

Being Immortal in Paris

Violence and Prophecy

during the French Revolution*

Francisco Javier Ramón Solans

What is at stake is not conservation of the past, but the fulfillment of past hopes.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno¹

In *Le chant du départ*, a paradigmatic example of the bellicose discourse of Year II, a mother, two old men, a child, and a wife sing in turn. In the second verse, the mother declares:

*We gave you life,
Warriors, it is no longer yours;
All your days belong to the motherland:
She is more your mother than us.*

A chorus of warriors rounds off each verse of this hymn, composed following the victorious campaign of the Army of Sambre-et-Meuse to words by Marie-Joseph Chénier²:

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1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, preface to the 1944 and 1947 editions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xvii.

2. Robert Brécy, *La Révolution en chantant* (Paris/Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Francis Van de Velde/Pirot, 1988), 160–65.

*The Republic is calling us
 Let us know how to conquer or how to perish
 A Frenchman ought to live for her,
 For her a Frenchman ought to die.*

By placing these characters of the family romance of the French Revolution center stage, the song presents precisely the people most disrupted by the soldiers' departure for war and, consequently, the most likely to oppose it.³

The romantic image of the war and the myth of the *levée en masse* have erased the traces of opposition to the conflict, or at least sidestepped them by transforming them into counterrevolutionary gestures. But rejection did not necessarily entail opposition to the Revolution or desire for defeat; it could also convey the fear of losing a loved one. The famous case of the prophetess Catherine Théot, who was instrumentalized at the Convention by Marc-Guillaume Vadier to ridicule Maximilien Robespierre and bring about his downfall during the session of 9 Thermidor, offers a glimpse of the anxiety these families felt for their kin, and their need for reassurance.

Beyond its political use, however, the “Mother of God” affair illustrates the Committee of Public Safety's concern over the multiplication of “fanatical” gatherings and the reaction of the “Christians without a church” to the dechristianization of Year II.⁴ At a moment when the political, cultural, economic, and social changes provoked by the French Revolution aroused a mixture of hope and dread among Parisians, Théot offered an explanation of traumatic events capable of easing their anxiety through a promise of immortality. Her supernatural interpretation of contemporary social changes also took advantage of the collapse of institutional religious frameworks. Théot's trial thus allows us to move beyond the political logic of opposition between revolution and counterrevolution to reveal the existence of a popular religious discourse along the margins of the ancien régime church and the Constitutional church, opening a window onto the emotional and religious universe of revolutionary Paris.

From there, new questions previously occulted by the political dimension of the case emerge. Situating the Théot affair in the *longue durée* underscores that the century of the Enlightenment was also the century of the supernatural, and that such prophetic echoes resonated well into the first half of the nineteenth century.⁵ The teleological understanding of history, based on the

3. Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

4. Michel Eude, “Points de vue sur l'affaire Catherine Théot,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 41, no. 198 (1969): 606–29; Michel Vovelle, *The Revolution against the Church: From Reason to the Supreme Being*, trans. Alan José (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 164–66.

5. The perception of the Enlightenment has evolved in recent years with the consideration of currents such as mesmerism or physiognomy and the study of their links with religion. See, for example, the reflections on mesmerism in Vincenzo Ferrone, *I profeti dell'illuminismo. Le metamorfosi della ragione nel tardo Settecento italiano* (Rome: Laterza, 1989).

self-fulfilling prophecies of secularization and progress, condemned such practices and religious discourses to extinction.⁶ As a result, the analysis of the documentation relaying them is frequently contaminated by such a reading, branding them as continuations or survivals, as if they were remnants of a past destined to disappear. In the same way, these discourses and practices are often presented as the unchanging manifestations of a popular sentiment supposedly devoid of historicity,⁷ despite the fact that the prophecies constantly evolved in dialogue with their context.

This evolution is directly reflected in the Théot affair. The first part of the documentation is held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France and relates to Théot's initial incarceration in the Bastille in 1779.⁸ The second part derives from the search of her house by police in January 1793. These documents were sent to the prosecutor of the Paris Commune, Pierre Gaspard Chaumette, with the recommendation that the prophetess was not to be considered a threat but rather to be pitied because of her madness.⁹ It is thanks to this police file that her journal of revelations, begun in 1790, survived. Finally, the last part of the documentation stems from the arrest of Théot and her followers on 27 Floréal Year II (May 16, 1794). Although biased by the polemic against Robespierre, the interrogations conserved in the collections relating to the police (F⁷) and the Revolutionary Tribunal (W) in the French National Archives illustrate the factors which drove Parisians to visit the Mother of God. Moreover, these collections contain two reports that synthesize her thought, a "summary of the sentiments and religion of citizen Catherine Théot" (the "Précis des sentiments et de la religion de la citoyenne Catherine Théo [*sic*]") and a treatise on the Apocalypse ("De Bestia"), both of which were drawn up for Chaumette in spring 1793. While the traditional political interpretation of the affair takes it as the first public episode of the rivalry

6. Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), consulted in its Spanish translation, *Aceleración, prognosis y secularización*, trans. Faustino Oncina Coves (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2003), 44–45; José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–74, here pp. 59–60; Casanova, "Secularization Revisited: A Reply to Talal Asad," in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 12–30, here p. 17 sq.

7. Philippe Simay, "Le temps des traditions. Anthropologie et historicité," in *Historicités*, ed. Christian Delacroix, Patrick Garcia, and François Dosse (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), 273–84.

8. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereafter "BNF"), MS fr. 6683, Prosper Siméon Hardy, "Mes loisirs, ou journal d'évènements tels qu'ils parviennent à ma connoissance," April 22, 1779, fols. 139–40; Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal (hereafter "Arsenal"), MS 12478, April 11, 1779, fol. 259; "Interrogatoire de Catherine Théot par le commissaire Chenon," printed in *La Bastille dévoilée, ou recueil des pièces authentiques pour servir à son histoire* (Paris: Desenne, 1790), 6:75–81, and in *Vie privée de Catherine Théos, se disant mère de Dieu, âgée de 78 ans, fille, née à Baranton, département de la Manche, près Avranches* (Paris: Imprimerie de Le Normant, n.d.).

9. Paris, Archives nationales (hereafter "AN"), T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

between the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security, revisiting these sources makes it possible to reinstate the historicity of prophetic discourse by analyzing its hybrid, porous nature; a nature which, feeding on different religious currents, transformed itself in dialogue with current events and new sensibilities.

Becoming a Prophetess in the Paris of Marvels

Louis Sébastien Mercier devoted a chapter of his 1782 *Tableau de Paris* to the city's love of the marvelous, in which the indefatigable observer of urban life recounted the various cases of prophets, healers, *convulsionnaires*, and so on that he had encountered throughout his life. Though the spirit of the text is critical, Mercier recognized that some of these phenomena were so extraordinary that "if someone believed there was something supernatural about them, it was entirely excusable."¹⁰ The capital of the Enlightenment was also the capital of the supernatural.¹¹ The streets, squares, and markets of the noisy city were filled with people discussing prophets, diviners, fortune-tellers, and sorcerers.

Most of all, Mercier was struck by the *convulsionnaire* movement, though it was already on the wane by his day. In 1727, a few days after the death of the pious deacon François de Pâris, several people were seized by convulsions on his tomb in the churchyard of Saint-Médard and then miraculously healed. The movement grew rapidly in a Paris shaken by the brutal repression of Jansenism following the failure of the resistance movement against the papal bull *Unigenitus*. Despite its defeat on the doctrinal and political plane, Jansenism won the battle of public opinion thanks to the publication of brochures, pamphlets, books, and other materials, leading to its democratization through an "incredible process of religious and political acculturation."¹² After the closure of the cemetery in July 1731 by the archbishop of Paris Charles Gaspard Vintimille du Luc, the *convulsionnaire* movement went underground, its members gathering in private apartments to represent, through their own bodies, the martyrdom of the church.

It was this Paris disrupted by the *convulsionnaire* movement that greeted the young Théot, a girl of very modest background. Born May 5, 1716, at Barenton in the diocese of Avranches (Normandy), she arrived seeking work as a domestic servant and moved into a hotbed of *convulsionisme*, a mere 300 meters from Saint-Gervais, one of the churches most affected. Although the heart of Jansenism was traditionally found in the Saint-Marcel neighborhood, most of the miraculous healings were concentrated in the large, populous, commercial, and artisanal parishes of the

10. Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Amsterdam: s.n., 1782), 2:297–303, here p. 301.

11. Ulrike Krampfl, *Les secrets des faux sorciers. Police, magie et escroquerie à Paris au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Éd. de l'EHESS, 2012).

12. Catherine-Laurence Maire, *Les convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard. Miracles, convulsions et prophéties à Paris au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 33.

Right Bank (Saint-Eustache, Saint-Paul, Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, and so on). The protagonists of the *convulsionnaire* miracles were mostly women between nineteen and thirty-nine years old.¹³

Théot was to opt for a more conventional path than the *convulsionnaire* model, but she gave it a more figurative and performative dimension. She thus claimed that God had ordered her to practice the ancient discipline, commanding that she go to the “Rose blanche” on the Pont Notre-Dame, where she would choose a horsehair shirt and iron belt from a shopkeeper’s cabinet filled with instruments of penance. She wore this type of device night and day, without anyone noticing. After this ordeal, God informed her that she had “done penance for all the nations, and that all the nations would be blessed provided that they wished to submit themselves to the practice of God’s law.”¹⁴ Suffering is commonly linked to passivity. However, in the Catholic cultural tradition pain can be envisaged as a means to promote virtuous conduct and discourage vice.¹⁵ Suffering thus becomes a public rhetoric, a moral necessity, and an instrument for the exercise of virtue and the salvation of nations.

At the beginning of her prophetic “career” around the 1760s, Théot, like so many other mystics, tried to obtain official recognition from the church. She arrived in Charenton with the goal of entering a convent: “I believed that it was only in a convent that one could save oneself, but God showed me otherwise.”¹⁶ She announced her revelations to the parish priest of Barenton, who sent her to Paris with a recommendation addressed to the man who became her spiritual guide, the abbé Grisel. Originally from Normandy, this priest had become an important figure at court as the grand penitentiary of the Church of Paris and a spiritual director to the devout. A Jesuit sympathizer—he was the teacher of Pierre Clorivière, who would play a key role in the restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1814—his criticism of Jansenism made him one of the targets of the polemical pro-Jansenist newspaper the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*.¹⁷

The abbé Grisel took charge of Théot and placed her in the convent of Miramion.¹⁸ Founded by the widow of Jacques Beauharnais de Miramion in 1655 and run by the Daughters of Sainte-Geneviève, the establishment devoted itself to visiting the sick and teaching young girls to read and write, among other skills. It also took responsibility for providing its boarders with a Christian upbringing.¹⁹ It was in this setting that Théot completed her religious schooling and learned to read.

13. *Ibid.*, 87–88.

14. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

15. Talal Asad, “Agency and Pain: An Exploration,” *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1, no. 1 (2008): 29–60, here pp. 42–49.

16. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

17. Louis-Gabriel Michaud, *Biographie universelle, ancienne et moderne* (Paris: Michaud, 1811–1862), 66:121–23.

18. Frédéric Pluquet, *Notice sur les inspirés, fanatiques, imposteurs, béates, etc., du département de la Manche* (Saint-Lô: Imprimerie de J. Elie, 1829), 10–12.

19. A.-J. Meindre, *Histoire de Paris et de son influence en Europe depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à nos jours* (Paris, E. Dentu, 1856), 4:583–84; François-Alexandre Aubert de la Chesnaye, *Dictionnaire historique des mœurs, usages et coutumes des Français* (Paris: Vincent, 1767), 1:628.

Her continuous search for recognition from a high ecclesiastical authority led her to contact the abbé Davisa of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, the priests of Saint-Hippolyte, Sainte-Marguerite, Saint-Gervais, Saint-Martin, and Saint-Marcel, and even the archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont. Receiving only rejections, she began to call into question the legitimacy of priests and the church. The context was more than favorable to such a shift. Traditional popular anticlericalism was reinforced by the crisis provoked by the archbishop's decision to refuse the sacrament to the dying unless they had a *billet de confession* from a priest approving the bull *Unigenitus* and affirming that Deacon Pâris was damned. The impact of this refusal was spectacular: to the popular sympathies for the Jansenist cause was added anxiety over a good death, since the absence of confession condemned the dying to hell.²⁰

The tensions aroused by these religious polemics led a segment of the population to manifestly reject the ecclesiastical order. For example, in June 1784 the *convulsionnaire* prophetess Sister Cathau defied the priests of Notre-Dame, Saint-Jean, Saint-Gervais, Saint-Louis, and Saint-Paul by wandering around their churches, calling out maledictions and anathemas against them.²¹ In other words, religious polemic prompted a shift “from parish piety toward an attachment to forms of the sacred not controlled by the clergy and toward practices which buried themselves in the silence of gestures, away from all ecclesiastical oversight.”²² This transformation also benefited from the interiorization and individualization of devotional practices that thrived throughout the eighteenth century.²³

It was in this context of disaffection with the clergy that Théot gradually moved away from the church, justifying her stance through Jansenist points of view. She thus abandoned the abbé Grisel because “he was not willing to believe that all nations would unite under the Christian religion.” From 1769, “while she was cleaning at the Convent of the Miramionnes,” Théot decided to stop receiving the sacraments. Having become her spiritual director, the abbé Davisa refused to give her communion because she “did not wish to believe that Our Lord was dead.” She announced that the clergy with whom she had spoken were insufficiently informed “because Our Lord had never revealed his mysteries to anyone until now; that it was only to her that he had revealed them, and that it was she who was destined to accomplish them.”²⁴ This rejection of

20. Dominique Julia, “Déchristianisation ou mutation culturelle? L'exemple du Bassin parisien au XVIII^e siècle,” in *Croyances, pouvoirs et société. Études offertes à Louis Pérouas*, ed. Michel Cassan, Jean Boutier, and Nicole Lemaître (Tregnac: Les Monédières, 1988), 185–239, here p. 230; David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 147–64.

21. Arsenal, MS 6882, fols. 179–80.

22. Julia, “Déchristianisation ou mutation culturelle,” 230.

23. Gaël Rideau, *De la religion de tous à la religion de chacun. Croire et pratiquer à Orléans au XVIII^e siècle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

24. *Vie privée de Catherine Théot*, 5–6.

the institutional church led her to prevent a large number of the parishioners of Saint-Hippolyte from celebrating Easter, and to demand that her followers not attend mass.²⁵

The parish priest of Saint-Hippolyte and the abbé Grisel denounced Théot to the authorities. On April 12, 1779, she was imprisoned in the Bastille with her inner circle of followers: the scribe Michel Hastain, a carpenter, a seller of lottery tickets, and a waitress. At the time of her arrest, her followers numbered around three hundred, the majority of whom were of modest origin—notably artisans and domestics from the Saint-Marcel neighborhood and the Marais.²⁶ On May 29, 1779, she was sent to the hôpital de la Salpêtrière, an institution more repressive than medical, where she spent three years. While there, she met other Jansenist *convulsionnaires* who had been interned because they were considered insane.²⁷

Figurism and Prophecy

The prophecies of Théot conserved in the records of the Bastille's interrogations are shot through with figurist thought. She claimed to be “the Virgin who would receive the little Jesus when he was brought from heaven to earth by an angel, in order to bring peace to the world and to receive all the nations,” a Messiah who would unite all religions under Catholicism. In her ultra-figurism, the “Mother of God” was already denying the death of Jesus and insisting that “the Holy Virgin and the Savior of whom we speak are only figures.”²⁸

While Jansenism was initially opposed to millenarian currents, over the course of the eighteenth century it progressively accepted them. In figurism it developed, “under the name of a ‘system of figures,’ a singular theology of history that consisted in deciphering its vicissitudes in light of their prefiguration in sacred history.”²⁹ This theory, invented by the abbé Duguet and perfected by his disciple the abbé d'Étemare, posited the existence of a spiritual millennium

25. BNF, MS fr. 6683, Hardy, “Mes loisirs,” April 22, 1779, fols. 139–40. See also Haim Burstin, *Le faubourg Saint-Marcel à l'époque de la Révolution. Structure économique et composition sociale* (Paris: Société d'études robespierristes, 1983), 58–59.

26. BNF, MS fr. 6683, Hardy, “Mes loisirs,” April 22, 1779, fol. 140; Arsenal, MS 12478, April 11, 1779, fol. 259; *La Bastille dévoilée*, 75–81; Frantz Funck-Brentano, *Les lettres de cachet à Paris. Étude suivie d'une liste des prisonniers de la Bastille (1659–1789)* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1903), 404; *Vie privée de Catherine Théos*.

27. Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy (London: Routledge, 2009); Jean-Pierre Carrez, *Femmes opprimées à la Salpêtrière de Paris (1656–1791)* (Paris: Connaissances et Savoirs, 2005); Brian E. Strayer, *Suffering Saints: Jansenists and Convulsionnaires in France, 1640–1799* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), 272–73.

28. *Vie privée de Catherine Théos*, 3–5.

29. Catherine Maire, “Les jansénistes et le millénarisme. Du refus à la conversion,” *Annales HSS* 63, no. 1 (2008): 7–36, here p. 9. For the figurist interpretation, see also Eric Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Meridian, 1959), 11–76.

to be inaugurated by the arrival of the prophet Elijah, a prefiguration of Christ's coming, who would bring about the conversion of the Jews, followed by that of all nations and a return to the golden age of the primitive church before the Last Judgment.³⁰

This figurist doctrine was widely diffused as part of the polemic surrounding the bull *Unigenitus*, notably through the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*, in order to appeal to the "Court of Public Opinion" and to offer an image of the Parlement of Paris as the true representative of the nation's interests against a monarch blinded by the first Antichrist, the Jesuits. Figurism also exercised a strong influence on the *convulsionnaire* movement, which became its performative element—its members acted like, and considered themselves to be, the prefiguration of an elect people and the precursors of Elijah.³¹ Théot's syncretic doctrines are a very good example of the popular reception of figurism.

At the time of her arrest in 1779, Théot—then aged sixty-three—claimed that she was six months pregnant with the next Messiah.³² It is not known if she showed physical signs that could have been interpreted as those of pregnancy, nor if they disappeared during her time in prison. In any case, after the failure of this inconceivable motherhood, it became a figurative motherhood, moving away from the flesh to become something spiritual. The great power of this image—of a woman pregnant with the Messiah whose arrival would signal the end of days—derived from the fact that it referred, beyond the positive image of the mother, to that of motherhood par excellence, the Virgin Mary.

Recourse to personifying the image of motherhood was not unprecedented in Christian mysticism, and around the same time a number of *convulsionnaires* likewise claimed to be pregnant.³³ More exceptional were two other prophetesses who also claimed to be carrying the future Messiah. In the group of *convulsionnaires* linked to the Bonjour brothers, the servant Claudine Dauphine gave birth to Elijah, "God on Earth," son of the parish priest François Bonjour, in Paris on August 18, 1792. The birth of this "new Paraclete" reinforced the existing group and created a new "Holy Family."³⁴ A little later, during the Empire, another servant, the Englishwoman Joanna Southcott, declared at the age of sixty-four that she was pregnant with the new Messiah. Her anti-Napoleonic, pro-monarchy prophecies had already attracted the attention of English public opinion, while her pregnancy and childbirth, fixed for October 19, 1814, kept the population in suspense. The

30. Maire, "Les jansénistes et le millénarisme," 11–13.

31. *Ibid.*, 14–15. See also Maire, "Le figurisme, de l'abbé d'Étemare à l'abbé Grégoire," *Politica hermetica* 10 (1996): 28–47.

32. BNF, MS fr. 6683, Hardy, "Mes loisirs," fol. 139.

33. Maire, *Les convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard*, 219.

34. Jean-Pierre Chantin, *Les amis de l'œuvre de la Vérité. Jansénisme, miracles et fin du monde au XIX^e siècle* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1998); Serge Maury, *Convulsions et prophéties jansénistes à la fin du XVIII^e siècle. Histoire d'une "secte" convulsionnaire tardive: les "Fareïnistes"* (Sarrebruck: Éditions universitaires européennes, 2010).

death of Southcott, who had not given birth, did not discourage her prophetic movement, which reached 120,000 followers and would have a marked influence on the socialism of Robert Owen.³⁵

These cases often involved people on the margins of society, in situations of exclusion and susceptible to becoming victims of social violence: women, servants, the elderly, those whom Arlette Farge defined as having “fragile lives” in eighteenth-century Paris.³⁶ These prophetesses have often been described according to a double, gendered stereotype, combining medical science’s vision of the hysterical madwoman with the Enlightenment image of the fanatical, ignorant pauperess.³⁷ Yet, as Michel de Certeau stresses, “a dangerous proximity—dangerous for its witnesses, but even more so for a society—often binds the ‘mystical’ to the ‘pathological’ on the borders of experience. The links between insanity and the truth are enigmatic and do not constitute a relationship of necessity.”³⁸ These two prejudices offer an image of passive, subjected women, without agency or autonomy, whereas in fact these women were restrained because of their power.

Beyond this supposed resignation, then, the cases of these women demonstrate the degree to which prophetic charisma gave them the strength to act and to overcome the obstacles of a fragile life. Théot’s mystical revelation in fact represents a claim to speech based on divine inspiration, charisma, and the gendered images of modesty and motherhood. In order to legitimate its authority, she calls on two powerful images of femininity: the New Eve and the Mother of God. The image of the “New Eve” had already been used in a Kabbalistic sense by Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) to invoke the coming of a female Messiah who would bring salvation and peace to the peoples of the world. In a work republished around 1780, Postel explained that this new Messiah would redeem the feminine part of the soul, as Jesus Christ had previously redeemed its masculine dimension.³⁹

This image of the New Eve was also present in one of the books requisitioned during Théot’s arrest in 1794: *The Triple Crown of the Blessed Virgin Mother of God*, by

35. Philip Lockley, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England: From Southcott to Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

36. Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Carol Shelton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

37. Elsa Dorlin, *La matrice de la race. Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009); Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Sabine Arnaud, *On Hysteria: The Invention of a Medical Category between 1670 and 1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

38. Michel de Certeau, “Mysticisme,” *Encyclopædia Universalis*, vol. 11 (1971), 525.

39. Guillaume Postel, *Les très merveilleuses victoires des femmes du nouveau monde* (Paris: J. Ruelle, 1553). This work states that Postel was from Barenton, Théot’s birthplace, which may have caught her attention and encouraged her to retrace his thought. See Yvonne Petry, *Gender, Kabbalah, and the Reformation: The Mystical Theology of Guillaume Postel (1510–1581)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

François Poiré (1584–1637). This Jesuit mystic was one of the disseminators of the figure of the “Enlightened illiterate”—an image which Théot herself cultivated, as we shall see.⁴⁰ The presence of this work among her possessions serves not only as a reminder of the influence of her one-time spiritual director, the abbé Grisel, but also as proof of the hybridity of a religious discourse that fed on both Jansenism and reformed mysticism. Poiré established comparisons between Eve and the Virgin, a “Second Eve” who “is properly called the Mother of Life; she is diversified with signs of the immortal life that she has brought to all the living.”⁴¹ This same comparison is found in the hymn sung in Paris on December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, and included in the Paris Breviary: “Criminal Eve produced a guilty race condemned to death; a New Eve is given to us to destroy death and sin by the sacred fruit which will come from her.”⁴² In this image, one also perceives a figurist interpretation in which the New Eve represents the Virgin (or the church) and the new Adam is Jesus Christ. In contrast to the negative association between Eve and original sin, the image of the New Eve rehabilitated the role of women in society. François Joubert,⁴³ disciple of the abbé d’Étemare, wrote:

*In order to entice Israel to return, Jeremiah declared to it ... that the woman par excellence, the New Eve, the true mother of the living, will join the man, that is to say the new Adam, the veritable, essential, and personal image of the living God. This blessed woman will join this man. She will be established as his mistress. She will have him at her disposition; and far from being dominated by the man and under his yoke, like the original Eve, it will be she who shall dominate him.*⁴⁴

Finally, Théot combined these two powerful images with that of the “most humble servant of the Lord,” which reflected her own daily life as a domestic. This modesty was a necessary element of her aspirations to sanctity, but was also mobilized to legitimize the speech of “the one that God had ordained since the beginning of the world to crush the head of the Serpent and bring freedom to all nations.”⁴⁵ The contrast between the destiny that God had chosen for her and her status as a weak woman was an oxymoron, dear to mystics, which allowed her to justify her capacity to act and to articulate her own voice in a hostile world.

40. Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 206–40.

41. François Poiré, *La triple couronne de la bien-heureuse Vierge mère de Dieu* (1630; rev. ed. Paris: Sébastien et Gabriel Cramoisy, 1643), 457.

42. *Breviaire de Paris, traduit en français*, part 1, *Hyver* (Paris: Libraires associés pour les usages du diocèse, 1742), 355. On this breviary, see Xavier Bisaro, *Une nation de fidèles. L’Église et la liturgie parisienne au XVIII^e siècle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

43. Catherine Maire, *De la cause de Dieu à la cause de la Nation. Le jansénisme au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 118.

44. François Joubert, *Concordance et explication des principales prophéties de Jérémie, d’Ézéchiel et de Daniel, qui ont rapport à la captivité de Babylone* (Paris: s.n., 1745), 112 (my emphasis).

45. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

Between Fear and Hope

Influenced by the work of Georges Lefebvre, Michel Vovelle set out an emotional sequence for the French Revolution that led from the Great Fear to the hope aroused by the Federation.⁴⁶ However, rather than following one another, these two emotions appear to have been experienced simultaneously by those involved throughout the entire Revolution, depending on events.⁴⁷ It seems pertinent to open the grand saga of the Revolution with the enthusiasm which spread throughout the country in the spring of 1789. The opening of the Estates General was seen as the beginning of joyful times when “good people” were finally going to be heard.⁴⁸ As Albert Mathiez once wrote, “at the beginning of 1789, it seemed that the French, in the grip of a feverish enthusiasm, lived in expectation of a miracle that was going to change the face of the earth.”⁴⁹ After the storming of the Bastille, enthusiasm turned to euphoria. Events followed one another with such speed that historical time appeared to accelerate and the future seemed closer, an impression that revived the messianic expectations of a segment of the population.⁵⁰

The revolutionary commitment of a portion of the clergy in particular can be explained by the mystical enthusiasm engendered by the Revolution. Certain ecclesiastics interpreted revolutionary events as signs that the advent of the Kingdom of Christ was imminent, projecting onto it their present desires, their conceptions of order and justice, even their idea of happiness.⁵¹ Faced with the

46. Michel Vovelle, *La découverte de la politique. Géopolitique de la Révolution française* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993), 29–44; Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* [1932], trans. Joan White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Lefebvre, “Revolutionary Crowds” [1934], in *New Perspectives on the French Revolution: Readings in Historical Sociology*, ed. Jeffrey Kaplow (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965), 173–90. For an assessment of the history of emotions, see Quentin Deluermoz et al., “Écrire l’histoire des émotions: de l’objet à la catégorie d’analyse,” *Revue d’histoire du XIX^e siècle* 47 (2013): 155–89.

47. Haim Burstin, *Révolutionnaires. Pour une anthropologie politique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2013), 17 and 391–94; Sophie Wahnich, *Les émotions, la Révolution française et le présent. Exercices pratiques de conscience historique* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2009).

48. Philippe Grateau, *Les cahiers de doléances. Une relecture culturelle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2001), 168–76.

49. Albert Mathiez, *Les origines des cultes révolutionnaires (1789–1792)* (Paris: Société nouvelle de librairie et d’édition, 1904).

50. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* [1979], trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Koselleck, *Aceleración*; Alexandre Escudier, “‘Temporalisation’ et modernité politique: penser avec Koselleck,” *Annales HSS* 64, no. 6 (2009): 1269–1301, here p. 1291. For a reflection on the impact of events, see Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

51. Rita Hermon-Belot, “God’s Will in History: The Abbé Grégoire, the Revolution and the Jews,” in *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture*, vol. 2, *Catholic Millenarianism: From Savonarola to the Abbé Grégoire*, ed. Karla A. Kottman (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2001), 91–100.

instability of the political transformations, the model offered by the Catholic religion—a model strongly anchored in French society—revealed itself to be an effective, supple, and flexible interpretive frame “whenever a need was perceived to solemnify or consecrate an event. The near millenarian enthusiasm of the early days of the Revolution was commonly expressed in a religious idiom drawing heavily on Catholic language and ritual.”⁵²

It is no accident that Paris, the political, cultural, and economic capital, also became the prophetic capital. It was there that events were set in motion, giving the impression of acceleration that seemed to indicate the approaching end of days; it was there that a new legitimacy, a new time, a new Man was established. It was to this Paris full of excitement that the prophetic group of the *Bonjour* brothers came from their native Lyon, traveling in order to give birth to the new Messiah, Elijah. This *convulsionnaire* group interpreted the Revolution as the Apocalypse that would bring about the reign of Christ, a belief that drove part of the group to an ultra-Jacobin and republican engagement.⁵³ This effervescent Paris also welcomed another prophetess, Suzette Labrousse, who entered the illuminist circle of the duchess of Bourbon and tried to obtain authorization from the National Assembly and the French bishops to travel to Rome and convince the pope of the good fortune of the Revolution.⁵⁴ The case of this prophetess is particularly interesting as it illustrates the millenarian interpretation held by some members of the Constitutional clergy. Labrousse benefited from the support of dom Gerle, a Carthusian priest and deputy of the Constituent Assembly (he renounced the priesthood at the end of 1793), Pierre Pontard, bishop of the Dordogne and editor of the *Journal prophétique*, Jean-Baptiste Miroudot, auxiliary bishop of Paris, and three other bishops.⁵⁵

The Revolution, then, did not make this supernatural Paris disappear—in fact quite the opposite. In addition to the Mother of God, the new Messiah, and the prophetess Labrousse, its streets were populated with figures like the widow Delormoy, a necromancer, or Marie-Anne Adélaïde Lenormand, fortune-teller to Talleyrand, Germaine de Staël, and the future empress Joséphine de Beauharnais.⁵⁶ Beyond the millenarianism of ecclesiastics and intellectuals, there thus took shape

52. Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture*, 9. On this mystical enthusiasm, see also Albert Mathiez, “Catherine Théot et le mysticisme chrétien révolutionnaire,” *La Révolution française* 40 (1901): 481–518; Renzo De Felice, *Note e ricerche sugli “Illuminati” e il misticismo rivoluzionario (1789–1800)* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1960); Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Marina Caffiero, *La nuova era. Miti e profezie dell’Italia in rivoluzione* (Genoa: Marietti, 1991).

53. Chantin, *Les amis de l’œuvre de la Vérité*, 41–43.

54. Garrett, *Respectable Folly*.

55. *Correspondance secrète de l’abbé de Salamon chargé des affaires du Saint-Siège pendant la Révolution, avec le cardinal de Zelada (1791–1792)*, ed. Eugène de Richemont (Paris: Plon, Nourrit et Cie, 1898), 363–64.

56. AN, W47 no. 3105; see Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France, 1785–1914* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 48–49.

a popular messianism that attempted to interpret revolutionary events according to a supernatural logic and appealed to a hybrid religious discourse midway between that of the Revolution and that of the church.⁵⁷

At the moment the Revolution took place, Théot, who had been released from the Salpêtrière in 1782, was once again running an active prophetic circle, re-formed thanks to the widow Godefroi and established on the rue des Rosiers. In 1790, like other famous *convulsionnaires* of the eighteenth century, she began to keep a journal of her revelations, which she continued until 1791. The text provides an excellent example of the providential perception of the Revolution and its accelerating dynamics, as well as an updating of the Parousia. After an intense year marked by the approval of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the Festival of the Federation, Théot declared on July 30, 1790, that “we were still very far” and reassured her followers. It was necessary to wait a while longer:

*Nevertheless, the Revolutions must continue some time yet on earth; for this is decreed by God my father. Our Lord knows what is useful to us, he knows in what time he must grant it to us—there are many things which could be used for our salvation, but in the past they have not been given to us because they would have been useless to us and we would not have taken advantage of them. This is why it has pleased God to defer.*⁵⁸

The providential interpretation of the Revolution did not necessarily entail its condemnation or its defense, but rather the assumption that its events could be explained as the result of a divine plan. Of course, this implied a moral judgment of the Revolution, an assimilation of one’s own desires with those of God. Joseph de Maistre could thus see the French Revolution as a divine punishment at the same time Labrousse considered it a happy state preceding the establishment of the reign of God. Between the pessimism of de Maistre and the optimism of revolutionary mysticism lay Jansenist interpretations⁵⁹ and Théot’s prophecies. For Théot, the Revolution was the sign of the end of days. According to the Mother of God, “we have all been until now, us and our fathers both, under the domination of the Antichrist, that is to say, of error and sin.” The imminent return of the Savior would simply be “the reestablishment of the earth in its original state of beauty and happiness in which Adam lived before his fall, which he deserved.”⁶⁰

Théot’s journal makes a clear link between the rapid succession of events and the imminence of the Parousia. Nevertheless, because the exact moment of its coming remained unknown, this relationship was not always experienced in a positive way. In each of her revelations, Théot attempted to hearten her followers. On March 23, 1791, she affirmed that “you should not worry about events brewing

57. Hermon-Belot, “God’s Will in History”; Maire, “Le figurisme”; Maire, “Les jansénistes.”

58. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette, dossier Théot.

59. Maire, “Les jansénistes,” 23.

60. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

on the earth, since the time has not yet come.” A month later, on April 15, she again tried to reassure her followers: “it is useless to worry about the events which are brewing on the earth.”⁶¹

There seems to be no correlation between the date of the revelations and specific episodes of the Revolution. Rather, it was the extraordinary succession of events that shook France between 1789 and 1791 which provoked the feeling of eschatological disquiet expressed in Théo’s predictions. She repeated her calls for calm on May 18 and June 10, 1791: “men should not torment themselves about events brewing on the earth.” The growing anxiety of her followers to know the date of the Parousia led her to pronounce on October 9, 1791, that “it is useless to think that we can dictate the date, it has been given to us to announce it, but it has not been given to us to fix it.”⁶² In the last entry of her journal on November 9, 1791, Théo recalled Psalm 59, invoking the persecution of David and of the true religion:

*We cannot order men to be patient and persistent, but only exhort them to be; because it is useless to lose patience with these workers of iniquity. Is it not necessary that all these things happen? For we say to you that in every century there have been persecutors and seducers. So do not be impatient with these workers of iniquity, because the time will come and is going to come. ... You must remember, my dear brothers, that a thousand years are like a day and a day is like a thousand years before the Lord and in the eyes of God.*⁶³

But who were these “workers of iniquity” for Théo? The psalm speaks of David’s trust in God despite the triumphs of the enemies of religion. In a letter written between spring and summer 1792, the Mother of God offered an answer by applying the term to those who had remained faithful to the old religious order and who were not expecting the coming of the True Gospel.⁶⁴ In the religious conflict triggered by the Revolution, Théo did not take a stance on any of the competing alternatives, aligning herself with neither the Constitutional nor the refractory church, nor, later, Hébertist atheism, nor the deism of Robespierre. She offered her own religious project, to which the Revolution had to submit.

Indeed, during the spring and summer of 1792 she started to write to members of the Legislative Assembly as well as to various leading figures to try to convince them of her message. Among the surviving documents, we find seven drafts of missives, somewhat resembling model letters, which could have been sent to multiple unknown recipients.⁶⁵ Théo thus continued the long tradition of

61. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

62. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

63. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

64. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

65. There remains the polemical question of the credibility of Théo’s letter to the “Son of the Supreme Being,” Robespierre. This missive, which has disappeared, was probably a fake intended to discredit Robespierre. See Joachim Vilate, *Les mystères de la mère de Dieu*

prophetesses who approached political power in order to submit it to their will. The institutions born of the Revolution were no exception. Several more famous cases are well known, such as Labrousse's demand to the Constituent Assembly, that of the *femme Bouche* to Napoleon, or even that of the Spanish visionary Rosa María de Jesús, addressed to the Cortes of Cádiz in 1811.⁶⁶

Facing the disarray provoked by the declaration of war against Prussia and the first military operations in the Netherlands, Théot promised immortality for the first time when she made the following request to the Assembly:

*To ask God to do us the grace of granting us the crown of immortality, which affects us all, soldiers as well as the people; and to do so as soon as possible since it is urgent; and to pass a decree approved by the Assembly and by the king and by Monsieur the bishop of Paris and by the municipality in order to commit all the people and soldiers to pray and to invoke the Lord to grant us peace and to make us triumph over the enemies of our salvation.*⁶⁷

Théot did not limit herself to trying to convince the deputies, she also instructed them to take several measures. First, she demanded that “the former religion be abolished” in order to “have a new order.” This was why she asked the National Assembly “to prevent bishops and priests from meeting to follow their ancient system, because they are pernicious for salvation, because they are going to reignite the fire of persecution, and their lives are not certain to be spared unless they agree to receive the religion and Gospel of the Reign of God.” In addition, she asked to be received in the church of Notre-Dame, the renewed center of political sacrality. Unlike Labrousse and Rosa María de Jesús, Théot articulated her demands by combining the image of the humble servant of God with the more powerful and confident one of the Mother of God: “only I can bring peace to the whole kingdom, because I have received the authority of God. God has accepted me as the interpreter of his word, which is his Word, conceived in me in order to be made known to man.”⁶⁸

Despite her rejection of the clergy, Théot remained sensitive to traditional devotional frameworks, making frequent references to the Virgin during her numerous readings of prayers. Above all, like many Parisians, she was very attached to the image of Saint Geneviève. Devotion to this saint was still widespread on the eve of the French Revolution, as illustrated by Mercier's description of “little

dévoilés. Troisième volume des causes secrètes de la Révolution du 9 au 10 Thermidor (Paris: s.n., 1794–1795), 57.

66. Garrett, *Respectable Folly*; Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, “Milagros, visiones apocalípticas y profecías. Una lectura sobrenatural de la Guerra de la Independencia,” *Ayer. Revista de historia contemporánea* 96, no. 4 (2014): 83–104. On the *femme Bouche*, see AN, F⁷ 6971, dossier 12785.

67. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

68. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

people” and elites appealing to her shrine in difficult times.⁶⁹ It is therefore not surprising that Parisians celebrated the storming of the Bastille with a *Te Deum* in her church and that her relics were displayed on July 18, 1789.⁷⁰

Following the comte de Mirabeau’s death on April 2, 1791, the church of Sainte-Geneviève became a temple welcoming the remains of the great men of the motherland. When a measure putting an end to pilgrimages and ceremonies involving the patron saint of Paris was announced, Jean-Sylvain Bailly, mayor of the capital, and Jean-François Lambert, member of the Constituent Assembly’s Committee on Mendicity, were among those who rose up against it. Despite numerous protests, however, the transformation of the church into a temple of the nation and the transfer of the saint’s relics to the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont were completed on August 14, 1792. This marked a decisive turning point. The shrine was dismantled during the outburst of dechristianization in the autumn of 1793, and the relics were publicly burned in the place de Grève on December 3 of the same year, a symbolic punishment for having promoted the counterrevolution.⁷¹

It is not hard to imagine the shock that all these vicissitudes could cause within a segment of the population which, a few months before, had shown a blind confidence in the shrine’s miraculous virtues. Théot was so struck by the changes brought about in this temple, now a Pantheon of the heroes of the Revolution’s motherland, that she designated it as the site where the reign of Jesus would begin:

*At Mary’s coming she will crush the head of the Serpent, but she cannot accomplish this task unless she is recognized, received, and established in the house of law near the new Sainte-Geneviève; for God had destined this house for her as soon the first stones were laid, and the new church of Sainte-Geneviève will be her house of prayer until God comes to reign. This church is not destined for the dead, because a dead man is no longer useful as God wants us to pray for Him.*⁷²

Finally, she promised that a True Gospel would appear, “a little book which is known only to the servant of the Lord,” and which “will appear only at the end of days with the religion of Jesus Christ in order to conceive for him children destined for immortality.” In this ultra-figurist doctrine, the existing Gospel was merely the prefiguration of the True Gospel which, soon after its arrival, would bring about the conversion of the entire world.⁷³ We should also remember that in semiliterate

69. Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 257–62. On devotion in the early modern era, see Moshe Sluhovsky, *Patroness of Paris: Rituals of Devotion in Early Modern France* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

70. Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, “Reliques et Révolution française (1789–1804),” in *Reliques modernes. Cultes et usages chrétiens des corps saints des Réformes aux révolutions*, ed. Philippe Boutry, Pierre Antoine Fabre, and Dominique Julia (Paris, Éd. de l’EHESS, 2009), 483–585, here p. 484–86; Haim Burstin, *Une Révolution à l’œuvre. Le faubourg Saint-Marcel (1789–1794)* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2010), 64–67.

71. Burstin, *Une Révolution à l’œuvre*, 219–22; Sluhovsky, *Patroness of Paris*, 203–8.

72. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

73. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

societies, texts were still invested with magical powers, a sacrality that recalled the importance and power of the written word.⁷⁴ Though she did not know how to write, the Mother of God could read complex texts.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, before her followers as well as during her interrogations, Théot intentionally presented herself as completely illiterate.⁷⁶ Far from being a handicap, ignorance echoed the mystical figure of the “Enlightened illiterate.” This was the image of a popular knowledge, humble and closer to both God and her followers, which defied the ecclesiastical monopoly of divine knowledge.⁷⁷ The transcription of Théot’s prophecies by Hastain echoes “delegated writing,” a very common phenomenon in semiliterate societies, and a form of learned mediation which not only builds bridges between oral and written culture, but also forges networks of solidarity around those who master the written word.⁷⁸

The activities of Théot’s group attracted the attention of the Commune of Paris, which, on January 15, 1793, sent the police to interrogate its members and to confiscate documents deemed suspicious, which were then transmitted to Chaumette. The latter summoned Théot to the city hall to explain, but being unable to receive her, asked her to prepare a summary of her thought. In response, in May and June 1793, Théot sent two texts transcribed by Hastain, the “Précis des sentiments” and “De Bestia,” based on Old Testament texts like the Books of Hosea and Isaiah and on the Apocalypse of Saint John, and showing the influence of eighteenth-century ecclesiastical controversies.

In these texts, Théot moved further into the figurist doctrine already present during her interrogations at the Bastille, stating “all that is written in Holy Scripture is only the figure of what is to come.” Thus, for example, “Moses delivering the people of God from the tyranny of Pharaoh ... figures the Savior of the world delivering the human race from tyranny.” Théot’s revelations did not simply reproduce the figurist framework, they stretched its limits to become ultra-figurist. By regarding what was related in the Bible not as real events but as prefigurations of the future, she came to deny the past existence of Moses, the Virgin, and Jesus at the same time as she promised their arrival:

Rely, then, on this truth: that the past is only the figure of the future. Believe, as a result, that there never really was a Moses, nor a Solomon, nor a Mary, nor an appearance of the Savior, nor apostles, nor a Gospel, nor a reign of God; but that the reality is coming.

74. Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

75. Her nephew, the ex-priest Raphael Théot, claimed that she had read the lives of Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Ávila: AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

76. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

77. De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 206–40.

78. Irene Murillo Aced, “Escribir para otros, comprometerse con otras. La figura del escribiente delegado en el Aragón de guerra y posguerra,” in *Historia, pasado y memoria en el mundo contemporáneo*, ed. Pilar Salomón, Gustavo Alares, and Pedro Rújula (Teruel: Instituto de Estudios Turolenses, 2014), 417–27.

*We are really going to have in our midst this same reign of God and truth, the Gospel in its purity. You will have at the same time and in succession Moses, Solomon, all the prophets, the apostles, the mother of the Saviour, and the Saviour himself.*⁷⁹

Théot continued to express her distrust of the clergy as a whole, “the refractory as well as the non-refractory, the so-called orthodox and the so-called heretical. Protestants, Catholics, and so on are all more or less affected and enveloped in the thick, spiritual shadows which have covered the earth until our time.” Her words were marked by an anti-Catholic discourse inherited from the clashes over Jansenism: “none of the churches of the World can nor should attribute to itself the divine qualities of universalism and infallibility,” while Rome “has become the organ of Satan to whom she prostituted herself.”⁸⁰ Théot’s popularity profited from the ambiance of doubt and uncertainty produced by the crisis of the constitutional oath, and her circle made a popular anticlericalism, provoked by the repression of Jansenism, converge with the weariness of the faithful in the face of tensions produced by the religious politics of the Revolution.

A victim of ecclesiastical repression, Théot fought against the image of the “Vengeful God” painted by the Catholic Church. She thought the idea that God would anathematize the world except for a small number of elect taken into the Catholic Church absurd, since by doing so he would only save four percent of the population of Paris. The Mother of God incited her followers to not see “God as wicked, vindictive”: “he comes to us with tidings of peace; he comes to deliver the poor from oppression, his hands filled with Holy Scripture.” Théot’s God was a God of forgiveness: “the whole human race would be saved without exception, even a runt”—the sole difference being that “all will not be saved at the same time; it belongs to the elect to be saved first.”⁸¹ As in the theory of the abbé d’Étemare, the circle of followers gathered around Théot became a “figure of the small number of Jews converted during the time of Christ,” who “made up the soul of the Church in a darkening time.”⁸²

Théot’s success reveals the need for comfort felt by a population that had seen its sacred reference points disappear. Following the religious quarrels of the eighteenth century, the role of the clergy had already been challenged by a small part of the population. However, this did not necessarily imply a lack of interest in rituals, devotional practices, and religious symbols. The ban on religious ceremonies and the iconoclastic outburst frightened some Parisians. Théot’s circle was both a response to this fear and proof of the continuity of a popular religiosity that traversed the Revolution and survived it.

Finally, the prophecies contained in the “Précis des sentiments” were emancipatory and anti-hierarchical, with the Savior “coming to deliver the poor from oppression”:

79. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

80. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

81. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

82. Maire, “Les jansénistes,” 13.

*His ways are prepared for the destruction of all power and principality on the earth, by lowering the mountains and raising the valleys (the people); by causing the stars (the great) to fall from the sky; by shaking the powers of heaven (the tottering thrones). And Babylon the Great (Rome), who has intoxicated all the kings of the earth with the wine of her prostitution (her idolatries, her cruelty, and her superstitions), will be treated as she has treated us, and Satan and the Beast hurled into the lake of fire and their armies consecrated to death.*⁸³

Although it referred to the Antichrist and the Apocalypse, “De Bestia” was in reality a treatise against the established order of the ancien régime, with the Antichrist becoming the image of the ills of the time. First of all, it was an appeal against the monopoly of reason, and a resistance to the religious and medical authorities who persisted in considering its author a foolish madwoman. The Beast persuades “his sectarians that his blasphemies are not blasphemies at all, that his light is the true light although it is only shadows, bitterness, and folly (Isiah 5:20–21), and that the only sensible and spiritual men in the world are those who approve of his intentions, his philosophy, and his laws.”⁸⁴

According to Théot, society was controlled by members of this sect of the “Beast,” “corruption [was] almost universal,” and “posts and dignities [were] only for them.” Rejecting an authority deemed unsatisfactory, they regarded with disdain those they did not count among their own, considering them beings “without consequence,” children “without discernment or understanding,” who did not merit their attention. For Théot, these enemies of religion and virtue were not to be found among the people but in “hôtels and châteaux.” “Kings, princes, even churchmen of the first rank, etc. (Revelation 13:16) thought themselves honored to preside over or attend these shadowy, profane assemblies.” The Mother of God even recounted that she had been invited to take part in one, depicted as:

*A Society of friends that needed only the prospect of being joyfully united to bring them together; who amuse themselves honestly with honest and permitted pleasures; with each contributing according to his means to the expenses that these pleasures necessarily entail; but what upset me was that they did not wish to tell me the practices, laws, and secret of the Society.*⁸⁵

Here Théot seems to be describing the remnant of the mystical society that she had found at Petit-Bourg after the imprisonment of the duchess of Bourbon in April 1793. She visited this château twice, once before August 1793 and again before the end of this same month. On this second occasion she met the philosopher Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, who professed himself skeptical about

83. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

84. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

85. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

“her doctrine, her mission, the New Gospel, the reign not yet begun, the nullity of the past, nonmortality, etc., all things that her disciples adopted with the greatest enthusiasm.”⁸⁶

Immortality in Revolutionary Paris

Around a hundred followers were arrested with Théot on 27 Floréal Year II and interrogated, but their total number was certainly higher. The most optimistic calculations tally between three and four thousand adepts in the Paris region.⁸⁷ Among their ranks could be found domestics, small shopkeepers, and vendors, mainly women and old people from the popular milieu of Paris and its environs—in other words, those excluded by the archetypes of a masculine, heroic, and youthful Revolution.

Attesting to the way her popularity spread and to the bases on which her charisma was forged, the records of these various interrogations allow us to grasp the extraordinary reputation Théot enjoyed among her followers. These individuals all agreed that the principal reason they attended her meetings was the comfort she brought them. Jeanne Renard, a domestic in the service of the comtesse Debar, reported that “this was a woman who offered great consolation when one was in pain.”⁸⁸ The lemonade seller Alexis Garin used similar terms, explaining “that he had heard her say such beautiful words of consolation while speaking to him about God that he had been brought to tears.”⁸⁹

The same interrogations detail the reasons behind this need for consolation. Marie-Anne Landry, sixteen years old and living in Choisy, went with some other women to see the Mother of God because she had heard that, if she addressed herself to Théot, “her brothers who were in the army would not die.” Another woman, the wife of one Tisderand, explained that she had gone there “around five or six months after her husband had left for the front, directed to Catherine by another woman named Gachet ... [and] that the said Catherine had told her that her husband would not die in the army, that she would pray to God for him.”⁹⁰ These women came to Théot hoping to “protect their children and their soldier husbands from death.”⁹¹ During his interrogation dom Gerle, one of the most important figures in Théot’s circle and the promoter of Labrousse’s prophecies, recounted

86. Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, *Mon portrait historique et philosophique (1789–1803)*, ed. Robert Amadou (Paris: R. Julliard, 1961), 220–21.

87. Henri Grégoire, *Histoire des sectes religieuses qui, depuis le commencement du siècle dernier jusqu’à l’époque actuelle, sont nées, se sont modifiées, se sont éteintes dans les différentes contrées du globe* (Paris: Baudouin frères, 1828–1845), 2:50. See Catherine Maire, “L’abbé Grégoire devant les prophétesses,” *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo* 4, no. 2 (2007): 411–29.

88. AN, F⁷ 4774⁸⁹, dossier 4.

89. AN, F⁷ 4715, dossier 2.

90. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

91. Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution*, trans. Katherine Streip (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 265. The hypothesis is also pointed out in Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 87.

that he “had seen people he was told were from the countryside, and that some soldiers had come before leaving for the army.”⁹² Even Vadier, in his report to the Convention, alluded to this military dimension:

*There are many soldiers in the departments and the army who, before their departure, have been initiated into the mysteries of the so-called Mother of God; entire families have brought their newborns there. All have been drawn there by the prestige of bodily immortality.*⁹³

The former baker Jean-Baptiste Delaroche placed a great deal of hope in Théot’s eventual recognition by the Convention: “we would be at the end of moral corruption, ... she would crush the head of the serpent, ... we would no longer die, and ... there would be no more war.”⁹⁴ In their report of the arrest, the agents François Heron and Jérôme Sénart noted their surprise at the hymn of Théot’s adepts: “that the armies of the Serpent will be vanquished and the soldiers of *la grande armée* must have courage, that their general was God, who alone must be believed in and fought for.”⁹⁵ In fact, the Mother of God took advantage of this image of the Immaculate Conception’s triumph over original sin (“the serpent”) to promise immortality to her followers. Interrogated about the presence of soldiers, Théot maintained that “many come, whether they remain in Paris or leave for the war, along with others who come from far away, ... some even came from one hundred leagues beyond Lyon.”⁹⁶

This desire for immortality is only one of the symptoms of the anxiety produced by the war. The armies of Year II still evoke mythical images of popular participation, of a means of defending social conquests, and of revolutionary zeal.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the democratization and reform of the army, as well as the intense propaganda glorifying combat, did not mean an end to the fear of war. The *levée en masse* was not as popular as we tend to think. People employed multiple strategies to avoid going to war, including marriage, subornation, requests for exemption citing disability or other major problems, and even desertion. In addition, the possibility of sending a replacement (except for the *levée* of summer 1793) and corruption during the requisition ballot (nepotism, influence peddling, etc.), lent an appearance of non-solidarity to military engagement.⁹⁸

92. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

93. Marc-Guillaume Vadier, *Rapport et projet de décret présentés à la Convention nationale, au nom des comités de sûreté générale et de salut public. Séance du 27 prairial, l’an II^e de la République française, une et indivisible* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, n.d.), 11.

94. AN, F⁷ 4667.

95. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

96. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

97. Albert Soboul, *Les soldats de l’an II* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1959).

98. On the myth of the army of Year II, see Alan Forrest, “L’armée de l’an II: la levée en masse et la création d’un mythe républicain,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 335 (2004): 111–30. On the unpopularity of the war, resistance, and corrupt practices, see Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), chap. 8; Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society During the*

Soldiers were not the only ones to dread war. Their relatives feared for their lives, but beyond sentimental factors a soldier's departure for the front also threatened his family's standard of living. In particular, the loss of his salary put the household's capacity to meet its needs in danger, and risked condemning it to indigence. Aware of this difficult situation, on November 26, 1792, the Convention granted aid to soldiers' families. Nevertheless, economic problems made it difficult to implement this decision: not only did the assistance arrive late, it also proved to be insufficient.⁹⁹ The fragile lives of families with few resources risked becoming even more precarious due to the war.

These difficulties explain the great reverberation caused by Théot's prophecy concerning the end of the war, and particularly the sign of immortality that she designated two or three months later and which attracted the attention of the police: the seven kisses. According to the arrest report, the ritual consisted of embracing the Mother of God while kissing her seven times on the forehead, the eyes, the cheeks, and the chin in order to renew the seven gifts of God. Strongly ritualized and polysemous, in this context the practice of kissing echoed a greeting ceremony. In particular, the arrest file explains that the number of kisses invoked the seven divine gifts. Based on biblical texts such as chapter 14 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, the idea of divine gifts has a strong prophetic dimension: "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." As for the number seven, its sacred dimension within the Catholic universe was tightly bound up with the apocalyptic tradition (the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven cups, the seven heads of the beast, the seven eyes of the lamb, etc.) and was charged with powerful magical connotations in a grid of symbolic interpretations that traversed all social classes. It was precisely in this Catholic and popular substratum that the seven kisses acquired their symbolism of immortality.

During their interrogations, Théot's faithful affirmed that the ritual of the kisses had begun around February or March 1794. Its origin may have echoed the renaissance of the armies of the Vendée and their victories during February of that year. Moreover, although there were no prior victims of political persecution among the faithful detainees, the enthusiasm for this practice may also have been linked to the fear induced by the massive executions of Hébertists and Dantonists at the end of March and beginning of April. At the Convention, the last public manifestation of discontent had occurred on December 12, 1793, when the mothers, widows, and sisters of the detained called for the freedom of their loved ones at the door of the Assembly.¹⁰⁰

War in the narrow sense, then, was not the only experience which led the population to a threshold situation. The political violence experienced throughout

Revolution and Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 43–97; Jean-Paul Bertaud, *La Révolution armée. Les soldats-citoyens et la Révolution française* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1979), 99–105 and 113–43; Sergio Luzzatto, *L'autunno della rivoluzione. Lotta e cultura politica nella Francia del Termidoro* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), 151–63.

99. Bertaud, *La Révolution armée*, 131.

100. Micah Alpaugh, *Non-Violence and the French Revolution: Political Demonstrations in Paris, 1787–1795* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 158.

the French Revolution produced its share of stressful conditions. Among historians who have sought to explain the Terror, some have viewed it as an inherent trait of the Revolution's true nature, as an exceptional response to the wartime context, or as a symptom of political radicalization; others have seen it as a practice which was far less exceptional once placed in its historical context.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, the historiography has paradoxically paid little attention to the perception of the Terror as it was experienced by the victims and the effects of such violence on the population. Among the most notable exceptions, Anne Simonin has analyzed the deaths—at once physical, civic, and civil—of those who were excluded through the prism of the Montagnard Convention's ideal of *fraternité*, while William Reddy has regarded the Terror as an expression of the emotional regime that began with the French Revolution and merged politics and sentiments, making fear into an instrument to purge the Republic of its enemies.¹⁰² More recently, Ronen Steinberg has addressed the way that contemporaries interpreted this violence, exploring their recourse to medico-philosophical theories in a search for understanding which lies at the foundation of the modern theory of trauma.¹⁰³

Political violence engendered a public space marked by denunciation, vengeance, and arbitrariness.¹⁰⁴ Philippe Pinel, doctor to the *aliénés* interned at the Bicêtre asylum during the Revolution, recalled the obsession a number of the inmates had for the guillotine. For example, a worker who had had the audacity to doubt the execution of Louis XVI in public appeared antipatriotic to many of his neighbors. "Due to a few vague hints and some menacing statements whose danger he exaggerates," he began to develop paranoid behaviors and was, night and day, obsessed by the idea that he was going to die.¹⁰⁵ A few years later, the fears Pinel spoke about were still present. Thus, the psychiatric doctor Alexandre Brierre de Boismont described two types of *aliénés* created by the Revolution:

In the one case, the individuals, chiefly belonging to the old noblesse, terrified at the sanguinary recollections of the revolution of '93, trembling for the safety of their families

101. Patrice Gueniffey, *La politique de la Terreur. Essai sur la violence révolutionnaire (1789–1794)* (Paris: Fayard, 2000); Sophie Wahnich, *In Defense of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* [2003], trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2012); Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution française. Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2006).

102. Anne Simonin, *Le déshonneur dans la République. Une histoire de l'indignité, 1791–1958* (Paris: Grasset, 2008); William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

103. Ronen Steinberg, "Trauma and the Effect of Mass Violence in Revolutionary France: A Critical Inquiry," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 41, no. 3 (2015): 28–49; Steinberg, "Trauma before Trauma: Imagining the Effects of the Terror in the Revolutionary Era," in *Experiencing the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), 177–99.

104. Martin, *Violence et Révolution française*, 198.

105. Philippe Pinel, *Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale* (1800; repr. Paris: J.-A. Brosson, 1809), 348–49.

and of their fortunes, were generally a prey to hypochondria, with a tendency to suicide; they imagined themselves surrounded with assassins and executioners; heard the booming of cannon, and uttered shrieks of terror.

On the other hand, some placed their hopes in “the new order of things” and believed themselves to be political representatives, “reformers called upon to bring happiness ... to the human race.” “Some even dreamed of an indefinite existence,” going so far as to clamor for the death of their enemies while hallucinating about guillotines.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, events such as the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat or the attacks against Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois and Robespierre (3 Prairial Year II) overwhelmed public opinion and provoked similar responses. On 17 Prairial Year II, one citizen Plaignier was thus arrested after she was “gripped with madness” over four or five days. According to the interrogations, Plaignier had constructed a kind of altar to Reason with a doll festooned with flowers, a feather, a heart, and a cross; she had surrounded it with flowers, plaster, and tobacco, and had added a glass of wine and some pamphlets on the Supreme Being. She knelt compulsively before this image and asked God to preserve Robespierre from assassination.¹⁰⁷ Such situations perfectly illustrate the climate of anxiety and fear provoked by political violence.

Even if there were no victims of political violence or those close to them among Théot’s followers, the case is proof of the obsessive fear and exhaustion produced by the Terror. In their account of Théot’s arrest, Heron and Sénart thus reported that the noise of horses in the street frightened the gathering and prompted a woman to exclaim, “Perhaps it is those who are going to guard the national butchery.”¹⁰⁸ The expression, “national butchery” conveys the disgust felt by a part of the population in the face of revolutionary violence and mass trials. In line with her rebellion against the ecclesiastical, judicial, and penal order, Théot criticized the judges: “Our Lord said judge not lest ye be judged,” and, consequently, “one does not prevent evil by killing men, because when more men are killed, more men will do evil.”¹⁰⁹

Théot’s offer of immortality was also a response to the crisis of traditional religious frameworks produced by the dechristianization of Year II. The sacred was not replaced by a void, but rather a plurality of competing sacralities, ranging from “Christians without a church” to refractory gatherings, atheism, deism, and so on. Fundamentally, the success of Théot’s prophecies could be interpreted as the sign of the collapse of revolutionary religion when it came to creating a new transcendence. The religious system put in place through local and national initiatives between winter 1793 and spring 1794 presented a many-sided face, and some of its traits, such as the cult of the martyrs of liberty, enjoyed immense

106. Alexandre Brierre de Boismont, *Hallucinations, or the Rational History of Apparitions, Dreams, Ecstasy, Magnetism, and Somnambulism*, translated from the second French edition (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1853), 292.

107. AN, F⁷ 4774⁷⁷.

108. AN, F⁷ 4775²⁷.

109. AN, T 604, Papiers Chaumette.

popularity.¹¹⁰ It was precisely the most popular and spontaneous manifestations that acquired a transcendent dimension. For the leaders of the cult of Marat, immortality referred to the notion of survival through memory: “for the sans-culottes, raised in Catholicism, the word immortal was inseparable from the immortality of the soul.”¹¹¹ But, because it was limited to the heroes and martyrs of liberty, this conception of immortality was a failure.¹¹²

In his famous speech of 18 Floréal Year II on “the relation of religious and moral ideas to republican principles,” Robespierre attempted to respond to the popular need for immortality. Following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the *Incorruptible* sought to base his morality on the immortality of the soul, which inspired in the citizen “more respect for his fellow men and for himself”: “The idea of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul is a continuous call to justice; it is thus social and republican.”¹¹³ Beyond morality, immortality was, for Robespierre, an emotional need:

*You who miss a virtuous friend, you like to think that the most beautiful part of him has escaped death! You who cry over the casket of a son or a spouse, are you consoled by those who tell you that nothing remains of them save foul dust?*¹¹⁴

At the end of his speech, Robespierre appealed to the same protagonists as *Le chant du départ*. The celebration of the immortality of the soul and the Supreme Being formed a rallying point for a population that had suffered the effects of war:

*You will be there, young citizens, to whom victory will soon bring back brothers and lovers worthy of you. You will be there, mothers whose husbands and sons build trophies to the Republic with the fragments of thrones. Oh French women, cherish the liberty bought at the price of their blood; use your empire to spread that of republican virtue! Oh French women, you are worthy of the love and respect of the world! Why would you envy the women of Sparta? Like them, you have given birth to heroes; like them, you have sacrificed these heroes, with sublime abandon, to the motherland.*¹¹⁵

110. Vovelle, *The Revolution against the Church*, 98–122.

111. Albert Soboul, “Sentiment religieux et cultes populaires pendant la Révolution. Saintes patriotes et martyrs de la liberté,” *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 2, no. 1 (1956): 73–87, here p. 79. On the origins of the idea of immortality in revolutionary discourse, see Elizabeth Liris, “À propos de l’immortalité révolutionnaire,” in *La Révolution et la mort*, ed. Elizabeth Liris and Jean-Maurice Bizière (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 1991), 107–18.

112. Philippe Goujard, “L’héroïsation en l’an II,” in Liris and Bizière, *La Révolution et la mort*, 119–25.

113. Maximilien Robespierre, “Les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains,” in *Œuvres*, vol. 10, *Discours*, 5^e partie. 27 juillet 1793–27 juillet 1794, ed. Marc Bouloiseau and Albert Soboul (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), 440–65, here pp. 451–52.

114. *Ibid.*, 452.

115. *Ibid.*, 461.

Ten days after this speech, Théot's arrest came as tangible proof of the popular need for immortality that Robespierre had unsuccessfully tried to satisfy. Plans for the creation of a new revolutionary religion were unable to fill the emotional void left by the prohibition of everyday religion after the dechristianization of Year II. This religious crisis, together with the need for consolation in the face of traumatic events, was the foundation of the success of Théot's prophecies in revolutionary Paris.

Nevertheless, the anxiety provoked by war, violence, and dechristianization did not necessarily lead to a condemnation of the events of 1789—this anxiety was compatible with a desire to see the Revolution triumph. Arrested with other partisans of Théot, citizen Lauriston made the following declaration during her interrogation on 6 Prairial Year II: “this society was absolutely for the Revolution. Citizen Théot told us that the decrees were not the work of men but of God; that no one would be judged, that France would triumph, that all the powerful would be overcome, and that *fraternité* would reign throughout the land.”¹¹⁶

A Brief Prophetic Epilogue

For Mathiez, Théot's death in prison in 1794 marked the demise of “revolutionary mysticism, which had momentarily spread among the Constitutional clergy and stirred a part of the masses at the beginning of the Revolution. The hopes for unalloyed bliss and for universal regeneration, born out of eighteenth-century philosophy, foundered in the Terror.”¹¹⁷ However, as we have seen, the Mother of God cannot be so easily integrated into this ambiance of hope for universal regeneration placed in the first Revolution and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. The propheticess was just as opposed to the Constitutional church as the refractory one. Théot should thus be considered closer to the ambiguity of the *convulsionnaires* than to the Constitutionalist optimism of the propheticess Labrousse, to whom she is usually compared.¹¹⁸

The death of Théot did not at all imply that prophecy had disappeared as a framework for interpreting reality.¹¹⁹ Indeed, this type of discourse continued to be formulated in constant dialogue with contemporary events, seeking to give them meaning at the turn of a troubled century. For instance, the Lyon *convulsionnaire* group known as the “Little Church” was just as opposed to the Concordat of 1801 as it was to the development of Ultramontanism in the years that followed.¹²⁰ During

116. AN, F⁷ 4768, dossier 5.

117. Mathiez, “Catherine Théot,” 510.

118. Another sign that Théot's death did not signify the end of such enthusiasm is the fact that on leaving the prison of Castel Sant'Angelo Labrousse would go on to play an important role in the society of the Roman Republic (1798–1799). See Marina Caffiero, *La Repubblica nella città del Papa. Roma 1798* (Rome: Donzelli, 2005), 141–77.

119. Thomas Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

120. Chantin, *Les amis de l'œuvre de la Vérité*.

the Restoration, the “return” of false Louis XVIIIs and the prophetic discourses associated with them (channeling the dissatisfaction with Louis XVIII and political instability) are worthy of closer attention.¹²¹ In the same years, a prophetic discourse of a counterrevolutionary bent developed around the figure of the Virgin, and would go on to play an important role in Marian apparitions for the rest of the century.¹²²

Indeed, enlarging the geographical frame of the enquiry makes it possible to grasp the importance of the prophetic phenomenon in other societies shaken by the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. In Italy, the pro-Jesuit prophecies of the young peasant Bernardina Renzi were rediscovered, but also texts inspired by the Jansenists that likened Rome to a new Babylon.¹²³ In Spain during the Peninsular War, numerous apocalyptic texts referred to Napoleon as “The Beast,” while the prophetess Rosa María de Jesús, at the behest of God and with the supposed mandate of Pope Pius VII, tried to submit the Cortes of Cádiz to her will.¹²⁴

The spectacular development of prophecies during this period was not limited to the Catholic sphere. Protestant England also saw the emergence of charismatic figures like Richard Brothers, who heralded the death of the king, the advent of the Republic, and the Apocalypse in a country at war with revolutionary France. One may add the prophecies of the English poet William Blake and the Church of the New Jerusalem, along with Southcott, the prophetess cited above, who brought together thousands of people convinced that she was pregnant with the new Messiah. Her followers would subsequently play a very important role in the utopian socialism and radicalism of the 1830s.¹²⁵

As Marshall Sahlins has pointed out, by operating on reality cultural categories acquire new functional values and transform themselves.¹²⁶ Far from constituting the immobile remnants of a past condemned to disappear, prophecies proved to be eminently malleable, interpreting reality at the same time they were modified by it. They thus provide a perfect example of the tension between structure and event highlighted by the American anthropologist. Théot’s prophecies were the

121. Philippe Boutry and Jacques Nassif, *Martin l’Archange* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985); Paul Airiau, “La légitimité incertaine (1814–1853). Retour sur les faux Louis XVII,” *Revue d’histoire du XIX^e siècle* 39 (2009): 115–27.

122. Jean Séguy, “La Société de Marie, dite d’Espagne. Mariologie, apocalyptique et contre-révolution,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 201, no. 1 (1984): 37–58.

123. Caffiero, *La nuova era*.

124. Ramón Solans, “Milagros, visiones apocalípticas y profecías.”

125. The pioneering works of E. P. Thompson were highly influential for the study of the English case, especially *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963) and *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Lockley, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism*. For the United States, see Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

126. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

object of a constant (re)elaboration which produced a hybrid discourse, situated between a figurism inherited from eighteenth-century religious polemics, an anti-establishment discourse, and a moral economy of a millenarist and revolutionary mold, whose goal was to deliver the poor from oppression and render justice. Within the short time-span of the Revolution, Théot's prophecies provided a response to the anxiety and disarray provoked by the rapid sequence of events. Her discourse on immortality counteracted the anguish wrought by the war and violence of the French Revolution. It was not positioned against the Revolution itself, but in favor of a rapid victory of the revolutionary armies under the protection of God and against the repressive excesses of the revolutionary tribunals.

Théot offered consolation to her followers, not only for the war and traumatic events of the Revolution, but also for the consecutive religious crises sparked by the repression of Jansenism, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and the dechristianization of Year II. The proposals for a revolutionary religion were unable to satisfy the emotional needs of the population. Despite the attempts to outlaw more traditional religion, devotees continued to gather together, and the pockets and dwellings of those arrested by the revolutionary tribunals overflowed with devotional objects. The sacred did not disappear after the church doors were shut. Paris continued to feel the love of the marvelous.

The Théot affair burst into the revolutionary political debate at a decisive moment. Vadier presented his report on the arrest of the Mother of God to the Convention just seven days after the celebration of the Festival of the Supreme Being. As Simonin has shown, with this festival the Terror entered a theocratic phase: the law ceased to be inviolable and became infallible. This process culminated in the law of 22 Prairial Year II and the suppression of procedural guarantees for "enemies of the people."¹²⁷ But beyond its political implications, the proclamation of the Supreme Being aimed to endow the Revolution with transcendence by means of a national religion. The use of the Théot affair during the sessions of 8 and 9 Thermidor Year II, as well as the fruitless search for connections between Théot and Robespierre, have eclipsed the religious coincidences between the two dossiers. From two very different positions, the *Incorruptible* and the Mother of God both attempted to respond to the need for immortality, whether spiritual or corporeal, in a context of increased anxiety brought about by war and political repression.

Finally, the case of Théot illustrates the need to escape the discursive logic at work at the time. This logic pitted revolution against counterrevolution but was also fluctuating and variable, alternately expanding and reducing the margins of what was considered revolutionary. Not wanting to fight did not necessarily entail a rejection of the Revolution, but rather revealed the effects of the war on the population.¹²⁸ The policy of the Terror engendered emotional suffering which

127. Simonin, *Le déshonneur dans la République*.

128. For instance, the protestations of workers in the war industry during Years II and III were not expressed in counterrevolutionary language, but as a demand for improved working conditions. Luzzatto, *L'autunno della rivoluzione*, 151–63. See also Roger Dupuy,

was not limited to the declared enemies of the Republic, but which also affected numerous defenders of the regime. No one could harbor sentiments as pure as those demanded by sublime republican ideals; anyone was therefore capable of treason.¹²⁹ In the eyes of a part of the population, unconditional love for the motherland, to be placed above one's own life and family, appeared to be an imposture that one could, at most, pretend to believe in.

Francisco Javier Ramón Solans
Exzellenzcluster "Religion und Politik" (WWU Münster)



La République jacobine. Terreur, guerre et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 1792–1794 (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2005), 315.

129. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, 197–210.