds, as they inspired when they first assumed government" (*Discourses* 147). Such actions, if arbitrary, can be politically destabilizing (*Discourses* 148). According to Mayer, Machiavelli sees terror as a useful tool to achieve strength as a ruler, making it a matter of political expediency rather than stemming from a deep-seated philosophy: terror's "success is measured by criteria of political efficiency, informed by *virtú*, and not by ideological standards" (Mayer 99). Machiavelli's *virtú* is essentially strength and the means of obtaining power; if it is efficient to use terror and fear in order to attain this power, it may be justified, but not if terror is used arbitrarily.

Hobbes' reading of terror exposes the relationship between terror and law, suggesting that raw violence and fear make the social contract possible. Hobbes sees terror as a motivating force that helps communities cohere into law-abiding societies. According to Richard Tuck, Hobbes thought that *Leviathan* applied to both English and French politics. Tuck explains, "The years 1649-52 were the years when the 'Fronde,' the confused uprising against the absolutist government of France, was at its height, and Paris itself has been seized by the rebels early in 1649: not only Englishmen needed instruction in the duties of subjects" (*x*). In Part 2 "Of Commonwealth" in *Leviathan*, Hobbes contends that political terror is necessary to ensure obedience to the law. According to Hobbes, people are naturally in competition with one

another, which leads to envy and hatred and then war (119). Men wish to avoid this “miserable condition of Warre”—which, Hobbes says, is the natural state of man—and so, out of necessity and to preserve their lives and their livelihoods, they choose to place authority in the hands of one or more persons. Laws work against our natures, but people desire safety; paradoxically, in order to be safe people must live in fear of a larger power or authority. Man must be forced to observe the “Lawes of Nature,” which Hobbes identifies as justice, equity, modesty and mercy—essentially, he says, “doing to others, as wee would be done to” (117). People will only follow laws out of fear of punishment; there needs to be a “visible Power to keep them in awe, and tye them by feare of punishment to the performance of their Covenants, and observation of these Lawes of Nature” and keeps them in “terroure of some power” (117). Hobbes recognizes that spoken agreements, while binding, must be reinforced with violence or the threat thereof: “Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all” (117). Hobbes argues that if this awe- and terror-inspired power was unnecessary, people would automatically act justly on their own and have no need of government. Since, he says, there is no case of such a community of man ever existing, this terror-inspiring power is necessary (118). Thus, desire to live in peace leads to representative government: they elect to “conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will: which is as much as to say, to appoint one Man, or Assembly of men, to beare their Person” (120). They willingly create this “artificial” covenant, choosing to submit their wills to this authority, whom he defines as the “Sovereigne” (120-121). Hobbes specifies that the common-wealth, held together by submission to the sovereign, is a “real Unitie,” a fusion of men together through a mutual and voluntary relinquishing of one’s right to govern oneself (120). The common-wealth is “the Multitude so united in one Person,”

who takes on the characteristics of a “Mortall God” who “hath the use of so much Power and Strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is inabled to forme the wills of them all, to Peace at home, and mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad” (120-121). So, for Hobbes, this unity is a form of safety. This “one Will” is a way to avoid fear by depending on it.¹³

While Machiavelli and Hobbes acknowledge the practical applications of terror, Montesquieu and Samuel Johnson emphasize its dehumanizing capabilities, both for victim and perpetrator. In *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu identifies the overriding principle of despotism as fear (*la crainte*), which can also be translated as terror. Montesquieu argues that when used as a political tool terror reduces human beings into a series of actions and reactions; under the dehumanizing regime of despotism, Montesquieu writes, “Man is a creature that obeys a creature that wants” (29). Under despotic authority, there are no negotiations or hope to improve situations. The entry on *terror* in Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) resonates with Montesquieu’s understanding. The definition emphasizes terror as the transmission of fear between parties: “fear communicated; fear received; the cause of fear” (“terror,” 784). Terror can be seen as a power relationship that involves one group or individual acting on another individual—in this case, through the transmission of fear.

While terror was used politically prior to the French Revolution, the Reign of Terror fundamentally altered the definition of terror; as Terry Eagleton notes, terrorism is a “modern invention” that made its first appearance “as a political idea” with the French Revolution (*Holy*

¹³ Significantly, this artificial covenant is enacted through a speech act: “it is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person, made by Covenant of every man with every man, in such manner, as if every man should say to every man, “I Authorise and give up my Right of Governing my selfe, to this Man, or to this Assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy Right to him, and Authorise all his Actions in like manner” (*Leviathan* 120).

Terror 1).¹⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to the Reign of Terror in its definition, showing the extent to which Terror transfigured fear and violence into a deliberate tool used to achieve and maintain political power and political legitimacy. The historical Reign of Terror extended roughly from the fall of the Girondins in June, 1793, to the arrest and execution of Robespierre in July, 1794.¹⁵ In total, “about 20,000 people were guillotined or shot ‘legally.’ Half a million more were arrested at one point or another” (Higonnet 52). The military repressions in the provinces also yielded large death tolls, including some 250,000 in the Vendée (Higonnet 52). The Terror depended on the suspension and creation of laws to enact itself in the name of justice and “public safety”: most notably, the Terror was made possible through the founding of the revolutionary tribunal, the law of suspects, and the guillotine. The Law of 22 Prairial, voted in June 10, 1794, and which targeted, in the words of Robespierre, the “enemies of liberty,” eliminated the need for representation and “transformed the hearing into a mere formality by eliminating the examination of witnesses” (Furet and Ozouf 141). The judicial Terror worked to justify and enact the violence of the historical Terror. The historical Terror helped to shape and redefine the concept of political terror, turning terror into terrorism.

During the Revolution terror takes on its modern characteristics that distinguish Revolutionary terror from previous acts of violence, regicide and tyranny. Randall Lewis writes of the “decisive break away from mere tyrannicide and toward terrorism in its modern guise came during the French Revolution” (59). These characteristics are: 1.) ideological and

¹⁴ There are other acts in history prior to the French Revolution that can be seen as terrorist, though the word did not exist at the time. These acts include the massacre of French Protestants in France in the late sixteenth century, the Babington Affair (1586), and the Gunpowder Plot (1685) (Rubin and Rubin 6).

¹⁵ The actual dates of the Terror are subject to debate, as are the reasons why the Terror happened in the first place. For a survey of opinions on the subject, Kafker, Frank A., James M. Laux and Darline Gay Levy, eds. *The French Revolution: Conflicting Interpretations*. 5th ed. New York: Krieger, 2002. Print.

deliberate, 2.) legitimating (or seeking to be legitimate) 3.) rhetorical / persuasive, and 4.) lawful (or “pretending” toward lawfulness). The terror that emerged during the French Revolution can be identified as a set of deliberate political strategies used to realize specific political goals and philosophies:

There, for the first time, terrorism was at the core of a comprehensive political strategy to gain and retain power. Many of the critical elements of terrorism are clearly expressed and implemented during the French Revolution: the deliberate instilling of fear, the elimination of entire social groups . . . the use of terror against others a way of mobilizing one’s own supporters, and incitement to murder as a means of political expression and to achieve utopian goals. (Rubin and Rubin 4).

Rubin and Rubin go on to describe terrorism as “the physical extinction of opponents, the rationale for large-scale murder, the intimidation of others, the mobilization of support from one’s own target audience” (Rubin and Rubin 6). The Revolution offered something “newer”: the “conscious use of deliberately organized and ideologically justified terrorism by nonstate actors as a political philosophy and as a strategy for seeking to gain political power rather than merely as a by-product of political struggle (Rubin and Rubin 3).

Another important component of terror is the quest for legitimacy. Legitimacy is an essential distinction between state-run or sovereign-centered terror and insurgent terror that seeks to create itself and justify its existence—in a sense, to enact its own legitimacy. Revolutionary government is by its very nature unstable. “Legitimacy,” says Patricia Marchak, “is an implied and occasionally explicit agreement on the part of the governed and the outsiders that a state has the right to determine the domestic rules for citizens, to act on their behalf, and to control the armed forces of the country . . . Once a government finds it necessary to rule by force on more

than an occasional basis, it is admitting a loss of legitimacy” (7). Such a quest for political legitimacy is important for the Revolution as a new regime attempting to maintain control and develop into a lasting nation.¹⁶ Terror is ultimately a tool for achieving and maintaining power. The use of fear as a political idea or tool appears in European intellectual thought before the French Revolution, though this use is attributed to an individual in power, i.e., the sovereign, rather than a rogue group using terror as a tactic to obtain legitimacy. Generally speaking and within a European context, prior to the French Revolution politically-imposed terror was wellled up in the figure of the king, the sovereign; the Reign of Terror marks a shift when terror becomes a force of the general will, an instrument for and by “the people” that is meant to perpetuate a collective understanding of “the people” and destroy those who fall out of this singularity. Often, how terror is understood depends on the perceived legitimacy of the Revolution. For example, according to Robespierre, terror was a necessary form of justice used to legitimate a government that locates sovereignty in the “people” rather than in the monarch; Burke, on the other hand, saw the “terrorists” (he coined the phrase in English in *Letters on a Regicide Peace*) as outliers who are always illegitimate and use violence and fear to coerce others for their own self-concerned ends. In many ways the relationship between virtue and terror hinges on this question of legitimacy.

Revolutionary terror was used an ideological tool to reinforce and create this sense of legitimacy; terror was used to force this “agreement” that the revolutionary government is a

¹⁶ This is a project that ultimately failed in terms of establishing a republic. Rubin and Rubin remind us that the Revolution was “an abject political failure” partially because of the recourse to terrorism, which caused the Revolution to fall apart from the inside and open itself to interlopers: “An emperor, Napoleon, took power, established his own noble class, and led the country into fifteen years of bloody and wasteful wars. France’s political turmoil was not resolved and democracy firmly established until more than eighty years after the Revolution” (Rubin and Rubin 4).

legitimate authority to act on behalf of the people. Randall Lewis calls the Terror “perversely educational” because its “primary goal was to shape the mind and behavior of the populace. This was the advent of modern terror, if not in form, then in function” (64). Marie-Hélène Huet identifies this ideological impulse as the French Revolution’s “will,” or “the active philosophical scrutiny that aimed to secure the Revolution’s ultimate goal against all odds” (*Mourning Glory* 3). As Huet explains, the terror of the Revolution was deliberate and goal-oriented, as the propaganda of the Revolution demonstrates. The festivals and the very renaming and reshaping of time were intended to restart the existing world according to revolutionary ideals and overriding narratives. Terror carries a utopian fervor that borders on the religious. Mayer identifies political terror as the moment when “politics becomes quasi-religious or when a utopia beckons or demands to be realized” (Mayer 98).¹⁷

Arendtian Total Terror: Ideological, Homogenizing, Isolating

The Russian communist regime and German Nazism refined terrorism and developed the political system of totalitarianism, but these movements shared some similarities with their predecessor, the French Revolution. As Rubin and Rubin note, “these movements put the highest priority on the use of political violence to intimidate enemies and to mobilize support for themselves. Terror was not something to be hidden, but celebrated as a protecting virtue, and seeking social righteousness. Indeed, their rationales were remarkably parallel to those of the French revolutionaries” (Rubin and Rubin 24). While the violence of the French Revolution did

¹⁷ For discussions of the role of festivals in the Revolution and Terror, see Gutwirth, Madelyn, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* and Ozouf, Mona, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, among others.

not reach the advanced levels of genocide or systematic destruction of human life, Hannah Arendt's discussion of mechanisms of terror in totalitarian governmental structures is theoretically useful for understanding the ways terror can function in the texts I examine. Arendt argues that because the Revolution was enacted "in good faith" it did not approach the level of totalitarian regimes of the early twentieth century (*On Revolution* 36). However, my reading suggests that the terror that emerges in these romantic texts shares qualities with total terror, often precisely because it was enacted in this "good faith"—in other words, while evoking virtue. I draw my understanding of Revolutionary terror as proto-totalitarian mostly from Arendt's conception of total terror as described in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt defines total terror as politically imposed fear and violence driven by an ideology that calls for death to form a cohesive and just society. This terror totalizes and dehumanizes as it compels people to join together into a homogenous mass to set in motion the idea of a larger force, History or Nature, that mankind must join together in achieving.

Because totalitarian rule makes claims to natural law, it is not considered arbitrary or lawless; in fact, Arendt argues that terrorists are following absolutely a certain type of law. These agents of terror do not see themselves as individuals acting on their own prerogatives, but as instruments of a teleological history that promises "justice on earth because it claims to make mankind itself the embodiment of law" (*Origins* 596). Arendt argues that totalitarianism makes a distinction between positive and natural law. Positive laws are laws that have been "posited," in other words "a law or body of laws artificially instituted or imposed by an authority" and is "often contrasted with natural law rooted in the requirements of justice and right reason."¹⁸ These are "man-made" laws imposed by a governmental authority. Natural law, on the other

¹⁸ "Positive law." *Oxford English Dictionary*.

hand, is law that is said to come directly from nature. It is “the law as it is naturally or immediately interpreted—the principles of morality, held to be discernable by reason as belonging to human nature or implicit in the natural of rational thought and action.”¹⁹ One is made-made and the other is considered naturally occurring or innate. What Arendt terms “totalitarian lawfulness” claims to reach beyond the legitimacy of positive law and reach to a “higher form of legitimacy,” that is, the law of nature or history (*Origins* 595). Totalitarian law, she says, “pretends to have found a way to establish the rule of justice on earth—something which the legality of positive law admittedly could never attain” (*Origins* 595).²⁰

Total terror insists on being “lawful” to the point that it “pretends to have found a way to establish the rule of justice on earth” (*Origins* 595) and is able to transform and unify mankind into “the embodiment of law” (*Origins* 596). These systems work to make ideology literal and visible through manipulating and controlling the lives and bodies of individuals—to turn their flesh into a realization of “justice.” Terror is the means to both achieve and justify this unification and realization; terror, according to Arendt, must “make the world consistent, to prove that its respective supersense has been right” (*Origins* 590). To achieve this unifying and totalizing enterprise, terror both literally and figuratively forces men together into a whole. Terror “holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality has disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions” (*Origins* 600). To totalize, to eliminate “the space between men” is to eliminate the freedom of the individual and the protection laws provide (*Origins* 600). Every life becomes a means to achieve this destiny, either through becoming death-givers or being subjected to death: “The inhabitants of a totalitarian country are thrown into and caught in the

¹⁹ “Natural law.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

²⁰ In *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution*, Dan Edelstein argues that the Jacobins considered the republic a manifestation of the doctrine of natural right and relied almost entirely on natural right to justify and enact the Terror.

process of nature or history for the sake of accelerating its movement; as such, they can only be executioners or victims of its inherent law” (*Origins* 603).

Because the terrorists believe they are working to “establish the rule of justice on earth,” their actions are meant to help achieve that rule through whatever means are necessary. Arendt defines terror as “the realization of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action” (*Origins* 559). She goes on to explain:

Terror as the execution of a law of movement whose ultimate goal is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind, eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrificing the ‘parts’ for the sake of the ‘whole.’ The suprahuman force of Nature or History has its own beginning and its own end, so that it can be hindered only by the new beginning and individual end which the life of each man actually is. (*Origins* 599)

Arendt underscores the relentless logic that undergirds the philosophy of total terror: “Ideologies are harmless, uncritical, and arbitrary opinions only as long as they are not believed in seriously. Once their claim to total validity is taken literally they become the nuclei of logical systems in which, as in the systems of paranoiacs, everything follows comprehensibly and even compulsorily once the first premise is accepted” (*Origins* 590). She emphasizes the logic of totalitarian discourses that work to affirm themselves and create logical progression through force.

According to Arendt, the work of terror is the systematic reorganization of society into a singular form; such a system sees the individual as a threat and seeks to override the desires and

needs of the individual for the sake of the general. As Rebecca Comay notes, “In the binary universe of the will, difference is legible only as opposition, and opposition itself becomes indistinguishable from treason” (69). In this way, terror both unifies and isolates. Arendt says that “the theory of terror from Robespierre to Lenin and Stalin presupposes that the interest of the whole must automatically, and indeed permanently, be hostile to the particular interest of the citizen” (*On Revolution* 79). This terror is inherently totalizing and is motivated by the need for “Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all humanity were just one individual” (*Origins* 565). Arendt describes the isolating and the fusing work of terror:

The compulsion of total terror on one side, which, with its iron band, presses masses of isolated men together *and* supports them in a world which has become a wilderness for them, and the self-coercive force of logical deduction on the other, which prepares each individual in his lonely isolation against all others, correspond to each other and need each other in order to see the terror-ruled movement into motion and keep it moving.

(*Origins*, 610)

Everyone is demanded to be the same and yet in this mass-making the individual is isolated and stripped of personality and individualism; there is only suspicion.²¹

Total terror’s goal is to eliminate the threat that comes from the individual, which comes from the newness of this individual: “For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power to begin something new out of his resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events” (*Origins* 586). The very innovative nature of

²¹ For discussions of suspicion and distrust during the Terror, see Maria Linton, *Choosing Terror*, and Brown, Howard G. *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007. Print.

mankind is suppressed: “the fact that men are being born and that therefore each of them is a new beginning, begins, in a sense, the world anew” (*Origins* 601). Spontaneity carries “incalculability” (*Origins* 588) which means that a person’s behavior cannot be predicted and might deviate from the master narrative that society is purported to follow. Guilt or innocence ceases to matter: “Under conditions of total terror not even fear can any longer serve as an advisor of how to behave, because terror chooses its victims without reference to individual actions or thoughts, exclusively in accordance with the objective necessity of the natural or historical process” (*Origins* 602). Arendt emphasizes the dehumanizing nature of total terror given its goal to reduce a man to a series of “reactions,” to reduce the individual to “ghastly marionettes with human faces” (*Origins* 586). The goal of terror—and where we see the political function of terror merging with its basic significance as fear—is to reduce people “to a bundle of reaction” (*Origins* 569), turning a human being into what Arendt identifies as “a mere thing” (*Origins* 569).²² This is the element of dehumanization that comes with terror, the reduction of a person to “a specimen of the animal-species man” (*Origins* 589).

Foucauldian Disciplinary Terror: Transparency and Visibility

Although not complete totalitarianism, in Arendt’s conception of terror one can see a move toward total domination: “Such power can only be secured if literally all men, without a single exception, are reliably dominated in every aspect of their life” (*Origins* 588). Such a call for permanent visibility and internalized control can be more fully understood in relation to

²² Giorgio Agamben, following Schmidt, Arendt and Benjamin, calls such a reduction “bare life,” in which the human being, stripped of political life, exists in “a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast” (*Homo Sacer* 109).

Michel Foucault's work on the disciplinary nature of French Revolutionary terror. Foucault's work on disciplinary power underscores the ways terror is "educational," demands transparency and visibility, and is tied to the body. Foucault's writings on Bentham's Panopticism helps to elucidate the late eighteenth-century insistence on transparency and visibility as a form of social control; this insistence is apparent in the Jacobin agenda and can be seen in the ways terror emerges in the literature I examine in subsequent chapters.

This emphasis on total visibility, which emerged during the French Revolution, is a quality that makes late eighteenth-century terror new. Foucault theorizes the Panopticon as panopticism, a way to understand modern surveillance culture, which he argues is dominated by "disciplinary power" in which normalizing behavior has been internalized through various forms of technology and social control (*Discipline and Punish* 215-16). "Discipline," he writes, "may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedure . . ." (*Discipline and Punish* 215-16). The terror that emerges during the Revolution is, in many ways, the manifestation of disciplinary power. Foucault speaks of the French Revolution's drive for transparency in opposition to the furtive practices of the *ancien régime*. Foucault emphasizes the ways this new form of social control makes everything visible and affords no one a place to hide: "the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection" (*Eye of Power* 147). Bentham, a British philosopher and social theorist, designed the Panopticon, "a technology of power" intended "to solve the problems of surveillance" (*Eye of Power* 148); though never fully realized architecturally, the panoptic design consisted of a circular structure in which subjects (inmates, school children, and other subjects) were always under the watch of a guard tower that

may or not be occupied at all times (*Eye of Power* 158). The effect was a sense of always being watched, which would create an atmosphere of “total and circulating mistrust” and prompt the prisoners to behave as desired even when unsupervised (*Eye of Power* 158). Explains Foucault:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (*Eye of Power* 202-203)

Here, rather than being eliminated, spontaneity is used to enact the automatic internalization of external forms of power. An authority figure is no longer necessary; the power structure becomes internalized and the subject is constrained without needing an external force.

The terror that emerged during the French Revolution insisted on total visibility as a form of preventing and punishing crime. According to Foucault, revolutionary justice called for the punishment and prevention of crime meant trying “to prevent even the possibility of wrongdoing, by immersing people in a field of total visibility where the opinion, observation and discourse of others would restrain them from harmful acts” (*Eye of Power* 153). Though Foucault does not call it such, this “field of total visibility” (*Eye of Power* 153) that supposedly permits “the full visibility of things, men and truths” (*Eye of Power* 153) is in many ways a form of terror in that it functions as a normalizing force that controls people’s behavior. Foucault identifies what he calls “the Rousseauist dream” that the Terror tried to make real:

the dream of a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zone established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogatives of some corporation, zones of disorder. (*Eye of Power* 152)

Terror then emerges as the end of obscurity in which people are controlled by making all visible but also by creating policy that encourages the internalization of these behaviors.

Foucault writes that “the state’s power . . . is both an individuating and a totalizing form of power” (“The Subject and Power” 782). In the case of the Revolution, it is not so much the state but the revolutionaries who are instituting these forms of power in order to justify their existence and create a new government unified around revolutionary principles.

All of these qualities add up to a terror that is totalizing, that works against plurality and difference and insists on the fusion of individuals into a collective defined by “permanent visibility,” in which all is known and felt together. The fusion of men together is both a totalitarian and a democratic structure, a troubling claim that Robespierre utilizes in his speech that connects virtue to terror (“a consequence of the general principle of democracy”), and that “naturally” leads to a revolution that totalizes to the point of self-extinction: “The climax of terror is reached when the police state begins to devour its own children, when yesterday’s executioner becomes today’s victim” (Arendt, *On Violence* 54).

This overview paints a complex portrait of terror and virtue, showing the connections between each that made not only Robespierre’s ideology possible but appear in other guises and other places. Each of the authors I examine in subsequent chapters reveal a dimension of this terror and show what can happen when revolutionary violence and speech-making is connected to civic and sentimental virtue.

Chapter Two

Robespierre's Virtuous Terror

Although Maximilien Robespierre did not make many of the key decisions in the French Revolution and subsequent Terror, he is seen as embodying the ideals and principles of the Revolution more than his compatriots: François Furet argues that Robespierre is not “an immortal figure” because of his brief stint as the leader of the Revolution, but “because he was the mouthpiece of its purest and most tragic discourse” (60). Robespierre held himself up as this mouthpiece, and perhaps it is for this that he is most remembered and most vilified (Furet 57-61). In this chapter, I investigate the ways Robespierre uses performative speech to legitimize and stabilize the Revolution through the linking of an enlightened, republican public virtue with an absolutist and totalizing form of political terror. Specifically, I focus on the ways Robespierre uses virtue and terror as speech acts in order to continue the Jacobin agenda of founding and legitimizing the nascent French republic. Robespierre endows virtue with legitimizing terror through his performative speech that simultaneously construes virtue and terror as forms of unifying love while identifying himself as the exemplary virtuous citizen whose ultimate sacrifice this chiasmus necessitates. I am interested in the ideological and political complexities embedded in this chiasmus and demonstrate the ways both virtue and terror—as conceived by Robespierre—serve totalitarian agendas. My purpose is to examine how the virtue-terror chiasmus functions in Robespierre's speeches in order to identify a pattern of thinking and speaking that, I argue, is replicated in other writings that utilize political virtue as a stabilizing principle. In the course of my argument, I show how Robespierre adapts a conception of political virtue as drawn from ancient Roman and Greek texts and from the Enlightenment *philosophes* to the French Revolutionary moment, and, in doing so, unleashed its terrors, connecting the idea of

benevolence to one's fellow man and attentiveness to the common good to the idea of a power that only stops when all opposition has been eliminated.²³

In his speeches to the National Convention, Robespierre revises the Enlightenment conception of virtue as a stabilizing and regulating force that forms the core of sentimental politics. Robespierre attempts to distinguish between categories of the criminal and the virtuous, but the instability of symbolic discourse and the instability of law itself make these boundaries blur until crime and virtue resemble one another. Robespierre, drawing from his and his audience's background in classical Roman and Greek republicanism, defines virtue as love of country and its laws. He envisions this political virtue as a protective force, a curative against the ills that threaten the attainment of an ideal republic; it is masculine, nation-building and nation-sustaining, binding its people together through love and sentimental feeling. Rather than the "not a man" with "a logic-formula instead of heart," as Thomas Carlyle would condemn him,²⁴ a closer examination of Robespierre's speeches reveals a conviction that virtue is a way to give politics a moral vigor propelled by sentimental and passionate attachment to the public good. He advocates for what could be called a politics of love with virtue as the overriding center. Patrice Higonnet, when urging his readers not to judge the Jacobins, notes that "unlike modern fascists and Bolsheviks, Jacobins, consciously at least, were driven more by frustrated love than by hate, envy or indifference" (132). While Higonnet suggests that this motivation may have dissipated by the time of the Terror, my reading of Robespierre's speeches demonstrates that love formed

²³ While Robespierre was influenced by the *philosophes* it is important to note that he objected to their atheism. See his speech on May 7, 1794, "On the Connection between Religious and Moral Ideas with Republican Principles and National Festivals."

²⁴ Carlyle's portrait of Robespierre in *The French Revolution* is especially virulent: "not a man, with the heart of a man, but a poor spasmodic incorruptible pedant, with a logic-formula instead of heart" (3:254). The accusations of extreme rationality at the expense of human particularity is one Germaine de Staël will make against the revolutionaries.

the core of revolutionary terror itself. The close association of love and death is made literal in the virtue-terror chiasmus, a subversive turning that crosses between public and private, speech and silence, authority and powerlessness. My analysis will show that Robespierre's idea of virtue echoes a number of different registers: ancient Roman and Greek public virtue, the idea of virtue posited in the *Encyclopédie*, as well as his understandings and revisions of Montesquieu and Rousseau.

Ironically, it is this idea of virtue as sentimentality and warm universalism that links virtue not just to violence but to terror. According to Robespierre, virtue, propelled by a "sublime" and "holy" love for humankind, acts as a tempering force that can transform both terror and crime into democratic necessities. The following conditions make this configuration possible: (1) his idea of virtue depends on the fiction of the general will, which requires a consensus that looks like terror, (2) his idea of virtue is wedded to law, which often realizes itself as violence that terrorizes, and (3) his idea of virtue presupposes radical equality, which, like the general will, can become a form of terror that strips differences from people. In the end, Robespierre's virtue, his own love of country realized through rhetorical and actual violence, turns on him. In his final speech, he portrays himself as the ultimate sacrificial victim of the Revolution, an allegory of a virtue that must kill and be killed. Robespierre often emphasizes the speech-act itself, reminding the audience that he is speaking of virtue as a means of establishing his authority and the legitimacy of the Revolution. This authorizing is two-fold: it establishes virtue as the overriding principle of the Revolution and establishes Robespierre's virtuous ethos. This ethos-building is complicated, however, by his discursive linking of this legitimizing virtue with revolutionary terror, making speaking virtue to actually mean calling upon an annihilating death. By verbally enacting virtue and terror simultaneously (recall the multiple meanings of "à

la fois” as both, and at the same time), Robespierre makes explicit the ideology of the Revolution in which death becomes a democratic necessity. At the cross-roads where virtue and terror intersect, death becomes the way to live out the teleological projection of human history and perfectibility, a dangerous revision of Enlightenment dreams for humanity. Such an analysis also reveals how both virtue and terror are totalizing forces.

In the first chapter of this study, I demonstrated that civic virtue was both conceived of as action and was realized through action. In the case of Robespierre, one of the central actions of virtue is founding and legitimizing. Central to my argument is the idea of the speech act as both the power to speak and the manufacturing of that power to speak. As Sandy Petry remarks, “The Revolution . . . consistently sought the means to speak itself while exercising the power to make itself” (*History in the Text* 7). In his speeches, virtue functions as a speech act that performs the actions of founding and legitimizing. Hannah Arendt notes that both Machiavelli and Robespierre worked within the Roman tradition: “founding was the central political action, the one great deed that established the public-political realm and made politics possible” (*Between Past and Future* 139). Robespierre’s use of virtue also speaks to his need for authority. Petry also says of performative speech: “Its power is inseparable from a precise collective vision of what counts as authority in which sets of circumstances” (Petry 21). Speech act theory illuminates the purposeful nature of speech: a speech act is illocutionary if it desires to affect or influence its listener in some way (Austin 109). Since the Revolution is a moment when everything is in question, Robespierre uses speech to persuade his audience of the legitimacy of his ideas and of his proposed courses of action. Given the provisional nature of the Revolution, Robespierre’s speech acts often take place *in media res* or even *ex post facto*, and work to justify, explain and direct the Jacobin course of action. Therefore, the action done by Robespierre’s speech is to

establish legitimacy and to persuade his audience to follow through on the Terror as a political strategy. As Patrice Higonnet says, “we remember Jacobins as ruthless politicians determined to carry out a revolutionary project regardless of its costs or legality . . . But we should remember also that, from day to day, at least until 1793—when they became the unbending quasi-functionaries of the revolutionary state—the Jacobins strained not to force but to convince” (132). While this convincing was often enacted through the implementation or the threat of physical force, the role of persuasion is important in understanding how Robespierre saw virtue playing a vital role in enacting terror. Marisa Linton stresses this need for justification:

They used their oratory to justify policy. Part of that policy was the use of terror. In speaking they gave the appearance of being in control of events, and in control of the Terror, but that appearance was to some extent illusory. No individual, no group of individuals, not even the Committee of Public Safety, could be said to have controlled the Terror. Nevertheless, Robespierre and the other spokesmen tried to impose an intellectual coherence on the revolutionary project. (*Choosing Terror* 190)

Virtue is a tool used to enact this “intellectual coherence.” Linton also notes that when Robespierre spoke of virtue, he “literally meant his own personal virtue. The legitimacy of his argument rested on the authenticity of his own commitment to the public good, and that of his fellow Jacobins” (*Choosing Terror* 190). Here, I build on and complicate this recognition of virtue as a rhetorical means used to gain political consensus by tracing the ways Robespierre’s performative identity as a virtuous citizen simultaneously creates the republic and destroys himself.

While Robespierre’s speeches have of course been the subject of much debate and discussion, his chiasmic linking of virtue and terror has been touched on but not made the focus of

sustained investigation.²⁵ Slavoj Žižek’s “Robespierre, or, the ‘Divine Violence’ of Terror” is an exception in that he directly addresses the philosophical and political workings of Robespierre’s virtue and terror. In this essay, Žižek uses what he calls “the Virtue-Terror conjunction” to meditate upon the different ways “virtuous terror” could be used to address and curtail current global crises, such as ecological disasters. He sees within the liberal discomfort with Robespierist ideology the problem of “collective decision-making” on the large scale, which he says is often rejected as “totalitarian” and yet might be necessary to divert the global community away from the impending doom brought by global capitalism (“Robespierre,” xxxvii-xxxviii).²⁶ Žižek argues that the violence of the Revolution is not foundational but an instance of Benjaminian divine violence in justice takes the form of vengeance committed by and in the name of “the people” (“Robespierre,” xi-xiii). My analysis suggests that the virtue-terror chiasmus is the manifestation of both divine violence and foundational violence, a perspective speech act theory helps make visible through its attention to ways speech determines legitimacy and constitutes identity. Žižek does not address performative speech in his discussion of the virtue-terror chiasmus; my attention to speech as action points to the making of justice through utterance that does the work of authorizing through self-annihilation—a divine justice that turns on itself and necessitates the speaker’s death.

Other prominent literary scholars who address the generalizing nature of Robespierre’s discourse of virtue and terror include Carol Blum and Caroline Weber. Carol Blum’s work is unique in that it takes seriously the use of virtue among the Jacobins, but her primary thesis—

²⁵ See, for example, Colin Hayden and William Doyle (Eds.) *Robespierre*; Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French Revolution*; and Dart, *Robespierre, Rousseau, and English Romanticism*, among others.

²⁶ Žižek suggests that our current global ecological crises call for a combination of egalitarian justice, terror, voluntarism, and trust in people when enforcing global ecological standards and meting out punishments for ecological infractions (xxxvi-xxxvii).

that Robespierre's "exaltation of virtue" was entirely indebted to the cult of Rousseau, whose conceptions of virtue lent an emotional vigor to Robespierre's and Saint-Just's speeches (154)—overlooks the complicated ways that Robespierre and his fellow Jacobins drew together a long history of public virtue in the forming of their political philosophies. I provide a broader reading of Robespierre's understanding of virtue, showing how while Robespierre was clearly influenced by Rousseau, his conception of virtue and his ability to link it to terror echoes Roman ideas of virtue as well as versions of Montesquieu's and other Enlightenment thinkers' political philosophies. Caroline Weber's work reveals the totalizing impulse of revolutionary discourse among Robespierre, Rousseau, Saint-Just, Desmoulins and de Sade. She argues that "The challenge faced by the Montagnard revolutionaries was thus to devise a language that would promote unifying doctrine and abstract patriotism while keeping expressions of divisive heterogeneity at bay" (xv). Weber argues that despite the Revolutionaries efforts to censor "any utterance" that might contradict their "universalizing, homogenizing agenda," moments of discursive difference appear within revolutionary discourse, therefore highlighting "the impossibility of maintaining strict boundaries between figurative and literal reference, between otherness and sameness, multiplicity . . . and unity" (Weber *xvi-xvii*). Like Weber, I focus on the totalizing and universalizing aspects of Revolutionary discourse and addresses its instabilities, but my focus remains on what I take to be the key intersection: the totalizing discourse of virtue and terror. My purpose here is to illuminate how speech, morality and violence intersect in the binaristic and reciprocal relationship that Robespierre performs in his quest to justify the Terror as integral to republic-building. Such an approach will set the stage for subsequent analyses of what the uses of virtue and terror reveal about the relationship between totalitarianism and speech in romantic literary texts that respond to and bear the mark of the Revolution.

Robespierre's Virtue and its Backgrounds

As Lynn Hunt observes, the Revolution was written in successive provisional forms (199-200) and, unlike the American Constitution, never solidified into a standing document. This means that the ideas surrounding the Revolution were always in flux and always in the process of being made; it was also in this state of suspension and revolution when the government was not only being formalized but still realizing what it was. It is important to note that Robespierre did not so much invent the virtue-terror link but voice its implicit operation from the beginning of the Revolution. As David Andress reminds us, the Terror was not “some mysterious substance immanent in social upheaval, breaking to the surface unbidden to wreak havoc”; rather, it was a response to actual civil war and abortive consensus among oppositional parties (5).

For Robespierre, virtue acts as a touchstone for this process of coming to know what the Revolution is and what a republic must be. In his speeches before the National Convention, Robespierre creates a moral political philosophy with virtue as its central force, functioning as both a means and an end—a means to achieve human liberty and social equality, and the realization of that achievement. He continually returns to virtue as a stabilizing, unifying and regulating force towards which the revolutionary government must strive and against which it must measure itself.²⁷ Throughout his speeches, he figures virtue as a means of regeneration and renewal for human society and as a remedy against internal and external corruption. He also ties it specifically to democratic government and its emphasis on equality.

²⁷ Patrice Gueniffey also writes of Robespierre's “stabilizing” project, saying that “since Robespierre never envisioned the situation as one in which the Revolution was over” he embarked upon a process of regeneration to transform the morals of the French people from that of a monarchy to one of a republic (“Robespierre,” *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* 307-308). Gueniffey acknowledges virtue as central to this regeneration project, but does not address the nature of this virtue in detail.

Speaking as a representative of the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre presents the principles of this moral government to the Convention and stresses the centrality of virtue to the process of creating and protecting government:

Now, what is the fundamental principle of democratic or popular government, the essential mainspring that supports it and makes it move? It is virtue; I am talking about the public virtue that worked such prodigies in Greece and Rome, and that should produce far more astonishing ones in republican France; that virtue is none other than love of the homeland [fatherland] and its laws . . .

But as the essence of the republic or of democracy, is equality, it follows the love of the homeland [fatherland] necessarily embraces love of equality . . . Not only is virtue the soul of democracy; it can only exist in that form of government. (111)

(Or, quel est le principe fondamental du gouvernement démocratique ou populaire, c'est-à-dire le ressort essentiel qui le soutient et qui le fait mouvoir? C'est la vertu; je parle de la vertu publique qui opéra tant de prodiges dans la Grèce et dans Rome, et qui doit en produire de bien plus étonnants dans la France républicaine; de cette vertu qui n'est autre chose que l'amour de la patrie et de ses lois . . .

Mais comme l'essence de la république ou de la démocratie est l'égalité, il s'ensuit que l'amour de la patrie embrasse nécessairement l'amour de l'égalité . . . Non seulement la vertu est l'âme de la démocratie; mais elle ne peut exister que dans ce gouvernement;
Discours)

The virtue for which Robespierre advocates is a distinctly political, public virtue: it directs its attentions and affections away from the self and toward the state, not as a geographical place but as a legal system, as a group of people unified by laws. It is also, he argues, inherent to democracy and requires a love of equality. The emphasis on “love” (“l’amour de la patrie et de ses lois”; *Oeuvres* 296) here is important: Robespierre is advocating for an idea of virtue as love, as attachment, but a particular brand of attachment: not necessarily between individuals but one

of individuals directing their affections toward laws, which are instruments of order and rules that bind a community together. Robespierre later defines homeland as “the country where one is a citizen and a member of the sovereign power” (111) (“le pays où l'on est citoyen et membre du souverain”; *Discours*). In Robespierre’s understanding, virtue equals love of the nation and love of the laws that bind together its citizens and render them equal. Here his beliefs align with Romilly’s understanding of virtue as the loving attachment of people to the laws that bind them together, an attachment that later proves problematic.

Robespierre’s background in ancient Roman and Greek texts is important in understanding his adherence to virtue as integral to the success of the French republic and to his insistence on an abstracted, all-encompassing virtue. Robespierre, like his revolutionary colleagues, attended the French *college* and was educated in the classics; he claimed this educational background played a distinct role in shaping his (and France’s) political philosophy. He was even called “The Roman” at Collège Louis-le-Grand (Jordan 19). Ruth Scurr writes of how in 1793, Robespierre “claimed that the colleges directed by the university of Paris has been ‘nurseries of republicanism, which formed the mind of the nation and made it worthy of liberty’” (30). Robespierre overlooks the class distinctions among “the people” who may not have had access to the same education; nevertheless, he reveals an educational background informed closely by a classical ideal of the republic very different from the social and political conditions of eighteenth-century France. In school, Robespierre likely read certain works by Cicero, Horace, Vergil, Tacitus, Livy and Sallust, many of which, Harold T. Parker notes, lamented the golden age of Rome characterized by heroic men who acted with a virtue defined as self-sacrificing love of country and liberty paired with frugality, courage, justice and integrity (23-24). Camille Desmoulins argued that such an education threw into relief the disparities between

the past and the present, writing, “We were brought up in schools of Rome and Athens, and in the pride of the Republic, only to live in the abjection of the monarchy” (309–10). Parker argues that Robespierre, along with Saint-Just, looked to antiquity to “suggest specific means to be used, specific institutions to be set up” when forming their revolutionary principles and hopes for a French republic (164). Parker goes on to argue that both Robespierre and Saint-Just inferred that because the Roman and Greek writers attributed the decline of virtue with the decline of the classical republics, “to preserve their own French republic from a similar fate, they must create and maintain a similar, superhuman virtue” (164-165) informed by these austere and heroic qualities. This educational background set up an idea in Robespierre’s thinking of a classically-inflected virtue as necessary to forming the French republic while recognizing that this virtue could be threatened by forces of corruption, decadence and self-interest, which, as Parker suggests, made him seek a more rigid virtue.

Hannah Arendt argues that Robespierre’s idea of virtue was “not Roman” (*On Revolution* 75), by which she means it sprung from compassion and in response to the boundless needs of “le people.” I too claim that the importance of the general will is central to understanding Robespierre’s philosophy; however, Robespierre’s references to Rome went beyond rhetorical flourish and provided a long history to which he continually returned. While the virtue that he imagined may not have been an accurate reflection of ancient Roman virtue, for him virtue carried valences that he used to give authority to his speeches and arguments. The references to ancient Greece and Rome in Robespierre’s speeches function rhetorically in that they are allusions with which his similarly-educated audience would be familiar, but they also serve a legitimating and historicizing function, resurrecting the virtue of the past—heroism, love of equality, success in maintaining a republic—to give credence, shape and historical backstory to

the present situation. For all their claims about the Revolution as a radical break with the past, as “entirely new,” Robespierre evoked the virtue of ancient Rome and Greece to justify and ground his nascent political philosophy.²⁸

Clearly, however, Robespierre’s conception of political virtue carried with it particular eighteenth-century political notions. Robespierre’s virtue, while retaining the public spirit of Roman *virtus*, is a Rousseauist and Montesquieuist virtue based on love of country and on the general will. Parker speculates that Robespierre’s “sympathetic” education in the classics made him more open to the ideas of Rousseau and Montesquieu (69). Much of Robespierre’s concept of democratic government comes almost directly from Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* (1757):

what I call *virtue* in a republic is love of the homeland, that is, love of equality. It is not a moral virtue or a Christian virtue; it is political virtue, and this is the spring that makes republican government move, as *honor* is the spring that makes monarchy move.

Therefore, I have called love of the homeland and of equality, *political virtue*. (xli)

Montesquieu presents virtue as distinctly political and non-Christian. He later associates virtue with love and feeling, and clearly separates it from rationality or knowledge. “Virtue, in a republic,” he says, “is a very simple thing: it is love of the republic; it is a feeling and not a result of knowledge; the lowest man in the state, like the first, can have this feeling” (42). In addition, to love the republic is to love equality: “Love of the republic in a democracy is love of democracy; love of democracy is love of equality” (43). He also believes in the role of law in ensuring that people attain their natural equality, thereby connecting virtue to a love of law. He

²⁸ Saint-Just was a revolutionary figure who took this interest in ancient republican philosophies to an extreme, envisioning France as a new form of Sparta. For more on Saint-Just’s use of ancient ideas, see Norman Hampson, *Saint-Just*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991. Print.

writes, “In the state of nature, men are born in equality, but they cannot remain so. Society makes them lose their equality, and they become equal again only through the laws” (114).

Montesquieu lays out his conception of virtue as a self-effacing love that is necessary for a republic to survive, saying that “virtue is a self-renunciation, which is ever arduous and painful” (IV, p. 5). In Montesquieu’s conception of virtue, there is no space between public and private selves: “As such love [of laws and country] requires a constant preference of public to private interest, it is the source of all private virtues; for they are nothing more than this very preference itself” (IV, p. 5). There seems to be little separation between public and private desires within this ideal democracy. Montesquieu attributes this love only to democracies, saying that “In these alone the government is entrusted to private citizens. Now a government is like everything else: to preserve it we must love it . . . Everything therefore depends on establishing this love in a republic” (IV, p. 5). Montesquieu sees this love as one that preserves and maintains, which is important to Robespierre’s understanding of virtue (which is this love of democracy) as essential to the stability and maintenance of the French Republic. Just as a king loves monarchy, so must a citizen of a republic love democracy, which means loving the public interest (IV, p. 5). Robespierre adopts this conception of virtue as a self-effacing love that binds individuals together in their shared affection and devotion toward their country and its laws.

Robespierre argues that this idea of virtue as the devotion to the public interest is essential because the Revolution is not only political but moral; law-makers must align themselves with the goal of promoting equality and virtue together. He uses virtue as a directive for the Convention, urging law-makers to focus on the activities that will promote this idea of virtue:

Since the soul of the Republic is virtue, equality, and your goal is to found and consolidate the Republic, it follows that the first rule of your political conduct should be to relate all your operations to the maintenance of equality and the development of virtue; for the legislator's first care should be to strengthen the principle of government. Thus, anything that tends to arouse love of the homeland, to purify morals, to elevate souls, to direct the passions of the human heart towards the public interest, should be adopted or established by you. (112)

(Puisque l'âme de la République est la vertu, l'égalité, et que votre but est de fonder, de consolider la République, il s'ensuit que la première règle de votre conduite politique doit être de rapporter toutes vos opérations au maintien de l'égalité et au développement de la vertu; car le premier soin du législateur doit être de fortifier le principe du gouvernement. Ainsi tout ce qui tend à exciter l'amour de la patrie, à purifier les mœurs, à élever les âmes, à diriger les passions du coeur humain vers l'intérêt public, doit être adopté ou établi par vous; *Discours*)

The verbs he chooses—arouse, purify, elevate, direct (*à exciter, à purifier, à élever, à diriger*)—suggest the powers he has afforded to the concept: virtue itself is an outlet for the excitable passions. It is also spiritual—able to “elevate souls”—and works directly in relation to the “passions of the human heart.” Robespierre’s virtue, while interested in purity and in purification, is not a cold-hearted one: it claims to understand the human heart and be able to direct those feelings toward the betterment of the French nation and the people to whom it belongs. He also sees love and human passions as linked to laws themselves; laws should be directed toward maintaining this moral love of homeland. The passions can be directed toward law, which in turn controls and regulates them toward the public good. In addition to

Montesquieu's, Robespierre's beliefs align with Romilly's understanding of virtue as the loving attachment of people to the laws that bind them together.

Rousseau's conception of virtue informed Robespierre's. Carol Blum argues that Rousseau's virtue profoundly shaped the rhetoric and policy of Robespierre, Saint-Just, and the Committee of Public Safety (150-151). Conversely, Marisa Linton argues that Rousseau's influence on Robespierre has been overstated: Rousseau did not invent the eighteenth-century conception of virtue, or even the particular conception of virtue toward which the revolutionaries adhere (*Politics of Virtue* 40). Gregory Dart provides an extended account of Rousseau's influence on revolutionary Jacobinism, arguing that Rousseau's "theoretical critique of the liberal bourgeois Enlightenment" and his conception of public virtue into Jacobin political philosophy (47). While Robespierre brought many different registers to his understanding of virtue, Robespierre's conception of Rousseau's ideas shaped Robespierre's political thought in important ways, especially in terms of the idea of virtue as love of homeland, adherence to duty and as the realization of the general will of the people. Rousseau conceptualizes a moral general will that functions as the source of law and leads to the establishment of "the reign of virtue," which Rousseau defines as the "conformity of the particular wills with the general wills" (140). According to Rousseau, whatever is done in the name of the general will reflects the general good.

In his speeches to the Convention, Robespierre, working from Rousseau, bases his virtue on the belief that people are not only naturally good but naturally in possession of virtue, which means that they are automatically attuned to the revolutionary project. "Happily," Robespierre says, "virtue is natural to the people, whatever aristocratic prejudice may think" (113) ("Heureusement la vertu est naturelle au peuple, en dépit des préjugés aristocratiques");

Discours). Revolutionary government strives to represent the will of the people, which springs from their naturally virtuous natures. The government must act in accordance to the will of the people, which means it must be virtuous itself, and use that virtue to keep its excesses under control and always work in line with the people's interest. Virtue is a regulating force within the representative body itself, which Robespierre figures as a person with agency to self-regulate: "But who will repress the body itself, if not its own virtue? . . . From all this we should deduce a great truth: that the character of popular government is to be trusting towards the people and severe with itself" (114) ("Mais qui la réprimera elle-même, sinon sa propre vertu? . . . Déduisons de tout ceci une grande vérité; c'est que le caractère du gouvernement populaire est d'être confiant dans le peuple, et sévère envers lui-même"; *Discours*).

For Robespierre, virtue enables unification and is the expression of an ardent love directed toward the general good of a nation. "Patriotism is ardent by its nature," he says. "Who can love the homeland coldly?" (101) ("Le patriotisme est ardent par sa nature. Qui peut aimer froidement la patrie?"; *Discours*). The Revolution was intended to help bring about "the shining dawn of universal felicity" (110) ("nous puissions voir au moins briller l'aurore de la félicité universelle"; *Discours*), and virtue was part of that happiness because it enabled unification within a stabilized government. Robespierre's play on this multi-layered public virtue proves problematic. In the next section, I argue that Robespierre's conception of virtue as politically unifying love always contained terror and death, even at the inception of the Revolution.

Virtue, Terror and The Case of Louis the Last

On December 3, 1792, the National Convention was divided on the fate of Louis XVI, who had the misfortune to be, as Robespierre puts it, "a dethroned king in the middle of a revolution" (64) ("un roi détrôné, au sein d'une revolution"; *Discours*). Although historians still debate whether

the Terror began with the trial of the king, Robespierre's speeches calling for the king's execution reveal the foundations of his linkage of virtue with terror, beginning with his connection between the "people's will" as imagined by the revolutionary leaders and the twinned use of violence and speech in seeking legal authority. The trial of the king stands as a complete inversion of France's traditional governmental structure and therefore posed fundamental questions about where Robespierre locates sovereignty and how he understands the nature of revolutionary justice. Louis was a symbol for the *ancien régime* as well as the father figure for French society. Before the Revolution, "To be a king was to be inviolable. That meant that no action of a reigning monarch, whatever its character, could possibly be construed as a crime. That status was, strictly speaking, a legal one only; it followed logically from the king's position as the source of law and justice" (Walzer 35). The Revolution absolutely reversed this idea, turning kings into upstarts and criminals and relocating justice and law—and therefore virtue—to the "people" as imagined by the revolutionaries. While the idea of the king as the center of virtue lost popularity by the 1790's, eighteenth-century tradition had held that the king was virtuous.²⁹ In this speech, Robespierre displaces virtue from the king and attaches it to "the people," a group of citizens who act, according to Robespierre, with one violent will. The trial reveals the extent to which Robespierre uses performative speech-acts to legitimize the revolution and authorize himself as the mouthpiece for the revolutionary project; at the same time, Robespierre's speech at the trial shows how terror is embedded in his idea of virtue.

In his speech to the Convention, Robespierre expresses a belief that Louis should be executed without trial, arguing that to put the King under the law was to put the whole

²⁹ Marisa Linton discusses how the idea of the virtuous king was challenged by the clearly non-virtuous habits of Louis XV. She argues that the virtuous king was slowly replaced by the idea of the *bienfaisant* king, one who kept the interests of the people in mind. See *Politics of Virtue*, Chapter 5, "The Virtuous King: a Rhetoric Transformed."

Revolution in question. Such a move would underscore the instability and precarious status of the Revolution itself, potentially reversing the meaning and understanding of the revolutionaries and their cause. He sees the debate surrounding Louis in oppositional terms, as “this great trial between crime and virtue, between liberty and tyranny” (58) (“Au tribunal de la nature entre le crime et la vertu, entre la liberté et la tyrannie”; *Oeuvres* 246), and wants the Revolution to fall clearly on the side of virtue and liberty. He reveals a painful awareness of how the ways people are categorized and named shapes their status: “If Louis is innocent, then all defenders of liberty become slanderers; the rebels were the friends of truth and defenders of oppressed innocence” (Robespierre 58) (“Si Louis est innocent, tous les défenseurs de la liberté deviennent des calomniateurs; les rebelles étaient les amis de la vérité et les défenseurs de l'innocence opprimée”; *Discours*). Robespierre tells his audience that putting Louis on trial—which suggests that he could be found innocent—opens up the possibility of finding the Revolution itself guilty of a great crime.

To protect the semantic status of the Revolution—and therefore preserve its legitimacy—Robespierre demands the literal, enacted death of the king; in doing so, he works to establish the authority of the Revolution and of himself as a speaker. Robespierre emphasizes that the Revolution set in motion a death that is completed through the act of speaking: “I utter this deadly truth with regret, but Louis must die, because the homeland has to live” (64) (“Je prononce à regret cette fatale vérité... mais Louis doit mourir, parce qu'il faut que la patrie vive” ; *Discours*). According to J.L. Austin, the authority of the speaker is important in determining the efficacy (or what he calls felicity) of a speech-act (22). In this case, the very act of uttering (“Je prononce”) is an act of authority: to utter the execution orders of the king is to continue the process of authorizing the Revolution and discrediting the monarchy. Robespierre proposes a

sacrificial exchange in which Louis must be eliminated from not only the seat of power but to be eliminated from the world of the living. This statement qualifies as a perlocutionary act, an “[utterance] that initiate[s] a set of consequences” (Butler 17); in this case, the consequences are convincing the Convention to execute Louis without trial. Robespierre states this equation at the beginning of his speech, again emphasizing that this act is enacted and legitimated through speaking and with words: “Louis was king, and the Republic is founded: the famous question you are considering is settled by those words alone” (57) (“Louis fut roi, et la république est fondée: la question fameuse qui vous occupe est décidée par ces seuls mots”; *Discours*).

“Illocutionary acts” center on the action being performed while perlocutionary acts refer to the effect of these actions on the audience—the consequences of these utterances (Austin 109). Through this statement, Robespierre performs the illocutionary act of dethroning Louis and founding the republic: “Louis *fut* roi, et la république *est fondée*.” The perlocutionary act is implied when he says that question of Louis’ guilt is “settled by those words alone”: he is persuading his audience to execute Louis based on the shift in tenses that signifies a seismic shift in political structure. Robespierre’s movement from past to present tense signals the movement from monarchy to the founding of the republic, suggesting that this progression eliminates Louis from the equation entirely: Louis does not belong to the process of becoming that is the Revolution, and therefore is at best irrelevant and at worst a threat. Caroline Weber also discusses this particular sentence in Robespierre’s speech, arguing that Robespierre isolates Louis and the people into “separate and mutually opposed discursive spheres” to the extent that Louis is rendered non-human and voiceless (70-71). I emphasize the construction of this sentence to shed light on how Robespierre’s active and performative use of utterances work to legitimize his own voice within the discursive founding and stabilization of the Revolution.

This formulation set up by Robespierre is a sacrificial exchange, enforcing the idea that revolutionary virtue requires sacrifice. Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer*, mentions the trial of the king, suggesting that the king himself becomes the *homo sacer*, a form of sacred life that can be killed by anyone but not officially executed or sacrificed (101-103).³⁰ Basing his brief discussion of Michael Walzer's interpretation of the debates surrounding Louis' trial, Agamben claims that "When the Jacobins suggested, during the discussions of the 1792 convention, that the king be executed without trial, they merely brought the principle of the unsacrificeability of sacred life to the most extreme point of its development, remaining absolutely faithful . . . to the *arcanum* according to which sacred life may be killed by anyone without committing homicide, but never submitted to sanctioned forms of execution" (*Homo Sacer* 103). To say that Louis was not figured as a sacrifice is to miss how profoundly Robespierre sees Louis is a sacrificial victim who must die in exchange for the life of the republic. In this speech, Robespierre uses the term "sacrifice," saying that previously, to "sacrifice" or "immolate" Louis would be a "virtuous act" (63) ("auraient immolé Louis XVI," "une action vertueuse"; *Discours*) because his crimes were so clear (63), and asks how three months passing could have changed his criminal status. His statement addressed earlier, that the "Louis was king and the republic is founded," suggests a system of exchange that necessitates bloodshed; one act essentially whisks the other out of existence. In addition, at the conclusion of the speech Robespierre calls for a monument to be constructed after the King is executed as a sign of the "salutary terror of the people's justice," underscoring the fact that this is a symbolic and literal sacrifice of the king that acts as a warning

³⁰ In his discussion of the Jacobin position on the state monopoly of violence, Dan Edelstein notes Agamben's reference to revolutionary violence and the *homo sacer*, arguing that since the Jacobins insisted on the lawfulness of any executions, the term *homo sacer* does not accurately reflect their ideology (153). However, Edelstein does not address the idea of *homo sacer* in Agamben's original context, that is, in relation to Louis and sacrificial violence.

to others. Jesse Goldhammer argues that sacrificial violence played a large role in the founding of the French republic and identifies two origins for this violence. The first is ancient Rome, “from which [the revolutionaries] learned how sacrifice contributes to both political and personal transformation” and from the Christian tradition, which showed them “how martyrdom transformed blood sacrifice into a redemptive experience that fostered the birth of a universal, transcendent community” (27). I would add that this sacrifice happens at the level of both speech and action: the king is dethroned and eliminated through the speech-making that precedes his actual death. In turn, the Revolution is legitimized and Robespierre is authorized in this act of speaking both the Revolution and Louis’ necessary death into being. As Robespierre’s understanding of revolutionary virtue develops, sacrificing oneself or others becomes a “virtuous act” if done in the name of founding and stabilizing the republic.

Robespierre considers Louis guilty in relation to the laws of nature and of “the people”; he claims that Louis has committed a crime both in his status as a monarch and in his actions against the Revolution. He is the ultimate criminal, “a criminal toward humanity” (65) who must be punished not by courts but by the “people’s will,” a violent force he associates with absolute law. Robespierre connects this idea of the “the people’s” will to his idea of virtue; in doing so, he underscores the violent nature of a virtue that is the collective will. According to Robespierre, executing Louis is an act of “public salvation” or “public health” and “national providence” (57) (“salut public” and “providence nationale”; *Oeuvres* 244). He attaches political and social values to religious ideas (salvation, providence) in order to underscore the sacredness of public virtue. He argues that the Revolution replaces the Constitution with natural law, which is, at its most basic form, “the salvation of the people.” This salvation is liberty gotten by whatever means necessary, and the means in this case is total annihilation.

Robespierre secularizes and politicizes religious language; the violent justice previously attributed to God, what Walter Benjamin calls “divine violence” (294), becomes the natural justice of the French people as conceived by their representatives. Benjamin separates “mythical” from “divine” violence: mythical violence is “bloody power over mere life for its own sake” while “divine violence is pure power over all of life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it” (297). Robespierre endows “the people” with this pure power, arguing that “Peoples do not judge in the same way as courts of law; they do not hand down sentences, they throw thunderbolts; they do not condemn kings, they drop them back into the void; and this justice is worth just as much as that of the courts” (59) (“Les peuples ne jugent pas comme les cours judiciaires; ils ne rendent point de sentences, ils lancent la foudre; ils ne condamnent pas les rois, ils les replongent dans le néant: et cette justice vaut bien celle des tribunaux”; *Discours*). Robespierre connects this violence with virtue and with law at its most fundamental:

Anything that refers to the sacred source of all law seems to us to take on an illegal character, and the very order of nature seems to us a disorder. The majestic movements of a great people, the sublime fervours of virtue often appear to our timid eyes as something like an erupting volcano or the overthrow of political society; and it is certainly not the least of the troubles brothing us, this contradiction between the weakness of our morals, the depravity of our minds, and the purity of principle and energy of character demanded by the free government to which we have dared aspire. (59)

(que tout ce qui remonte à la source sacrée de toutes les lois semble prendre à nos yeux un caractère illégal, et que l'ordre même de la nature nous paraît un désordre. Les mouvements majestueux d'un grand peuple, les sublimes élans de la vertu, se présentent

souvent à nos yeux timides comme les éruptions d'un volcan ou le renversement de la société politique; et certes ce n'est pas la moindre cause des troubles qui nous agitent que cette contradiction entre la faiblesse de nos mœurs, la dépravation de nos esprits, et la pureté des principes, l'énergie des caractères que suppose le gouvernement libre auquel nous osons prétendre; *Discours*).³¹

According to Robespierre, to be a part of a revolution, to be true to its source as the will of the people, requires a moral integrity that can be frightening and can look like disordered violence. Robespierre claims that the will of the people is violent; this will actually calls for violence of the highest order, a violence that is like the Old Testament God's in that it sends that which is anathema to the void. To sanitize this violence, Robespierre calls it natural and associates it with natural cataclysm ("les éruptions d'un volcan"). To view this violence as unnatural is royalist sickness, a sign that his listeners are "inevitably still connected with the prejudices on which despotism fed us" and remain attached to "the most arbitrary conventions" (58-59). Virtue makes itself known through "sublime fervours" or "force" ("les sublimes élans"; *Oeuvres* 247). Its sublimity is directly linked to its power to annihilate, to not merely "condemn kings" but to "drop them back into the void" (59). At the end of the speech Robespierre calls this power the "salutary terror of the people's justice" (65) ("la terreur salutaire de la justice du peuple"; *Oeuvres* 253). Here the building of the concept of virtue deepens and expands: it is love of the homeland and its laws, it is equality, and now it is justice in its most severe form, as a death-imposing force, while being salutary—that is, healthful, cleansing.

³¹ This sentiment echoes Rousseau's: "The contradictions between our condition and our desires, our duties and our inclinations, between nature and social institutions, between man and citizen, is the source of human misery. Give him entirely to the state, or leave him entirely to himself, but if you divide his heart you will break it" (qtd. in Higonnet 289).

The power the revolutionaries attempt to harness from the king is, to use Benjamin's word, a "primordial" power of and from the people, and, according to Robespierre, is pure justice and therefore pure law. In Robespierre's argument, the people's law is death itself because it makes itself recognized and known through its capacity to render things nonexistent. Benjamin identifies this capacity as the defining and foundational characteristic of law: "For if violence, violence crowned by fate, is the origin of law, then it may be readily supposed that where the highest violence, that over life and death, occurs in the legal system, the origins of law jut manifestly and fearsomely into existence" (286). Benjamin connects lawmaking to utopia (292); establishing the "reign of virtue" is a deeply utopian project. Virtue is both the means and the end, but threaded throughout this "generous ambition to establish here on earth the world's first republic" (Robespierre 130) ("cette ambition généreuse de fonder sur la terre la première République du monde"; *Discours*) is, according to Robespierre, the natural and moral necessity to not only act out violence but to *terrorize*, which is, in part, politically sponsored intimidation and fear. Robespierre makes pains to separate virtuous republican citizens from the subjects of this terror. As Marie-Hélène Huet points out, Robespierre believed that the citizens' virtue would safeguard them from the threat of terror (*Mourning Glory* 52), much in the same way virtue could regulate terror and keep it from becoming "disastrous." At the time of the king's trial, the "salutary terror of the people's justice" was directed symbolically toward all kings in all places, and acted out literally on the body of the French king. Hannah Arendt writes that "The source of authority in authoritarian government is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which the authorities derive their 'authority,' that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked" (*Between the Past and Future* 97). For Robespierre, this source is "the people" and

their virtue; the revolutionaries claim to be acting as representatives of the people, and therefore draw their legitimacy and authority from their virtue, which manifests itself as an annihilating justice.

Despite Robespierre's and fellow Jacobins' arguments, the Girondins went ahead with the trial, which ended with Louis's conviction and subsequent execution on January 21, 1793 (Neely, *Concise History of French Revolution* 169-170). The news of Louis' execution spread across Europe, and only a few days later France was at war with England and the Dutch Republic (Scurr 258-60). By September 5, 1793 terror had been made "the order of the day" (Blum 217), and after a series of uprisings, a report by Billaud-Varenne declared the government "revolutionary until peacetime" starting on October 10, 1793, which included the suspension of the 1793 Constitution. On December 25, 1793, Robespierre attempted to justify terror as a political instrument before the Convention in his speech "On the Principles of Revolutionary Government," and later, on February 5, 1794, speaking as a representative of the Committee of Public Safety, he presented "the goal of the revolution, and the conclusion we want to reach" (109) ("Il est temps de marquer nettement le but de la révolution, et le terme où nous voulons arriver"; *Discours*) in the speech known as "On the Principles of Political Morality." These speeches culminated in his final speech to the National Convention on July 26, 1794. As the Revolution advanced, the scope of the Terror expanded to include all "enemies" of the Revolution, which solidified Robespierre's conception of virtue as a politics of love that manifests itself through lawful violence.

In "On the Principles of Political Morality," Robespierre's formulation of a virtuous terror (or terrible virtue) is a direct response to and revision of Montesquieu. After claiming that popular government in revolution needs both virtue and terror, he explains:

Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a specific principle as a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to the homeland's most pressing needs. (115)

(“La terreur n'est autre chose que la justice prompte, sévère, inflexible; elle est donc une émanation e la vertu; elle est moins un principe particulier qu'une conséquence du principe général de la démocratie appliqué aux plus pressants besoins de la patrie”;

Discours).

Again, Robespierre emphasizes how the exceptional circumstances of the Revolution call for severity, and argues that “popular government in revolution” (“gouvernement populaire en révolution”; *Discours*) would require the kind of justice seen in the case of Louis: the “salutary terror of the people’s justice.” In this formulation, virtue and terror are linked through law: virtue is the love of country and its laws; terror is justice, which the execution of these laws through the divine right of the people. This is what Robespierre means when he says that terror is an “emanation of virtue.” The word “emanation,” as Agamben notes, carries with it meanings related to the Holy Trinity, and “until the seventeenth century ... [this was] the only meaning of the French term émanation” (*The Kingdom and the Glory* 275). Justice comes from adhering to the law absolutely, which is virtue, because in this case to love is to attach oneself fully to the public good (in other words, to fuse to the general will, which makes itself known through law, and find fulfillment of one’s individual needs and desires in this general will). But just as one cannot have violation without law, one cannot have a love of law without justice, in this case terror. It is important to note that virtue is not enough on its own here; it becomes “unmanned” or “impotent” (“impuissante”; *Oeuvres* 301), when before it was the cleansing and regulating remedy. This seems to be a contradiction, but it is not: in Robespierre’s understanding, virtue

always existed alongside terror, and here it is the ultimate regulator, fending off death and disaster, while, at the same time, being the source of this death and disaster. It is a logic that propels the Terror, and resembles what Hannah Arendt calls the “law of movement” in which the agents of the Terror gather up the people and propel forward to fulfill the destiny of mankind.³² The “law of movement” is not a law of stability or boundary but the laws of history as shaped by ideology. In this conception of the teleological progression of history, individuals no longer matter and in fact impede the progression of this history because each new life is a new beginning (*Origins* 601).

Robespierre’s speeches on the Terror enact this totalizing of individuals into the larger collective: through the act of speaking, Robespierre attempts to harness individual love and passion and direct these powers toward protecting France as a republic. The togetherness for which Robespierre advocates is more than simple patriotism, however; it is terror as a form of democracy in which all things are rendered equal and all passions are directed toward the enforcement of laws upon which all citizens agree. The redirection of these individual appetites and passions is part of Robespierre’s project of enforcing a single and unifying virtue. As he tells the Convention in “On the Principles of Political Morality,” “Anything that tends to concentrate [the passions of the human heart] on the abjectness of the personal self, to arouse crazes for small things and contempt for great ones, should be rejected or oppressed by you” (112) (“Tout ce qui tend à les concentrer dans l’abjection du moi personnel, à réveiller l’engouement pour les petites choses et le mépris des grandes, doit être rejeté ou réprimé par vous”; *Discours*). Here Robespierre admonishes the Convention to adhere to the conception of virtue as devotion to the public interest at the expense of private or self-interest. The construction of this sentence is

³² It is also a masculinist ideology, as noted by Mary Wollstonecraft among others.

revealing of the complexity of such a project: he begins the sentence with the widest possible generality (“tout”) and ends the sentence the particular (“vous”), which is also the general in that the “you” being addressed is the collective of the Convention who in turn represent the collective of the people. Therefore this imperative (“doit être”) signals the struggle between individuating and generalizing forces that characterize the revolution, and suggests that Robespierre recognizes the near-inevitability of these small, individual desires threatening to overwhelm the agency of the individuals who comprise society and the individuals who comprise the Convention.

On a related note, and on a larger scale, Robespierre sees the Revolution in archetypal, historical terms, as a theatrical stage on which human history is playing out a battle between the virtuous and the criminal; such a perspective supports the idea of terror as the vast movement toward a larger human destiny that requires the elimination of those acting on private interests who threaten to impede this progress. While rebuking those whom he sees as having defected from the revolutionary purpose to fulfill their own selfish ends, he says:

One might say that the two opposed spirits that have been represented as disputing the dominion of nature are fighting during this great epoch of human history to decide the destinies of the world once and for all, and that France is the theatre of that formidable struggle. Outside, all the tyrants surround you; within, all the friends of tyranny are conspiring; they will conspire until hope has been stripped from crime. We must stifle the internal and external enemies of the Republic, or perish with it; and in this situation, the first maxim of your policy should be that the people are led by reason, and the enemies of the people by terror. (114-115)

(On dirait que les deux génies contraires que Ton a représentés se disputant l'empire de la nature combattent dans cette grande époque de l'histoire humaine pour fixer sans retour

les destinées du monde, et que la France est le théâtre de cette lutte redoutable. Au dehors, tous les tyrans vous cernent; au dedans, tous les amis de la tyrannie conspirent: ils conspirent jusqu'à ce que l'espérance ait été ravie au crime. Il faut étouffer les ennemis intérieurs et extérieurs de la République, ou périr avec elle; or, dans cette situation, la première maxime de votre politique doit être qu'on conduit le peuple par la raison, et les ennemis du peuple par la terreur; *Discours*).

Such a staging reflects an idea of terror as fulfilling the promise of human history, a history that is, in this case, made absolute and monolithic in service to its ideological argument.

Maurice Blanchot, like Arendt, believes that the revolutionaries were captivated by their own enactment of the progression of history. Their thinking “has the freedom of a decapitated head” because they were already separated from their individual bodies in their desire for “absolute freedom”; they were “like beings deprived of being, like universal thoughts, pure abstractions beyond history, judging and deciding in the name of all history” (Blanchot 320). He writes:

At such times there is nothing left for anyone to do, because everything has been done. No one has a right to a private life any longer, everything is public, and the most guilty person is the suspect—the person who has a secret, who keeps a thought, an intimacy to himself. And in the end no one has a right to his life any longer, to his actually separate and physically distinct existence. This is the meaning of the Reign of Terror. Every citizen has a right to death, so to speak; death is not a sentence passed on him, it is his most essential right. (319)

Robespierre’s conception of virtue becomes disciplinary in the Foucauldian sense, in that terror becomes the demand for transparency in which there is no division between the public and

private self.³³ This radical equality is one of the reasons virtue becomes linked to terror. Under this terrorist ideology, the insistence on sacrificing the parts for the whole obliterates individuality. It is “the special kind of equality that follows from the idea of popular sovereignty: because every man is a citizen, every man can also be a criminal; because no man is without peers, no man is exempt from judgment” (Walzer 77). Virtue is above all a unifying force. In the logic of virtue and terror, death becomes, perversely, healthy, because equality carries with it the right to death, the right to die in the same way for the same crimes and to not be held to any special or superior position. As Arendt writes, “By destroying all space between men and pressing men against each other, even the productive potentialities of isolation are annihilated” (478). Terror in this regard is therefore the elimination of distance between all men in order to fuse them into “One Man of gigantic dimensions” (Arendt, *Origins* 600) that knows no difference and moves along the teleological progression of history. Terror is then a claim to absolute universality, to an absolute representation that causes one to not only imagine one’s annihilation, but to expect annihilation in the name of this universal representation.

Again, this idea of absolute representation is seen in the adherence to the idea of the general will. The agents of the Terror believed that they were acting as a part and on behalf of “mankind,” helping history reach its inevitable conclusion. One agent of the Terror was recorded as saying, “We believed that when one acted for the people, nothing could be bad, a mistake, a crime” (qtd. in Sutherland 209). Such an apology should not be taken at face value, however. As seen in his speeches during the trial of the king, Robespierre was painfully aware of the Revolution’s precarious semantic status and how easily the revolution could lose its legitimacy.

³³ For discussions of transparency in the French Revolution, see Lynn Avery Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* and *Family Romance of the French Revolution*, among others.

His concern about the “internal and external enemies of the revolution” (Robespierre 115) comes from similar concerns about preserving the integrity of the Revolution as an utopian project, and his speeches often reflect the need to refute naysayers and insist on the naturalness of boundaries between crime and virtue. For example, after equating virtue with terror, he responds to those who may recall Montesquieu’s association of terror with tyranny by focusing on the presumed backwardness of how things are named:

. . . For how long will the rage of the despots be called justice, and the people’s justice be called barbarity or rebellion? How tender people are towards oppressors and how inexorable towards the oppressed! Nothing could be more natural: who does not hate crime cannot love virtue. (115)

(Jusqu'à quand la fureur des despotes sera-t-elle appelée justice, et la justice du peuple barbarie ou rébellion? Comme on est tendre pour les oppresseurs et inexorable pour les opprimés! Rien de plus naturel: quiconque ne hait point le crime ne peut aimer la vertu; *Discours*)

In Robespierre’s formulation, the lines between crime and terror should be distinct (and this distinction is dictated by nature), but, as Arendt notes, “once [Robespierre and his followers] had equated virtue with the qualities of the heart, [they] see intrigue and calumny, treachery and hypocrisy everywhere” (*On Revolution* 96). Robespierre’s insistence that “who does not hate crime cannot love virtue” resonates with Žižek’s claim that a revolutionary needs to “love with hatred” (*Violence* 204); Robespierre’s formulation relies on opposites that function as binaries but are also reciprocal. Like virtue and terror, love and hate are totalizing forces that feed one another, and can be directed toward specific groups who fall outside of delineated parameters.

This awareness of the pervasiveness of crime as a threat to virtue can be seen in Robespierre's final speech before the Convention, the day before his arrest. He portrays virtue as a cleansing, regulating force, a necessary component that keeps the Revolution from becoming the crime that it is at its most basic level:

I said, *virtue!* It is a natural passion, no doubt about it . . . But there exist, I can assure you, souls that are feeling and pure; it exists, that tender, imperious and irresistible passion, that torment and delight of magnanimous hearts; that deep horror of tyranny, that compassionate zeal for the oppressed, that sacred love for the homeland, that even more sublime and holy love for humanity, without which a great revolution is just a noisy crime that destroys another crime. (129)

(Que dis-je, vertu? c'est une passion naturelle, sans doute: . . . Mais elle existe, je vous en atteste, âmes sensibles et pures; elle existe, cette passion tendre, impérieuse, irrésistible, tourment et délices des coeurs magnanimes; cette horreur profonde de la tyrannie, ce zèle compatissant pour les opprimés, cet amour sacré de la patrie, cet amour plus sublime et plus saint de l'humanité, sans lequel une grande révolution n'est qu'un crime éclatant qui détruit un autre crime; *Discours*)

Robespierre says, “I say, *virtue!*” (or “Que dis-je, vertu?”) in his attempt to realign the Revolution with what he sees as its ruling idea.³⁴ Here performative speech becomes saying a single word that has been endowed with the power to both stabilize and destroy; for Robespierre, to say the word “virtue” should be enough because, by this moment, virtue has become not only the ruling principle of the revolution but the legitimizing force necessary for the revolution to

³⁴ I have seen multiple versions of the original French; some include an exclamation point after “vertu” while others include a question mark. The exclamation point can be seen as repetitive emphasis; the question mark is an example of anthyphora. Both forms of punctuation signal Robespierre's rhetorical move in insisting on virtue as the overriding principle of the Revolution.

exist at all. The word “virtue” becomes an illocutionary speech-act that contains the entire force and future of the revolution in its ability to transform and save the revolution from internal and external corruption. All of the qualities he had insisted that virtue had, such its naturalness, its relationship to the passions, and its generalized love for all mankind, add up to an ability to render what is essentially a crime—the overthrow of an existing government and all the death that it involves—into a sanctified pursuit. As in the virtue-terror conjunction, virtue, powered by a “sublime” and “holy” love for humankind, acts as a tempering force that can transform crime just as it can transform terror into a democratic necessity.

Robespierre not only speaks of virtue, but he becomes virtue: in this final speech, he figures himself as an embodiment of a virtue that must kill and be killed. He says, “for what can they hold against a man who is right and who knows how to die for his country? . . . I was born to fight crime, not to control it. The time has not arrived for men of substance to be able to serve the homeland with impunity; defenders of liberty will just be outlaws, for as long as the hordes of scoundrels predominates” (141) (“car, que peut-on objecter à un homme qui a raison, et qui sait mourir pour son pays? Je suis fait pour combattre le crime, non pour le gouverner. Le temps n'est point arrivé où les hommes de bien peuvent servir impunément la patrie: les défenseurs de la liberté ne seront que des proscrits, tant que la horde des fripons dominera”; *Discours*). Here Robespierre finds himself on the other side of the semantic divide he worked so hard to maintain in his previous speeches: he is a “defender of liberty” who is now identified as among the “outlaws.” Robespierre does not actually use the term “*hors la loi*”; instead, he uses “*proscrits*,” which can be translated as outcast, outlaw, ostracized person or bandit. According to Edelstein, the “*hors-la-loi* category . . . was not found in any prerevolutionary French criminal code (including the 1670 *Ordonnance Criminelle*). The first recorded use of the expression in French

dates back only to 1774: ‘I am not what they call in England *ex lex*, an outlaw [*hors la loi*],’ which appears in Beaumarchais’ *Mémoires contre M. Goëzman* (Edelstein 146). The Terror itself was characterized by an expanding definition and exclusion of specific groups as outlaws made possible through the decrees passed in March and April of 1793. Those found participating in counter-revolutionary riots could be found guilty without trial and executed within twenty-four hours; *émigrés* were also added to the list of *hors de loi*, their property seized and their status as French citizens permanently revoked (Talmon 124). The March 19 decree ended up sanctioning seventy-eight percent of the executions during the Terror (Edelstein 19). September 17th Law of Suspects was even more comprehensive, “declar[ing] suspect all who had befriended tyranny, federalism and counter-revolution by deed, word or by the way of personal relations” along with people accused of tax evasion, relatives of *émigrés*, and others (Talmon 124-125). By April, even the deputies in the Convention lost their immunity against accusations of outlawry (Talmon 125).

Therefore, in this final speech, Robespierre is facing accusations of being outside of the law himself. His final argument continues the long argument he has been making through the course of the Revolution: the Revolution is about naming and identifying those who reside inside and outside of it; to determine these positions in relation to the law determines the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the Revolution itself. In the case of the trial against Louis, the disposed king had to be guilty of crimes against the people’s will for the Revolution to be lawful; otherwise, the Revolution would lose its authority. In this speech, Robespierre finds himself potentially excluded from the law and the nation itself, but he insists that he *is* the revolution himself: to die for the revolution is not be excluded from it but to be its essential part. Again, this formulation does not fully correspond to Agamben’s idea of sovereignty, in which he claims that sovereignty is “nothing other than the capacity to constitute oneself and others as life that may be killed but

not sacrificed” (*Homo Sacer* 101). Robespierre does figure himself as a sacrificial victim, a victim who, by giving up his life, attains the ultimate virtue which is to accept the death that was already built into it. Here Robespierre collapses the difference between love of self and love of country, effectively willing himself out of existence. Robespierre self-identifies as someone who “knows how to die for his country,” which is what makes that fusion between self and country complete and absolute.

Robespierre also “speaks the truth,” a claim that presents virtue as a speech-act: to speak of virtue is to perform a virtuous identity that thrusts the republic into being and pulls the speaker out of being. Blum also recognizes the role of virtue in Robespierre’s martyrdom, but attributes it to a mimicking of Rousseau: “Robespierre and Saint-Just, like Rousseau, did not merely preach virtue, they made it an object of display . . . Theatrical Saint-Just and Robespierre, virtuous, terrifying, were in reality victims, and their status as martyrs was an indispensable part of their divinely appointed fate, as it had been of Rousseau’s” (Blum 152). While Robespierre’s figuring of himself as virtuous is performative and does rely on the charisma of Rousseauian virtue, Blum’s emphasis on the cult of personality causes her to overlook how much Robespierre’s understanding of virtue is about founding and authorizing the revolution by using speech to connect love and violence.

Marie-Hélène Huet, on the other hand, recognizes the importance of speaking in Robespierre’s final plea. She argues that at this moment in Robespierre’s speech death becomes the opportunity to transcend what Robespierre perceived as the corruptibility of words and to gain the “right to speak” the truth; this right to speak on the “threshold of death” is the sublime in that what is spoken cannot be misrepresented (*Mourning Glory* 55). Earlier, Huet associates revolutionary virtue with the same sublime ability—“to elevate [corrupted] discourse beyond all

misrepresentation” (*Mourning Glory* 54). While I have emphasized how Robespierre works to avoid misrepresentation throughout his speeches as in seen his careful delineation between what can be called virtuous and what can be called criminal, I am more interested Huet’s claim about the relationship between truth and death. For Robespierre, public virtue is the truth, in that it cannot be wrong because it always reflects the general will. Robespierre insists that he belongs to that will when he says that he is a “man who is right.” It is important that the wisdom Robespierre claims for himself here is knowing “how to die for his country,” which, given that virtue manifests itself as both love and death, is knowing how to be virtuous. Death and truth are conjoined, as Huet suggests, but Robespierre’s desire “to speak the truth and [consent] to die for it” also reveals the power of speaking in all of its contradictory multiplicity; not just as a “testament” as Huet claims (*Mourning Glory* 55) but, simultaneously, creation, destruction and dissemination in that the nation is made and unmade through action of being virtuous, which is an act of creating, killing or being killed, and speaking.

Robespierre’s final speech-act could be seen as either felicitous or infelicitous in that Robespierre consented to his death and the Convention agreed. Caroline Weber argues that the silences that characterized Robespierre’s and Saint-Just’s last day alive reflect the larger totalizing project of the Terror: “Because fraternity, with its imperative of absolute homogeneity, could by no means tolerate the deviations and differences made possible by language, the deposed leaders were left with death, which they themselves had meted out in the name of the republic” (114). While this silence is significant, it also comes from the moment of speaking: I would also connect this utterance of “truth” to Robespierre’s early utterance, performed with “deadly regret”: that Louis must die for the Revolution to live. Robespierre, like Louis, is figured as an outsider who must be sacrificed in the name of the Revolution. Robespierre is fighting

against accusations of despotism and dictatorship, accused of crimes similar to those of the monarchy. In this case, as in the case of Louis, the virtue that will make the republic live requires—or at least calls upon the openness to—death. This is a sacrificial death. Weber also does not consider how, when the executioner tore the bandages from Robespierre’s wounded jaw, the condemned man released a terrible cry of pain (Scurr 558). Žižek says that this final scream is “legendary,” suggesting that it was as if in this last moment “Robespierre humanized himself, discarding the persona of revolutionary virtue embodied and emerging as a miserable scared human being” (“Robespierre” xxxviii). I argue that this is the moment when Robespierre’s embodied virtue meets what it means to be a terrified body: at its oldest, most fundamental level terror turns its victims into “miserable scared human being[s]” who stand vulnerable against a power that shows no mercy. Perhaps this is the true virtue-terror chiasmus, the crossing from ideology and abstraction into the naked vulnerability of a death that may have been expected but causes any living creature to cry out in the involuntary language of pain and fear.

Robespierre never saw himself as the agent of rhetorical inversion; rather, he viewed rhetorical inversion as a destabilizing force that threatened the meaning of a language he generated but claimed was universal. “Everything you say will be turned against you,” he tells his colleagues in the National Convention days before they order his execution. David P. Jordan argues that Robespierre’s rhetoric of terror was “the language of unmasking, unveiling, revealing, discovering, exposing the enemy within, the enemy hidden behind patriotic posturings, the language of suspicion” (27). My reading of Robespierre’s speeches suggests that what Jordan identifies as Robespierre’s “authentic rhetorical violence” (Jordan 27)—

Robespierre's paranoid seeking-out of moral corruption in others while insisting on their natural goodness—was only a side effect of the larger inversion of turning virtue into a love that must annihilate all opposition. Ironically, the language of love fueled Robespierre's suspicion of others. An analysis of the use of virtue and terror in Robespierre's speeches shows that the virtue-terror chiasmus is not the state of equipoise that Robespierre hoped would stabilize and legitimize the revolution but the violent intersection of two totalizing forces that demand self-effacement to the point of sacrificial death. This rhetorical violence reveals the fatal undersides of eighteenth-century understandings of virtue as a political principle. In the following chapters, I argue that other romantic writers, being products of eighteenth-century intellectual and political culture, adhere to an idea of virtue as necessary within the public sphere, and yet find that they cannot avoid the totalizing terrors of this love-driven virtue that Robespierre's chiasmus lays bare. Virtue's complicity with terror, especially when understood within the context of speech as action, underscores the dangers of sentimentality, the uneasy relationship between the self and nation, and the death-making aspects of law.

Chapter Three

Edmund Burke's Terrifying Proximities

“[The revolutionaries] endeavored to establish a distinction, by the belief of which they hoped to keep the spirit of murder safely bottled up, and sealed for their own purposes, without endangering themselves by the fumes of the poison which they prepared for their enemies.”

—Edmund Burke, *Preface to M. Brissot's Address to His Constituents*

“Patriotism is ardent by its nature. Who can love the homeland coldly?” (“Le patriotisme est ardent par sa nature. Qui peut aimer froidement la patrie?”)

—Maximilien de Robespierre, *On the Principles of Revolutionary Government*

Edmund Burke's *Reflections* was prompted by Dr. Richard Price's sermon, “A Discourse on the Love of Our Country,” delivered in November 1789, in celebration of the anniversary of the Glorious Revolution. Price, enthusiastically attributing to the French Revolution the dawn of universal love for mankind, urges his audience to move beyond national patriotism to embrace other countries with universal benevolence and to bring popular government to England (10). In response, Edmund Burke composed *Reflections*, a missive that addresses not only Price's hopes for French Revolution-inspired reform in England but the violent potentiality of the Revolution and what he perceived as its moral vacancies. Burke was one of the first Englishmen to recognize the threat revolutionary France posed to England, which was realized not in the least as a war between the two countries that lasted nearly twenty-two years (Macleod 2). Burke's *Reflections*, and his later texts on the Revolution, made him rise in prominence and become “the first great European author on the subject” (Furet and Ozouf xvii). In many ways, he set the stage for the debate: those taking positions on the Revolution and England's war against France “all had to respond to Burke's views in one way or another, because he had constructed a cogent

ideological response to the Revolution and called for war against it long before almost anyone else in Britain had taken the Revolution particularly seriously or recognized the possibility of war” (MacLeod 10). Despite Burke’s well-known animus against the French Revolution, an animus that suggests he and Robespierre could not have been further apart, I argue in this chapter for a surprising kindredship in the ways they attempt to use political virtue as a legitimizing and stabilizing force against ideological enemies.

As portrayed in *Reflections*, Burke’s conception of virtue is fundamental to a healthy government; it is a force that directs and defines action; it is also a sentimental, emotional attachment to a country that enables laws to fully protect its citizens. Yet Burke recognizes that the revolutionaries use the same language as the English but to very different ends: they speak of virtue in order to justify and support their own hegemonic agendas. J.M. Pocock argues that in many ways the Revolution and the French nation constituted texts on which revolutionary ideology was inscribed, and “the English translated the text as it reached them into terms of their own which were already well established, and thereby contextualized it, subjecting it to the discipline of a discourse externally existing” (“Edmund Burke” 21). Burke, insisting on understanding the Revolution in terms of traditional European history and culture, positions his understanding of virtue in opposition to the “barbarous philosophy” of the Revolution in which he sees laws followed not out of affection or veneration but fear (*Reflections* 214). In *Reflections* and subsequent texts, Burke sees in the revolutionaries a false virtue, one that the Jacobins use to disguise a violent and corrupting ideology that threatens not only the British monarchy but history and language itself.

Burke centers this opposition to revolutionary virtue on the body, both in terms of individual bodies and the body politic. When describing British virtue, Burke employs corporeal

metaphors, focusing on the body as the source of “natural” public affections that characterize virtue and provide the basis for the political and social stability in England and Europe. In his formulation, these individual and collective bodies are under threat from the “contaminating” force of the Revolution which claims to be virtuous but is driven by self-interest, atheism and violence. Burke stresses how the Revolution poses an abstract and ideological threat that can contaminate or function as a disease or plague to the body politic. In *Reflections* and subsequent texts, Burke attempts to quarantine the English against this ideological and linguistic “plague” through an analysis of the inadequacies and dangers of the revolutionary philosophy, using his understanding of virtue as a counterpoint to expose the falsity of not only the revolutionaries’ thinking but to critique their bodily and emotional responses to political and social events. For Burke, virtue is enacted and felt; it also functions as a defense mechanism, a means of categorizing and delineating what does and does not qualify as correct political and social relationships and therefore of indicating the proper political and moral course for Europe to follow.

While other readers have touched on Burke’s attention to virtue in his struggle against revolutionary ideology, they tend to lump *virtue* together with a host of other words important to the revolution (liberty, fraternity, and so on).³⁵ Stephen Browne, who omits *Reflections* from his book dedicated to Burke’s rhetoric of virtue, says that Burke’s “virtue was a way of talking, a discourse of commitments”; these commitments determined the actions that “strengthened and ennobled the bonds of human community, that opened up and sustained the very possibility of public action” (117). Browne also notes that anything that does not “ennoble” these social bonds

³⁵ See, for example, Gilmartin, Kevin. *Writing Against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832*; White, Stephen K. *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics and Aesthetics*; Zerilli, Linda Marie-Gelsomina. *Signifying Women: Culture & Chaos in Rousseau, Burke and Mill*.

is virtue's opposite (117). However, Browne does not delve into the contradictions that emerge from this oppositional approach, arguing instead that this approach strengthens Burke's claims; in addition, Browne focuses on Burke's use of virtue over his entire career, and does not consider Burke's understanding of virtue in the context of eighteenth-century intellectual history related to the Revolution. Such an approach overlooks the important work critical attention on Burke's negative definitions of virtue does in illuminating Burke's strategies for criticizing revolutionary policy and ideology. Paddy Bullard's *Edmund Burke and the Art of Rhetoric*, a fairly straightforward rhetorical analysis of Burke's oratory, examines Burke's insistence on good political character as displayed through the rhetoric of ethos, and therefore addresses virtue in terms of its ethos-building—rather than nation-sustaining—power. J. M. Pocock's important work examines the relationship between property ownership and conceptions of civic virtue in the Scottish Enlightenment, arguing that Burke adapted the idea that sentimental attachments necessary for civic virtue could be understood as manners that made commerce a sociable rather than corrupting practice (*Virtue, Commerce and History* 37-50). While each shows an interest in the role of virtue in Burkean writing and addresses important dimensions of Burke's rhetorical strategies and the intellectual backgrounds that shape and inform his political philosophy, none of these studies investigate fully Burke's defensive use of virtue as a site where speech, morality and sentimentality intersect.

In this chapter, I offer a reading focused on how Burke uses virtue, arguing that, as in the case of Robespierre, a performative virtue meant to stabilize and legitimize crosses over to a dehumanizing terror. Such a reading helps illuminate the problematic relationship between political discourse, figural representation, sympathetic attachment, and moral politics in Burke's writing and in this period. Many critics ground their discussion of Burke's deep awareness of the

fundamental powers of language in shaping and determining lived experience. Steven Blakemore, among others, argues that *Reflections* is a defensive response to the “linguistic revolution” in which the “old meanings” of words were destroyed and replaced with abstractions; Burke recognized “that language and ideology are intimately intertwined and that whoever controls language controls not only the terms of ‘war’ but the terms of ‘reality’ itself” (*Burke and the Fall of Language* 2).³⁶ I argue that Burke sees the Revolution as provoking a linguistic / discursive war in which the correlation between signifiers and signified is wrenched away. In his texts concerning the Revolution, Burke targets specific incidents of catachresis that exemplify what he believes to be some of the most dangerous weapons of the Revolution. Catachresis—*abusio* in Latin—can be understood as the “Improper use of words; application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).³⁷ Burke attempts to fight back with a usage of virtue that is defensive in order to re-impose the “true” meaning of words and counteract the revolutionaries’ ideologically-based catachreses.

Whereas Blakemore contends that Burke holds his own against the abstracting force of Jacobin discursive ideology, I argue that, in his writings about the Revolution, Burke’s insistence on the concrete and visceral fails to maintain a distance from the actual and ideological violence

³⁶ It should be noted that, when Burke wrote *Reflections*, the “‘Revolution in France’ meant, primarily, Louis XVI’s summoning of the States General, over which he swiftly lost control, and its conversion by the Third Estate into a single National Assembly” (Pocock, “Introduction” viii). Also, Burke was not opposed to revolutions entirely; he supported the American Revolution, and certainly considers the Glorious Revolution to be justified.

³⁷ “Catachresis: < Latin *catachrēsis*, < Greek *κατάχρησις* misuse (of a word), < *καταχρησθαι* to misuse, < *κατά* with sense of perversion + *χρησθαι* to use. Improper use of words; application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. This is not to suggest that language has not been manipulated or abused before the Revolution, but to emphasize the special importance Burke places on how words are used in the French Revolutionary context and his insistence that the revolutionaries are using words in the “wrong” way and that these “abusive” uses have dangerous consequences.

of the Revolution. This distance is important because it keeps the danger from becoming fatal; the threat of the Revolution partly lies in its proximity, yet to bring that violence directly into his text—to go so far as to perform it—causes Burke to replicate that violence.³⁸ By pairing negative definitions of virtue with corporeal discourse, Burke destabilizes and unsettles his own text; Burke's virtue comes too close to death and terror even as it works to regulate and delineate the separations between what he perceives as moral and immoral political ideologies. Burke's performative and oppositional use of virtue, which includes imaginatively recreating the attack on Marie Antoinette at Versailles in order to provoke sentimental and moral outrage in his readers, crosses into a performance of the literal and rhetorical violence he condemns. Burke, who accuses the revolutionaries of sinking “deep into the negative series” (*Reflections* 317), operates in a negative economy as well in which negating the anathema requires evoking it. This terror he lets into his text replicates the Jacobin terror of political abstraction and dehumanization that reduces an individual to what Burke terms “our naked, shivering nature”—the individual reduced to a state of powerless exposure that characterizes the state of Arendtian terror.

Burke's tendency to speak against, to denounce and contest, function as a speech acts in that they make declarations and call for action. They “do something in saying something” (Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* 12). In this case, this “something” is to demarcate lines of defense against what Burke views as a contaminating ideology that threatens to displace the traditional practices of European society. In his texts, Burke spends his time in refutation and rebuttal and, as Marc Redfield notes, in drawing lines between positive and negative forces, letting these views into his text in order to refute them. As other critics have observed, Burke

³⁸ One of the reasons he was less concerned about the American Revolution was its very distance, both in terms of geographical location and historical circumstance. See Ryan Dermot, “‘A New Description of Empire’: Edmund Burke and the Regicide Republic of Letters.”

enacts a discursive war on the ideology of the French Revolution.³⁹ Redfield goes so far as called Burke and Robespierre “skewed doubles” who continually declare war against boundless ideological enemies (90-91). What my argument emphasizes is the consequences of Burke’s rhetorical war for Burkean virtue. By focusing on the relationship between virtue and terror in Burke’s texts, I analyze Burke’s defensive performance as a reenactment of the virtue-terror chiasmus, a metaphorical border-crossing in which Burke fails to keep his understanding of virtue—which, for him, forms the foundation of European political culture—from crossing into and becoming synonymous with the Jacobins’ “new-invented virtue” (Burke, *Selected Writings* 183) that enables revolutionary terror. Descriptions become action in the sense that he vividly depicts an action that he says opens the tide of violence and depravity that characterizes revolutionary ideology. This turn to terror by way of a love-driven virtue is a “skewed” replication of Robespierre’s own sacrificial, performative turn from a founding and authorizing virtue to a self-destroying and totalizing political terror.

In my analysis, I will move between Burke’s texts written in response to the Revolution, namely *Reflections on the Revolution in France* but also his *Letters on Regicide Peace*, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, *Preface to M. Brissot’s Address to His Constituents*, and *Letter to a Noble Lord*. Such an approach provides a more complex picture of the role of virtue in Burke’s battle against revolutionary and terrorist ideology, revealing the importance of this term in understanding the nature of Burke’s political theory as well as the literary and rhetorical strategies he employs to make his argument. I will

³⁹ Critics who discuss Burke in the context of discursive war in include Stephen Blakemore, *Intertextual War: Edmund Burke and the French Revolution in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and James Mackintosh*; Zerilli, *Signifying Women: Culture & Chaos in Rousseau, Burke and Mill*; Jane Hodson, *Language and Revolution in Burke, Wollstonecraft, Paine and Godwin*.

first discuss how Burke perceives the revolutionaries as an ideological threat he figures as linguistic in order to show the importance of words and their definitions in maintaining the stability of traditional English and European society. I then provide intellectual background for and an overview of Burke's conception of virtue, analyzing how he positions his idea of virtue in relation to the revolutionaries'. Finally, I turn to what Burke calls in a letter sent to Philip Francis in February 1790 "the abominable Scene of 1789" (*Correspondence* 139), the attack on the Queen in Versailles, which I argue is an enactment of Burke's idea of a corporeal and sympathetic virtue that reveals a reliance on terror.

Catachresis and Discursive War

Throughout his writings on the Revolution, Burke accuses the revolutionaries of catachresis, or the misuse or abuse of words or metaphor, especially in their definition and use of virtue. Burke had seen certain fundamental words (and the beliefs they represented) to be stable insofar as they persisted long enough to help establish European civil society as he knew it, and he foresaw the Revolution as a force that actively sought to destabilize that system of meaning. As Sandy Petry explains, "When the natural, eternal, and universal way of expressing meaning reveals its temporal, social and national limitations, categories of what is true threaten to lose their grip on human consciousness" (*History in the Text* 11). In critiquing the revolutionaries' use of language, Burke struggles to keep a "grip" on the ways these fundamental words are defined and how certain acts are named, because, like Robespierre, Burke recognizes that definitions and categories determine the perceived legitimacy and illegitimacy of political movements and the moral foundations that undergird them. Burke sees catachreses as a form of linguistic contamination and believes that these catachreses will help bring revolutionary ideology to England and challenge existing forms of government and religious beliefs. According to Burke,

to change the meaning of words, to misapply them and act on these misapplications, results in actual corruption and actual violence; throughout his texts, Burke seeks to discredit these definitions. In this section I will briefly introduce Burke's understanding of revolutionary catachresis and how it relates to the portrayal of virtue, a topic I will take up more in depth later in the chapter.

Paul de Man's understanding of the work of catachresis specifies the extraordinary work of catachresis in Burke. According to de Man, catachreses "are capable of inventing the most fantastic entities by dint of the positional power of language" and can "dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways" (*Aesthetic Ideology* 42). Because catachreses can hybridize beast and human, man and nature by mixing their parts and qualities, "[s]omething monstrous lurks" within them (*Aesthetic Ideology* 42). Burke, who calls revolutionary ideology a "monstrous fiction" in which "Everything seems out of nature" with "all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies" (*Reflections* 40, 150), figures the Revolution as a kind of catachresis in itself through which the "texture of reality" threatens to be changed fundamentally by how the revolutionaries categorize and define themselves, their actions and their beliefs. In his later work, *The Letters on a Regicide Peace*, Burke calls the revolutionaries' use of virtue bombastic, which he defines in *Inquiry* as when words used in sacred occasions "are put together without any rational view, or in such a manner that they do not rightly agree with each other" (*Inquiry* 132). Burke writes that "A theatrical, bombastic, windy phraseology of heroic virtue, blended and mingled up with a worse dissoluteness, and joined to a murderous and savage ferocity, forms the tone and idiom of [the revolutionaries'] language and their manners" (*Regicide Peace* 94). This "bombastic" virtue is catachrestic in its mixing of the heroic with the savage and profligate; it is not virtue at all but a kind of monster

that speaks in false voices and performs, but does not embody, the qualities the make up actual virtue.

Burke's preface (1794) to a translation of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, a leading member of the Girondist movement, poses this idea of speaking catachrestically. In this essay, Burke directly discusses his view that the revolutionaries have appropriated virtue for their own purposes, and addresses the change in language the Revolution has wrought explicitly. He notes that the translator faced difficulty with the French: Brissot "writes with great force and vivacity, but the language, like everything else in his country, has undergone a revolution" (*Preface to Brissot* 327). Burke says of Brissot:

When he speaks to the populace he can no longer be direct. The whole compass of the language is tried to find synonyms and circumlocutions for massacre and murder. Things are never called by their common names. Massacre is sometimes *agitation*, sometimes *effervescence*, sometimes *excess*; sometimes too continued an exercise of a *Revolutionary power*. (*Preface to Brissot* 314)

According to Burke, Brissot abuses language by being imprecise and straining to use euphemisms to cover or rename violent acts that are clearly crimes. Burke emphasizes that these acts have "common names"; Brissot's semiotic misdirection is a sign of the revolutionaries' dishonesty and desire to mislead the public.

In seeking to discredit revolutionary discourse, Burke suggests that while the Revolution is based on new ideas and is admittedly "astonishing," its origins can be identified by its actual, rather than false, names. De Man notes that catachresis can be used "to coin a name for a still unnamed entity, to give face to the faceless" (*Resistance to Theory* 44). In many ways the Revolution and the ideas that propelled it were "unnamed entities" in that it purported new ideas

and new ways of being in the world. In the same preface, Burke rejects the names with which the revolutionaries have chosen to identify themselves, especially in their self-identification as virtuous. Burke writes, “as the disguise became them, [the revolutionaries] began to assume the mask of an austere and rigid virtue” (*Preface to Brissot* 300). By calling their virtue a “mask” and a “disguise,” Burke accuses the revolutionaries of catachresis in their naming of themselves. The revolutionaries’ catachrestic “mask” of virtue is merely a performance, hiding only violence, corruption and terror. There is, he says, “nothing” behind it, at least nothing new:

Everything which they have done, or continue to do, in order to obtain and keep their power, is by the most common arts. They proceed entirely as their ancestors of ambition have done before them. Trace them through all of their artifices, frauds, and violences, you can find nothing at all that is new. (*Reflections* 186)

By revealing what lies beneath the misnamed face, Burke tries to show that the revolutionaries are merely “common” and driven by ordinary greed and ambition. However, by rejecting this definition of virtue outright Burke avoids considering the possibility that the threat lies less in replacing the meaning of words than in the possibility that the new understandings and uses of these words may have expanded their definitional meanings. For example, after the revolution murder may become synonymous with “revolutionary power” and the “austere and rigid” virtue seen in some of the revolutionaries may have become one way to understand and enact political virtue. This overdetermination of words such as virtue—an overdetermination that was of course happening well before the Revolution—reappears when Burke seeks to enact his own virtue in *Reflections*.

Corporeality and Sympathy: Burke’s Virtue and Its Backgrounds

That Burke's virtue was informed by sources other than French Enlightenment thinking does not mean that his use of virtue does not relate to or function in the same way as revolutionary virtue. As in Redfield's work, this project traces the surprising affinities within texts of this period. Burke was a product of the late eighteenth century and therefore brought certain ideas to his understanding of virtue. My intent in the following sections is to establish enough of an intellectual background and context to see how he defines his own conception of virtue, how he distinguishes it from revolutionary virtue, and how his use of virtue links his texts to the dehumanizing and totalizing terror from which he strives to defend England and his texts.

As Stephen K. White notes, Burke did not write a single, overarching political and philosophical treatise; instead, he responded to circumstances as they arose, letting his ideas emerge in the texts he produced over the course of his lifetime (2). In this way, Burke's use of virtue is, like Robespierre's, active and foundational, one that does the work of both defending and stabilizing in light of shifting circumstance. Burke's conception of virtue emerged not from the rationalist ideologies of the Enlightened thinkers—except for Montesquieu, whom he respected—but from Old Whig philosophies and Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of natural morality and sympathy. Stanlis notes, “Long before he entered parliament, [Burke] had rejected a priori, abstract, analytical type of reasoning in politics, centered in mathematical logic and metaphysical speculation, as represented by Descartes, Hobbes and Locke” (“Introduction,” *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches* 20). Instead, he sought out Adam Ferguson, David Hume and Adam Smith. Burke spent extended periods in Scotland when he was installed as Lord Rector at the University of Glasgow; he also became acquainted with Scottish writers in

his work with Robert Dodsley's *Annual Register* (O'Neill 54-55).⁴⁰ O'Neill provides a useful summary of the ways the Scottish Enlightenment helped shape Burke's moral thinking. Smith's emphasis on manners and social morality appealed to Burke; as O'Neill informs us, "Like the Scots, Burke held that social interaction was the embodiment of universal human nature as reflected in manners, and saw history as the records of evolution in manners over time" (65-66). The Scottish thinkers, following Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, believed that all people share a common, instinctive (and therefore non-rational) "moral sense" that enables them to discern "virtue and vice in themselves and others" (O'Neill 24). Burke disliked how this idea precluded divine intervention, but as O'Neill notes, "Smith's theory . . . focusing as it did on instinctive sympathetic response and avoiding any direct reference to 'moral sense,' could be squared easily with Burke's religious convictions, especially in that Smith specifically identified sympathy as a God-given instinct" (65). Generally speaking, the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers rejected the idea of the state of nature, believing that a scientific approach calls for examining people as they are; therefore, they concluded that society is humankind's natural state and that people are innately social creatures (O'Neill 33). Such an understanding of humankind's natural sociability meshed well with Burke's rejection of *a priori* explanations for human social behavior. Burke also appreciated the Scottish understanding of history as progressive and comprehensible: "In their account, history evinced patterns amenable to explanation; history was a narrative of cause and effect, reason and consequence, rooted in contiguity, relations of temporal priority, and constant conjunction, a tale of moral as well as material progress" (O'Neill 36).

⁴⁰ For a fuller account of Burke in relation to the Scottish Enlightenment, see Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics and the Colonia Sublime*; Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender and Political Economy in Revolution*; and Charles Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*.

Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* inflects Burke's analysis of the ways virtue and sympathy interrelate. Smith connected virtue to manners, saying that "There is no virtue without propriety and wherever there is propriety some degree of approbation is due" (VII.ii.54; p. 347). He also praises virtue, saying that it is "excellent, something uncommonly great and beautiful, which rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary" (I.ii.5.6; p. 33). Smith considered sympathy a key moral sentiment, and made connections between sympathy, the imagination, and morality in which the imagination allowed for attachment to and identification with others, especially in terms of sharing in their suffering. According to Smith, sympathetic imagination allows a person to bridge the distance between self and other: "Though our brother is upon the rack as long as we ourselves are at ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations" (I.i; p. 9). The imagination allows for a kind of bodily transference that permits a sense of oneness with others: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them" (I.i p. 9). This relationship between sympathy, imagination and common moral feeling resonates with Burke's writing on sympathy in *Inquiry*: "For sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected" (44). This idea of common feeling via the imaginative capacity for substitution—especially in terms of bodily substitution—is important when considering the role emotion and attachment to others play in Burke's conception of virtue.

Burke's notion of sympathetic virtue picks up a strand of inquiry that David Hume developed in *A Treatise of Human Nature* about virtue and the primacy of moral sentiment in political and social interactions. Like Smith, Hume viewed sympathy as a key moral principle, saying that "Sympathy is a very powerful principle of human nature . . . Sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions" (VI.iii; p. 618-619). Hume also speaks extensively about virtue, which is distinguished by being agreeable and useful. Virtue is fundamental to stable society: "Over time, Hume argued, the passions that provided the blunt impulse to enter societies were molded into virtue, an artificial construct that made for political and social stability, and could be judged by the ultimate standard, utility" (O'Neill 34). According to Hume, "morality is something real, essential and founded on nature," and the difference between "vice and virtue, and the origin of moral rights and obligations, is, that from a primary constitution of nature certain characters and passions, by the very view and contemplation, produce a pain, and others in like manner excite a pleasure" (VII.i; p. 296). In Hume's formulation, virtuous action invokes approval and pleasure; vice disapproval and pain.

The only French Enlightenment thinker Burke praises is Montesquieu (*Selected Letters* 265). If the revolutionaries have in fact read Montesquieu, which Burke doubts, he insists that "they do not understand him"; in fact, he speculates that Montesquieu, if he was alive during the Revolution, would have fled France (*Selected Letters* 267). Burke's most famous praise of Montesquieu appears in *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in which Burke calls Montesquieu a "man gifted by nature with a penetrating, aquiline eye," who, of all the governmental systems to choose from, had held up the English constitution "to the admiration of mankind" (*An Appeal* 140). C.P. Courtney, writing on Montesquieu's influence on Burke, suggests that Burke appreciated Montesquieu's understanding of "man's natural aptitude for

virtue” as the moral basis of society, as well as his belief in natural class difference, his lack of desire for absolute democracy, and the role of honor in monarchies—ideas, Courtney suggests, that were not transferred from Montesquieu to Burke but confirmed what Burke already believed given his traditional Old Whig views and his background in classical and eighteenth-century political thought (161, 163). O’Neill suggests that a shared admiration for Montesquieu helped to connect Burke to the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, whom he says considered Montesquieu “their intellectual forefather” (71-79); they admired Montesquieu’s belief in a “uniform human nature” and his ability to connect laws and forms of government to multiple factors such as climate, economic systems, and social customs (37), as well as their shared admiration for the English Constitution.

Additionally, the intellectual background and understandings of European history that shaped Burke’s values and therefore his conception of the role of virtue within politics can be traced directly in his writings. In both *Letters on Regicide Peace* (1796) and in the fragmentary “Abridgement of English History” (1791), Burke identifies Roman law, Christian morality and Teutonic customs and manners as forming the basis of European society.⁴¹ In *Regicide*, Burke speaks of the unity of Europe threatened by revolutionary ideology:

The nations of Europe have had the very same Christian religion, agreeing in the fundamental parts, varying a little in ceremonies and in subordinate doctrines. The whole of the polity and economy of every country in Europe has been derived from the same sources. It was drawn from the old Germanic or Gothic customary; from the feudal institutions which must be considered as an emanation from that customary; and the

⁴¹ For an extended discussion of Burke’s Abridgement, see Stanlis, “Burke, Rousseau and the Revolution” in *Burke and The French Revolution: Bicentennial Essays*.

whole has been improved and digested into system and discipline by the Roman law.

(*Regicide* 310).

Even if a European state is no longer a monarchy, Burke says, it retains the “spirit” of European monarchy. Before the Revolution, Europe enjoyed a comforting homogeneity in which “a system of manners and of education which was nearly similar in all this quarter of the globe” (*Regicide* 310). Such shared ideals “provided the moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and social norms for the value system of European civilization” (Stanlis, “Burke, Rousseau, and the Revolution” 100).

The French Revolution threatened that sense of unity both within Europe and in England.

Seamus Deane explains that the Revolution “polarized British politics to an unprecedented extent. In a country where party lines had by no means run deep, profound ideological differences suddenly appeared” (*French Revolution and Enlightenment* 4). In Burke’s view, the fact that the Revolution broke France from this homogeneity poses a threat to the cohesion of the rest of the continent.

In Burke’s *Reflections*, it is a corporeal and heroic virtue that is based on sympathy and sentimental attachment. Throughout *Reflections* Burke insists on the centrality of virtue to any solid and legitimate government: “There is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive,” he writes (188). Burke’s idea of virtue falls within the classical republican tradition in that it is civic in nature; it relies on consensus and is based on love of one’s country and commitment to the public good. Burke’s conception of virtue does not privilege individual agency unless it works to sustain the cohesion of a community. He says in his early essay, *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756):

. . . as if all happiness was not connected with the practice of virtue, which necessarily depends upon the knowledge of truth; that is, upon knowledge of those unalterable

relations which providence has ordained that every thing should bear to every other.

These relations, which are truth itself, the foundation of virtue, and consequently, the only measures of happiness. (13)

According to Burke, virtue encompasses the relations and links between people as established by God, and, like Robespierre, he believes it essential to human happiness. Everywhere in *Reflections* is an emphasis on feeling, which solidifies the bonds within a community; desire and affection help soften laws and encourage loyalty and conformity. These “public affections” are linked to laws themselves, and act as their “supplements,” “correctives” and “aid” (*Reflections* 214). Burke often uses familial metaphors, which involve “binding up the constitution of a country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections” (*Reflections* 173). In *Regicide Peace*, Burke says:

Men are not tied to one another by papers and seals. They are led to associate by resemblance, by conformities, by sympathies. It is with nations or with individuals.

Nothing is so strong a tie of amity between nations and nation as correspondence in laws, customs, manner and habits of life. They have more than the force of treaties in themselves. They are obligations written in the heart. (309).

Sympathetic connection is stronger than “paper and seals”; it is the moral connections that bind people and nations together, and this connection is located in the body, a treaty that is “written on the heart” rather than on paper. The body is the text of the social contract, and this mutual agreement is acted out through organic and sympathetic human attachments and shared customs and manners.

Embodiment is necessary to Burke’s idea of civic virtue. Patriotic bonds require an attachment that is both corporeal and affective: institutions should be “embodied . . . in persons”

in such a way that inspires “love, veneration, admiration or attachment” (*Reflections* 214). These feelings of affectionate attachment require physical beauty; the nation and its institution must be loveable: “To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely” (*Reflections* 214). Because of the importance of emotion and physical feeling, the virtuous cannot rely entirely on rationality; the virtuous English need their bodies to have the feelings necessary for their virtue. The English, Burke insists, have “real hearts of flesh and blood beating in [their] bosoms” (*Reflections* 223). The body and its responses are necessary for the kind of affectionate binding that happens between beloved institutions and its citizens. Thus, when Burke states that virtue is love of one’s country, he does not mean an abstract, intellectual love, but one grounded in individual bodies, public bodies as embodied in institutions, and within the larger body politic of a people united through shared history, common manners and familial ties.

Burke’s conception of virtue is both universal and individual; it is ingrained in the bodies of citizens and aids in decision-making. This virtue is universal in that it is reinforced by habitual prejudice that extends beyond time and place, and comes from “the general bank and capital of nations and of ages” (*Reflections* 223). This “general bank” is unchanging: there are, he says, “no discoveries . . . to be made, in morality” (222). For Burke, to act virtuously is to follow this tradition (“prejudice”); such a claim goes along with his distaste for innovation (*Reflections* 172). He writes:

Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man’s virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature. (*Reflections* 224)

This “steady course of wisdom and virtue” comes from repeatedly doing the same thing in accordance with the past, which, according to Burke, conforms to the social relations established by God (*Reflections* 223). Notably, Burke does not consider rationality or logic important in decision-making; instead, he suggests that reactions to situations should be automatic because all decisions are based on the choices others made in the past. In connecting virtue to habit, he emphasizes the naturalness of such bonds and affections. He writes that “when such ideas [God, kings, lawmakers, nobility] are brought before our mind, it is *natural* to be so affected; because all other feelings are false and spurious, and tend to corrupt minds, to vitiate our primary morals, to render us unfit for rational liberty” (*Reflections* 223). In his formulation, “rational liberty” does not mean being governed by ideals or abstractions but on the dictates of tradition and religion, which, he says, are conducive to an orderly and just society based on an affectionate and obedient social restraint.

While the practice of applying habitual prejudice links the virtuous to a larger community that transcends temporal boundaries, Burke does not subscribe to an idea of virtue as an automatic, universal love of humanity. On the one hand, because the system relies on prejudice, habit and emotional fidelities to the past, the whole of the English nation “at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression,” enabling its citizens and monarchy to maintain a continuous connection with the past, present and future (172-173). Thus, Burke insists that his political and social system, because of its placement “in just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world,” is deathless, transhistorical, and comprehensive. Still, in his conception, the love for one’s nation begins on an individual level (*Reflections* 185) and then radiates outward. Sympathy (and therefore virtue) is an impulse

toward oneness, but one that respects the spaces between individuals. Importantly, Burke's virtue is not sufficient on its own—it must be wedded to wisdom, and wisdom comes from class distinctions—privilege and leisure (*Reflections* 189n)—paired with “some difficulty and some struggle” (*Reflections* 189).

What the French Have Done to Their Virtue

Burke understands the proximity of France as both literal and geographical: he points out that France is separated from England by only “a slender dyke of about twenty-four miles” (*Reflections* 221). The threat is also proximal in that it approximates familiar speech: the discourse of the Revolution sounds like the discourse of moral sentiment, which Burke insists that this is a misuse and abuse of language. Disturbing proximal, also, is the “glorious” Revolution of 1688 and the French Revolution, a proximity Burke undercuts by insisting that the English were claiming their traditional constitutional rights (*Reflections* 145). In many ways, Burke figures the Revolution as a bodiless, abstract force that threatens to infect the body politic of England. In *Reflections*, Burke responds in the collective voice of the English as a rallying cry against what he sees as a potential ideological epidemic, unnecessary at best and devastating at its worst:

Your affairs, in spite of us, are made a part of our interest; so far at least as to keep at a distance your panacea, or your plague. If it be a panacea, we do not want it. We know the consequences of unnecessary physic. If it be a plague, it is such a plague that the precautions of the most severe quarantine ought to be established against it. (*Reflections* 225)

It is a plague, a disease and a form of pollution that will drift over and attack English society. Burke says that the French's “present confusion, like a palsy, has attacked the fountain of life itself” (*Reflections* 187). It infiltrates the air: “the wild *gas*, the fixed air, is plainly broke loose” (*Reflections* 148) and poisons the water: “when [France's] fountain is choked up and polluted,

the stream will not run long, or not run clear, with us, or perhaps with any nation” (*Reflections* 216).⁴² Such a representation of the Revolution as abstract relates to his understanding of the Revolution a threat that comes not from the French nation per se, but is an ideological threat that knows no physical boundaries. Later, in 1796, when responding to Prime Minister William Pitt’s plan to make peace with the revolutionary French Directorate (what Burke calls “the Regicide Directorate of France”), Burke says:

We are in a war of a *peculiar* nature. It is not with an ordinary community, which is hostile or friendly as passion or as interest may veer about: not with a state which makes war with wantonness, and abandons it with lassitude. We are at war with a system, which, by its essence, is inimical to all other governments, and which makes peace or war, as peace and war may best contribute to their subversion. It is with an *armed doctrine* that we are at war. (*Regicide Peace* 164)

Burke identifies the revolutionary ideology as an “armed doctrine,” a “system” of beliefs, values and practices that “contaminate” and threaten to undermine traditional English society.

In *Reflections*, Burke outlines the mistakes the revolutionaries have made in their conception of virtue as a function of their political policy. He accuses the revolutionaries of acting hardheartedly and to have “perverted” their natural sympathies. According to Burke, revolutionary ideology is not just a moral perversion, but an illness or disease to which the French are especially susceptible. This disease causes to one prepare for the worst and in this preparation lose one’s understanding of human nature:

⁴² Daniel E. Ritchie touches on the medical imagery in *Reflections*, noting that Burke was “aware of the dangers of false diagnosis and of the willingness of quack doctors to treat hypochondriacs” (“Desire and Sympathy, Passion and Providence,” *Burke and the French Revolution* 135).

the mind receives a gratuitous taint; and the moral sentiments suffer not a little, when no political purpose is served by the depravation. This sort of people are so taken up with their theories about the rights of man, that they have totally forgotten his nature. Without opening one new avenue to the understanding, they have succeeded in stopping up those that lead to the heart. They have perverted in themselves, and in those that attend to them, all the well-placed sympathies of the human breast. (*Reflections* 202)

Here Burke criticizes the revolutionary tendency toward abstraction, which disconnects them from the “heart,” which, in this case, signifies the compassionate and sentimental feelings that Burke believes are necessary to maintain a cohesive and orderly society. Repeatedly, Burke compares the “dry,” “mechanic,” and “cold” approaches of the revolutionaries to the English, who, he implies, are made virtuous through their corporeality: “We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms” (*Reflections* 223). Interestingly, Burke often figures revolutionary ideology as something “sketched” or on paper (“paltry shreds of paper about the rights of man” [*Reflections* 222-223]) in comparison to the living and breathing bodies of the English, who respond to the Revolution and to each other as physical, sensory beings. This contrast between the written and the affective/corporeal underscores the problem Burke faces when confronting the Revolution: he is using language to discredit the language of others, and attempts to render his text fully corporeal in response to what he sees as the disembodied heads thinking and writing the Revolution into being.

Burke argues that the French are attempting to deny the concrete realities of human existence, which, in his mind, include “real inequality” between people that cannot be proclaimed away. The French, who, he says, “began ill,” should have respected the past as the English do. If they started “under a pious predilection for those ancestors,” he says, “your

imaginations would have realized in them a standard of virtue and wisdom, beyond the vulgar practice of the hour” (*Reflections* 174). Again, Burke draws virtue and wisdom together, suggesting that wisdom affords virtue a gravitas that can only come from knowledge of and respect for the traditions and practices of the past. He outlines what might have been:

You would have had a free constitution; a potent monarchy; a disciplined army; a reformed and venerated clergy; a mitigated but spirited nobility, to lead your virtue, not to overlay it; . . . you would have had a protected, satisfied, laborious, and obedient people, taught to seek and to recognize the happiness that is to be found by virtue in all conditions; in which consists the true moral equality of mankind, and not in that monstrous fiction, which, inspiring false ideas and vain expectations into men destined to travel in the obscure walk of laborious life, serves only to aggravate and embitter that real inequality, which it never can remove. (*Reflections* 176)

The French, he seems to suggest, have failed to manage expectations. The “true moral equality of mankind” is the community of like-minded people agreeing upon a way of living in the world that conforms to all the old ways of the past. The idea that all people are equal is a “monstrous fiction” in that it denies the true order of nature. Instead, he says, France is “prostitut[ing] her virtue” (*Reflections* 176) by opening up avenues for misuse of power. Even the National Assembly, which may appear to be all-powerful, is only what “God, and nature, and education, and their habits of life have made them” (*Reflections* 179). They may wish to operate with virtue and wisdom, but they show very little experience or promise as leaders (the best are “men of theory,” which means they operate at the level of abstraction). Unless they possess “a supreme degree of virtue as very rarely appears in the world” (*Reflections* 179), which is unlikely, they will be led instead by “sinister ambition, and a lust of meretricious glory” that will lead the

whole assembly astray (*Reflections* 179). Clearly, while the Revolutionary government might gesture toward virtue, they fail to possess it, which, Burke argues, will lead to disaster. In many ways, Burke characterizes the French both as incorporeal in their insistence on abstract rationalism and also vulgarly carnal in their “lust” for glory and their willingness to “prostitute” virtue. In his discussion of revolutionary virtue versus what he perceives as English virtue, Burke attempts to inoculate or “cure” France with a dose of England, reminding them of the peace and prosperity they could have enjoyed had they followed the path of the Glorious Revolution.

Burke goes on to suggest that the revolutionaries are using the word *liberty* catachrestically; their idea of liberty has nothing to do with “free” government, which, he says, must be regulated by both virtue and wisdom. Otherwise, liberty is mere anarchy:

It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint. Those who know what virtuous liberty is, cannot bear to see it disgraced by incapable heads, on account of their having high-sounding words in their mouths. Grand, swelling sentiments of liberty I am sure I do not despise. They warm the heart; they enlarge and liberalize our minds; they animate our courage in a time of conflict . . . But to form a *free government*: that is, to temper together these opposite elements of liberty and restraint in one consistent work, requires much thought, deep reflection, a sagacious, powerful, and combining mind. This I do not find in those who take the lead in the National Assembly. (*Reflections* 375)

This description echoes his description of the Revolution itself: “all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies” (*Reflections* 150). Virtue is a restraining factor that encourages unity (“one consistent work”) and requires the wisdom of a “combining” mind, that is, a way of thinking that looks for similarities and strives for cohesion over individual impulse.

Burke also criticizes the idea of radical equality, which not only “perverts” (187) the natural order of things but exposes people to the terrors that reside inside of law itself. This leveling strips away all distinction and beauty: “all the pleasing illusions . . . which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off” (*Reflections* 213). This adjustment in social structure, which reduces everyone to the same level regardless of rank or distinction, requires new understandings of how people and acts are named and classified. “On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal of not the highest order” (*Reflections* 214). People are reduced to categories in which their individual differences are effaced. This new understanding of words and the acts they describe renders all death ordinary: “The murder of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father, are only common homicide; and if the people are by any chance, or in any way, gainers by it, a sort of homicide much the most pardonable, and into which we ought not to make too severe a scrutiny” (*Reflections* 214). This stripping down to a common, animal level not only threatens the monarchy but all members of society. According to Burke, it is our flesh—our beating hearts filled with blood—that helps to bind us, but these vulnerable bodies need to be clothed in the “pleasing illusions” and the “public affections” that characterize virtue; without them, our bodies are left “naked” and unprotected. Burke repeatedly equates the loss of social customs and tradition with denuding and isolation: “our naked, shivering nature” (*Reflections* 214), “the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction” (*Reflections* 148). Rather than respecting the “natural” distinctions between men, the revolutionaries “have attempted to confound all sorts of citizens, as well as they could, into one homogeneous mass” (*Reflections* 317) that resembles the

“one man of gigantic proportions” that lives out the ideology of terror (Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* 600).

In *Reflections*, Burke anticipates the Terror, which he says will be enacted under the catachrestic guise of “preventative murder”: “On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported by their own terrors . . . In the grove of *their* academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows” (*Reflections* 214). Burke’s conception of the violence embedded in law resonates with Walter Benjamin’s claim that violence forms the core of law (“Critique of Violence” 286). Terry Eagleton describes the atrocities Burke fears when authority dispenses with the ceremony that, by decorating and beautifying the motions of power, regulates its inherent violence:

The true danger of the revolutionaries is that as fanatical anti-aestheticians they offer to reduce hegemony to naked power. They are Protestant extremists who would believe insanely that men and women could look on this terrible law in all its nakedness and still live, who would strip from it every decent mediation and consoling illusion, break every icon and extirpate every pious practice, thus leaving the wretched citizen helpless and vulnerable before the full sadistic blast of authority. (“Aesthetics and Politics in Burke” 60)

Burke recognizes the “grim and bloody maxims” embedded in power, and argues that honor is the mitigating force that protects both the royal authority and his subjects. In his critique of revolutionary philosophy by way of his critique of revolutionary virtue, Burke calls for social cohesion, but with respect for manner and customs which he believes creates the spaces of safety between people and forms of authority. These are, to use Arendt’s words, the “living space of

freedom” (Origins 600) that seemed dangerous to Robespierre but life-saving to Burke.

According to Burke, without these codes of honor, the law becomes an instrument of terror: in the absence of “the old feudal and chivalrous spirit of *fealty*” in which both the king and his people agreed to protect one another, “plots and assassinations will be anticipated by preventive murder and preventive confiscation, and that long roll of grim and bloody maxims, which form the political code of all power, not standing on its own honour, and the honour of those who are to obey it” (*Reflections* 215). The Revolution takes as its foundational event the revoking of that honor, equalizing king and citizen in that both are now subject to this “naked power.”

In *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), Burke suggests that even war has been stripped to its most terrifying. He writes, “The new school of murder and barbarism set up in Paris, having destroyed (so far as in it lies) all the other manners and principles which have hitherto civilized Europe, will destroy also the mode of civilized war, which, more than anything else, has distinguished the Christian world” (485). To live in a world based on equality without these customs and manners, without virtue and wisdom, is to live in a destroyed civilization ruled by and at the mercy of terror.

Burke’s responses to Rousseau reveal the kind of abstracting and generalizing terror he sees in Jacobin ideology.⁴³ Peter J. Stanlis informs us: “Burke became convinced that no one was

⁴³ Burke was not enamored of French rationalist Enlightenment thinking. According to Seamus Deane, “more than anyone else, Burke was responsible for the incorporation into the public debate the names and reputations of the chief thinkers of the French Enlightenment” establishing a “climate of hostility toward them which persisted in an extreme form until 1802” (5). The key figures Burke criticized include Helvétius, Condorcet, Diderot and D’Alembert, but especially Rousseau and Voltaire, whose role in shaping Jacobin ideology confounded and horrified him. In *Reflections* Burke says of the English: “We are not the converts of Rousseau; we are not the disciples of Voltaire . . . Atheists are not our preachers; madmen are not our lawgivers” (222). By calling the followers of these *philosophes* “converts” or “disciples,” Burke suggests that he sees this philosophy as supplanting Christian morality and formal religion, mocking the replacement of rational law and religion with the ideas of atheists and “madmen.” In an earlier

more responsible for advocating the removal of the moral restraints upon men in France than Rousseau” (106). In *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, Burke details his objections to Rousseau’s role in the revolutionaries’ moral and political project. He compares the French Revolution to the Glorious Revolution, saying if the French Revolution was in fact “honest,” “necessary,” and “purifying” it would have followed the “virtuous policy” set forth by the English during the Glorious Revolution. As J.M Pocock notes, the Glorious Revolution acts as a precedent for Burke’s confidence that history should be relied upon when making political decisions (“Edmund Burke” 23). The virtue to which the revolutionaries adhere is a “new-invented virtue” wrested from tradition and one that functions in the realm of abstraction and generalization. He says that virtue calls for “sound reason” and “true humility,” neither of which Rousseau possesses. Burke’s critique of Rousseau reveals his perception of the revolutionaries as atheists who have replaced “true virtue” with an illogical and cruel vanity that destroys social relations and affections.

In this letter, Burke’s main critique of Rousseau is his tendency toward abstraction at the expense of the particular:

It is that new-invented virtue which your masters canonize that led their moral hero constantly to exhaust the stores of his powerful rhetoric in the expression of universal benevolence, whilst his heart was incapable of harboring one spark of common parental affection. Benevolence to the whole species, and want of feeling for every individual

letter sent to an unknown recipient (1790), Burke expresses astonishment that the ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire could be used to form laws, asking, “Who ever dreamt of Voltaire and Rousseau as legislators? . . . [Of the *Social Contract*] I thought it a performance of little or no merit; and little did I conceive, that it could ever make revolutions, and give law to nations. But so it is” (*Selected Letters* 268). That Burke saw the *Social Contract* as a performance relates to his claim that revolutionary ideology is based on catachrestic disguise and pivots on providing the appearance of moral feeling rather than actual feeling.

with whom the professors come in contact, form the character of the new philosophy.

(*National Assembly, Selected Writings* 183)

Here Burke suggests that the virtue to which the revolutionaries adhere is cut off from the long traditions of Christian morality, Roman law and Teutonic manners and customs that he considers the foundations of European civil society. He suggests that the revolutionaries have “canoniz[d]” Rousseauian virtue, making him the saintly center of a cult that relies on false proclamations of universal love. He sees the influence of Rousseau on his followers as a kind of infusion in which Rousseauian ideas enter in their bodies and contaminate their actions: “His blood they transfuse into their minds and into their manners. Him they study; him they meditate; him they turn over in all the time they can spare from the laborious mischief of the day or the debauches of the night” (*National Assembly, Selected Writings* 31). Again returning to what he considers the center of virtuous politics—the human heart—Burke accuses Rousseau of advocating for love of humankind while showing disdain for the individuals to whom he should be closest: his offspring.⁴⁴ This tendency toward abstraction results in unloving actions towards individuals, which disturbs Burke and goes against his belief that positive social relations begin at the individual and familial level and then radiate outward (*Reflections* 185). Rather than actual virtue, Burke suggests, the followers of Rousseau subscribe to the cult of vanity, which is a “pervert[ing]” force that “revers[es] the train of natural feelings” (*National Assembly, Selected Writings* 35). Burke identifies “True humility, the basis of the Christian system, [as] the low, but deep and firm foundation of all real virtue” (*National Assembly, Selected Writings* 33). However, he says that followers of Rousseau reject this “very painful” and “imposing” conception of virtue

⁴⁴ Burke’s attitude toward Rousseau as a parent resonates with Adam Smith’s writings on natural familial sentiments. Smith argues that, because of these natural attachments, “[a] parent without parental tenderness, a child devoid of all filial reverence, appear monsters, the objects, not of hatred only, but of horror” (*Theory of Moral Sentiments* II.I).

and instead seek out Rousseau as a model for their “ruling virtue” (*National Assembly, Selected Writings* 33). Burke emphasizes the understanding of virtue as an active force when he says that Rousseau’s account of his life was not “even distinguished by a single good action” (*National Assembly, Selected Writings* 34). Basically, Burke’s critique of Rousseau is based on what he sees as moral vacancy and corruption disguised as the virtuous love of humanity. He repeatedly calls Rousseau’s writing a “performance” or “rhetoric,” suggesting that his works reflect his vanity and catachrestic use of virtue as a catchword; such adherence to vanity makes “the whole man false” (*National Assembly, Selected Writings* 33). Burke’s portrayal of Rousseau’s virtue in opposition to his own insists that Burke believes the revolutionaries are operating under false and immoral pretenses and that their tendency to prefer the general over the particular endangers not only France but England and Europe as well.

Imagining the Queen’s Death: The Case of Marie Antoinette

So far, I have argued that Burke employs a defensive use of virtue in order to counteract what he sees as the false virtue “put on” by the revolutionaries. This “false” virtue intends to disguise an abstracting force that seeks to strip what Burke sees as the necessary distinctions between people and bring forth the terrors that come from unprotected exposure to the dehumanizing violence of the law. In this section, I examine the pitfalls of Burke’s oppositional approach in relation to his portrayal of the attack on the Palace at Versailles on October 5, 1789.⁴⁵ Rereading the attack against the Queen in light of the connections Burke develops in *Reflections* and in subsequent

⁴⁵ As this scene is arguably the most famous in Burke’s writings, it has been the subject of much critical discussion both among Burke’s contemporaries and in recent literary criticism. See James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics*; Gerald Chapman, *Edmund Burke: The Practical Imagination*; Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789-1820*; Paul Hindson and Tim Gray, *Burke’s Dramatic Theory of Politics*; and Robert Markley, “Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue,” *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown.

texts between definitions of virtue, corporeality, and the performance of sympathy provides a fuller understanding of how these connections function within Burke's oeuvre itself.

Here, I read the scenes involving the queen as enactments of Burke's idea of virtue, which is manifested in the way they are inspired by sympathy *for* others, they are intended to inspire sympathy *in* others, and they demonstrate the kind of chivalrous, well-mannered virtue for which Burke advocates. These scenes also center around the body, which is important to Burke's conception of virtue in the following ways: the queen as an embodiment of the virtuous institution of the monarchy; the body as protected by virtue from the exposure to the violence of terror; and the body as the source of the natural emotions and feelings that make virtue possible. This scene also draws on the virtue of the king and queen as familial and communal in that the royals' and the citizens' fates are tied together. According to Burke, it is our flesh—our beating hearts filled with blood—that helps to bind us, but these vulnerable bodies need to be clothed in the “pleasing illusions” and the “public affections” that characterize virtue; without them, our bodies are left “naked” and unprotected.

I argue further that the enactments of virtue are subjected to a similar kind of reversal suffered by Robespierre when he attempts to perform virtue. Let's be reminded of what Quint says about chiasmus: “The reversal chiasmus effect is thus also a kind of *double cross*: it sets up a binary opposition only to break it down; it gives one value to one side of an opposition only to load it with the value to which it had been initially been opposed” (274). This transposition of values happens in Burke's defensive use of virtue; as he dismantles the semantic logic of the Revolution, he employs his own rhetoric of “heroic” and “manly” virtue that could also be accused of relying on unsound juxtapositions and dangerously theatrical imaginings. I argue that while these scenes are meant to be enactments of virtue in that Burke attempts to make the

abstract threat of the Revolution visceral and concrete enough to provoke a sympathetic response in his readers, Burke's rejection of terror is effaced by these linguistic embodiments. Burke's strict moral order, based a closed system of prejudice, inheritance and fidelity to the past, is contaminated and destabilized by his own rhetorical choice to condemn the conflict by representing it. This contamination is literalized in his detailed, imaginative description of the assault on the royal palace, which he did not personally witness but imaginatively recreates and represents in order to provoke sympathy and outrage in his readers. Just here the distinction between Burke's language of virtue and the bombastic, catachrestic language of the Revolution blurs, and Burke enacts the very violence and terror he strives to condemn. He does this by stripping away the obscurity that he claims is necessary to protect people from the terror of law; he engages in a similar kind of theatrical bombast that he critiques in the revolutionaries; and he places violence and terror against monarchy at the very center of his text. The violence of the Revolution comes too close, and what is intended to be an act of virtue and inspire virtuous feeling in his readers instead literalizes the terror he fears.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ In *Aesthetic Ideology* Tom Furniss attributes Burke's contradictions and inconsistencies to Burke's engagement in the "rapidly shifting political parameters of eighteenth-century Europe," especially in terms of his bourgeois class status (112). Furniss focuses part of his examination on how Burke attempts to show that the Revolution is a "perversion of the sublime" (130). In this attempt, Furniss argues, Burke finds that his "discourse is continually in danger of lapsing or rising—of opening himself to ridicule or of figuring the Revolution as truly sublime" (111). I too focus on the contradictions found in Burke's text within the context of the inversions and reversals that characterized revolutionary discourse and also argue that Burke sometimes fails to keep the distinctions between the "perversion" and the "actual" distinct. Such contradictions signal the complexities of the ideas that ruled the Revolution and the ways the contradictory ideas rampant during this period intersect and complicate one another.

It is typically understood that monarch's body held symbolic importance within European political history.⁴⁷ Ernst Kantorowicz's classic study of sovereignty *The King's Two Bodies* examines the medieval European understanding of the king as having a natural body that died and an immutable, supernatural one that represented the body politic. In his criticism of the revolutionaries, Burke makes metaphorical references to the body of the king: by "dismembering" the country—that is, cutting up the body politic—the revolutionaries have rendered the king, as the head of that body, useless: "They have forgot, that when they framed democratic governments, they had virtually dismembered their country. The person, whom they persevere in calling king, has not power left to him by the hundredth part sufficient to hold together this collection of republics" (*Reflections* 191). However, when he wishes to enact his own idea of virtue, rather than focusing on the king's body as vulnerable, Burke turns to the Queen, whose body was of particular interest in that, as an aristocratic female body, it was expected to inspire natural, chivalrous feelings in the reader (*Reflections* 223). Burke insists that the love of country must be embodied by institutions, and the Queen's body functions as a kind of institution. The Queen was also the object of display and speculation: Lynn Hunt notes that the Queen's body was of prurient attention and public obsession before and during the Revolution; she examines the sexualized representations of the Queen's body in pornographic pamphlets of the time period, concluding that "The queen's body . . . was of interest, not because of its connection to the sacred and the divine, but because it represented the opposite principle—namely the possible profanation of everything the nation held sacred" (*Eroticism and the Body*

⁴⁷ The literature on the topic of the body of the monarch in eighteenth-century Europe is extensive. See, for example, Cavareo, *Stately Bodies*; Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*; Melzer and Norberg, *From the Royal to the Republican Body*.

Politic 111). Therefore, the Queen's body is an especially fraught site presumably in need of the "softening" and protective efforts of Burke's heroic virtue.

In *Reflections*, Burke begins the description of the attack on the queen by referencing history: "History will record" that when Louis and Marie Antoinette sought a few hours of sleep after a day full of "confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter" they were attacked (208). Burke's reference to history can be seen as a violent speech act that precipitates the recreation of this violent act within the course of his text. This declarative sentence and the scene that follows imprint the attack on the Queen on the historical record that Burke sees as the code for all action. Burke then dramatically represents this moment of regicidal violence:

. . . From this sleep the queen was first startled by the voice of the sentinel at her door, who cried out to her to save herself by flight—that this was the last proof of fidelity he could give—that they were upon him, and he was dead. Instantly he was cut down. A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with a hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and, through ways unknown to the murderers, has escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment. This king, to say no more of him, and this queen, and their infant children, (who once would have been the pride and hope of a great and generous people,) were them forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses. (*Reflections* 208-209)

The rhetorical engine of Burke's vivid description is the language of sentiment. As much scholarship has documented, many of Burke's contemporaries mocked and criticized his

narrative style; for example, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Mary Wollstonecraft disparaged Burke for his reliance on sentiment as a rhetorical device, claiming that such emotionalism was inappropriate and unconvincing in a political tract. Others consider the scene a rhetorical achievement. For example, James T. Boulton argues that the depiction of the Queen functions as the “rhetorical and philosophical centrepiece” of *Reflections* at which “Burke’s vision of moral disorder contrasted with the symbol of the moral order he venerates reaches climactic proportions, and the principles underlying his vision receive their most startling evocation” (98). I am more persuaded by John Barrell’s recent argument that Burke’s use of the language of sentiment reveals the dangers of such language in the political sphere: while familial metaphors and sensationalized violence may provoke sympathy for the monarchy, they also quickly disintegrate into violent patricidal fantasies (86).

But the problem is more than the language of sentiment—Burke encounters the problem of literary representation itself. According to Barrell, 1790’s British law stated that it was treasonous to *imagine* the death of the king. Earlier in his epistle, Burke had criticized the revolutionary philosophy of equality as a stripping down of people to an animal level; in the revolution, he says, “all the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off” (*Reflections* 213). By imaginatively representing the violence against the royal family with such detail (the palace reeking, swimming in blood, the queen “almost naked,” swords penetrating the queen’s bed), Burke himself is complicit in this stripping away of what he considers a productive and protective obscurity, especially in relation to the queen’s body. Despite his insistence on a uniform virtue based on the “moral constitution of the heart” (*Reflections* 217), Burke does not resist this inclusion of terror and the terrible in his text—he actually recreates this act of treason,

a sensationalizing representation that renders him imaginatively complicit in regicide and in the revolutionary terror he fears.

Such a recreation can be seen as an act of manly virtue that uses concrete representation to invoke sympathetic feeling and combat the revolutionary tendency toward abstraction. In *Inquiry*, Burke catalogues types of words according to their power. “If words have all their possible extent of power, three effects arise in the mind of the hearer. The first is, the *sound*; the second, the *picture*, or representation of the thing signified by the sound; the third is, the *affection* of the soul produced by one or by both of the foregoing” (*Inquiry* 132). Virtue, which Burke identifies as a “*compounded abstract* word,” is not able to bring a picture into the reader’s mind on its own. Though a direct line of thinking cannot be drawn from *Inquiry* (1757) to *Reflections* (1790), it could be argued that Burke conjures images of the attack on the queen order to fight against the abstraction of the Revolution. This scene contains both “picture” and “affection.” It also emphasizes the Queen’s body, which reflects his need to oppose the abstracting nature of revolutionary ideology: as Craig Carson notes, “Against mere abstraction and empty juridical formalism, political sovereignty, in a very literal sense, must have a body” (116). Carson is talking about the king’s body in *Reflections*, but the insistence on portraying the violence done to the Queen’s body—a portrayal that intends to have an affective effect on his audience’s bodies—shows Burke’s understanding of embodied politics and how he conceives of virtuous action.

Burke attempts to condemn the violence by showing the actual violence done to actual bodies, but, in doing so, he reduces the queen to a body that is stripped and exposed within his text. This textual representation is a virtuous act because Burke attempts to cloak the scene with his feelings and the feelings he hopes to inspire in others; his writing is motivated by his

sympathetic attachment to the Queen, especially in terms of her gender (*Reflections* 211). While Burke does not call his conception of virtue “manly” he associates it with what Claudia Johnson identifies as “chivalrous heterosexuality” that makes itself known through exaggerated sentiment (3-4). Johnson argues that Burke’s staging of the attack is less about Marie Antoinette and more about the loss of “sentimentalized manhood, the kind of manhood inclined to venerate her” (4). Certainly, this scene relies on masculine virtue, but it also hinges on the violation to the actual body of the queen as the source of these virtuous feelings and affections. Earlier in *Reflections*, Burke writes that he “love[s] a manly, moral, regulated liberty as well as any gentleman” (*Reflections* 147). As I have noted previously, *vir* signifies man; Burke’s concept of virtue does carry the martial and masculinist connotations of the Roman *virtù*. Understood in the chivalrous context of *Reflections*, this manly virtue is submissive and obedient, only eager for violence when a noble woman such as the queen is “threatened . . . with insult” (*Reflections* 212). Ironically, in the process of trying to defend the queen through heroic sympathy, Burke repeats this insult. Blakemore writes of how Burke “sometimes gets entangled in his own contradictions and discrepancies” (“Revolution in Language” 6) and uses passages from *Reflections* as examples, including the scene of Marie Antoinette in her bedchamber. He provides another example of how, by portraying the queen’s assault, he inadvertently debases her, saying, “Burke unwittingly exploits the Queen’s sexual ‘reputation,’ for she has been repeatedly described as a monstrous woman with dark, insatiable desires gratified in multitudinous affairs and orgies. Hence Burke inadvertently raises the specter of the Queen’s sexuality, even though his chivalric code is expressed in terms of protection, repression, and restraint” (7). However, Blakemore’s emphasis on the accidental nature of this debasement downplays its important role in Burke’s larger project of enacting a virtue that opposes the one posited by the revolutionaries.

Tom Furniss, in “Stripping the Queen” in *Burke and the French Revolution: Bicentennial Essays*, offers a reading closer to my own: that Burke, by representing the attack theatrically, exposes Marie Antoinette’s “aristocratic beauty” to “democratic terror” (70). However, Furniss does not strip the Queen far enough: he keeps his discussion within the aesthetic, not specifying the nature of the “democratic terror” to which the Queen is exposed. I see this scene as a sign of Burke’s entrapment in corporeal discourse of sentiment that in seeking sympathetic identification with others exposes the Queen and his text to a dehumanizing, revolutionary terror. Rather than respect the queen as an individual draped in protective obscurity, he exposes her to a homogenizing violence through the way his imaginative representation renders the queen a body like all other bodies. Thus scene shows how in Burke’s negative definition of virtue the virtuous body relies on the terrified body to produce its own virtuous feeling. This terror is a version of Agamben’s idea of “bare life.” Marc Redfield explains how this reduction to “bare life” is centered on the body: “It is life lived naked under the eye of sovereignty—or, in the idiom we are exploring here, life lived in and as terror. As the linchpin of biopolitics, sovereignty causes us to consider the inscription of terror on the body, or, perhaps better, the political fashioning of a terrified body” (145). While the question of who is the sovereign in this case is a complicated one, as Burke is both in power as the author of this text but also subjected to the vicissitudes of the language and rhetorical strategies he employs, it is clear that the Queen is not the sovereign in this scene. She has been reduced and, “almost naked,” becomes the terrified body on which virtuous feelings now rely. Burke has replicated the reduction of the “natural hierarchy,” turning the queen into an animal; he, like the revolutionaries, performs the return to a state of nature in which men are beasts. As he says of the revolutionaries: “Their humanity is savage and brutal” (*Reflections* 216); this scene suggests that Burke’s humanity may also rely on forms of brutality.

Burke seems to recognize that his prolonged portrayal may upset some readers, and includes an apology in which he emphasizes the revolution as an obliteration of manners (*Reflections* 217). His portrayal, he claims, is an act of homage based on respect; that he feels moved enough to depict the queen's travails is a sign that he "harbour[s] the common feelings of men" (217), suggesting that his readers should feel the same. Much of the performance of virtue lies in the expected transference of feeling between the writer and the reader: Burke has portrayed this scene for the reader by way of his imagination, and expects the reader to feel a sympathetic connection to Queen's plight by way of his or her imagination. This idea of sympathetic exchanges goes back to Adam Smith's idea of the role of sympathy in moral judgment, as well as echoes Burke's earlier thoughts on sympathy in *Inquiry*.⁴⁸ Stephen Browne argues that "Burke's appeal rests on his ability to convince the reader that by interpreting events as he does, together they reclaim virtue by instantiating it" (12). While I agree that Burke enlists his readers in interpreting history in the way he does (which must be an interpretation through feeling and sympathy), I argue that the very act of "instantiating" virtue—that is, by representing it through concrete examples—undermines his definition and understanding of virtue.

Burke's portrayal of Marie Antoinette also recalls the symbolism rampant in Jacobin discourse: that of classical female standing in for revolutionary abstractions such as liberty or justice. Philip Hicks notes that "eighteenth-century writers emphasized that Roman women attained the height of public and private virtue in the period of the republic" (38); Burke evokes this ancient female virtue, but ties it to violence: both the threat of sexual violence against the queen, and of violence she inflicts upon herself. Burke suggests that the queen is willing to kill

⁴⁸ For more on sentiment and sympathy in the eighteenth century, see Ildiko Csengei, *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* and John Mullar, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, among others.

herself in order to protect her sexual bodily honor: “that she feels with the dignity of a Roman matron; that in the last extremity she will save herself from the last disgrace; and that, if she must fall, she will fall by no ignoble hand” (*Reflections* 212).⁴⁹ By making this comparison, Burke seeks to depict the queen’s virtue not only by recreating the violence against her but by imagining her death.

Just after offering the image of a suicidal and virtuous Marie Antoinette killing herself to avoid sexual violation and assassination, Burke moves back in time and resurrects the image of a younger queen and an entirely different kind of revolution: “I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,—glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendour, and joy. Oh! What a revolution! and what a heart must I have to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall!” (*Reflections* 212). Here Burke recalls the astronomical origins of the Latin notion of revolution as “designating the regular, lawfully revolving motion of the stars” (Arendt, *On Revolution* 42); this idea of revolution as cyclical and restorative would be applied to political events up until the French and American Revolutions. Burke uses this image to underscore his sentimental feelings toward the queen and attempts to evoke in the reader a similar sympathy by contrasting that past “elevation” with her more recent “fall.” Still, while the inclusion of this image of the queen has a restorative effect, the text cannot revise the historical violence it both depicts and imagines.

Burke insists that it is “*natural*” (217; italics his) to respond with pity and emotion to representations of the actual and imagined downfalls of kings and queens. Comparing such “spectacles” to ones viewed in the theater, Burke explains:

⁴⁹ For more on the use of republican images of women in Britain and France during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Philip Hicks, “The Roman Matron in Britain: Female Political Influence and Republican Response, ca. 1750–1800” and Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1800*, among others.

we behold us disasters in the moral, as we should behold a miracle in the physical, order of things. We are alarmed into reflection; our minds (as it has long been observed) are purified by terror and pity . . . Some tears might be drawn from me, if such a spectacle were exhibited on the stage. I should be truly ashamed of finding in myself that superficial, theatric sense of painted distress, whilst I could exult over it in real life. With such a perverted mind, I could never venture to show my face at a tragedy. (*Reflections* 217)

Burke says that since he responds emotionally to staged tragedy, he should respond in kind to what he sees as actual tragedy. By evoking the classical idea of catharsis, Burke directly addresses terror, not to condemn it, but to suggest that it is in some way virtuous, or an instrument of virtue, in that it can purify our emotions, which, as has been established, are connected to morality. Such characterizations of terror echo Burke's writings on the sublime, which have shadowed his *Reflections* from the beginning. Some of these connections are commonly agreed upon in recent criticism. For example, at the start of *Reflections*, Burke calls the revolution "Hitherto one of the most astonishing things to have happened in the world" (*Reflections* 150). In *Inquiry*, Burke argues that the sublime provokes astonishment: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (*Inquiry* 49). The Revolution was, to Burke, decidedly unnatural, but he still responded with horror, which associated it with the sublime. Terror is also associated with intense feeling in *Inquiry*. As portrayed in *Reflections*, the Revolution seems to be a source of the sublime: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner

analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, productive of that strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (*Inquiry* 35).

Terror was of course integral to Burke’s conception of the sublime. Claudia Johnson, Andrew Ashfield, Peter de Bolla, Robert M. Maniquis, and Stephen K. White, among others, have examined how the relationship between the sublime and terror had to be revised after the Revolution: each of these critics note that Burke’s near-celebration of terror as a force of aesthetic pleasure lost its appeal in light of actual historical violence.⁵⁰ Specifically, Ashfield and De Bolla note that the *Inquiry* had portrayed the sublime as “morally sanctionable,” an idea Burke sought to revise after the Revolution (265). They also note wryly that Burke’s catalogue of the sublime provided the revolutionaries with the vocabulary with which to articulate their goals (267). Stephen K. White argues that Burke recognized this shared vocabulary and rejected the revolutionaries’ sublime as “false” and “humanized” (77); Tom Furniss makes a similar argument in *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology*.

What has not been fully addressed is the role of proximity in Burke’s refutation of revolutionary virtue. I argue that Burke’s discussion of terror and proximity in *Inquiry* is helpful to understanding how virtue functions in *Reflections* and subsequent essays. In *Inquiry*, Burke emphasizes that distance is necessary for danger to be sublime and therefore morally and aesthetically useful (thus the mind can be “purified by terror and pity” as it observes the tragedy of regicide on the stage). To close the distance between the terrible thing and the self means that whatever is frightening actually becomes dangerous (*Inquiry* 36). I conclude this analysis of

⁵⁰ See, for example, Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*; Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*; Stephen K. White *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics and Aesthetics*; Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology*; and Robert M. Maniquis, “Filling Up and Emptying out the Sublime,” *British Radical Culture of the 1790s*.

Reflections with the suggestion that Burke's engagement with virtue closes this distance, bringing actual terror and death into his text. Burke's fight against what he perceived as catachresis inadvertently brings the terror/Terror into his texts; he invokes and represents an emotional and chivalrous virtue that must enact and imagine death and terror in order to be emotionally—and therefore morally—effective. Burke uses sympathetic imagination to bridge the distance between the Queen and those who should admire and respect her, but in facilitating this fusion of self and other he instead brings the “terrible thing”—revolutionary terror—into his text and exposes the Queen to its mercilessness. This proximity to real peril marks the moment when the sublime ceases to be aesthetically and morally useful and becomes truly dangerous.

“The Spirit of Murder”

In 1796, Burke wrote *Letter to a Noble Lord*, his own defense against those attacking him, and everywhere in the text is the specter of the Revolution. In this letter Burke attempts to defend himself and his virtue, which remains linked to order, morals and religion (*Noble Lord* 388), but the contamination of language that he fights against in earlier texts overwhelms him. Here, the distance between the terrible thing and the self has been closed completely.

Like the revolutionaries in the passage from *Preface to M. Brissot* in the epigraph, Burke sought to make “a distinction,” hoping that virtue would be a sealed container in which he could contain the “spirit of murder” to be used against the rhetoric of the revolutionaries. The distinctions he attempted to make between revolutionary virtue and real virtue, between man and man, cannot be made any longer. Nothing, he says, has been left unaltered by the revolutionaries: “The consequences are *before* us, —not in remote history; not in future prognostication: they are about us; they are upon us” (*Noble Lord* 391). He attaches a number of verbs to the revolutionaries: they “shake,” “menace,” “dwarf,” “break,” “stop,” “pursue,” “interrupt,”

“trouble,” “sadden,” “poison” and “pervert” (*Noble Lord* 391). The spread of the sickness is complete, and the revolution has affected a violent change in the “constitution of the mind of man” (*Noble Lord* 382).

The revolting (in both senses) women portrayed in *Reflections*—“all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women” (209)—return to Burke’s text, but this time they threaten more than the monarchy and its servants. Burke figures them as harpies out of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, who are “sprung from night and hell, which generates equivocally ‘all monstrous, all prodigious things’” (391). They “flutter over our heads, and souse down upon our tables, and leave nothing unrent, unrifled, unravaged, or unpolluted with the lime of their filthy offal” (391). The ideology and language of the French Revolution infiltrates even death itself: “Neither sex, nor age, nor the sanctuary of the tomb, is sacred to them. They have so determined a hatred to all privileged orders, that they deny even to the departed the sad immunities of the grave . . .” (*Noble Lord* 383). There is no escape from the forces of the Revolution, and even the poet Virgil, Dante’s guide in Hell, would not be able to represent them had he been alive (*Noble Lord* 391n). As Linda Marie-Gelsomina Zerilli says, “nothing can stop it—not even writing. For it exceeds the writer’s powers of signification” (93). Examining the virtue-terror chiasmus in Burke’s texts shows how, despite the author’s intentions, language speaks out and representation acts out the violent logic of the Revolution.

A close analysis of his use of virtue and his condemnation of revolutionary virtue demonstrate how a virtue that regulates and is propelled by sentimentality lets in terror and makes Burke’s text unwillingly follow patterns of thought and violence that resemble the revolutionaries. By examining texts that work against the Revolution, I uncover the subtle and surprising consanguinities within the paradoxes and contradictions that characterize

revolutionary discourse. Burke clings to the idea of obscurity as necessary for a just and safe society to function. He evokes virtue as a stabilizing, unifying force based on a sentimental politics of love and affection, but the principles that underlie this affection compel the merging of people and a stripping of difference that resembles—or is—terror.

Chapter Four

“wholesome ministry of pain and evil”: Virtue and Terror in William Wordsworth’s *The Borderers*

In this chapter, I examine the ways William Wordsworth displaces and refracts the totalizing and isolating impulses characteristic of the Revolution in his only drama *The Borderers*.⁵¹ I begin with a discussion of borders as places of legal and linguistic uncertainty that replicates the discursive moment of Revolutionary France. I then provide an overview of Wordsworth’s shifting view of the Revolution and establish the importance of speech in relation to foundational revolutionary violence through a brief discussion of his *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793) and Book Ten of *The Prelude* (1805). Finally, I move into an analysis of *The Borderers* itself, focusing on the figure of Rivers as the tropological embodiment of Jacobin catachresis that relies on the semantic turning between virtue and terror that, by seeking to simultaneously totalize and isolate, complicates the romantic investment in community-building.

Borders of Revolutionary Discourse

As Alan Liu notes, William Wordsworth’s *The Borderers* reads like a police ledger: the main characters are guilty or accused of infant selling, conspiracy to commit fraud, sexual slavery, manslaughter, and false witnessing, among other crimes (225). However, after citing national crime records for England in the 1790’s, Liu rejects the idea that the play is concerned with actual crime in England at the time of its composition, and suggests instead that criminality in

⁵¹ William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, ed. Robert Osborn. I choose to reference the early version of the play, composed between fall 1796 and spring 1797, because it was written closer to the Revolution and reads more smoothly, despite David Bromwich’s contention that “on the whole, the revision is a triumph: nobody who cares about the original has wanted to argue otherwise” (45).

the play should be understood in relation to the crime of the nuclear family against the self and “the family dramatization of illegitimacy” (228-229). While I agree that familial relations are fundamental to the play and provide my own reading of how they function later in this chapter, Liu’s intense focus on eighteenth-century English familiarity neglects the contemporary context for the play’s setting, the lawless borderland between England and Scotland during the Baron Wars of the thirteenth century, and misses the figurative importance of borders as sites of criminal, familial and semiotic indistinction without clear leaders or laws.⁵² I argue that these borders, which are upset by inversions in political and moral semantics and which occasion the committing and obfuscation of crime, both reflect and distort the discursive linking of virtue to terror that characterized the French Revolution.

The border is a place of political uncertainty in which England and Scotland literally converge on one another; it is a transitional site characterized by historical and geographical movement. Wordsworth claims that it was this area’s history of political instability that led him to choose medieval Scotland as a setting: “As to the scene & period of action little more was

⁵² The play portrays how the young Mortimer is manipulated by the older, solitary figure of Rivers, who enlists a beggar woman to support his claim that the Baron Herbert, the elderly, blind father of Matilda, the woman Mortimer loves, purchased her as a small child and, now that she has reached sexual maturation, plans to sell her to the local orgyist, Lord Clifford. Mortimer, who is the leader of a small band trying to maintain law and order in the lawless Tweed, believes Rivers’ story and abandons Herbert to die by starvation and exposure on the heath. The play’s plot closely resembles *Othello* in that a villain of questionable motives, posing as the protagonist’s friend, manipulates the protagonist into murdering an innocent, beloved person in the name of virtue.⁵² Previously, Mortimer saved Rivers’ life, and Rivers resents him for it; Rivers also sees in Mortimer a younger version of himself, ambitious and respected, and wishes to damage Mortimer in the same way he was. While Iago is often termed a “motiveless malignity,” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge first called him, Rivers justifies himself with a philosophy that echoes Machiavellian and Godwinian politics as well as the language of late-eighteenth century popular and gothic romance (Osborn 400), all with the eloquence of Milton’s Satan and, to a degree, Robespierre. The play concludes with a series of confessions from Rivers to Mortimer and Mortimer to Matilda; the band executes Rivers off-stage and Mortimer condemns himself to life as a wandering exile.

required for my purpose than the absence of established Law & Government—so that the Agents might be at liberty to act on their own impulses” (*Fenwick Notes* 192). Though Wordsworth does not take pains to fully represent the landscape and the political troubles of the time, the setting is significant to the play in that borderlands are by definition unstable.⁵³

Borders are filters with highly variable degrees of permeability or porosity; and border regions are peripheries of infiltration, transition or separation, defences for the supposed 'purity' of the 'centre' . . . Like the Janus-faced nationalisms with which they are intimately associated in the so-called sovereign 'nation-state', borders look inwards and outwards: they simultaneously unify and divide, include and exclude. They are coercive, disabling and limiting, including and excluding many people against their will; but they are also benign and enabling, providing the basis for security, dominant forms of identity and conventional representative democracy. 'Prison' or 'refuge', they can facilitate oppression or provide an escape from it. (Anderson and O’Dowd, “Borders, Border Regions, and Territorialities...” 596)

In this indistinct space without set leaders or laws, the play’s characters grapple with the most basic questions of civilization: questions of authority (Who shall lead?), of justice (Who is guilty and how can this guilt be proven?), and of social relationships (Whom can I love and trust?). The play is set during the Reign of Henry III (1216-72), in the midst of the Baronial War on the Tweed and the Crusades abroad. As noted by Marjean Purinton, the Baronial War came about because the barons sought to take control over the government from Henry III in order to secure for themselves the rights and freedoms promised by the 1215 Magna Carta (*Romantic Ideology*

⁵³ This lack of detail has led critics to assume that the actual historical events alluded to in the play are less important than the emotional and psychological turmoil experienced by the characters (c.f. Rieder).

Unmasked 32). The Crusades were also taking place in the thirteenth century, and, by the time of the play's setting, had disintegrated from religious missions into "an excuse to plunder, kill and usurp human rights" as well as the means to increase the power of kings at the expense of feudal barons (Purinton 33). Thus, this border setting is one fraught with questions about rights and the contracts that affirm them, with violence wrought in the name of moral and religious righteousness, and the clash between the monarchies and other stakeholders interested in securing power and rights for themselves.

In the contested space of *The Borderers* where there is no law or central authority, human bonds must be negotiated through speech. However, in *The Borderers* words themselves become border-like and thus vulnerable to shifts between the signifier and signified: the familiar terms of human connection—community, love, family—as well as the legal understandings that create safety and delineate the criminal from the virtuous become unreliable.⁵⁴ Reading these texts in the context of the virtue-terror chiasmus reveals the extent to which these authors rely on the perceived stability of meaning in what they and others say, and fight against what they see as misuses or abuses of words that convey fundamental political concepts when, in fact, neither side employs language that is fixed or stable. In *The Borderers*, this perceived catachresis becomes explicit and deliberate; Wordsworth inverts and complicates the lines between sincere and insincere speech, suggesting that the intentions that underlie the discourse of law, crime and community can be self-serving and obfuscating. The borders around words reveal themselves to be porous and easily infiltrated by new meanings, as Burke has feared; the same word can be used to "facilitate oppression or provide an escape from it" in the play. The word *virtue*—meant

⁵⁴ This claim does not imply that words always have stable meaning.

to denote a goodness that enables social cohesion—becomes its opposite: a categorizing force that separates people not only from each other but from their moral groundings.

In this way, the play's setting recreates, to a degree, the relationship between semiotic and political instability seen in Revolutionary France. While some critics, such as Osborn, remain unconvinced of the play's connection to the French Revolution, enough evidence points to the reasonableness of reading in such a context.⁵⁵ If nothing else, as Hartman says, "Written between 1795 and 1797, [the drama] reflects a growing awareness of the crucial role played by ideas and ideologies in contemporary life—an awareness intensified by the French Revolution" (762).⁵⁶ Wordsworth himself claims that the play was written as a reflection on the Revolution, which he personally witnessed in Paris in 1792:

During my long residence in France, while the revolution was rapidly advancing to its extreme of wickedness, I had frequent opportunities of being an eye-witness of this

⁵⁵ Osborn asserts that if Wordsworth "had any such intention . . . he would presumably have mentioned the fact in the Preface or in his correspondence of 1796-1797, and the relevance of the situation presented in *The Borderers* to the French Revolution made obvious in the play itself" (409). While this is a valid assumption, the lack of a direct reference does not mean that the intellectual climate of the time did not help shape Wordsworth's conception of revolution and call into question his then-radical political views. Wordsworth was very much engaged with the issues of his time, as his letters indicate. Also, the play is supposedly set in the thirteenth century, so any direct reference to the Revolution and Terror would have been prophetic on the characters' part.

⁵⁶ Recent criticism has shed light on the play's individual and multiple historical contexts. For example, Myers examines the play in relation to the Revolution and the English treason trials of the 1790's, Cara Norris looks at the play in relation to the suspension of habeas corpus in England, and Geoffrey Sanborn traces Wordsworth's personal connection to the mutiny on the *Bounty*. In *Romantic Ideology Unmasked*, Marjean Purinton considers all of these contexts (as well as the Crusades) and argues the oppressive and hierarchal "mental structures and processes" of revolutionary thought are revealed through the collapsing of multiple contexts and setting into one text (33-34). She draws out commonalities from them all: "They all represent periods of tension between a monarch and a struggling class trying to gain power, freedom, economic independence, and equality. All reflect periods filled with rebel heroes, exiles, and social unrest. All reflect periods of clashes between classes with simultaneous attempts to coalesce nationalism and patriotism" (33-34).

process, and it was while that knowledge was fresh upon my memory, that the Tragedy of "The Borderers" was composed. (*The Borderers* 813)

And then, in the Fenwick note (1843), he claims that he wrote an accompanying essay "On the Character of Rivers" "to preserve in my distinct remembrance, what I had observed of transitions in character, and the reflections I had been led to make, during the time I was a witness of the changes through which the French Revolution passed" (*Fenwick Notes* 193-194). It is these "transitions"—in character, in states of being, in linguistic meaning—that are essential to reading *The Borderers* as a representation of the contested site of the border, and also as a working-out of the chiasmic linkage of virtue and terror. The Revolution itself moved from one condition to another, crossing and re-crossing the borders between liberty and tyranny and between virtue and violence as it devolved from liberatory Revolution to Terror. Wordsworth's choice to stage this "transition of character" he witnessed during the Revolution in a liminal, historical England rather than France suggests that the borders between political ideologies and the borders around words have become fluid and easily penetrated.⁵⁷

Wordsworth and Revolution

Wordsworth's shifting feelings about the Revolution have been well-documented.⁵⁸ As John Reider notes, "Though there is no doubt that Wordsworth eventually became a political conservative, there remains considerable disagreement concerning how early and how

⁵⁷ At the time of play's composition, the unifications of England and Scotland had already been solidified through the parliamentary union of 1707 (*Anglo-Scottish Relations*, Ed. T. Christopher Smout 186).

⁵⁸ See, for example, Kenneth Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy*; Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*; Carl Woodring's chapter on *Wordsworth in Politics in English Romantic Poetry*; Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*; and James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature*.

thoroughly Wordsworth abandoned his youthful radicalism” (*Wordsworth’s Counterrevolutionary Turn* 22). One key document that provides context for *The Borderers* and for this “youthful radicalism” is Wordsworth’s *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, written in February and March of 1793.^{59, 60} Wordsworth composed this letter in response to Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, who attached a polemic decrying the execution of Louis on January 24, 1793, to a sermon he had delivered previously; both the sermon and the appendix were published in *The Morning Herald* and *The Times* (*Wordsworth’s Political Writings* 15). Trying to emulate the style of Thomas Paine’s response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections* (Williams 62-67), the youthful Wordsworth used Watson’s appendix as an opportunity to grapple with key issues in relation to revolutionary ideology and to voice his support for the Revolution. The *Letter* also shows Wordsworth engaged in the intellectual climate of the time period: according to John Rieder, “Admiring Priestley, distaining Burke, and heavily indebted to Paine and Rousseau, [the *Letter*] is in all respects typical of, and thoroughly immersed in, the furious political debate of the early 1790s” (33).⁶¹ Still, as John Williams reminds us, “Like so much of

⁵⁹ Wordsworth never sought to publish this letter, possibly for fear of legal repercussions: In 1792, the Royal Proclamation Against Seditious Writings and Publications, paired with the suspension of the right of Habeas Corpus, made publically criticizing monarchy a risky and potentially criminal endeavor (Mason 33). Thomas Paine himself faced libel charges under the Seditious Writing and Publications law (Mason 33). Such measures were just some of the signs of how the Revolution helped to provoke serious repressive measures in England, especially in terms of free speech.

⁶⁰ After the French Revolution, fears of revolt and uprisings in England spurred repressive measures including increased surveillance of political gatherings and limits on the press. Under the Royal Proclamation Against Seditious Writings and Publications, authors and printers could be prosecuted for producing and distributing works deemed seditious. By 1794 people could be brought to trial for “seditious speech”; figures such as John Frost and William Winterbotham were “singled out as orators and activists, not casual speakers who overstepped their bounds” (Cressy 367).

⁶¹ Zera Fink argues that the *Letter* reflects Wordsworth’s engagement with the theoretical ideas of Milton, Harrington and Algernon Sydney. See Zera Fink, “Wordsworth and the English Republican Tradition,” *Journal of English and German Philology* (1948), 107-26. Charles

Wordsworth's greatest poetry, the *Letter* records an evolving state of mind, not the summation of a fixed position" (67). In this letter, Wordsworth systematically attacks the Bishop's position, expressing hatred of monarchy and disdain for sympathizers of Louis (51). Perhaps most significantly, in the *Letter* Wordsworth expresses support for the idea that Revolution relies on violence in order to achieve its liberatory ends. Wordsworth writes, "have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant, that a time of revolution is not the season of true liberty . . . the obstinacy and perversion of men is such that she [liberty] is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence" (52). Such sentiments—that revolution requires a suspension of "liberty" in order to achieve liberty—echoes Robespierre's claims that violence is necessary in order to stabilize the nation. Wordsworth seems to make this concession reluctantly—rather than an indication that the people's will is necessarily both virtuous and terrible, this need for foundational violence marks an "obstinacy and perversion" in humankind that must be accepted and overcome for just government to be possible. In *Letter*, Wordsworth makes a distinction between virtues, saying that "Political virtues are developed at the expense of moral ones," suggesting that such an exchange is unfortunate but necessary in order to "spin a fairer order of things" (52). By making a distinction between "political" and "moral" virtues, Wordsworth seems to fall on the Machiavellian side of necessity, accepting that one must exchange freedom momentarily for security established through stabilizing violence. His assertions about the general will reveal some familiarity with Rousseau: The "particular will" of the monarchy cannot abide by "pure and universal representation, by which alone liberty can be secured" (60-61); the

Robert argues that Wordsworth was already influenced by Godwin when he composed the *Letter*; see "The Influence of Godwin on Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff," *Studies in Philology* 29 (1932).

particular will and the general will “must war with each other, till one of them is extinguished” (60-61). In addition, Wordsworth also echoes Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, writing that government is “a necessary evil” (61).⁶²

The Borderers records Wordsworth’s fluctuating view of virtue, from what might be called the naïve rationalism he drew from Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793) to something less stable, less convinced that reason could support an account of virtue in face of the Revolution. In *Political Justice*, Godwin argues that if people adhered to this rational virtue than all government could be dissolved and society could be developed further. Godwin emphasizes utility in his argument about virtue in *Political Justice*: “Intention no doubt is the essence of virtue. But it will not do alone. In deciding the merits of others, we are bound, for the most part, to proceed in the same manner as in deciding the merits of inanimate substances. The turning point is their utility” (156). How much and in what ways Godwinian philosophy shaped *The Borderers* is contested. William A. Ulmer suggests that Wordsworth misrepresents Godwin’s ideas in *The Borderers* (233-234). Roe says, “By working through his doubts about Godwin and political revolution in *The Borderers*, Wordsworth effectively clears his mind of the intellectual debris of the previous five years” (Roe 223).

Wordsworth’s position in relation to the French Enlightenment is also a contested one. M.A. Abrams argues that Wordsworth was strongly influenced by these thinkers. John Williams argues that Wordsworth’s *Letter to the Bishop* and *Descriptive Sketches* shows “the considered extent to which his attempt to find a political and aesthetic identity was informed by eighteenth-century radical Whig thinking of the American war period and before, and the extent to which this qualified his adoption of latter-day, Paineite radicalism” (67). Others have traced

⁶² For a discussion of how Paine influenced Wordsworth’s *Letter*, see E.N. Hooker’s “Wordsworth’s *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*,” *Studies in Philology*, 28 (1931).

Wordsworth's intellectual background to seventeenth-century thinkers such as Milton, Harrington and Algernon Sydney, a seventeenth-century English politician who plotted against King Charles III and was later executed for treason (Fink 107-26).

The Borderers functions as the site of Wordsworth's dissatisfaction with these radical models, precisely because they do not account for the role of language in shaping or misshaping perceptions of the social and political world.⁶³ That Wordsworth recognized the power of speech to change social realities in the Revolution is apparent in *The Prelude*, which, while not a biographical record, does reveal the ways Wordsworth chose to represent his evolving understanding of and relationship to the Revolution.⁶⁴ In Book Ten of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth regrets that he, "An insignificant stranger and obscure," had not the "powers / Of eloquence" to help lead France back into the liberating direction promised by the Revolution at the beginning (128-136). He then notes that "Inly I resolved / How much the destiny of man had still / Hung upon single persons" (136-138), recognizing that single individuals—especially ones with those "powers / Of eloquence" and who are primed for "tumult and intrigue" (128-136)—can shape human events through speech. At this moment in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth wishes for such an individual to rise up and redress the Revolution. He attributes this redeeming power to virtue: "the virtue of one paramount mind" that

Would have abashed those impious crests, have quelled
 Outrage and bloody power, and in despite
 Of what people were through ignorance

⁶³ For a discussion of Wordsworth's shifting political orientations, see Rieder, *Wordsworth's Counterrevolutionary Turn*; Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*; David Bromich, *Disowned By Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790's*; and John Williams, *Wordsworth: Romantic Poetry and Revolutionary Politics*.

⁶⁴ Because I am interested in Wordsworth's portrayal of the Revolution at the time of the Revolution, I will use the 1805 version of *The Prelude*.

And immaturity, and in the teeth
 Of desperate opposition from without,
 Have cleared a passage for just government,
 And left a solid birthright to the state,
 Redeemed according to example given
 By ancient lawgivers (179-187)

Here, Wordsworth attributes the power to reshape the Revolution and overcome the “ignorance / And immaturity” of the people to a single individual whose virtue is intellectually—rather than corporeally—centered. The particular, the individual, is granted this power to restore the Revolution to its original purpose and overcome the unreadiness and opposition of those who set it down the wrong path; he attributes the power to utilize this singular, intellectual virtue to persuasive speech. In this passage, Wordsworth also suggests that the Revolution is justified and part of progressive history in that “just government” is a “birthright” handed down by “ancient lawgivers” to the French people. The use of the word “redeem” here is twofold: the people would be able to “redeem” or finally enjoy this birthright, and this virtuous individual would be able to “redeem” the revolution by resetting its path toward justice rather than corruption and terror.

Just as Wordsworth cannot conjure the speech and eloquence necessary to save the Revolution, he visualized the Terror as a failure of speech to save himself. Wordsworth tells of how he imagines the Terror as a nightmare of oratory during his time in France:

I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep,
 Such ghastly visions had I of despair,
 And tyranny, and implements of death,

And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
 Before unjust tribunals, with a voice
 Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
 Of treachery and desertion in the place

The holiest that I knew of—my own soul. (*The Prelude* 10 373-380)

This passage coalesces a number of Wordsworth's concerns about and understandings of the Revolution and Terror that are of high importance in *The Borderers*. Wordsworth had identified himself as not the figure on whose powers of speech "much the destiny of man" depends; here, he draws this connection between impotency and speech even further. He lists the instruments of the Terror as "tyranny, and implements of death, / And long orations." Such instruments of Terror are ideological, symbolic and literal; they all work together to render the defendant helpless and inarticulate. Law and speech are intertwined; where speech and voice fail justice fails, and in this absence of effective speech in which one can only "plead" rather than declare, Wordsworth portrays himself as emptied out and alone, deserted even by his "own soul." Critics, such as Kenneth R. Johnston, read in this passage Wordsworth's sense of betrayal in his relationship to the Revolution and to his relationship with Annette Vallon, with whom he had an affair and a child during his time in revolutionary France (286); I argue that this passage is also important in that it emphasizes the discursive nature of the Terror, showing how the "voice / Labouring" is a voice helpless against the false justice of revolutionary law.

The death of Robespierre is also conveyed through speech in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth "hears" of Robespierre's execution while walking on the English seashore. He asks "a traveller / Chancing to pass" for news, and the man replies in "the familiar language of the day / That, *Robespierre was dead*" (531-535). He recounts his thoughts:

behold,

They who with clumsy desperation brought
 Rivers of blood, and preached that nothing else
 Could cleanse the Augean stable, by the might
 Of their own helper have been swept away.
 Their madness is declared and visible;
 Elsewhere will safety now be sought, and earth
 March firmly towards righteousness and peace. (545-552)

It is significant that he refers to the Jacobins' "madness" as "declared and visible": their madness has been declared, not merely recognized or acknowledged but made into being through speech and therefore made "visible," exposing the revolutionaries' beliefs and actions as illogical. He criticizes the ways that they "preached" that only violence—figured as "Rivers of blood"—could "cleanse" the corruption and filth of an oppressive monarchy, which he compares to cleaning the stables of King Augeas, an act that required diverting the rivers Alpheus and Peneus (Wordsworth, Abrams and Gill *The Prelude* 388). In this account, the pursuit of liberty has been displaced both geographically and ideologically: "elsewhere will safety now be sought," which suggests a turning away from France and from Jacobin ideology.

In the next section, I will examine how Wordsworth portrays the role of speech in the making and breaking of social bonds through the tropological figure of Rivers in *The Borderers*. Rivers, as a continuation of those "Rivers of Blood" that would putatively cleanse France of political corruption, also posits a necessary relationship between virtue and violence in order to serve his own ends. Wordsworth's portrayal of Rivers complicates the ways virtue is used as a legitimating force that seeks to endow the speaker with authoritarian power while creating a

community of individuals unified by a political, totalizing terror.

Criminal and Familial Ties in the Borderland

In *The Borderers*, Wordsworth restages Robespierre's and Burke's earlier negotiations between virtue and terror in a world of Burke's nightmares, in which "we have no compass to govern us, nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer" (*Reflections* 553)⁶⁵. *The Borderers* depicts an Iago-like and Miltonic-Satanic villain, Rivers, attempting to manipulate others using discursive and symbolic tools that echo those of the revolutionaries.⁶⁶ But these discursive tools have been distorted, and their meanings skewed: what is witnessed in *The Borderers* is an inversion of not only virtue but of the symbolic and literal instruments of the Revolution such as familial connections, sentimental attachments, ideas of justice—even terror itself. Here in *The Borderers*, I suggest that Wordsworth portrays Rivers as a figure of insincere speech and willful catachresis who seeks out criminal persons or ideas, revealing the complicated reciprocal relationships embedded in Robespierre's virtue-terror chiasmus. Terror and crime rely on one another in *The Borderers*: crime is the binding force that makes terror possible, and virtue as justice and sentimental attachment is the linguistic instrument that makes crime happen.

By depicting the manipulation of speech to goad others into violent action, Wordsworth demonstrates the extent to which virtue has failed as a regulating and stabilizing force and the extent to which any adherence to the idea that such words have foundational meaning has been

⁶⁵ Works that discuss Wordsworth in relation to Burke include James Chandler's *Wordsworth's Second Nature*; Tim Fulford's *Romanticism and Masculinity*; and Kenneth R. Johnston's *The Hidden Wordsworth*.

⁶⁶ Wordsworth's sources and references include but are not limited to Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*), Joseph Fawcett, William Gilpin, William Godwin (*Caleb Williams* and *Political Justice*) and Schiller (*The Robbers*). For a discussion of Wordsworth and referentiality, see Scott Dykstra's "Wordsworth's 'Solitaries' and the Problem of Literary Reference," among others.

blown. Rivers uses virtue and terror to attain ends that are visionary and totalitarian but also individualized and private. As seen in Rivers' interaction with the other characters, the work of speaking, of utterance, is a force of violence that relies on this instability of meaning as it inverts and reshapes social relations. In the play's inverted echo chamber of the Revolution, crime forms the foundation of Rivers' contrary project of community-building, made possible through the malleability of language and the instability of terms such as "virtue." In the drama, Wordsworth confronts the problem of foundational violence, a "necessity" he supports in the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* and later rejects.

My analysis of the play centers on Rivers, who, I argue, functions as a trope in the etymological sense of a figure of speech that signals a turn in meaning. After being betrayed into participating in a mutinous crime that resembles the parricidal and regicidal actions that propelled the Revolution into the Reign of Terror, Rivers becomes a walking inversion, "his perverted reason justifying his perverted instincts" (*The Borderers* 67). In my reading of the play, I argue that Rivers operates at the "double-cross" of the virtue-terror chiasmus; he is a literal figure of speech that seeks to both create and destroy social bonds through speech that acts and causes others to act. He is also an inverted and inverting instantiation of the general will in that he is both individuated and generalizing. Through a series of performative speech-acts, Rivers enacts a philosophy in which power originates from the self and is contingent upon the individual; while profoundly individuated, this power generalizes in that it works its will onto other people in its desire to form a community based on crime and guilt. Rivers evokes a community-building and love-driven virtue to entrap the other characters in a totalizing and isolating terror. In the *Encyclopédie* (1765), Jean-Edme Romilly writes in the entry on virtue: "However corrupt a man may be, he is never so hideous as to say intrepidly to himself: 'I

abandon myself to crime, to inhumanity, as the principle of my nature; it is beautiful to love vice and to hate virtue” (176–182; vol 17). In the figure of Rivers, Wordsworth presents a man who literally abandons himself to crime in order to become what he believes is more fully human, an *Übermensch* who transcends the moral codes of social convention and becomes instead a force of futurity and vision.⁶⁷ Because Rivers is a distorted reflection of revolutionary ideology and performative speech, the inner contradictions of this ideology and performative speech are made visible. The play recasts the terms of the Revolution, and, in doing so, not only shows these “transitions in character” seen during the Revolution but exposes how virtue and terror can both serve totalitarian agendas.

Little attention has been paid to Wordsworth’s engagement within the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary discourse of virtue. Only Rieder’s work on civic virtue and class differences in Wordsworth’s poetry looks explicitly at his conception of virtue, arguing that his poetry addresses “widespread anxieties about social cohesion in late-eighteenth-century British writing” (*Wordsworth’s Counterrevolutionary Turn* 13). Rieder emphasizes class privilege and economic disparity in his analysis, arguing that Wordsworth saw these social issues as antithetical to “the very foundation of healthy community and individual virtue, often because poverty drives desperate people to crime” (Rieder, “Civic Virtue and Social Class” 355). Such class and economic desperation can be seen in *The Borderers*, in which characters often act out of economic need and fear of the law. Yet Rieder does not consider the ways that this

⁶⁷ Hartman focuses on the character of Rivers (Oswald in the later version) as a mastermind of the first “intellectual murder”: “Whether or not Oswald was conceived in revulsion, as a critique of Godwin’s separation of head from heart, he fosters this imperialism of the intellect, this ruthless futurism of a revolutionary who would achieve autonomy at one blow and by a divorce from natural process” (Hartman “Intellectual Murder”). While my reading is notably less celebratory of Rivers, Hartman’s identification of Rivers with “ruthless futurism” informs my later reading of him in relation to totalitarian ideology, a connection Hartman does not make.

community-seeking virtue is used as an instrument of totalizing terror. I argue that in *The Borderers* a particular type of civic virtue emerges in contrast to Rivers' catachrestic one: Wordsworth portrays what the other characters believe virtue to be, and by showing a man dealing in opposites Wordsworth shows what is possible within virtue, although because of the "perversion" of humankind—and the laws that govern societies—such virtue may not be attainable. This relational virtue is based on familial attachment and sympathy for others.⁶⁸ Such an understanding of virtue, which is both private in its interest in individual relationships and public / political in that it dictates the means of linking individuals together into a larger society, places Wordsworth's understanding of virtue in relation to Scottish Enlightenment thinking in which sympathetic ties are essential to solidifying social bonds and igniting our moral feelings.⁶⁹

Rivers has been considered as a critique of Godwinian philosophy, as a biographical stand-in for the young Wordsworth, as a solitary figure of the sublime, or as an abstracting force that only sees man as an abstraction without frailty or indecision.⁷⁰ William Jewett's approach is perhaps closer to my own, as he examines how Wordsworth "figures the workings and the

⁶⁸ Related to Wordsworth's interest in social and economic inequalities is his investment in "rustic" virtue, that is, the virtue of the "uncontaminated" poor who display industriousness and fortitude in the face of poverty. A discussion of economic virtue falls outside of the political virtue I seek to explore in *The Borderers*. For a discussion of poverty and morality in Wordsworth's early work, see Gary Lee Harrison, *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse: Poetry, Poverty and Power*, among others.

⁶⁹ For discussions of Wordsworth and the Scottish Enlightenment, see Evan Gottlieb, *Feeling British: Sympathy and National Identity in Scottish and English Writing, 1707-1832*; William Richey, "The Rhetoric of Sympathy in Smith and Wordsworth," *European Romantic Review* 13 (2002); Gary Lee Harrison, *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse: Poetry, Power and Power*.

⁷⁰ See, for example, William A. Ulmer, "Answering *The Borderers* in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'" and Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., "Wordsworth's *Borderers* and the Romantic Villain-Hero" for accounts of Godwinian influences, and Robert Sharrock's discussion of Rivers and Mortimer as representative of the younger Wordsworth in "*The Borderers*: Wordsworth on the Moral Frontier." As an abstraction, see Melynda Nuss, "Dramatic Ethics," in which she says that "Rivers envisions man as an abstraction, man without weakness, man without infirmities, man without individuality" (608).

failings of a ‘revolutionary’ moral discourse” (403). Jewett argues that Wordsworth stages the discourse of action as talking about action rather than engaging in it; “the political consequences of a discourse of radical freedom can only unfold in an illusory historical vacuum for which the discourse itself, rather than any characters it generates must be held accountable. The theatrical mechanism by which a moralized language of the self leads to an involuntary repetition of transgressive action, is I believe, what Wordsworth wanted to get rid of in sacrificing Rivers” (Jewett 410). While I agree that the “moralized language of the self” does not always produce action in *The Borderers*, I argue that talking *is* acting in the drama; therefore, talking does not neutralize the transgressive power of Rivers’ Jacobin-like discourse, which does its revolutionary violence in the very naming of things.

When Rivers was a young, ambitious man, his shipmates tricked him into abandoning their captain on a deserted island. This foundational crime that leads Rivers to sever all moral agreements with society; he is transformed by this crime and turns away from the conventions of society and to see “that every possible shape of action / Might lead to good—I saw it and burst forth / Thirsting for some exploit of power and terror” (IV.ii 1836-1838, IV.ii 1780-1782). As Wordsworth says in his essay “On the Character of Rivers”:

It is his pleasure and his consolation to hunt out whatever is bad in actions usually esteemed virtuous and to detect the good in actions which the universal sense of mankind teaches us to reprobate . . . his reason is almost exclusively employed in justifying his past enormities and in enabling him to commit new ones . . . His imagination is powerful, being strengthened by the habit of picturing possible forms of society where his crimes would be no longer crimes. (*The Borderers* 62, 64-65)

Rivers continually imagines a world in which his individual actions, however detrimental to others, would be justified using the language of morality. Now a criminal and a self-proclaimed murderer, he inverts the usual chains of affection and the assumptions of a shared good will that supposedly bind together a society: “I felt that to be truly the world’s friend, / We must become the object of its hate” (IV.ii 1827-28). Rivers willingness to cast himself outside of society in to order to become what he sees as more human marks a distinct break with the chivalrous codes of the medieval period to which he supposedly belongs and figures him as a post-revolutionary figure who is human, allegorical and tropological. As Theresa M. Kelley writes, romantic allegory makes “border raids on what is real” (*Reinventing Allegory* 131); Rivers, as an allegory and a trope, transgresses these borders and lures others to join him.⁷¹ In addition, Rivers’ tropological nature resonates with Paul de Man’s discussion of Locke’s concern with the boundary-crossing capabilities of tropes in *Aesthetic Ideology*: “We have no way of defining, of policing, the boundaries that separate the name of one entity from the name of another; tropes are not just travelers, they tend to be smugglers and probably smugglers of stolen goods at that. What makes matters even worse is that there is no way of finding out whether they do so with criminal intent or not” (39). Because the stability of a word’s meaning shifts depending on the interpreter, the speaker, and the situation, tropes resist authoritative significance: the meanings of words pivot not on “a question of ontology, of things as they are, but of things as they are decreed to be” (de Man 39). Rivers is a “smuggler” who transgresses the borders between the “real” and the figurative: the absence of legal authority in the Tweed compounds the absence of

⁷¹ Rivers is the type of romantic allegory does not appear fully as an abstraction, allowing him to be both particular and carry the abstract resonances of the allegory (c.f. Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory*, especially chapters five and six).

categorical distinctions between words, and Rivers' listeners are unable to discern his intention because reality is determined by whatever—and by whomever—it is “decreed” to be.

Rivers, as a trope, is also rhetorical in the sense of using persuasive speech to shape and change reality:⁷²

a work of rhetoric . . . functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive.

(Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation” 22)

Rivers, as a body of rhetoric, is able to flow freely through the borderlands and in and out of the minds of its inhabitants who are famished for stability. He uses the uncertainty of the borderlands to work his will upon others: presumably speaking only for himself, he says: “Happy are we / Who live in these disputed tracts that own / No law but what each man makes for himself. / Here justice has indeed a field of triumph!” (II.i. 595-598). Each invocation of a universal term is a kind of ironic slippage that underscores the discrepancy between the River's audience (Mortimer) and Rivers' meaning. Rivers thinks in terms of rhetoric; as he builds his argument, he moves between “proof” and “passion,” logos and pathos (III.ii 1148), and even assesses Mortimer's plans to reveal Herbert's guilt in terms of kairos and audience: he notes that “The thought is grand, / And worthy the occasion” but asks if “some may think / It is unseemly in a man like you / To take the life of one so helpless?” (II.i 599-603). In the course of his

⁷² In addition to Jewett, Stefanie Markovits has discussed action in *The Borderers*, but not the idea of Rivers as a tropological figure.

argumentation Rivers raises counter arguments, which only strengthen Mortimer's resolve to punish Herbert violently for his putative crimes. He also relies on speech as a force of action, and uses virtue as a means of persuasion to justify and encourage the retributive and preventive death of others. His use of speech is performative in that it intends "not to inform or to describe, but to carry out a 'performance' to accomplish an act through the very process of enunciation" (Felman 15). Rivers recognizes that Mortimer's virtuous calling must be in response to an actual criminal act. In order to transform Mortimer through crime as he was transformed through crime, Rivers invents a scenario in which the familial ties between Matilda and Herbert are forged only through deceit and exploitation; he uses the language of moral sentiment and legal obligation in order to provoke action in his audience.

Mortimer, a relic of a chivalrous age who values honor and believes in the possibility of social stability through sentimental connections to others, functions as a foil for the post-Revolutionary Rivers. The play begins with Mortimer's comrade warning Mortimer to be "cautious" because Rivers seems to hate him (I.i 1, 28). Rivers chooses Mortimer because he sees that Mortimer is weak in that he seeks sentimental attachments to others and considers Rivers his friend (I.i 1, 56). Friendship is one of the many unstable categories in the Tweed. Rivers is able to take advantage of the ambiguity caused by the lack of authority in both legal terms and in terms of language; as Francoise Furet writes of Robespierre: "the tendency of ideology to slide toward the manipulation was inherent in the nature of revolutionary power, which set up and legitimated by opinion alone, without there being rules for expressing that opinion. Robespierre ruled thanks to that ambiguity" (*Interpreting the French Revolution* 56). To manipulate Mortimer Rivers preys upon his desire for order, familial ties and regulation. The virtue to which the characters cling is recognizable within the larger context of revolutionary

discourse: it is stabilizing, promotes the bonds between people, protects the weak and punishes the guilty; it is also linked closely to justice.⁷³ Victoria Meyers, in her reading of *The Borderers* in relation to the sedition and treason trial of the 1790's, touches on the importance of determining the "ownership" of virtue during the trial of Louis (444), connecting Mortimer's need for Herbert to be punished as the need to confirm his own righteousness (445). Indeed, virtue in the drama is enacted through justice, which makes itself known through violence; even Mortimer's conception of virtue is violent to the degree that to act virtuously is to punish the outliers of society.

Rivers makes this association explicit: Rivers says, "Justice! Is there not thunder in the word?" (II.iii 893), echoing the divine violence of the people evident in Robespierre's speeches. Rivers says to Mortimer of Herbert:

He dreads the presence of a virtuous man
 Like you, he knows your eye would search his heart,
 Your justice stamp upon his evil deeds
 The punishment they merit. (I.i 264-267)

In order for the virtue to be regulating and to work as a divider between the guilty and the innocent, it must do the work of punishment. It is a virtue that sees evil and violently "stamps" it out. Rivers also makes a statement about what the "word" justice contains, confirming that its definition includes violence. While they talk of the possibility of trial and verdict (II.iii 881-883), the virtuous justice Rivers forces upon Mortimer is singular ("your single virtue") and recognizes guilt with immediate violence, no matter the relative helplessness of the accused ("Justice /

⁷³ The virtue Rivers references and Mortimer yearns for is gendered as well; Matilda's virtue is seen in her tender care for her father as well as her sexual virtue, which is first seen as under threat and then compromised once Mortimer is led to believe that she will go to Clifford willfully.

Admitting no resistance, binds alike / The feeble and the strong” (II.iii 1087-1090). Mortimer, despite his dismay at Rivers’ story, seems to agree that Herbert’s crime falls into the realm of divine justice because it outsizes human law: “There is no earthly law / That measures crimes like his” (II.i 583-584). Rivers also connects Mortimer’s virtuous and justice-creating task by identifying it as part of the larger human project of abolishing evil from world. He is quick to tell Mortimer that he is “a protector of humanity! an avenger of innocence!” (II.iii 981), and Mortimer follows suit by ascribing universal benefit to this singular act of punishing Herbert: “This act has virtue for a thousand lives” (II.i 624). This virtuous and violent justice seems to be transparently universal and align with the general will: an individual acts according to and at the service of the agreed-upon good of all, but such seemingly universal understandings are revealed to be distorted and manipulated as the play progresses.

Rivers’ logic turns on the meaning of words; he uses the instability of categorical and relational meaning to manipulate Mortimer into violent action. He threatens Mortimer with a state of social affairs ruled by the false understanding of words: “Henceforth it shall be said that bad men only / Are brave—Clifford is brave, and that old man / Is brave” (II.iii. 910-912). Here he manipulates Mortimer by bestowing virtue upon those considered not virtuous; the irony underlying this formula is that Clifford is (presumably) not virtuous whereas Herbert is, and Mortimer believes he is acting virtuously when really he is not. When Mortimer balks at killing Herbert, Rivers exclaims: “Herbert! the *Baron* Herbert! since you will have it, he who will be / the Baron Herbert when Matilda is Clifford’s Harlot” (II.iii 979-979). In the transitional space of the borderlands, the appellations that identify one’s social and moral standing are in flux and subject to human intervention: Herbert could be a baron or he could be a criminal; Matilda could be a wife or could be a prostitute. Rivers places Mortimer in charge of preventing these titles and

their corresponding social positions, but the actual categories that Rivers wants Mortimer to attach to Herbert and Matilda mark the severing of social and familial ties: Herbert dead, Matilda an orphan.

Rivers is a force of revolutionary virtue in that he causes Mortimer to reverse his moral understanding of the world; in this way, the shifting in moral order through the shifting in categorical terms recalls the “transitions” that Wordsworth witnessed during the Revolution. In the 1842 note on the play, Wordsworth writes:

The study of human nature suggests this awful truth, that, as in the trials to which life subjects us, sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities, so are there no limits to the hardening of the heart, and the perversion of the understanding to which they may carry their slaves.

In the case of *The Borderers*, “sin and crime” are the inversions of virtue and law, which when placed together in the context of the border results in this “hardening of the heart” and the “perversion of the understanding” that is seen in Rivers and absorbed by Mortimer. Rivers is a trope but also a personification of traumatic social change, and this change works itself out in Mortimer’s grappling of his new understandings of human relationships and the corrupt intentions that underlie virtuous and lawful exteriors.

If I ever knew

My heart, and naked saw the man within me,
 ‘Tis at this moment.—Rivers! I have loved
 To be the friend and father of the helpless,
 A comforter of sorrow—there is something
 Which looks like a *transition* in my soul,

And yet it is not (II.i 632-637)

In this transitional moment Mortimer experiences multiple shifts in how he perceives himself and others. In this passage Mortimer's love for and desire to protect others is wedded to a thirst for violence and revenge, which is a sign of the "hardening of the heart" that will lead him to commit an atrocity against a fellow man, even if he does so by accident. This "transition" mimics the "double cross" of the virtue-terror chiasmus in which Mortimer finds that his compassionate and sympathetic impulses—to be a "friend and father"—have crossed into a violence that Mortimer sees as related to this impulse; such vision of his "naked" self previously defined by its virtue now crossing into violence frightens and unsettles him. This is a form of the self-referential and self-created terror that Rivers seeks: to strip Mortimer of his moral groundings and to create in him a creature who is both terrified and terrifying: isolated, and yet needing to replicate this isolation in others.

Unhinging Herbert's from his paternal authority mimics unhinging Mortimer from a stable understanding of virtue; his accusation and death, which resemble the reversals of familial sentiment toward Louis during the Revolution, also marks a reversal in Mortimer's emotional attachment to and perception of others.⁷⁴ The regicidal echoes behind Herbert's death intensify Rivers' parricidal and totalitarian drive to form a brotherhood of isolated individuals.⁷⁵ By arranging his death, Rivers prevents the restoration of Herbert to a position of authority (II.ii 1020-1029), which is like the Revolution in that Herbert has royal connections, but also unlike the Revolution in that regicide was meant to be a socially-stabilizing necessity. These

⁷⁴ David Erdman, in his mostly biographical reading of *The Borderers*, argues that Wordsworth uses the drama to exorcise the desire for vengeful, regicidal violence that comes from revolutionary ideology ("Wordsworth as Heartsworth; Or Was Regicide the Prophetic Ground of Those Moral Questions?" in *The Evidence of the Imagination: Studies of Interactions in Life and Art in English Romantic Literature*, Ed. D.H. Reiman, M.C. Jaye and B.T. Bennett).

⁷⁵ See R.F. Storch, "William Wordsworth's *The Borderers*: The Poet as Anthropologist."

reenactments of the death of the father may also speak to conceptions of “the fatherland” during the Revolution; the nation was figured as in need of protection and devotion, but monarchical structures led to the betrayal and exploitation of its “offspring.” Throughout the play, Mortimer seeks out familial connections—Herbert would be in his father in law if he was to marry Matilda, and Mortimer is preoccupied with Herbert’s supposedly false status as a father. Mortimer’s dilemma is encapsulated in his exclamation to Wallace, as they discuss how to render Herbert’s guilt “a monument to the ages” (II.ii 1123): “I love the father in thee. / —You know me, friends: I have a heart to feel, / But Justice! Justice— (II.ii 1110-1112). Mortimer’s affection for others drives both his emotional turmoil about how to confront this crime and his outrage at the supposed perversion of fatherhood. When he thinks he is guilty, Mortimer wonders at Herbert’s paternal corruption:

Even while he printed kisses on the cheek
 Of this poor babe, and taught its innocent mouth
 To lisp the name of father, could he look
 To the unnatural harvest of that time
 When he should give her up, a woman grown,
 To him who bid the highest in the market
 Of foul pollution— (II.ii 1049-1056)

The “name of father” becomes a corrupting lie, and the tableau of a loving father teaching his daughter to speak has been inverted; instead, the scene is one of exploitation and the unnatural commodification of an innocent child. Such outrages at the complicity of language in man’s depravity is one of the moral shifts Mortimer undergoes: first in his belief that a man would pose as a loving father in order to foster a woman into sexual slavery, and then when he learns that

Rivers has manipulated him into causing the death of an innocent man. To abandon the fatherland is another example of dislocation in the play, suggesting that there is no father or homeland, only liminal spaces that seek to betray and exploit those who pass through.⁷⁶ Hearing more of Rivers' story, Mortimer expresses incredulity at the chains of connection that supposedly link the people he once cared for:

And I have *loved* this man? And she hath loved him,
 And I loved her, and she loved the Lord Clifford,
 And there it ends—if this be not enough
 To make mankind merry for evermore
 Then plain it is as day—that eyes were made
 For a wise purpose—verily to weep with! (III.iii 1269-1274)

Love, rather than linking people together into chains of affection and protection, links Mortimer to a series of betrayals and inversions that call into question the very foundations of human attachments. He connects these personal connections to the larger sorrow and corruption of mankind; his sense of generalized connection to others is slowly being corrupted by Rivers' imagined crime. This lament also carries the ironic reversal of the love-driven virtue that turns into the source and instigator of corruption and human suffering.

Mortimer does not realize that he has broken from the chains of "ordinary" society until Rivers names himself as a "murderer" (IV.ii 1681) and recounts the story of his foundational crime. Throughout Rivers' confession to Mortimer, Mortimer repeatedly evokes friendship, sympathy and outrage on his behalf at the betrayal (IV.ii). "Oh, my poor friend! / By all that thou hast suffered doubly dear—" (IV.ii 1815-1816). In this exchange Mortimer compares his

⁷⁶ Mona Ozouf, among others, discusses the changing conceptions and representations of the fatherland in *Festivals in the French Revolution*.

situation with Rivers, happy that he has “The proofs, the proofs” which have enabled him “to have touch’d the guilt” (IV.ii 1770-1771), but these too resulted from the unreliability of others’ insincere speech. Mortimer he realizes that the bond between him and Rivers is a sinister one; they are linked by a twinned or symmetrical guilt, which, in Rivers’ inverted ideology, is a form of familial and communal connection, as I will discuss in the next section.

Rivers’ Band of Brothers

Rivers’ larger intent in entrapping Mortimer into murder is an enactment of an idea that speaks to the violent nature of humankind: that crime is the origin of civilization. Arendt observes the ways that betrayal and crime among brothers reappear in stories of how human society was created: “The tale spoke clearly: whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men may have achieved has its origins in crime” (*On Revolution* 20). Lynn Hunt understands primitive violence as fundamentally familial and patriarchal: “The killing of the political father enacted a ritual sacrifice and opened the way to the band of brothers” (*Family Romance* 53). She looks at the “collectively shared images” of family and father-figures during the Revolution: “Every person, every group, every political faction did not share them in the same way, of course, yet such images, and the conflicts over them, helped to structure narratives of power and authority” (*Family Romance* 124). Rivers both seeks out and attempts to erase crime. He needs crime as the binding force that sets the conditions for his version of terror; he relies on others’ conceptions of a virtuous justice in order to pull them into a community based on shared guilt. This compulsion toward self-justification and self-exoneration seems to embody a certain part of the virtue-terror conjunction in which violence, murder, betrayal, false-witnessing and all sorts of other universally-agreed upon

“crimes” can be for good, or not be crimes at all—a similar argument made by the revolutionaries when discussing the fate of Louis the XVI (“Louis must die for the republic to live”) and the kind of violent severity that Robespierre declares necessary for the republic to survive during the Revolution.

Rivers’ delicate balancing of malice tempered by an inverted benevolence is perhaps the most transparent connection to the virtue-terror conjunction seen during the Revolution. When asked his favorite plants, Rivers responds: “That which, while it is / Strong to destroy, is also strong to heal” (I.i 47-48); at the very end of the play, shortly before he is executed, he is muttering to himself: “Strong to destroy—strong also to build up” (V. iii 2245). He articulates this idea more fully in this attempt to keep Mortimer from acting rashly with his newfound knowledge: “Benevolence that has not heart to use / The wholesome ministry of pain and evil / Is powerless and contemptible” (II.i 617-619). Rivers plays off of Robespierre’s merging of virtue with terror in that good will (“benevolence”) is impotent without the salutary application of “pain and evil.” And yet there is something skewed in Rivers’ application of these ideas that is made especially apparent when viewed in relation to Robespierre’s virtue-terror chiasmus. Rivers’ desire for “some exploit of power and terror” is deeply individuated. It is literally self-made.

Rivers individuates the general will, arguing that the individual must override the general. He tells Mortimer:

You have taught mankind to seek the measure of justice
 By diving for it into their own bosoms.
 To day you have thrown off a tyranny
 That lives but by the torpid acquiescence
 Of our emasculated souls, the tyranny

Of moralists and saints and lawgivers.
 You have obeyed the only law that wisdom
 Can ever recognize: the immediate law
 Flashed from the light of circumstances
 Upon an independent intellect. (III.v.1488-1496)

The Godwinian cast of this declaration is problematic to the core because it collapses the general and the individual.⁷⁷ Rivers locates the general will in the self, where it always resided, but instead of conforming to the will of all Rivers universalizes acting on individual impulses in order to excuse crime. He rejects the tyranny of a Robespierre—“of moralists and saints and lawgivers”—and instead claims that Mortimer should rely on the doubly contingent law of self and circumstance. In this way, River eradicates the existence of crime; in a moral universe dictated by individuals who deny the social contract, Rivers’ “crimes would no longer be crimes” (65). If “every possible shape of action / Might lead to good—” (IV.ii 1780-1782), then there is no true crime, only choices made by men who follow their own wills. Rivers demonstrates the ways that the general will discounts individuals who do not conform to universal ideas. At the same time, Rivers relies on universal moral codes to create the opportunities for the crime he needs in his quest to connect with others.

Rivers individuating project transforms the idea of terror itself. He is his own ideology, “pretend[ing] to know the mysteries of the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future because of the logic inherent in [his] respective ideas” (Arendt, *Origins* 604). Arendt defines terror as “the realization of the law of

⁷⁷ In “Answering *The Borderers*,” Ulmer argues that Wordsworth portrays Rivers as a “Godwinian rationalist” who posits a problematic moral philosophy that dismisses the idea of “human guilt”; through his portrayal of Rivers, Ulmer argues, Wordsworth critiques the Godwinian concept of Necessity (235).

movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action” (*Origins* 559). The “new beginning” that threatens the progression of history with each person’s birth is epitomized by the figure of Rivers, who sees himself as reborn through crime and as a spontaneous force that moves forth into the future (what Hartman calls, a “ruthless futurism”). Arendt writes that totalitarian government promises “justice on earth because it claims to make mankind itself the embodiment of law” (*Origins* 596); Rivers wants to make himself the embodiment of law, as an individual separated from mankind who fabricates mankind. Rivers views himself as having a larger purpose (“to enlarge / The intellectual empire of mankind”) and he affects to produce change in the world through other people, whom he manipulates through words of his own invention and those he ventriloquises through others.

Rather than a collective Rivers is a totalitarian force that attempts to gather up a “band of brothers” in order to move forth through time and space: total terror “substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it as though their plurality has disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions” (*Origins* 600). Rivers says of Mortimer that “Henceforth I’ll have him / A shadow of myself, made by myself” through the process of making Mortimer complicit in a murder. Rivers makes it clear that he will attach himself to Mortimer: “Therefore I’ll cleave to you / In camps and cities, in the wood and mountain, / In evil, and in solitary pain,/ You shall find that I will cleave to you” (III.v 18-21). He tells Mortimer: “Because I feel / That I am bound to you by links of adamant” (III.v 22-23), and that “I still will be your friend, will cleave to you / Through good and evil, through scorn and infamy—” (III.v 1499-1500). John Rieder writes, “In ironic contrast to his rhetoric of sublimely isolated will, however, [Rivers] attempts to bind Mortimer to

himself by means of seizing the power of death over another, making of that other a sacrificial victim whose execution produces the communal bond of shared guilt” (125); this triad of community-solitude-abandonment codifies terror as both the fusion of people together and absolute isolation. Such an act of sacrificial violence parallels the sacrificial death of the Louis, and, later, of Robespierre himself, echoing the idea that the formation of a community requires foundational, sacrificial violence.

Rivers manipulates Mortimer in order to refashion him in his image, to make Mortimer border upon him until they enter a place of indistinction between man and man. To border on or upon means “to approach closely in character, to resemble closely, to verge on.”⁷⁸ This idea of approaching closely in character, to resemble, is a revealing way to analyze the significance of how the characters “border upon” one another. There are numerous references to resemblances throughout the play. Herbert’s familial resemblance to Matilda undermines Mortimer’s murder attempt and Rivers’ story about his guilt; Herbert sees the “skeleton” of Matilda in the face of the woman driven insane by the sexual predilections of Clifford, which further convinces him to take “judicial” action (II.i.581); the two murders-by-abandonment mirror one another; the sea resembles the border in that it too is a liminal space of indefinite laws. This bordering and merging is part of the larger project of terror to eliminate the difference between men, which is also a form of radical equality. This sameness-through-complicity even transcends the boundaries of the body: Mortimer says of the criminals who surround him and of whom he is a part: “We are all of one blood, our veins are filled / At the same poisonous fountain” (IV.ii 1739-40).

⁷⁸ “Border.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Essential to this fusion of men to men is the abandonment of other men, which speaks to the terror of being abandoned by the law (however unfounded) and without the protection of the community. The image of the abandoned captain warrants closer examination. Mortimer's shock at the description is that the man retained his resemblances to other men:

A man by men deserted,
 Not buried in the sand—not dead nor dying,
 But standing, walking—stretching forth his arms:
 In all things like yourselves, but in the agony
 With which he called for mercy—and even so,
 He was forsaken. (IV.ii 1727-1732)

Mortimer ruminates over the idea that the man left on the island resembled those who left him: he was “In all things like yourselves,” but still abandoned by human society. Rivers dehumanizes the captain, calling him “A giant body mid a world of beings / Not one of which could give him any aid, / Living or dead” (IV.ii 1725-1728). This island setting, which resembles the woods where Herbert is left to die, echoes “the wilderness that the world has become” that is part of the isolating and the fusing work of terror:

The compulsion of total terror on one side, which, with its iron band, presses masses of isolated men together *and* supports them in a world which has become a wilderness for them, and the self-coercive force of logical deduction on the other, which prepares each individual in his lonely isolation against all others, correspond to each other and need each other in order to see the terror-ruled movement into motion and keep it moving.
 (Arendt, *Origins* 610)

In *The Borderers*, this wilderness is figured as the desolate landscape in which man renders man into a body (living or otherwise) in the name of unfounded justice that must sacrifice parts in order to create a criminal whole. To leave someone to die in solitude is to render them less human: as Mortimer says: “The wounded deer retires to solitude— / And dies in solitude—all things but man, / All die in solitude” (V. iii 2117-2124). Of course, Mortimer is himself guilty of abandoning a man to die alone. He recounts the facts of his crime without embellishment: “I led him to the middle of this heath. / I left him without food and so he died” (V.iii 2228-2229) and then become alone himself: “I am cut off from man / No more shall I be man, no more shall I / Have human feelings!” (III.iii 1327-1330).

Mortimer’s transition into a “world which has become a wilderness” for him is complete, precisely because it holds no hope of unity with others. In the end he condemns himself to be a wanderer “unnamed by man” (V.iii 2318-19). He ejects himself completely from the social space built and destroyed by language. Arendt writes that “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist” (*Origins* 610). Mortimer becomes this “ideal subject,” at least for a while, as a result of being on the border where opposites cleave and the disconnection between signifier and the signified is absolute. Law contains crime, was built on crime, and justice relies on crime in order to be virtuous and to complete its own stabilizing work. But the totalitarian conditions created by Rivers inverts justice and inverts crime, creating a “wilderness” in which truth and falsity merge and resemble one another. In this unstable, borderline world, being alone and being together becomes a form of terror.

Conclusion: Distance and Irony

Mortimer laments that “We are all of one blood, our veins are filled / At the same poisonous fountain” which signals the extent to which familial relationships—“blood relations”—have been poisoned by Rivers’ warped attempt at familial unification. This poisoning echoes Burke’s fear that the French-born linguistic turn of Revolution would spread across geographical borders and infect the “moral essence” that constitutes a nation. Mortimer, when learning of Herbert’s intentions, cries: “The world is poisoned at the heart” (II.iii 1036). In the context of the play and within the context of the Revolution, “world” becomes a near synonym for speech, and vice versa: if speech constructs reality and if speech is poisoned then reality—the world—becomes “contaminated” and dangerous as well.

Like Burke, Wordsworth seeks out theatrical structures to critique revolutionary ideology and its enacting of virtuous terror; this structure emphasizes the role of distance in understanding the possessive nature of the discursive virtue-terror conjunction. While the play was not staged in Wordsworth’s lifetime, the genre of the drama creates a self-conscious space between audience and observer that comes across even in closet dramas as the space between text and reader.⁷⁹ In the play, the tropological inversions and irony work together to create distance for the audience: the audience can see the inversions at work in a way the characters cannot, and the irony of these reversals—safety as abandonment, attachment as betrayal—serve to create even more distance by emphasizing the discrepancy between what is said and the reality of the scene. In this way, the play affords the audience enough distance to have a moral grounding in which to situate the meaning of words, but this dramatization also shows how terror can shrink that distance: during

⁷⁹ It was, in fact, rejected outright by the manager of Covent Garden (“Introduction” Osborn 4).

the Revolution even the outside audience found that speech turned on them, and those inside the shifting discursive world had even less critical distance.

Chapter Five:

Public Speaking: Performative Speech, Gender, and the Borders of Legitimacy in Staël's *Corinne, or Italy*

Germaine de Staël's novel *Corinne, or Italy* (*Corinne ou l'Italie*, 1807) features a most unusual heroine: she is, as English Showalter notes, perhaps the first truly independent heroine to appear in a European novel at that time (189).⁸⁰ Modeled after a real-life Italian *improvisatrice*, Maria Maddelena Morelli Fernandez, also known as Corilla Olimpica (Gonda 199), Corinne begins the novel as a renowned artist, living a “free life,” and, when we first meet her, at the center of the public stage, literally being crowned for her artistic and social achievements. However, by the end of the novel she is dying in a private room, attended by Oswald, Lord Nelvil, her former lover, now her brother-in-law, and his wife, her half-sister Lucile:

She wanted to speak to him, but was not strong enough. She raised her eyes to heaven and saw the moon covered with the same cloud as the one she had pointed out to Lord Nelvil

⁸⁰ The time frame for *Corinne, or Italy* spans from 1794 to 1803. The novel is both a tragic love story and a critique of the ways society condemns free-thinking individuals—artistic, independent women in particular. The novel begins with Oswald, a melancholy Scottish peer who comes to Italy in the wake of his father's death. He first encounters Corinne in Rome, where she is being crowned in honor of her artistic gifts. Corinne later reveals that she is half-English, half-Italian, and is the half-sister of Lucile, the young English woman Oswald's father wished Oswald to marry. Corinne and Oswald begin a tempestuous but chaste love affair and travel together through much of Italy. Corinne is unsure about marrying Oswald because she does not want to give up her free, artistic life and move to Scotland, where she spent a miserable and oppressive adolescence; Oswald is conflicted in his feelings because he knows that his father would disapprove of the marriage (which is in fact true: he later learns that his father had once considered Corinne as his betrothed, but had decided that her talents and Italian background made her an inappropriate wife for an Englishman). Near the end of the novel, Oswald returns to Scotland, where he meets Lucile and is intrigued by her reticent charms. In despair of losing Oswald, Corinne goes to Scotland secretly, but, after seeing that he is falling in love with Lucile and she with him, sends him a letter informing him that “you are free” (337). Thinking that Corinne has betrayed him, Oswald marries Lucile; he then learns that Corinne had been in Scotland and is now dying in Florence. Oswald takes Lucile and their daughter, Juliet, to Italy, where Corinne instructs Lucile and Juliet in her talents, and then dies an abandoned, dispirited woman, leaving Oswald to return to his life as a dutiful, if regretful, husband and father.

when, on the way to Naples, they had stopped by the seashore. Then, with her dying hand, she pointed it out to him, and with her last breath that hand dropped down. (*Corinne* 404)

(Elle voulut lui parler, et n'en eut pas la force. Elle leva ses regards vers le ciel, et vit la lune qui se couvrait du même nuage qu'elle avait fait remarquer à lord Nelvil quand ils s'arrêtèrent sur le bord de la mer en allant à Naples. Alors elle le lui montra de sa main mourante, et son dernier soupir fit retomber cette main; *Corinne ou l'Italie*)

That Corinne lacks the strength to speak before dying is striking because her voice propels the novel—in fact, her monologues constitute a significant portion of the text. Some readers, such as Jennifer Birkett, see “continuity” in this scene rather than “the failure of feminine voice” (400); because Corinne passes on her talents to the other women in the novel, and because of the narrative momentum of the novel itself, she has created a “community of language, society, and individual subject” (Birkett 400). Others agree, seeing her grooming of Lucile and Oswald’s daughter Juliet as a sign that Corinne’s powers of speech have not ebbed entirely. Hillman, for example, sees the ending of the novel as Corinne having “revenged herself in the most imaginative way possible” in passing on her gifts to Juliet (244). Hillman writes, “Conscious of her proud heritage, she passes it on to a future muse” (244). Marso takes this reading even further: through her portrayal of Corinne, she argues, Staël “develops the practices of women to articulate a critique of the masculine public sphere and to make a gesture toward an alternative future” (108-109) in which women play an active role as citizens.

However, such readings fail to recognize the extent to which Corinne’s redaction from the public sphere is an act of terror that denies Corinne the performative speech on which her

subjectivity and any alternative future depend. As Vincent Whitman observes, Corinne's "physical and psychological disintegration" coincides with "the progressive attenuation of the protagonist's originally free, expansive, authoritative, and public literary discourse" (55); Corinne literally cannot survive without a public forum. Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed . . . A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (110). Corinne depends on this public sphere, and in her improvisations she leads and creates these conversations to the point that she comes to represent this public body. Corinne's engagement with the public depends on speech that literally performs her identity and gender; as Angela Esterhammer explains, performative speech creates subjecthood and relies on an exchange with an audience to sustain itself. According to Esterhammer, "verbal utterances have an effect on the addressee, the speaker and the speech situation that needs to be described not just in terms of rhetoric or persuasion, but as the actual founding of the subject—positions of speaker and hearer, the establishment of their relationships to one another and to the external world" (*Romantic Performative* xii).

Performative speech also relies on social context for maintaining its legitimacy and authority. As Sandy Petrey notes, "Performative speech is by definition—in its essence—socially specific. Its power is inseparable from a precise collective vision of what counts as authority in which set of circumstances" (*Realism and Revolution* 21). By the end of the novel, Corinne's gifts have been reduced to "her charm" (*Corinne* 269) ("le charme"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*), and they are transmitted for the private pleasures of men, first Oswald, and later Juliet's husband. No longer spontaneously springing from her natural talents, the fact that her gifts become skills that can be transferred to others for domestic use suggests that her speech has become neutralized; Lucile

and Juliet cannot maintain the same subjectivity as Corinne because they lack Corinne's oral performative virtue, which I argue is necessarily spontaneous and public.

Previous scholarship on *Corinne* focuses on how the tyranny of patriarchal public opinion brings down Corinne—at least, on the way Oswald submits to this opinion, and how he judges Corinne according to the socially specific rules that determine feminine behavior and value.⁸¹ More recent scholars have started investigating Staël's interest in the ways performative speech works for and against these prevailing social and political norms. Focusing on Staël's *Considerations*, Karyna Szmurlo writes that Staël “tries to detect the transgressive / regressive action of speech within a social context” (“Speech Acts” 237), suggesting that Staël is well aware both that words can act and that context determines their efficacy. Szmurlo later describes Staël's portrayal of Corinne as one of oral performativity: “Corinne's mother tongue is oral, the art of conversation, the spirit of conversation” (*The Novel's Seductions* 121). Birkett is also interested in performativity and improvisation, claiming that “Corinne is not tale but a presence, a speech-product, generated by a plurality of voices in a range of tenses . . . Corinne appears pre-eminently a subject in discourse, a construction in the present voice” (401). While Birkett overlooks the importance of public context, her reading here reveals the tenuous nature of Corinne's presence: Corinne depends on speech that is contemporaneous and simultaneous, created and sustained through speech.

⁸¹ Most Staël scholarship takes a feminist perspective and focuses on Corinne's relationship to sometimes vaguely identified “patriarchal” forces. See, for example, Francine du Plessix Gray, *Madame de Staël: The First Modern Woman*; Charlotte Hogsett, *The Literary Existence of Germaine de Staël* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987); Marie-Claire Vallois, *Fictions féminines: Mme de Staël et les voix de la Sibylle* (Stanford: Anma Libri, 1987); Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho* (University of Chicago Press, 1989); Doris Kadish, *Politicizing Gender* (Rutgers University Press, 1991); Geneviève Fraisse, *Muse de la Raison* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1989); Avriel Goldberger, Madelyn Gutwirth, and Karyna Szmurlo, editors, *Germaine de Staël: Crossing the Borders* (Rutgers University Press, 1991).

Even with increased critical attention to performative speech in *Corinne*, there remains much to be discovered about the ways Staël uses *Corinne* to grapple with the role of oral performance in creating and maintaining political subjecthood, especially in the context of the French Revolution.⁸² In this chapter, I suggest that reading Corinne’s speech and silence in relation to oral performativity and political ideology offers a less hopeful—but perhaps more realistic—understanding of Corinne’s treatment throughout the novel and her demise at the end. Because Corinne enacts her virtue through speaking, to silence her is to deny this new vision for women in public; Corinne’s embrace of the ideals of revolutionary virtue leads to the disciplinary aspects of revolutionary terror, suggesting that Staël recognizes revolutionary virtue’s destructive potential.

While the novel is set after the French Revolution, scholars, such as Simone Balayé, have been reading the novel in relation to the French Revolution for some time.⁸³ Doris Y. Kadish argues that Corinne’s downfall mirrors the descent of the Revolution from idealistic possibility to disappointment and tyranny (113-121). Kadish asserts that Corinne “must die because the early dreams for the Revolution did, not just because she was the hopeless romantic that some

⁸² Born in France but of Swiss nationality, Staël’s life was intimately connected to revolutionary events: her father was Jacques Necker, Director of Finance under King Louis XVI; she was present at Versailles when it was attacked in October 1789. While she initially supported the Revolution insofar as it promoted personal liberty, she identified as a constitutional monarchist, and wrote an anonymous defense of Marie Antoinette before her execution. In 1802 she was banished by Napoleon for her political opinions, and spent much of her life in exile from her beloved Paris (biographies include Herold, *Mistress to An Age*, Renee Winegarten, *Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant: A Dual Biography*, and Ghislain de Diesbach, *Madame de Staël*). It is difficult to separate Staël as an historical figure from her literary writings, and much criticism examines her biography in relation to her work, sometimes even explaining inconsistencies in her portrayals of male characters based on who she was involved with at the time (see, for example, Herold, *Mistress to An Age*). Over the last thirty years, she has gained popularity with feminist readers, who have deemed her “the first modern woman,” and have taken to addressing the political implications of both her fictional and non-fictional work.

⁸³ Balayé, Simone. *Madame De Staël: Lumières Et Liberté*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1979. Print.

readers might take her to be” (121). I take this argument further to examine the specific ways Corinne becomes victim to the contradictions and tensions inherent in the virtue-terror chiasmus, which works dramatically and performatively in *Corinne*. I argue that Corinne embodies a public, civic virtue made possible through her improvised performances, a virtue that resembles the revolutionary ideal and becomes subject to Arendtian total terror manifested as the disciplinary suppression of mental, verbal and physical spontaneity.

I begin my analysis with Corinne’s account of her youth in Scotland before considering how this experience helps to explain the impossibility of a future for the adult Oswald and Corinne. The Scottish section, buried and withheld in the novel, marks Corinne’s first, symbolic death, the precursor of her actual death. Most scholarship skims over Corinne’s Scottish experience, but I argue that the Scotland section details the first time terror infiltrates the novel, laying the groundwork for how totalitarianism, performative speech and subjectivity intersect in private and public spaces. In Scotland, Corinne encounters a counter-discourse of virtue that does the work of terror. The word virtue is used against Corinne—it is used to “impose this silence” on Corinne. Then, I turn the beginning of the novel, arguing that prior to the terror that the Scotland narrative introduces, Corinne enacts a public, civic virtue through her improvisations, a virtue that resembles the revolutionary ideal of the transparent representation of the general will. Corinne is commended for communicating from her heart directly and with absolute sincerity; in this way, she exhibits a spontaneous fusion of inner and outer selves and is able to read the feelings of the public and integrate these feelings into her performances. She can see into the hearts of the people around her while also speaking freely from her own heart; it is this interplay between the individual and the public that allows her to speak both as and for the collective.

However, this virtue becomes subject to revolutionary terror. As in the case of Robespierre, Burke and Wordsworth, this crossing from revolutionary virtue to total terror pivots on performative speech: Corinne, as a woman and because she is a woman, crosses the “borders of legitimacy” that determine who can speak, and where. The novel moves from an innovative virtue that reflects the general will to a virtue that gets suppressed and is subjected to terror because it is spontaneous and suggestive of a new future.

The Limits of Public Female Speech in Scotland: Repression and Surveillance

In her confession, Corinne tells Oswald how she spent her childhood in Florence before being sent to live with her stepmother in rural Scotland at age fifteen. This formative experience comes late in the novel, but informs and determines her later life in Italy and establishes the way terror functions in relation to speech, gender and the performative self. Oswald’s father’s disapproval of Corinne as a future wife for Oswald and Corinne’s demise can only be fully understood by examining more closely her Scottish experience, which is decidedly political and functions as a larger commentary on the public role of women speakers during the revolutionary moment in both England and France. Staël’s portrayal of rural Scotland resembles the totalitarian world ruled by the principles undergirding the idea of terror. This terror is directly tied to Corinne’s speech and her spontaneous nature, especially her desire and need to speak in public. Scotland is the first stage in which Corinne’s status as a female performative speaker is challenged by the collective in the name of maintaining social unity.

Staël restages the “cold calculations” of the Terror in Scotland as seen in the mother-tyrant figure Lady Edgermond, whom Corinne calls “a tyrannical woman” (*Corinne* 253) (“c’était une personne despotique au fond de l’âme, bien que sa timidité l’empêchât souvent

d'exprimer sa volonté"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Lady Edgermond uses a counter-discourse of virtue that does the work of terror by suppressing certain forms of speech. The small Scottish town where Corinne's family resides resembles the Venetian police-state discussed earlier in the novel, a world where "everything is known"; all that is private is made public, and this potential to be interrogated for one's actions—"hostile faces . . . would ask you to give an account of what you are doing" (*Corinne* 245)—causes its residents to internalize and enforce the laws regulating their own behavior. Staël's portrayal of rural Scotland resembles the disciplinary society Michel Foucault theorized from Jeremy Bentham's architectural design the Panopticon. Bentham, a British philosopher and social theorist who helped to introduce utilitarianism, designed the Panopticon, "a technology of power" intended "to solve the problems of surveillance" (*Power / Knowledge* 148). The panoptic design, which was never constructed, consisted of a circular structure in which subjects (inmates) were always under the watch of a guard tower that may or not be occupied continually (*Power / Knowledge* 148). This design creates a sense of always being watched, fostering an atmosphere of "total and circulating mistrust" and prompting the prisoners to behave as desired even when unsupervised (*Discipline and Punish* 202-203). Foucault theorizes this idea as panopticism, a method of social control that seeks to impose norms and reform nonstandard behavior by compelling people to enforce their own "normalization":

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (*Discipline and Punish* 202-203)

Those who know they are being observed become the enforcers of their own observation,

internalizing the power structures built on surveillance. Though Corinne struggles against this internationalization, she admits that when surrounded by a community that insists on certain conventions one becomes accustomed to them, and “In spite of you, they get to the heart of your thought” (*Corinne* 248) (“ils pénètrent malgré vous dans le fond de votre pensée”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*).

To more fully understand the implications of Lady Edgermond’s insistence on “general rules,” I briefly turn to Staël’s essay *On Literature* (1800). In this essay, Staël concedes that scientific experiment and mathematical calculation can be used to make abstract claims about “men united in a mass” and to determine what forms of government will be the most effective at ordering society (*On Literature* 247), but notes that this abstraction can go too far:

If a physical experiment can fail because a slight difference in the processes or a slight degree more or less of heat or cold has not been taken into account, what study of the human heart is not required in order to determine the degree of respect that ought to be given to government so that it may be obeyed, but without its power becoming unjust, and to determine the power legislators need to unite the nation in a single spirit, but without shackling individual genius! . . . There is no problem composed of a greater number of terms, and none in which error would have more disastrous consequences. (*On Literature* 246)

The sheer diversity of human experience and national character makes a political science based on calculation and probability not only potentially inaccurate but dangerous because it can fail to take into account all exceptions.

Staël then goes on to offer another interpretation of the motives behind the agents of the Terror. Rather than using universal terms as a convenient rhetorical hinge on which to hand their

crimes, as she suggests earlier, the agents of the Terror were “barbarous theorists [who] took mathematical calculations as the basis of their bloody laws and coldly sacrificed the lives of several thousand individuals to what they regarded as the happiness of the greatest number” (*On Literature*, 246-247). This is an example of the utilitarian, generalizing impulse taken to violent extremes—an adherence to a universal idea that eliminates all exceptions and contingencies. Staël is in many ways responding to Bentham and others’ ideas about utilitarianism. In 1789, Bentham published *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, positing a system of punishment and reward intended to promote the general happiness of society (VII.i). Staël, along with her sometimes-companion Benjamin Constant, wrote against this idea, arguing that such an approach “destroys morality” (Faccarello and Steiner 41).⁸⁴ Staël uses her essays to criticize this principle of political economy, citing the example of the Terror as a warning for political scientists: a poorly measured calculation or a political system based on broad generalizations, she suggests, could lead to the very tyranny and violence a humanistic political science hopes to understand and avoid.

By citing this example, Staël suggests that political science cannot operate in a moral vacancy if it wishes to respect the diversity of human experience. As in *Considerations*, Staël figures the agents of the Terror as criminals with empty understandings of humanity—an emptiness most evident in their disregard for individuality and human sentiment. She writes, “These atrocious men thought they could simplify their calculations by omitting suffering, feeling and imagination; they had no conception of the nature of general truths,” which are, she

⁸⁴ Gilbert Faccarello and Philippe Steiner in “Religion and Political Economy in Early-Nineteenth-Century France” mention how Staël critiques the concept of utility in *Corinne*, citing Book V, Chapter 1, and Book IX, Chapter 5, as places where Staël is “strongly negative when she speaks of economic self-interest and avidity” (38). In other writings she and Constant “emphasize the necessary and positive role played by religion in social life” instead of utilitarian concepts (34).

says, “made up of every fact and every individual being” (*On Literature* 247). She argues that these “general truths” must make room for exceptions and take into account all individual differences; these truths are at once general and particular and are held together by sentimental attachment. Here Staël insists that the agents of the Terror fall outside of the general in their very insistence on generality. Taken together, these two interpretations of the Terror suggest that the agents do not participate in general truths because they fail to take into account exceptions; such a failure renders them exceptions to a rule, which allows Staël to dismiss their relevance to a humane political science and the humane employment of language.

Lady Edgermond becomes the mouthpiece for a rigid conception of general virtue that she uses to limit her expansive and vivacious stepdaughter. She tells Corinne, “one must not struggle against the customs of the country where one is settled” (*Corinne* 245) (“Mais il ne faut pas lutter contre les usages du pays où l'on est établi; Ton en souffre toujours ; car, dans une ville aussi petite que celle où nous sommes , tout se sait , tout se répète”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*); otherwise, Corinne explains to Oswald, she would have been considered “a trouble-maker, a woman of doubtful virtue” (*Corinne* 249) (“on aurait eu l'air d'une mauvaise tête , d'une femme de vertu douteuse, si l'on s'était livré à parler, à se montrer de quelque manière”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*).⁸⁵ Corinne’s exceptionality would not give rise to others trying to emulate her, but to “repeat” her actions—that is, to report on her. Such description resonates with Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the totalitarian state in which “Everyone, in a way, is the *agent provocateur* if ever

⁸⁵ Corinne specifically notes that her experience of Scotland was confined to the lives of women. Men were permitted lives of the mind and of society, “But women’s lives, in the isolated corner of the earth where I was living, were very dull” (*Corinne* 249). She also makes it clear that she was living in a provincial, rural area; she supposed that life would have been different in an urban center such as London or Edinburgh. By making these distinctions, Staël emphasizes the importance of locality in relation to women’s freedom.

an ordinary friendly exchange of ‘dangerous thoughts’ . . . should come to the attention of the authorities” (*Origins* 556). Corinne finds herself diminishing in this stifling environment, her “love of nature, of the fine arts, of feeling” falling away as her life and habits become reduced to a monotonous conventionality (*Corinne* 245) (“l’enthousiasme de la nature, des beaux-arts, des sentiments, et mon âme me tourmentait comme une flamme inutile, qui me dévorait moi-même, n’ayant plus d’aliments au dehors”; *Corinne ou l’Italie*). Corinne describes the enforcement of conventionality as a kind of “leveling,” an equality that forces a sameness and “uniformity” upon all individuals, excising beauty, imagination and art from daily existence (*Corinne* 250). It is also deeply dependent on the ways women are viewed and expected to behave as well as the roles they are expected to serve in Scottish society. Her stepmother believed that women were only to care for her husband, children and home (*Corinne* 246); therefore, Corinne should not pursue the arts and cultivate her talents because they would serve no larger, domestic purpose. This perspective was common during the revolutionary period when women were excluded from this public discourse. Joan B. Landes, in *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, writes of the rise of “a specific, highly gendered bourgeois male discourse that depended on women’s domesticity and the silencing of ‘public’ women” (2). She explains that women were delegated to a private, domestic sphere devoted to “child-bearing, child-rearing and maintaining the household” that was “viewed as inferior to the male-dominated ‘public’ world of civil society and its culture, property, social power, reason and freedom” (2). Thus, Lady Edgermond’s perspective reflects not just a rural Scottish view but a perspective popular in France during the Revolutionary period as well.

Importantly, this disciplinary suppression is most evident in the ways speech is controlled. Corinne’s experience in Scotland is one of being silenced. Her first infraction is oral,

public and gendered: she quotes from memory some Italian poetry at the dinner table and then is swiftly censured. Her stepmother tells her that in that town, it is “not usual for young ladies to speak” (*Corinne* 245) (“Ma belle-mère, à souper, me dit assez doucement qu'il n'était pas d'usage que les jeunes personnes parlissent”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). This assertion carries a number of themes iterated through this section of the novel: speaking in a semi-public setting is “not usual,” in other words, against convention and out of the ordinary; in addition, the topic and purpose of speech is dictated by gender (“young ladies”). The types of speech permitted to men and women are carefully separated: men can speak of politics and society while women “remained at the back of the room, distributing the tea cups” (*Corinne* 248) (“les femmes restaient dans le fond de la chambre, distribuant les tasses de thé”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Women’s speech serves no purpose or direction: “Every quarter of an hour a voice would be heard asking the most insipid question, to obtain the most non-committal answer, and boredom, momentarily lifted, fell back again with renewed weight” (248) (“Tous les quarts d'heure il s'élevait une voix qui faisait question la plus insipide, pour obtenir la réponse la plus froide ; et l'ennui soulevé retombait avec un nouveau poids sur ces femmes, que l'on aurait pu croire malheureuses, si l'habitude prise dès l'enfance n'apprenait pas à tout supporter”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Female speech is purposeless, contentless, and disembodied: “a voice would be heard,” disconnected from the speaker, punctuating a hollow, anonymous identity that performs no action and reflects nothing of the individual. Both the voice and the body become unexpressive: “Sometimes I spent whole days in my stepmother’s social gatherings, without hearing a word which expressed a thought or a feeling. Even gestures were not allowed in speaking” (*Corinne* 249) (“Je passais quelquefois des jours entiers dans les sociétés de ma belle-mère, sans entendre dire un mot qui répondit ni à une idée, ni à un sentiment; l'on ne se permettait pas même des gestes en parlant”;

Corinne ou l'Italie). The kinds of speech limited to women in rural Scotland perform only a proscribed identity of a house-bound female who cannot be distinguished from the others: such speech permits no efficacy because the words do nothing and accomplish nothing. To Corinne, this imposed silence is akin to death.

Life in rural Scotland centers on monotonous routine. Anything new or spontaneous is considered not only undesirable but a threat to the existing order. This disciplinary suppression of mental, verbal and physical spontaneity can be seen as a dimension of Arendtian total terror. According to Arendt, total terror strives to “make the world consistent” in an attempt to achieve uniform movement toward a teleological destiny (*Origins* 590, 559). Newness or change threatens the world created by terror precisely because novelty offers an opportunity for that destiny to be changed. Arendt emphasizes that each individual, by virtue of being new, threatens this ideology: “Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity” (*Origins* 588). In this surveilled totalitarian state that considers the individual a threat to the collective, “Simply because their capacity to think, human beings are suspects by definition, and this suspicion cannot be diverted by exemplary behavior, for the human capacity to think is also the capacity to change one’s mind” (*Origins* 555). Corinne’s desire for novelty—and her status as a novelty—makes her subject to terror, which is a force that necessarily homogenizes and suppresses the individual. Spontaneity is a sign of this possibility to divert from the proscribed formula for daily life in Staël’s rural Scotland: while obviously not imprisoned in a concentration camp, Corinne feels that what has been removed from her is what makes her a living individual, and that any newness that she could contribute to society has been erased.

When Oswald later confronts Lady Edgermond in his quest to marry Corinne, Lady

Edgermond presents a case for a rigid and severe virtue that excludes Corinne from even the realm of the living. When making her case, Lady Edgermond uses her strict definition of virtue to condemn Corinne as a criminal. Corinne, who recognizes that her stepmother will use her plural and expansive virtue against her, warns Oswald beforehand: “It is in the name of virtues which I respect as much as you do that she will condemn my character and my fate” (*Corinne* 300) (“C'est ait nom des vertus que je respecte autant que vous, qu'elle oort damnera mon caractère et mon sort”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Lady Edgermond, who is described as “someone who admitted no nuances or exceptions and judged everything by general, unsentimental rules” (*Corinne* 307) (“d'une personne qui n'admettait point de nuances ni d'exceptions, et jugeait tout par des règles générales et positives”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*), provides an extreme example of the rhetoric of virtue as the enforcer of social conformity. She resonates with Staël's description of the leaders of the Terror in that her judgments involve a cold calculation that insists on negating all difference, including “suffering, feeling and imagination.” However, unlike Staël's revolutionaries, Lady Edgermond's calculations do not exist within a moral vacancy: a strict virtue supposedly guides her. In this way, her terror is an emanation of her virtue.

Corinne also sees this imposition of silence in the name of duty as ideological warfare. “Duty, man's most noble objective, can be distorted, like every other idea, and become an offensive weapon which narrow-minded and mediocre people, who are content to be so, use to impose silence on talent and rid themselves of enthusiasm and genius, indeed of all their enemies” (*Corinne* 246) (“Le devoir, la plus noble destination de l'homme, peut être dénaturé comme toute autre idée, et devenir une arme offensive dont les esprits étroits, les gens médiocres, et contents de l'être, se servent pour imposer silence au talent, et se débarrasser de l'enthousiasme, du génie, enfin de tous leurs ennemis”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Here,

Corinne describes the imposition of these cultural and social standards as acts of violence and war: these rules of governing behavior are an “offensive weapon” that is “imposed” on “enemies.” In Corinne’s understanding, Lady Edgermond’s insistence on certain forms of speech is an act of aggression. Staël, through Corinne, is suggesting the ways that ideological certainty realized through laws can be used to shape daily behavior by enacting violence on individuals and through individuals. In this case, the laws are social, based on custom and enforced through agreed-upon conceptions of duty and what constitutes a “dutiful” male or female. To underscore the ways Corinne fails to fit this model, Staël presents Lucile as the opposite of Corinne: silent and dutiful to a fault, she is the figure of “pure Englishness” but indistinct as an individual; she is a blank slate on which Oswald can inscribe thoughts and feelings (*Corinne* 378).

Arendt’s understanding of the ways totalitarianism reduces the human being resonates with Corinne’s experience in Scotland: “The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating . . . spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing” (*Origins* 565). Obviously, Corinne’s experience does not approach the scale of being in a concentration camp, but her experience does show that spontaneity—which will later be essential to Corinne’s artistic performance as an improviser—is the target of this disciplinary terror. And Corinne’s experience of this terror does have life and death consequences: her life in Scotland was a kind of death, and she has to symbolically die in order to escape it. Her stepmother tells her that she must “pass for dead” to avoid tarnishing the public perception of her family name (*Corinne* 258) (“et de vous faire passer pour morte”; *Corinne ou l’Italie*). Public opinion is such that it calls for Corinne’s death in order for her to live as an independent, public woman: in small-town society—“that peopled wilderness” (*Corinne* 254) (“désert peuplé”; *Corinne ou*

l'Italie) that is both isolated and intensely communal—she cannot live as an individual. Corinne describes the thought of returning to Italy as rising from the dead: “If life were offered to the dead in graves, they would not raise their covering stones with more impatience than I felt, to cast away all my shrouds and regain possession of my imagination, of my genius, of nature!” (*Corinne* 259-260) (“Si la vie était offerte aux morts dans les tombeaux, ils ne soulèveraient pas la pierre qui les couvre avec plus d'impatience que je n'en éprouvais pour écarter de moi tous mes linceuls et reprendre possession de mon imagination, de mon génie, de la nature!”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Life in rural Scotland is seen as a kind of death-in-life characterized by disciplinary suppression of speech, self-policing and the insistence on absolute regularity and consistency that shares qualities with total terror.

Significantly, such terror comes not from France but from Scotland, or, as Staël refers to it, England. In the wartime years of 1794 and 1798, the Habeas Corpus Act in England was suspended in cases of treason or suspected treason (Weil 52). According to Kenneth R. Johnston, “the harsh repressions of the 1790s reform movement instituted by William Pitt’s government, beginning in 1792 and effectively completed in stages through the rest of the decade—an interlocking system of spies, informers, packed juries, compliant magistrates and hegemonic vigilante forces which reform activities then and some historians still today refer to as ‘Pitt’s Reign of Terror’” (xvi). David Worrall emphasizes the ways written and spoken speech was controlled by the state around the turn of the nineteenth century: in England, “to speak covertly was dangerous because of the informer network, to speak publicly was also dangerous because of the laws of sedition. To speak or write in any oppositional or interventionist manner posed problems of personal safety because of the remorselessness with which the State maintained that it could pluck out of a spoken or written text a politics of intervention” (61).

The debate between Oswald and Lady Edgermond underscores the lack of consensus surrounding the definition of virtue. Oswald praises Corinne's moral character in relation to her artistic talents:

'Those talents which come from the soul, and which can occur only in the loftiest, most sensitive character, those talents which are combined with the most touching goodness, the most generous heart, you would blame them because they extend the mind, because they give even to virtue a greater sway, a wider influence?' 'To virtue?' answered Lady Edgermond, smiling bitterly. 'I do not know what you understand by the word used in that way. The virtue of a woman who fled from her father's house, the virtue of a woman who settled in Italy, leading an extremely independent life . . . ' (*Corinne* 312)

(ces talents qui viennent de l'âme, et ne peuvent exister sans le caractère le plus élevé, sans le cœur le plus sensible, ces talents qui sont unis à la bonté la plus touchante, au cœur le plus généreux, vous les blâmeriez parce qu'ils étendent la pensée, parce qu'ils donnent à la vertu même un empire plus vaste, une influence plus générale? —A la vertu? reprit lady Edgermond avec un sourire amer; je ne sais pas bien ce que vous entendez par ce mot ainsi appliqué. La vertu d'une personne qui s'est enfuie de la maison paternelle, la vertu d'une personne qui s'est établie en Italie, menant la vie la plus indépendante . . . ;
Corinne ou l'Italie)

Oswald situates Corinne's virtue in relation to her talents, suggesting that the scope of her virtue, which reaches into the public space, is not a reason to dismiss it. In Lady Edgermond's grim, localized worldview, however, the question of Corinne's virtue is limited to the norms that govern the behavior of rural Scottish women. According to Lady Edgermond, Corinne's lack of

virtue is evident in her actions, which rely on being separated from paternal authority figures. Lady Edgermond's exclusionary understanding of virtue, which she claims is general in that it is the "exact observation of the established rules," suppresses Corinne's individual virtue to the extent that she refuses to acknowledge that Corinne is alive. Critics have discussed how Corinne becomes subjected to paternal codes of behavior, but few have noted that one of the most oppressive figures in the novel is a woman; the inclusion of Lady Edgermond in the text suggests the extent to which these larger social conventions are internalized and enacted through a language of virtue that seeks to control and police the behavior of women.

Oswald, too, is just as subject to an idea of virtue that enforces conformity and privileges the general; he is a part of the English collective and ultimately rejoins this collective. The letter from Oswald's father regarding his decision to choose Lucile over Corinne for his son is the lasting example of what universal agreement and consent look like in the novel. Rather than a stabilizing, tempering influence, virtue used to define national character reveals itself to be just another generalizing that idea that results in the unhappiness of individuals—the very opposite of what Staël had hoped a moral political science would achieve. Though the letter is written out of love, it shows the kind of cold calculation that Staël associates with an over-generalizing political science. Oswald's father writes:

A man born in our fortunate native land must, above all, be English . . . How do you expect a person as exceptional as your daughter to be content with such a lot? Believe me, marry her in Italy; her religion, her tastes and her talents call her there. If my son married [Corinne], he would certainly love her greatly . . . [and] to please her, he would try to introduce foreign ways into his house. Soon he would lose the national spirit, the prejudices, if you like, which unite us and our nation; we are a group, a

community, which is free but indissoluble, and can perish only with the last one of us.

(*Corinne* 389)

(Un homme né dans notre heureuse patrie doit être Anglais avant tout: il faut qu'il remplisse ses devoirs de citoyen, puisqu'il a le bonheur de l'être; et dans les pays où les institutions politiques donnent aux hommes des occasions honorables d'agir et de se montrer, les femmes doivent rester dans l'ombre. Comment voulez-vous qu'une personne aussi distinguée que votre fille se contente d'un tel sort? Croyez-moi, mariez-la en Italie: sa religion, ses goûts et ses talents l'y appellent. Si mon fils épousait miss Edgermond, il l'aimerait sûrement beaucoup, car il est impossible d'être plus séduisante, et il essaierait alors, pour lui plaire, d'introduire dans sa maison les coutumes étrangères. Bientôt il perdrait cet esprit national, ces préjugés, si vous le voulez, qui nous unissent entre nous, et font de notre nation un corps, association libre, mais indissoluble, qui ne peut périr qu'avec le dernier de nous; *Corinne ou l'Italie*)

Here virtue becomes a nation-defining force that determines and shapes the boundaries between countries while simultaneously forming the bonds that link them together. Oswald's father presents a national identity consisting of a group of individuals who all think alike; he enacts the crime of political science in his claim of a moral and social universalism based on the erasure of difference. Corinne, an exceptional foreign woman, threatens to destabilize these boundaries and contaminate the very nature of Englishness. Ultimately, Oswald finds himself bound to these "English ways, the customs and opinions of a country where the most scrupulous respect for duty, as for the law, is readily to be found" (*Corinne* 229) ("Les mœurs d'Angleterre, les

habitudes et les opinions d'un pays où Ton se trouve si bien du respect le plus scrupuleux pour les devoirs, comme pour les lois, le retenaient dans des liens assez étroits à beaucoup d'égards"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*); this adherence to the law is made manifest in Oswald's submission to a conception of virtue as duty and filial piety, a personal conception of virtue that was challenged in both Italy and France, but ultimately endures. Scotland sets the groundwork for legitimate speech and the ways speech determine gendered identities and determines the course of the novel.

Women in the Public Sphere: Corinne at the Capitol and the Borders of Legitimacy

Corinne's role as an improviser and public performer is especially significant given that spontaneity is the hallmark of improvisation. Staël portrays Italy as the anti-Scotland: here what Corinne is condemned for in Scotland she is celebrated. In her adult life, Corinne strives to create a different kind of virtue that hinges on a woman performing in public for a large audience. But this spontaneity that comes from speech / speaking, cannot be tolerated by or as the collective. She isn't considered legitimate and therefore is not virtuous, and is subjected to a terror that hates innovation and newness, that sees it as a threat. It kills Corinne and cuts off her future.

Judith Butler's work on speech and censorship suggests a connection between the power to speak and the powers that come with legitimate citizenship. Butler concentrates on "the kind of speaking that takes place on the border of the unsayable," which, she says, "promises to expose the vacillating boundaries of legitimacy in speech" (*Excitable Speech* 41). While Butler is referring to the "unspeakable"—that is, speech that is censored—I argue that Corinne exists on this border, especially if we consider her as a figure of speech herself, as a performer of a certain

type of female selfhood that depends on and is made possible through public speech. In *Corinne*, those “vacillating boundaries of legitimacy” become quite literal: Corinne’s experience demonstrates how what is allowed to be said, and what kinds of speech are allowed to be performed in front of what audiences, rely in part on the boundaries that delineate national difference. As a woman whose identity relies on performing in public, Corinne borders on the “unsayable” and her treatment reveals the ways speech is controlled and authorized. It also suggests that surveillance is a complicated interplay between the need for private intimacy and the drive for public transparency.

According to Butler, the state determines what is legitimate and illegitimate speech. She writes, “the state actively produces the domain of publically acceptable speech, demarcating the line between the domains of the speakable and the unspeakable, and retaining the power to make and sustain that consequential line of demarcation” (47). It is speech that determines one’s status and one’s legitimacy: “To move outside of the domain of speakability is to risk one’s status as a subject. To embody the norms that govern speakability in one’s speech is to consummate one’s status as a subject of speech” (133). In Scotland, Corinne crosses the lines of legitimate speech and learns how social norms determined her status as a virtuous young woman and as a threatening entity who must be suppressed. This movement—the ways Corinne “risk[s] her status as a subject”—comes to a head in Italy. Staël depicts Italian society as deeply permissive, noting that “since society does not set itself up as a judge of anything, it allows everything” (*Corinne* 93) (“et comme la société ne s’y constitue juge de rien, elle admet tout”; *Corinne ou l’Italie*).

According to Staël’s depiction, in the adoring, collective gaze of the Italian public Corinne’s performative persona reflects almost perfectly the norms and values of Italian society.

Italy may be considered a more “permissive” country because the question of legitimacy extends to the nation of Italy itself, which, in 1807, still constituted a number of separate states under varying degrees of sovereign and imperialist control (Casillo 47-50).⁸⁶ In one of her first conversations with Oswald, Corinne says, “All we ask of foreigners is a little indulgence, and as, for a long time, we have been denied the lot of being a nation, we are often greatly at fault, as individuals, in lacking the dignity which is not permitted to us as a people” (*Corinne* 38) (“Un peu d'indulgence nous suffit de la part des étrangers; et comme il nous est refusé depuis longtemps d'être une nation, nous avons le grand tort de manquer souvent, comme individus, de la dignité qui ne nous est pas permise comme peuple”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). The Italian people appear to find some legitimacy as a nation through Corinne's performative identity.

However, Oswald is Scottish, and it is through his judgmental eyes that we first meet Corinne. Ultimately, in *Corinne* the state—as an abstract ruling entity, however Butler defines it—does not make important decisions about legitimacy so much as the individuals who represent these national entities. As has been noted, the major figures in the novel represent certain national characteristics—Corinne herself, of course, is intended to represent “our beautiful Italy” with its imperfections removed, but the other characters display qualities that reflect national characteristics, such as Oswald's melancholia and Count d'Erfeuil's frivolity. The question of what is socially acceptable—this is, what is “speakable” and “unspeakable”—haunts the characters; the question of what is right, of what is desirable and therefore legitimate and authoritative, is discussed from multiple angles and perspectives throughout the novel. And, as Corinne's experience under the disciplinary regime of virtue in Scotland demonstrates, controlling the speech of oneself and others directly relates to who and who does not have

⁸⁶ For discussion of how Staël portrays Italy as a nation, see Chapter 2, “The Debate over Italy,” in Robert Casillo's *The Empire of Stereotypes: Germaine de Staël and the Idea of Italy*.

agency and power. Corinne herself is immediately wary of the power that comes from national social conventions and the ways it separates the permitted/legitimate from forbidden/ illegitimate when she first meets Oswald. Knowing what she knows about the Scottish, she is unsure how he will judge her career given her gender (*Corinne* 30).

Given the way Staël organizes the novel, she may have been concerned how her eighteenth-century audience might react to Corinne as a public performer. When the reader first meets Corinne, she is fenced in by other people's speech. The coronation in Rome is corralled with laudatory speeches that tell the reader how we should understand Corinne, and Oswald's skepticism is that of a late eighteenth-century audience. Castel-Forte's speech functions as a kind of border or boundary that protects her (and elevates her) and keeps her from being judged as "as an ordinary woman by ordinary rules," but her traditional feminine virtue—that is, her chastity—is the subject of public speculation. Count d'Erfeuil, who represents the more frivolous French perspective, often raises these questions. "She leads a strange life," he says of Corinne. "She is rich, young, and free, and with no one able to find out definitely whether she has any lovers" (37) ("Elle mène une vie singulière ; elle est riche , jeune, libre, sans qu'on puisse savoir avec certitude' si elle a des amants ou non"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Count d'Erfeuil later questions her chastity on the basis of her life in the public sphere and her lack of attachment to any man: "An independent woman on her own, who leads almost an artist's life, should not be difficult to win" (47) ("Une femme seule, indépendante , et qui mène à peu près la vie d'un artiste, ne doit pas être difficile à captiver"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Despite the narrator's assurances and the claims by reputable men in the novel, Corinne's legitimacy—and therefore her virtue, as understood in the traditional sense—remains as "doubtful" as it was in Scotland, if not more so.

Critics have noted how Corinne's status as improviser reveals tensions between public and private selves in the novel. Esterhammer focuses on the ways Corinne's improvisational nature reflects characteristics the novel attributes to Italians. Esterhammer writes that "the legacy of Corinne comprises both a model of improvisation as interactive sociability and a heightened visual dimension that operates on the public level as spectacle, and on the private level as the need for an affirming gaze" (*Romanticism and Improvisation* 86). She suggests that Corinne needs her audience as much as her audience needs her: the "performer-audience relationship . . . inevitably slides from reciprocity into dependence" (*Romanticism and Improvisation* 91). Caroline Gonda addresses these tensions as well, noting that improvisation raises "questions of authorship and intentionality; possession and ownership; inspiration and craft; spontaneity and effort; performance and inscription; nature and art. Since the improvisatrice becomes at least as significant a figure as the improvisatore, issues of gender come into play" (195).

Georges Poulet, in "The Role of Improvisation in Corinne," reads Corinne as a stand-in for Staël, an essentially narcissistic presentation of the author as heroine (603, 605). He stresses the importance of speech in the novel: "Thus everything in *Corinne* becomes language. Thought charges itself with emotion, and emotion becomes speech . . . Almost the entire narrative structure of the novel consists in the descriptions of certain major moments when the heroine, either at the Capitol, -- the monuments of Rome, or in the presence of the natural beauty of the Gulf of Naples, begins to speak" (607). However, Poulet does not conclude much beyond the idea that speech is essential and that improvisation is powerful in the novel: "Improvisation for [Corinne] is an inexhaustible source of fertile and resplendent thought, of intense and marvelously contagious emotion. Misfortune—itsself requiring invention and language—cannot annihilate this talent for improvisation" (612). I argue instead that because improvisation is tied

to Corinne's virtue, this virtue is subjected to terror. This is where Poulet and I part ways—the improvisatory nature of Corinne's self—which, I argue, is encapsulated by her virtue—is the direct target for annihilation.

Corinne's Revolutionary Virtue

From the very beginning, Corinne is set apart as exceptional; this sense of exceptionality both includes and excludes her from the community. She is first introduced to the reader (and Oswald) as “the most famous woman in Italy, Corinne, poetess, writer, and improviser, and one of the most beautiful women in Rome” (*Corinne* 21) (“femme la plus célèbre de l'Italie , Corinne, poëte, écrivain, improvisatrice, et l'une des plus belles personnes de Rome”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). The pairing of the superlative (the most famous, the most beautiful) with the specificity of place (in Italy, in Rome) highlights Corinne's position as both a part of and above Italian society. Corinne's virtue is that of the independent female genius who lives according to the laws of nature; she is individualistic, imaginative, both private and public, inconsistent, improvisational and ruled by emotion. Corinne's virtue is decidedly plural; as the narrator says of Oswald: “He did not understand how all Corinne's attributes could be combined in one person” (*Corinne* 39) (“il ne comprenait pas comment une seule personne pouvait réunir tout ce que possédait Corinne”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Her improvisations are manifestations of this virtue: they are “unpremeditated and uninterrupted composition[s]” (*Corinne* 45) that reflect her emotions as she experiences them. Like all improvisations, they are products of novelty: “But I am bold enough to say that inspired by genuine emotion or by an idea that I thought new” (*Corinne* 45). When introducing Corinne, Castel-Forte “dwelt on her talent for improvisation” (*Corinne* 25) (“Il

s'étendit sur son talent d'improviser"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Later, when describing Corinne's dancing abilities, the narrator notes that "Everything was language for her" (*Corinne* 91). The emphasis here is on Corinne in the sphere of "public opinion," a part of a "public body," where private individuals are united through her improvisation, which, according to Corinne, "is like a lively conversation" (*Corinne* 45-46) ("je dirai que l'improvisation est pour moi comme une conversation animée"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Corinne epitomizes the possibilities for women in the public sphere in that she brings imagination, beauty and sentiment into the public world and moves freely within it, visibly unattached to any man.

However, as much Corinne's artistic virtue is celebrated by the Italian public and appreciated by Oswald, at least at first, this virtue is subjected to judgment. Oswald often speaks of Corinne in relation to social judgment and the rules that govern human behavior, initially placing her out of reach of these rules by denationalizing and dehumanizing her: "Heavenly creature," he tells her, "may ordinary women be judged by ordinary rules! [. . .] Nothing in the universe equals your mind and heart. At the divine spring which is the source of all feelings, everything is love and truth" (*Corinne* 300). Oswald's perception of Corinne's exceptionality, seen in her radical inequality with other women, takes her out of the realm of the nation and the human community into the world of abstraction where she is momentarily safe from human opinion. This safety is temporary, however. While Staël presents Corinne as freely moving through Italian society, those who cross Italy's borders bring different judgment and competing codes of feminine behavior. The reader is made aware of this cultural difference immediately: when Corinne first meets Oswald, she is "surprised at Oswald's outward calm, not knowing whether he approved of her or secretly blamed her, or whether his English ideas would allow him to applaud this kind of success in a woman" (*Corinne* 40) ("étonnée du calme extérieur

d'Oswald, ne sachant pas s'il l'approuvait ou s'il la blâmait secrètement, et si ses idées anglaises lui permettaient d'applaudir à de tels succès dans une femme"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Corinne's uncertainty destabilizes Corinne herself, foreshadowed in her crown sliding off her head as she looks back at Oswald the first time (34); later, the narrative is punctuated by Corinne's attempts to protect and defend her plural virtue against the unifying and categorizing force of a general virtue that leaves no room for exceptions. Like Staël in *On Literature*, Corinne speaks for the importance of virtue as a means of recognizing and respecting individual and national difference and individual particularities. She says to Oswald about Italy, "there is little good to say about the nation considered as whole, but you come across many private virtues . . . The individual people you know decide the judgment of a nation" (*Corinne* 36). She also makes this plea for herself, saying, "in all innocence, you would hurt me terribly if you wanted to judge my character according to the usual broad categories for which there are ready-made maxims. I suffer, I enjoy, I feel, in my own way, and if you wanted to have an influence on my happiness, you would have to observe me alone" (*Corinne* 184) ("mais vous me feriez très innocemment un mal affreux, en voulant juger mon caractère d'après ces grandes divisions communes, pour lesquelles il y a des maximes toutes faites. Je souffre, je jouis, je sens à ma manière, et ce serait moi seule qu'à faudrait observer si l'on voulait influencer sur mon bonheur"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Although Corinne asks to be read in a way that respects individual variances, virtue, being tied to judgment and therefore rule and law, becomes linked to disciplinary terror.

Arguing the opposite view, Suzanne Hillman and Patrick Vincent suggest that Staël sees virtue as a feminine quality that would contribute to political society, if permitted: "Regardless of 'natural' distinctions of intellect and talent, women citizens had an important role to play as virtuous bearers of moral values and thus as active participants in and crucial shapers of the body

politic” (Hillman 253). Vincent qualifies the role Staël gives female virtue in politics; Corinne’s story, he writes, implies that “these female passions can only play a role in perfecting society when channeled or ‘disciplined’ into performing virtuous action. Love, in particular, gets in the way of virtue” (12).

I contend though that more than “love” gets in the way of virtue—a love-driven terror undermines that ways that virtue is understood in the novel. Staël uses Corinne to suggest that alternative conceptions of virtue exist but that Corinne’s status as a female performing in public is too terrible to sustain. If Corinne had not fallen in love with Oswald, she would not have such problems, but love is not the issue here: it is the ways terror functions to undermine certain types of female public speech. I would like to add that Corinne’s virtue is particularly revolutionary as well—it adheres to the types of virtue held up by the revolutionaries and therefore functions as a commentary about how women are excluded from revolutionary discourse.

Because Corinne’s speech is so reflective of her own self, and because it is defined in ways such as transparency, naturalness and spontaneity, Corinne’s virtue resembles revolutionary virtue. She is sincere, transparent in her feelings and thoughts, civic-minded and emotional. Castel-Forte, when introducing Corinne, focuses on her language, which he says “has its source in her character and way of feeling” (*Corinne* 25) (“qui naissent toutes de son caractère et de sa manière de sentir, sans que jamais aucune nuance d'affectation pût altérer un genre de charme non-seulement naturel, mais involontaire”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Her language is a reflection of herself; she *is* her language in many ways, and this language is described as both original and natural (*Corinne* 25). The appeal of both Corinne and her language is described as “involuntary” (*Corinne* 25), suggesting spontaneity and, in some sense, a lack of control over the beauty she can produce. He emphasizes her sincerity and lack of guile; she is authentic, natural

and sincere. These qualities resonate with an idea of revolutionary virtue as love-driven, sentimental, and nation-sustaining, which is the kind of virtue seen in the writings of Robespierre and Burke. It also echoes the alignment of virtue with ways revolutionary virtue is tied to citizenship and national identity; Corinne's performances are driven by patriotic feeling and love of her country, which she is said to represent (*Corinne* 28). As Milnes and Sinanan note, "what makes a verbal expression sincere is that it corresponds directly to the intention that it represents" (5). This demand for direct congruence between an individual's internal state and this individual's external expressions, gestures and utterances speaks to the revolutionary call for absolute transparency.

Corinne's virtue reflects both the classical idea of virtue and the eighteenth-century conception of virtue that requires authenticity and sincerity. Corinne's virtue depends on a sympathetic exchange with others; her virtue requires an audience. In this way Corinne's virtue resembles the classical ideal of virtue, as adapted by late eighteenth-century thinkers, which is characterized by action. It is realized through action and is based on the "transactions with other men," as Aristotle notes (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2:1). Corinne's virtue is highly transactional: Castel-Forte introducing Corinne: "He spoke of her eloquence as a powerful force that was the more bound to move her listeners the more they themselves were intelligent and sensitive" (*Corinne* 25) ("Il parla de son éloquence comme d'une force toute-puissante qui devait d'autant plus entraîner ceux qui l'écoutaient, qu'ils avaient en eux-mêmes plus d'esprit et de sensibilité véritable"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). The power of the words is distinctly emotional, and the narrator attributes this emotional air to the nature of the Italian language: ". . . when these words, still marked by the happiness spread in all hearts by a beautiful climate, are uttered with feeling, their softened brilliance, their concentrated power, give rise to an emotion as keen as it is unexpected"

(*Corinne* 33) (“quand ces paroles, encore tout empreintes des joies qu'un beau climat répand dans tous les cœurs, sont prononcées par une voix émue, leur éclat adouci, leur force concentrée fait éprouver un attendrissement aussi vif qu'imprévu”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). The importance of emotion, and that eighteenth-century favorite, enthusiasm, is repeatedly noted by Castel-Forte: “‘It must be attributed,’ he continued, ‘not only to her fertile mind, but to the deep emotion aroused in her by all generous thoughts. She cannot utter a word about them that is not stimulated and inspired by the inexhaustible source of emotions and ideas, enthusiasm’” (*Corinne* 26). (« Ce n'est pas seulement , continua-t il , à la fécondité de son esprit qu'il faut l'attribuer, mais à l'émotion profonde qu'excitent en elle toutes les pensées généreuses; elle ne peut prononcer un mot 'qni les rappelle, sans que l'inépuisable source des sentiments et des idées , l'enthousiasme , ne l'anime et ne l'inspire. »; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Castel-Forte enumerates Corinne’s talents—“painting, music, oratory, and dancing” (*Corinne* 26-27) (“il parla du talent de Corinne pour la peinture, pour la musique, pour la déclamation, pour la danse”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*), and emphasizes “that in all these gifts Corinne was always herself, not restricting herself to a particular style or particular rules” (*Corinne* 26-27) (“il dit que dans tous les talents , c'était toujours Corinne , ne s'astreignant à telle manière , à telle règle”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Corinne’s talents are described as unrestrained and always a direct reflection of Corinne’s authentic self. Her expressions and gestures “are a continual revelation of the human heart” (*Corinne* 26). This need for sincerity and authenticity is common in late eighteenth-century conceptions of virtue; as Tim Milnes on sincerity and authenticity in romantic writing, there is “a desire to discover a holistic self at the heart of writing, a hub at which the *meaning* of a word might be connected with the *truth* of an intention” (2). If we are to believe the narrative and the characters in the novel who praise her, Corinne has achieved that fusion of pure,

unadulterated transmission of meaning and truth.

Because Corinne is defined by the transparent connection to others, a form of communication that comes from and through sympathetic connection to others, and because she speaks for and in the public, Corinne engages with the idea of the general will. In speaking about revolutionary French society, Michel Foucault claims that “It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men’s hearts should *communicate*, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles” (*Power / Knowledge* 148). This statement refers to both the panoptic nature of revolutionary ideology—the need to see all from “whatever position”—paired with the desire for unfettered communication from the heart. Foucault understands revolutionary transparency as the need to see both through and into people. Also, he suggests that being able to see through people means that they do not function as obstacles that might obscure some kind of collection vision.

Corinne has achieved the revolutionary dream of transparency, of the spontaneous fusion of the inner and outer selves and shares that feeling with those around her, with the public. In her discussion of improvisation with Oswald, Corinne describes the ways she reaches toward a wider, higher self when she performs: “At such a time I think I experience a supernatural enthusiasm and I have the definite feeling that the voice within me is of greater worth than myself” (46) (“Je crois éprouver alors un enthousiasme surnaturel , et je sens bien que ce qui parle en moi vaut mieux que moi-même”; *Corinne ou l’Italie*). She also emphasizes the ways she, as an individual, represents larger universal emotions: “I am a poet when I admire, when I despise, when I hate, not out of personal feelings, not for my own sake, but for the dignity of humankind and the glory of the world” (46) (“Je suis poète lorsque j’admire , lorsque je méprise, lorsque je hais, non par des sentiments personnels, non pour ma propre cause, mais pour la

dignité de l'espèce humaine et la gloire du monde"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). She is literally transparent herself: Castel-Forte says to Corinne: "You are the easiest person in the world to know" because she does not conceal her thoughts or her feelings (50).

However, as a woman Corinne lacks the legitimacy to speak in public. Her experience in Scotland demonstrates that this type of virtue is not permitted in a woman because she is speaking in public. The terror that comes for Corinne is a terror that cannot permit transparency and cannot permit newness, which suggests a troubling double-bind for revolutionary ideology: it does not want the type of virtue it claims to want, at least not from a woman. Instead, performative speech that claims to enact revolutionary virtue only invites the speaker's death. As in the case of Robespierre, her authority hinges on her public performance of virtue, but because this authority is determined by context and social circumstance, Corinne's virtue is continually in question and ultimately found illegitimate.

Corinne's attention to Oswald as an individual seems to infect her public performance. During that first performance, before they have even spoken, Oswald's "gaze, fixing on her, seemed to reproach her gently. She understood the thoughts which filled his mind and felt impelled to respond to them by speaking less confidently of happiness and by devoting a few verses to death during a celebration" (31-32) ("Son regard, alors attaché sur elle, semblait «lui faire doucement des reproches ; elle devina les pensées qui l'occupaient, et se sentit le besoin de le satisfaire , en parlant du bonheur avec moins d'assurance , en consacrant à la mort quelques vers «au milieu d'une fête"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Corinne's first poem has been about happiness and hope, but Oswald's look makes turn to the topic of death and how Rome is "now the land of tombs" (32) ("Rome maintenant n'est-elle pas la pairie des tombeaux"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). This public performance turns intimate: Oswald applauds enthusiastically, and the narrator notes that

it was “to him rather than to the Romans that Corinne had addressed her second improvisation” (33) (“En effet, c’était à lui , plus qu’aux Romains, que la seconde improvisation de Corinne était destine”; *Corinne ou l’Italie*). However, like the cloud over the moon Corinne sees later, this intimacy and choice of topic seems to be an ominous sign for Corinne as a public performer. Corinne’s status as a successful public performer begins to erode from that moment on, ultimately leading to her inability to perform and even speak before she dies.

Conversely, Corinne’s status as a public performer continually undermines the performative speech Corinne and Oswald try to enact in private. In *Corinne*, the most pivotal speech-act—the act of Oswald promising to marry Corinne—cannot happen because of the speech that she enacts in the public sphere. Corinne’s public speech interrupts and undermines her private performative speech. As Miller notes, “A promise is an elementary example of a speech act. It commits its utterer to do what the words say. The one who promises is made different by uttering the words. He or she is bound by what has been said and henceforth must be measured by whether or not the promise is fulfilled, whether or not he or she commits a breach of promise” (Miller 2-3). For example, later in the novel Corinne and Oswald struggle to have private conversation, but Oswald’s speech-act is abortive:

Corinne, still wandering, cried: "Good God! what do you say? are you going to leave me?"—"No;" interrupted Oswald, "I swear—" At that instant the crowd of Corinne's friends and admirers forced the door in order to see her. Her eyes were fixed upon Oswald, listening with anxiety for what he was about to answer; but there was no opportunity for further conversation between them during the whole evening, for they were not left alone a single instant. (Corinne 315)

(Corinne , encore égarée , s'écria : « Grand Dieu ! que dites-vous? voudriez- vous me

quitter? le voudriez- vous? — Non, non, interrompit Oswald; non, je jure . . . » A l'instant, la foule des amis et des admirateurs de Corinne força sa porte pour la voir; elle regardait Oswald, attendant avec anxiété ce qu'il allait dire; mais ils ne purent se parler de toute la soirée; on ne les laissa pas seuls un instant; *Corinne ou l'Italie*)

Corinne's connection to Oswald hinges on his words. "What do you say?" she asks, knowing that this "saying" would lead to an action—either him staying with her or leaving her. Oswald begins the speech act ("I swear") but is interrupted by Corinne's public fame; her private connection is severed by her public self and her public speech. During her performance of the thematically appropriate *Romeo and Juliet*, Corinne fixates on this arrested action: "her soul remained suspended on the words 'I swear,'—which Oswald had pronounced when he was prevented by the entrance of the company from concluding his sentence: this word might in truth contain the secret of her destiny" (315) ("mais son âme était restée suspendue à ce mot je jure . . . qu'Oswald avait prononcé, et dont l'arrivée du monde avait interrompu la suite: ce mot pouvait en effet contenir le secret de sa"; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Her "destiny" hinges on this one speech-act; her connection to Oswald and her legitimacy in his eyes depends on whether or not his promise will remain unsayable. Because of the disciplinary nature of speech—the social disapproval of Corinne as a woman performing in public—Corinne falls into a limbo state and ceases to be present to her performance. Her identity, like her crown, is slipping away: she is "suspended" in a silence in which she rejects the voices of public fame while waiting to hear the voice of Oswald. But Oswald has been subjected to the terrorizing norms of his native home. He even questions her sincerity, the very basis of felicitous speech acts: later, Oswald tells Corinne that "It is not sincerity but indifference to public opinion that is the reason for this kind of frankness" (94). Corinne's "indifference to public opinion" allows her to flourish as an artist but

it is also her crime that leads her first to silence and then to death.

Corinne: Past and Future

In the novel, Corinne is portrayed as a figure of both continuity and newness: she suggests a future filled with possibility that is informed by knowledge of the past. Castel-Forte sees such futurity and historical continuity in terms of the nation and the larger collective: “We delight in gazing at her as an admirable product of our climate and of our arts, as an offshoot of the past, as an harbinger of the future” (*Corinne* 27) (“Nous nous plaisons à la contempler comme une admirable production de notre climat, de nos beaux-arts, comme un rejeton du passé, comme une prophétie de l'avenir”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). Oswald, on the other hand, sees Corinne as offering a him a private future that allows him to remain connected to his personal past: “How would it be then, if he could simultaneously find memories of his native land and through the imagination, receive new life, if he could be reborn for the future without breaking from the past” (*Corinne* 35) (“que serait-ce donc s'il pouvait à la fois retrouver les souvenirs de sa patrie , et recevoir par l'imagination une vie nouvelle , renaître pour l'avenir, sans rompre avec le passé?”; *Corinne ou l'Italie*). As the novel progresses, the characters fret about the future, asking if the couple have a future together, and, if so, what that future might be. In my reading of *Corrine*, Corinne’s silence—her inability to speak—is a sign that Corinne has no future. Corinne’s self-identity is tied to her public performance, and, while a portion of her talents may live in on Lucile and her daughter Juliet, Corinne no longer speaks for and within the collective, which was decidedly heterogeneous, male and female, and based on sympathetic, conversational exchange. No one wants Corinne’s virtue: because of the self-destruct mechanism that seems to be embedded in revolutionary virtue, it invites terror and extinguishes the speaker who embodies it; as a woman, she is rejected by both revolution and tradition.

Corinne loses her voice to the disciplinary regime of terror that eliminates spontaneity and newness. Transparency becomes a form of surveillance rather than intimacy; the revolutionary dream of the union with the collective requires homogenization rather than individual exceptionalism. Rather than elevate all members of society, revolutionary virtue and terror call for a collective leveling. Through *Corrine*, Staël reveals the little secret about virtue and terror—that transparency and absolute sincerity, a complete match between the inner and outer selves, cannot be tolerated or permitted. Terror is an attempt to achieve, enforce transparency, and yet it seeks to eliminate Corinne. Reading Staël's novel in this context exposes the limits of the revolutionary conception of the general will: private, individual virtue—especially if it is gender-inflected—cannot speak in and for the public. To examine Corinne's virtue in relation to revolutionary terror reveals the pitfalls of the revolutionary conception of the general will and questions the ways an Enlightenment virtue achieves the revolutionary ideal.

Figuratively speaking, Corrine is already dead when the reader meets her at the beginning of the novel. She has already been subjected to total terror while in Scotland as a young woman. This terror killed her, at least symbolically: she had to fake her death in order to escape. She and Oswald have no future together because her futurity has already been eliminated by the forces that cannot tolerate newness, that cannot tolerate change that comes from a woman speaking in public. Such a reading suggests that revolutionary terror is in many ways deeply conservative and, perversely, anti-change: it cannot tolerate any novelty aside from collective goals, it finds the individual to be the ultimate threat, and it uses speech to perpetuate itself and to cut out Others from its relentless and undeviating narrative.

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