Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*
Chatto and Windus: London 2006, £20, hardback
304 pp, 0 70117 600 8

Christopher Prendergast

FROM ARRAS TO THERMIDOR

Synthesize the numerous biographies of the leaders of the French Revolution during the high period of radical Jacobinism, and perhaps the first thought to emerge is what an improbable collection of characters they were. Ruth Scurr begins her biography of Robespierre with the masterly understatement: 'Political turmoil can foster unlikely leaders'—indicating that, at a deeper level of explanation, the sheer contingency of political fortunes at a time when traditional sources of authority and legitimacy were collapsing might be very much to the point. Joseph de Maistre famously described the Revolution as God's retribution for human folly; if so, His purpose in selecting precisely these individuals as the instruments of His vengeance remains profoundly inscrutable. Nothing here seems remotely foreordained or even moderately predictable. Danton, Marat, Fabre d'Eglantine, Saint-Just came out of nowhere: middle-class provincials with little or nothing in their backgrounds to suggest they were qualified for major parts in a great world-historical drama, and—especially in the cases of Fabre and Saint-Just—much to suggest that they were not. Paradoxically, given his own stress on the Rousseauist ideal of 'transparency', the most mysterious of them all was Maximilien Marie Isidore de Robespierre.

The prim lawyer from Arras, courteous, diligent, sartorially fussy, a trifle burdened by the shame of having been conceived out of wedlock, but altogether boringly conventional (Scurr represents him—a nice touch—as 'meticulously unflamboyant') was not on the face of it destined to become one of the chief architects of a political experiment whose 'meaning' has been debated ever since. True, even in Arras there were tentative signs of things to come: the lawyer with a burning sense of 'justice', prepared to

represent those who could not pay their legal fees and eloquently opposed to the death penalty. Drawing on his sister Charlotte's account, Scurr writes with sympathy of the six-year-old boy's character change after his mother's death: previously boisterous and light-hearted, he became 'serious, poised, responsible and diligent', preferring 'solitary pursuits like building model chapels or reading. He had a small collection of pictures and engravings that he liked to arrange in exhibitions for his sisters, delighting in their admiration.' In 1769, aged eleven, a Church scholarship took him to the Louis-le-Grand college in Paris, and his first encounter with the works of Rousseau, his 'mental companion for life'. (Scurr depicts as 'apocryphal', but 'too alluring to pass over', a possible meeting of the two: 'an attic in the rue Plâtrière: the author bedridden, the frail student breathless from climbing the stairs . . .') Maximilien distinguished himself sufficiently to be chosen, aged seventeen, to give the school address to the young King Louis XVI after his coronation in 1775. But, returning to Arras to practice law in 1781, Robespierre at his beginnings seemed destined for a humdrum existence in a provincial backwater.

That it was all to be otherwise rests on a historical joke of which the Cunning of Reason could have been proud. Robespierre's career could never have taken off without the machinations of the party of the Nobles in 1787. Faced with deadlock in their running dispute with the Absolutist state over the fiscal reforms brought forward by the King's successive chief ministers, Calonne and Brienne, they devised what they thought of as a smart ruse. Instead of continuing with the futile tactic of refusing to 'register' royal edicts (a traditional constraint on executive power), the Parlements—the juridical institution representing the interests of the nobles—simply declared themselves 'incompetent' in matters of taxation. The deadlock, they suggested, should be broken by the only body that could properly decide the matter, the Estates-General, which had not met since 1614. The belief was that, if reconvened, it would proceed as in 1614, with the two most powerful estates, the clergy and nobility, combining electoral forces to block the royal will. It was thus to be game, set and match to Privilege.

Its proponents, however, made one major error of political calculation; they assumed the docility of the Third Estate. Thus was set in train a sequence of events that would lead from the meeting of the Estates-General in May 1789 to the Third's self-declaration in June as a National Assembly and, after July 14, both the King's recognition of the new Assembly and the formal abolition of 'feudal' rights. As it turned out, game, set and match to the People, though not without substantial retranslations of the Tennis Court Oath further down the road. One of the deputies from Arras who arrived in Versailles for the May gathering (roughly one year later he spoke

of 'the hatred with which the aristocrats regard me') and who was to be at the very heart of those retranslations was Robespierre.

The rest is the extraordinary tale that has been rehearsed so many times, from so many points of view. That of conservative England was graphically depicted by John Wilson Croker in 1835: 'The blood-red mist by which his last years were enveloped magnified his form, but obscured his features. Like the *Genius* of the Arabian tale, he emerged suddenly from a petty space into enormous power and gigantic size, and as suddenly vanished, leaving behind him no trace but terror'. To this we might juxtapose Michelet's more companionable yet slightly eerie postscript to his great epic work, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, mourning, with the departure of his book for the press, the loss of 'my pale companion, the most faithful of them all, who had not left me from '89 to Thermidor; the man of great will, hard-working like me, poor like me, with whom I had, each morning, so many fierce discussions'. Michelet's discussions were fierce indeed; he certainly did not canonize Robespierre as a hero of the Revolution. Others proved more ardently hagiographic. Georges Sand, rarely at a loss for hyperbole, wrote that Robespierre 'was not only the greatest figure of the Revolution, but of all history'.

In 1828 Philippe Buonarroti, who had been appointed by Robespierre to organize expatriate Italians, published his account of Babeuf's 'Conspiracy of Equals', a text which enjoyed an astonishing longevity in revolutionary circles, perpetuating Jacobin ideas and Robespierre's example not only for the 1848 insurrections but also for Russian revolutionaries. Louis Blanc hailed Robespierre as a great revolutionary leader (but as a 'moderate' who was not to be associated with the Terror). Later Jaurès famously wrote: 'I am with Robespierre and go to sit next to him at the Jacobins'. Meanwhile Taine emerged as the standard-bearer of the right, describing Robespierre's progeny as 'the insatiable gasping mouth of the monster he has trained and bestrides'. Towards century's end, the debate would become a more specialized one, with the high-tension disputes between the two zealous guardians of revolutionary historiography, Aulard (pro-Danton) and Mathiez (pro-Robespierre).

But from the institution of Bastille Day in 1880 to the Bicentenary in 1989, official commemoration preferred to write Robespierre out of the script, thus 'remembering' the Revolution by conveniently forgetting the question Robespierre himself put with such devastating clarity: 'Citizens, do you want a revolution without a revolution?' It did to memory what the Thermidoreans had done with his bloody and mangled remains, dispatched to an unmarked grave and dissolved in quicklime. In 1978 François Furet duly declared the Revolution 'over'. Naturally, scholarly adjustments in the light of new research would still be required; but, to all intents and purposes,

the French Revolution was now essentially an archival matter. Bastille Day would continue as, on the one hand, a state-sponsored media event, serving the purposes of the political classes—military parade down the Champs-Elysées, Presidential address on television—and, on the other hand, a public holiday, understood simply as a day off work, with all felt sense of connection to revolutionary turmoil and transformation irretrievably lost.

However, the term 'over' referred to three quite distinct burial ceremonies. The long-range settlement issuing from the first revolution of 1789—national sovereignty, expressed through institutions of representative democracy—had fully bedded down as the 'normal' form of the modern polity, at least since the Third Republic; an achievement to be highly prized but now so taken for granted as no longer to warrant any special commemorative wonder. The other two revolutions, that of 1792, with the Insurrectionary Commune, the overthrow of the monarchy, the September Massacres and the proclamation of the Republic, and that of Year II—the Committee of Public Safety and the Revolutionary Tribunal—were 'over' in the sense of definitively consigned to oblivion. These were the blind alleys of the revolution, littered with corpses; they had nothing to offer posterity, either in practice or for memorial, and were best walled up and forgotten. Robespierre was off-limits. Simon Schama's *Citizens*, published for the 1989 Bicentenary, ends abruptly, with 9 Thermidor and the messy death of the 'fastidious prophet of Virtue' as just deserts, before proceeding to an epilogue taking us across the Atlantic to an altogether more congenial sort of revolution.

To Furet's touted theme of overness Scurr prefers the Zhou Enlai approach; her take on her subject rests on the view that the jury is still out. In a somewhat cramped field, she has produced a first-rate biography of Robespierre for the English-speaking world. Scurr's dispassionateness serves her well, and her book is in all sorts of ways a sustained achievement from first to last page, not least its weaving of Robespierre's life story into an account of the Revolution that is exemplary in its lucidity. The deputy from Arras, fired up by six weeks of intensive discussion among the representatives gathered in Versailles, was among those who greeted the women's march from Paris in October 1789. Scurr conveys a vivid sense of the crowded city, as the Assembly reconvened in Paris; of Robespierre's interventions in the debates on the monarchical constitution over the next two years—attacking the lack of democracy, the celibacy of priests, censorship of the press, capital punishment—and the nightly analysis in the crowded Dominican refectory nearby where the Jacobin Club met. Scurr gives a sensitive description of Robespierre's home life, lodging with a Jacobin carpenter's family, the Duplays, who adored him, and wonderful set pieces of the famous scenes. The royal flight to Varennes in June 1791, the National Guard shooting into the crowd of petitioners against the King on the Champs de Mars; the

heightening tension as Austrian and Prussian forces advanced on Paris to restore royalist order in the summer of 1792; the storming of the Tuileries, the trial of the King, the innumerable processions and festivals, trees of liberty, pikes and bonnets—all are strikingly evoked. If, for example, you want to know what it must have felt like to be Maximilien Robespierre on the day of his own creation, that strangest of republican rituals, the Festival of the Supreme Being, Scurr provides an unforgettable account.

Yet as she says, 'the real challenge' of a Robespierre biography lies deeper—'a question of interpretation that reaches down to the roots of modern democratic politics'. This takes us straight to the core issue on which the jury has still to make up its mind, reflected in her title: *Fatal Purity*, one way of representing the fateful link between Terror and Virtue. Scurr succinctly summarizes the former as a 'system of emergency government and summary execution', adding 'with which no-one was more closely identified than Maximilien Robespierre'. The two components are not identical. If the emergency government run by the Committee of Public Safety from 1793 was a dictatorship, it was in the unusual form of a dictatorship of deputies, fusing the legislative and executive branches in defiance of Montesquieu's doctrine of the separation of powers; but at a time when the ministries and administrative bureaucracies had become essentially dysfunctional, France was besieged by foreign powers, Paris racked by food shortages and the federalist revolt against the centre was agitating the countryside. This was not simply another version of arbitrary rule.

Summary execution—under the infamous Law of Prairial—was a different, if related, story, source of the view so memorably staged by Carlyle's incandescent prose of Robespierre the pathological monster, an aberration of gigantically repellent proportions. But Carlyle, being Carlyle, had more to offer than a simple rant, and his ever-inventive repertoire also gives us a far more intriguing description: 'the seagreen Incorruptible'. It is intriguing because of the odd qualifier, 'seagreen'. This is normally taken to refer to Robespierre's physical appearance, what one contemporary noted as his 'livid and bilious' complexion, and Mme de Stael described as the 'greenish hue' of his veins. Carlyle seems to have intended it in this sense (when the revolutionary going gets rough Carlyle shifts to 'tallowgreen'). But philology suggests another reading: 'seagreen' as derivative from Old English 'sengreen', the household leek; folk-etymologically deformed to 'seagreen', and thus evoking the notion of the 'evergreen', the moral sense of 'incorruptible'—Robespierre as the man who could never be bought—linked to the temporal sense of incorruptible, the everlasting status of the republic of virtue.

It is the relation in Robespierre's own mind between virtue and terror that takes us to the 'something deeper' which Scurr specifies as the central issue for Robespierre's biographer. Robespierre's philosophy turned

famously, or notoriously, on an ends–means argument. The end was the creation of the virtuous republic, where 'virtue' is to be understood in the classical-republican sense of public spiritedness. Terror was the necessary means to that end in revolutionary circumstances. In his famous speech to the Convention of 17 Pluviôse (5 February 1794) he declared:

> If the basis of popular government in peacetime is virtue, its basis in a time of revolution is both virtue and terror—virtue, without which terror is disastrous, and terror, without which virtue has no power . . . Terror is merely justice, prompt, severe and inflexible. It is therefore an emanation of virtue, and results from the application of democracy to the most pressing needs of the country.

Robespierre would have had no time for Kant's view that mankind is constitutionally made of crooked timber. If it is crooked, this is but the historical effect of bad government, and it is the duty of revolution to straighten it out; the reign of virtue will be the reward of strenuous revolutionary endeavour.

But even on its own assumptions, Robespierre's thinking remained trapped within a logical aporia. The grammar of virtue straddled two tenses, future and present. On the one hand, virtue was a future object that only revolution can bring into being (this was revolution's telos). On the other hand, virtue was also a present requirement for the successful prosecution of the revolutionary enterprise. As simultaneously prospect and presupposition, the problematic of virtue inhabited a circle. Robespierre sought in part to square it, by maintaining that the People, being 'naturally virtuous', could be subtracted from this aporia, although some pretty robust policing was necessary to ensure that the beneficiaries of this natural endowment kept it in clear and steady focus; otherwise society threatened to splinter into what he called the 'hundred thousand fractions', where private interests overwhelm the public good. In one of his speeches he quotes Rousseau: 'the people want what is good, but they do not always see it'. But if, courtesy of bountiful nature, the People already has what the revolution is supposed to bring about, the same cannot be assumed of leaders, and still less of enemies. In respect of the former, eternal vigilance is imperative. In respect of the latter—which, in dire circumstances, can incorporate the former; a slide which sealed the fate of Danton in the wake of the Compagnie des Indes scandal—only terror will do.

In practice, the ends and means argument entailed the separation of justice from law. Since existing—*ancien régime*—laws are merely entrenched injustice, the creation of the just society necessarily involves the suspension of legality. This was a constant of Robespierre's thought. Foulon's lynching in the days following the storming of the Bastille elicited the comment:

'M. Foulon was hanged yesterday by the people's decree'. On the events of August 10, 1792 he observed: 'The Revolution is illegal: the fall of the Bastille and of the monarchy were illegal—as illegal as liberty itself'. At the trial of Louis XVI he ran the argument that 'a deposed king in the midst of a revolution as yet unsupported by just laws' cannot enjoy the customary protections of due process, adding that 'a people does not judge as a court of law'. This was the basis of what Scurr calls Robespierre's 'pact with violence'. The temporality of revolution—the revolution as transitional state of emergency—opened onto a wild zone of power, in which the task of a leader was to ensure that the People's 'justice' was implacably administered.

This, of course, is why the right has always hated Robespierre. But while it is invidious to play the numbers game, it remains correct to stress that, as political bloodshed goes, the total victims of the Jacobin death-machine were relatively small beer—some 1,300 were guillotined in the six weeks of June and July 1794, customarily seen as the height of the Terror—compared to what, in the carnage stakes elsewhere, Outrage has viewed with altogether greater equanimity. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that Robespierre took pleasure in killing. If there was something punitive to the psychic structure of his more ruthless impositions of 'virtue', there was nothing visceral to it. On the contrary, his relation to power was curiously bloodless even as he authorized the blood-letting. Carlyle's polemic—'acrid, implacable-impotent; dull-drawling, barren as the Harmattan wind'—suggests one important insight into Robespierre's political character: the libido was not engaged.

Since Robespierre did not personally operate the guillotine nor take to the streets with the *sans-culottes* brandishing gun and pike, his particular means in the more general means–ends calculus were purely verbal and discursive. Without his speeches Robespierre would have had little direct influence on the course of events. J. M. Thompson remarked that for someone who, for a crucial period of the revolution, was its virtually unchallenged leader, Robespierre, notwithstanding his membership of the Committee of Public Safety, remained curiously detached from the machinery of government. His role was less quasi-ministerial than that of a 'spokesman'. If Robespierre invested so much time and energy in training himself to become an effective speaker, it was because he had grasped how important this was for mastering the arena of revolutionary politics. This was partly to do with the routines of the new politics, the debating and argumentative techniques essential to the great game of representation and constitution-making. But the niceties of constitutional considerations and lawyerly argument have little bearing on the chilling speeches for which he is above all remembered, those made between the overthrow of the monarchy and Thermidor, at the Jacobin Club, in the Convention, on the Committee of Public Safety. These

were interventions justifying a political practice—seen, by sympathizers, as 'necessary' in the sense of imposed by the circumstances of a real state of emergency; or, by detractors, as irrecuperably abhorrent, a programme simply unrecognizable to any version of democracy based on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.

This is the stuff of Scurr's later chapters, 'The Pact with Violence' and 'Robespierre's Red Summer'. Here she summarizes the content of the speeches, broadly along the lines of the ends–means argument. But the content only makes proper sense when placed in its political context: in the historically specific circumstances of trying—against superhuman odds—to keep revolutionary republicanism alive as a viable project. Scurr takes us crisply through the various narrative stages of this desperate struggle: the *levée en masse* to send some 700,000 to the front; the Convention's dispatch of *représentants en mission* to quell Girondist federal revolts in the provinces; the mobilization of Hébertist *enragés* against Girondins in the capital, and then the turn against them to bring the city back under control. She shows in particular that the 'pact with violence' has to be understood more precisely as the pact with *popular* violence, although this is later re-described as 'an implicit pact with street violence', and sometimes what is evoked is merely 'the crowd' or 'the mob'. The real issue of historical assessment here concerns the nature of Robespierre's association with the *sans-culotte* movements and their organizational structure in the Paris Sections.

The one formal position that, along with his one-year service on the Committee of Public Safety, seems to have really mattered to him was his election to the Insurrectional Commune in August 1792. Yet it has never been fully clear whether this was from conviction, mere expediency, or a mix of both. Scurr is very good at showing that, for Robespierre, the Revolution meant nothing if it failed to protect the interests of the labouring poor; oppressed, at times to the point of near-starvation, not only by the remnants of 'feudal' privilege, but also from exposure to the 'modernizing' forces of the free market. Robespierre fully understood that this meant, and could only mean, 'freedom' for some. He supported the Maximum, but this changed little since its ceilings included wages as well as prices. Similarly, he supported restrictions on private property—'It is not true that property can ever be held in opposition to man's subsistence'—but did not question the institution of private property as such. As Scurr notes, for Robespierre redistribution came down essentially to progressive taxation, although for the time this was a genuinely radical proposal. The Girondins opposed it violently, on several grounds, including the claim that progressive taxation was the enemy of 'equality'!

Nevertheless, on the political front, Robespierre was never fully comfortable with popular insurrection. A fair characterization might be that he was

a radical activist who came to distrust radical activism among the common people. Perhaps the most important turning-point in the Revolution came in the summer of 1793, when the *sans-culotte* Insurrectional Committee organized the siege of the Convention, demanding the arrest of the Girondin deputies; that is, the moment when the institution of representative democracy was challenged by the popular will in the name of direct democracy. Robespierre's attitude to this challenge was ambivalent and evasive. He supported the insurrection's demands for the arrest of the Girondins, but then promptly retired to his sick-bed. More generally, whenever it was an outright contest of wills between the Commune and the Assembly or the Convention, Robespierre erred instinctively on the side of caution.

The last document he signed was as a member of the Committee of the Commune, the text with the famously truncated signature RO. It has long been debated whether he dithered over the call to the Sections to resist the Convention, persuaded to sign just as the latter's armed guards burst into the room and half of Robespierre's jaw was blown away. But what is beyond dispute is that, when asked to sign, Robespierre posed the central question: 'in whose name?'. The answer he himself proposed was 'in the name of the French people'. From the outset, the term 'people' had always been a controversial one. When Mirabeau argued that the elected members of the National Assembly should be designated 'representatives of the French people', it was objected by lawyers that the word could be taken to mean either the *populus* or the *plebs*. Robespierre exploited both senses according to his particular purposes on any given occasion. Here the relevant sense—the term qualified by the national epithet 'French'—is clearly that of the *populus*; this is not what the Hébertists understood by the word.

Scurr does not go into the debate over the meaning of the truncated signature or the issue of legitimacy raised by the question 'in whose name?'. This is a pity because it might shed light on a tension in her argument. At one point she qualifies the 'pact with violence' as a manifestation of 'dangerous pragmatism', with its implication of political opportunism; but this sits uneasily with the more principled stress on 'purity'. Perhaps the tension is resolved by the terms of the ends–means philosophy. But there is still a real question as to whether, in Robespierre's mind, popular revolution was to be revolution by the People, or for the People, or in the name of the People. There is yet another aporia or black hole here: the People as simultaneously the instrumental means to an end and yet also itself the end, the Revolution's telos. Nor can a still more dubious possibility be ignored. 'I am the people', Robespierre declared in one of his more recklessly exuberant moments. Robespierre's theoretical understanding of democracy included elements of both the participatory and the representative conceptions. But his instinctive sympathy went less to the indirect mediations of representation—the

interests of the represented were all too easily betrayed by the self-interest of the representative—than to the principle of direct embodiment. The People embodied the General Will; but since the People's 'body' was not something that could be immediately apprehended, Robespierre's own body took its place. Scurr informs us that his modest rooms in the Duplays' house contained many mirrors, his full-length portrait, his bust and 'print after print of him all over the walls'—'a kind of shrine'. There is perhaps a political as well as a personal narcissism in play here: the prints and mirrors afforded so many spectral reflections of Robespierre's own person as the Revolution incarnate.

If there are ellipses in her account, Scurr has a sure feel for the idiom in which the travails, contradictions and ironies of the 'life' are best represented. The image favoured by those who detest Robespierre and everything he stood for is nightmare: the bad dream he created and which then engulfed him. A grander representation is that of tragedy. Even Carlyle approaches it in his depiction of Robespierre's convulsive end—'Oh Reader, can thy heart hold out against that?'. In a very different register, Furet too calls on the term 'tragic'; in his oft-cited formulation, 'the Revolution speaks through him its most tragic and purest discourse'. Scurr's notion of a purity that proved fatal—to himself as well as to others—travels a similar road, and in her concluding remarks she also reaches for the grand; of Robespierre's scream under the guillotine she writes that 'as a biographer I hear it as the agonized separation of Robespierre and the Revolution: the man and what he lived for'.

This image of agonized separation has the merit of keeping the grand inside the terms of history. Assessing Robespierre's part in the Revolution turns ineliminably on two kinds of judgement, which overlap and are often inextricable. Both involve Scurr's stress on a parting of the ways. The first has to do with historical understanding of a causal sort: did Robespierre's analysis of the state of emergency and his related political practice conspire to 'save' the revolution, such that his own extremities were among the necessary conditions of its being saved? They clearly did not, in the sense that the kind of political order he wanted did not come into being. In another sense, arguably he did 'save' it: a turning-point in the War of the First Coalition of the European monarchies against revolutionary France came at Fleurus in June 1794, a month before 9 Thermidor. Had the war gone the other way, the victorious 'enemies' at the gate would have lost no time in turning the clock back. This raises a further question, less analytical than evaluative, and belonging in the domain of preferences: whether the form of the revolution that was 'saved' was, all things considered, a better regime for modern human beings than the system that was swept away. Not everyone has agreed on this, though it is now only in some very small and peculiar

corners of the contemporary world that one still encounters a preference for the *ancien régime*. Even Zhou Enlai, while probably not the best placed person to guide us in the sphere of preferences—the last truly political invocation of July 14, 1789 was not on the Champs-Elysées but in Tiananmen Square—would presumably have agreed that, on this point at least, it was not too early to tell.

In his last speech to the Convention, as his support crumbled around him, Robespierre said: 'The French Revolution is the first to have been founded on the rights of humanity and the principles of justice'. There is an enduring, if rough and ready, consensus around this view. But Robespierre also added his own distinctive twist: 'other revolutions required only ambitions; ours requires virtue'. The conceptions of rights and justice that underpin modern democracies do not typically require invocations of virtue; more commonly, they tend to rationalize the triumph of what John Dunn has called the 'order of egoism', for which justice is primarily seen as the arena for some sort of rational adjudication of rights and interests. This is not what Robespierre wanted, altogether too 'impure', but it is what by and large we have got. The unfathomable causal question is whether, without Robespierre, we would have got it at all.