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WHY DID ROBESPIERRE WRITE AN *ÉLOGE DE* *GRESSET*?

Mircea Platon

One of the most important debates in the field of the eighteenth-century French intellectual history concerns the ideological significance of the rise of the cult of the Great Frenchmen. If the roots of this cult are to be found in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* rediscovered by the Renaissance, the systematic pantheonization of great figures from the past started in France in 1758. In that year, the French Academy decided to change the subjects for its eloquence prize, replacing the religious and moral topics with eulogies of great men who had served the nation.¹ For Jean-Claude Bonnet this cult carried a subversive message, being an implicitly republican cult *à l'antique* that gave birth to a non-Christian pantheon of secular saints praised not for their godly devotions, but for their services to the nation, fatherland or humanity. For David A. Bell the entire enterprise was still very much a conformist affair. Bell argued that, far from subverting the absolute monarchy, the cult of the great Frenchmen actually reinforced the status of the king who partook in the glory of the renowned French statesmen or writers.² "It is precisely because France's kings hoped to gain luster from the

¹ Jean-Claude Bonnet, "Le culte des grands hommes en France au XVIII^e siècle ou la défaite de la monarchie," *MLN* 4 (2001): 692.

² David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 123.

glory of France's great men that much of the cult amounted to a quasi-official enterprise, sanctioned by the monarchy itself," wrote Bell³ confirming Daniel Roche's judgment that, in the prerevolutionary decade, academism was still a brand of "open conformism."⁴

Taking this debate as a frame of reference, the following paper will attempt a close reading of Robespierre's *Éloge de Gresset* (written in 1784, published in 1785). Usually dismissed by Robespierre scholars as either an unoriginal and insignificant text,⁵ as a youthful blunder,⁶ or as an embarrassing attempt to get ahead in life,⁷ this text is in fact a very important document offering clues not only to Robespierre's intellectual formation, but also his appropriation of what he regarded as the official and established rhetoric of his age. If Robespierre's discourse seems tame, then it might say something about what constituted the "conventional wisdom" of the decade immediately prior to the Revolution. If it was daring, then it will indicate the ways in which received formulas could have been used for inflammatory purposes, much as the judicial *mémoires* studied by Sarah Maza transformed divorces, adultery or village festivals into microcosmical confrontations of macrocosmical principles such as liberty versus despotism, or natural virtue versus court corruption.⁸

These questions engage the larger debate regarding the origins of the French Revolution,⁹ in particular the "cultural origins"—defined or characterized by the rise of the levels of literacy and printed media and by the emergence of a "public sphere" and the appeal to the "public opinion"¹⁰—and the intellectual origins, defined as the distillation of and interactions between competing representations of society and its

³ Bell, *Cult of the Nation*, 123.

⁴ Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province: Académie et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1978), 1:349.

⁵ Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London: Duckworth, 1974), 14-16.

⁶ Albert Mathiez, "Deux discours de Robespierre inconnus," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 5 (1928): 470-71.

⁷ Max Gallo, *Maximilien Robespierre: histoire d'une solitude* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1968).

⁸ See Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Celebres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁹ For a recent summary of the whole debate see *The Origins of the French Revolution*, ed. Peter R. Campbell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

¹⁰ See Roger Chartier, *Les Origines Culturelles de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

relation to that public sphere.¹¹ Far from being only a projection of class struggle, political discourse, as Keith Baker perceptively argued,¹² formulated and reshaped even minor conflicts¹³ into significant political debates. The discursive politicization of French life in the eighteenth century did not stop at the threshold of domestic life and indeed, it would be strange if Robespierre's eulogy of Gresset would not bear any sign of those confrontational years. The thesis proposed by this paper is that Robespierre's eulogy of Gresset could either antedate Robespierre's proto-republicanism or that cultural practices compatible with Old Regime could, in a new context, take a revolutionary guise



Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset (1709–1777) was one of the most deceptively frivolous figures of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Born in Amiens as the son of a “conseiller du roi, commissaire enquêteur au baillage et présidial d’Amiens” and of a pious *bourgeoise*, Gresset entered the Society of Jesus in 1725, was educated at the Jesuit college in Amiens and at “Louis le Grand” in Paris, and then taught at various Jesuit institutions until 1734. But his ecclesiastical career came to a halt not long after the onset of his literary one, which began with the publication of a translation of Virgil's *Eclogues* in 1730. In 1735 he was expelled from the Society (he was not ordained however) due to his light poetry judged by Cardinal Fleury to be too easy a target for Jansenist attacks. Gresset went to Paris and continued to write. Under the protection of Madame de

¹¹ For a recent example of the impatience of Marxist scholars with this school, see Henry Heller, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789–1815* (New York: Bergham Books, 2006), a book whose tenor is perhaps best represented by the claim that: “Indeed, toward the latter half of the eighteenth century the nobility appear to have become, more rather than less, religious. In contrast some merchants and even common people, seem to have fallen away from religion. Looked at as a whole the nobility can hardly be said to have placed themselves in the vanguard of the culture of the Enlightenment” (28).

¹² Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution. Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24.

¹³ See David Garrow, *The Formation of a Parisian Bourgeoisie, 1690–1830* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

¹⁴ See Jules Wogue, *J.-B.-L. Gresset: sa vie, ses oeuvres* (Paris: Lecène, Oudin, 1894); and Mircea Platon, *Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset: Les Aventures Critiques d'un Poète dans le Siècle des Lumières* (M.A. thesis, McMaster University, 2004).

Pompadour and of Louis XV, who was himself very fond of Gresset's poem *Ver-Vert* (1735), Gresset obtained, after the required dramatic triumphs, a seat in the French Academy in 1748. To the dismay of his philosophical fellows, among whom Voltaire proved to be the most bitter and Diderot the most impartial, Gresset renounced the literary world in 1748. Returning to Amiens, he married, settled into a provincial life, and in 1759 published a resounding denunciation of his own dramatic works as being unworthy of a true Catholic. Under the spiritual guidance of Louis-François-Gabriel d'Orléans de La Motte, the ultramontane Bishop of Amiens,¹⁵ the poet whom Frederick the Great once wanted at Berlin¹⁶ became a counterenlightenment figure. Gresset attacked the *philosophes* more resoundingly in 1754 and 1774 when, as director of the French Academy, he had to pronounce the reception discourse for the newly elected members Jean Le Rond D'Alembert and Jean Baptiste-Antoine Suard. He died in 1777 as an old-fashioned, Catholic gentleman at odds with the "immorality" of the times.¹⁷



Every year between 1781 to 1784, the Academy of Amiens announced the *éloge* of Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset as the subject of its competition for the Prize of Letters. Since nobody won, in 1784 the prize had become four gold medals worth 1,200 *livres*. On 25 August 1786, the lawyer Gossart, permanent secretary of the Academy, announced that despite the fact that some of the discourses submitted to the jury had "des beautés remarquables," none of them was worth the prize. The *éloge* of Gresset would never be proposed again as subject of the competition. Among the fourteen concurrents who failed to make a sufficiently good impression on the Amiens academicians was a recently elected member of the Academy of Arras named Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre. Unsatisfied with the verdict of the

¹⁵ For La Motte, see John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth Century France*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1:265-73, 291; 2:41, 86, 458, 705.

¹⁶ Voltaire, *Correspondence and Related Documents*, ed. Theodore Besterman, in *Complete Works*, (Geneva: Voltaire Foundation, 1968-, LXXXV-CXXXV), D1475.

¹⁷ See Louis-Petit de Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la République des lettres en France*, 36 vols. (London, 1780), 10:158.

Academy of Amiens, young Robespierre made the by then customary appeal to "public opinion" and, at the end of 1785, anonymously printed his *Éloge de Gresset. Discours qui a concouru pour le prix proposé par l'Académie d'Amiens, en l'année 1785* (London and Paris, 1786).

Why did Robespierre choose to write a eulogy? One reason might have been that, as Daniel Roche has showed, for many a provincial barrister this was a way of making a name for himself: trying his hand at nimbly playing the academic rhetorical jettons with the hope of gaining money and fame.¹⁸ But another reason might be that, for Robespierre as for many others educated in the spirit of Ciceronian rhetorics, the academic eulogy of a great writer presented the added attraction of restoring the link with the republican eloquence¹⁹ and with rhetoric as an effective political weapon in the battles of opinion taking place in the "public sphere." In deciding the subject of a eulogy it was customary to choose a great man who fitted your own aesthetic or ideological inclinations or who could offer you the chance to take the proscenium.²⁰ The eulogy came in very handy for "political and literary strategies" of this sort and that was why, Bonnet contended, many young and promising men of letters or of action chose the eulogy as their testing ground.²¹

But why did Robespierre choose to write the eulogy of a writer, not that of a statesman or of a military commander, given his Spartan tastes? The antiheroic and Fénelonian "heroisme de la valeur"²² of a Rousseau who "preferred Fénelon to anything else"²³ might be one answer. Robespierre was interested in a man of letters because of the rhetorical roots of his politics. Like Rousseau, he was not interested in history, in those men who made history, but rather in those virtues that were able

¹⁸ Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province*, 1:338.

¹⁹ Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon*, 86.

²⁰ Bonnet cites Necker's eulogy of Colbert, *Naissance du Panthéon*, 110.

²¹ Jean-Claude Bonnet wrote: "Puisque l'éloge se prêtait aussi bien aux stratégies politiques et littéraires, beaucoup d'écrivains en herbe et de jeunes ambitieux destinés à jouer plus tard un rôle dans la Révolution sacrifièrent à cette mode : Condorcet fit l'éloge de Michel de L'Hospital, Marat celui de Montesquieu, Robespierre celui de Gresset, Carnot celui de Vauban, Mme de Staël celui de Guibert, Hérault de Séchelles celui de Suger, Rivarol, Chamfort, Joubert donnèrent leur contribution, et certains auteurs, comme Mercier, Guibert, Bailly firent paraître des recueils de leurs éloges" (*Naissance du Panthéon*, 111).

²² Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon*, 42.

²³ Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *La vie et les ouvrages de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Maurice Souriau (Paris, 1907), 123.

to put an end to it, to abstract virtues out of the tumult of vices that was history. Robespierre's politics, like Rousseau's, betrayed that disregard for history that usually goes hand in hand with the millenarian, revolutionary politics that make history while attempting to put an end to it.²⁴

But another, more practical answer, could be that Robespierre wrote the essay because he knew he had inside information, a mandatory requirement for winning such a competition because, as a "tool of social integration," the eulogy was also a way of "canonization and documentation."²⁵ Indeed, in order to ensure his victory, Robespierre consulted his patron and friend Antoine Buissart, a lawyer in Arras with good connections in the academic milieu in Amiens.²⁶ Buissart in turn sought information about Gresset from Sellier, a professor of mathematics, architect and director of the *École des beaux-arts et commerce d'Amiens*. Sellier answered with a *Notice sur Gresset* compiled by a M. Baron to which he added some anecdotes of his own vintage, all sprinkled with a warning to Robespierre about the veneration in which the elites of Amiens held Gresset.²⁷ And if it was necessary to flatter the elites in order to build a career based on academic competitions, in the manner of La Harpe, Robespierre would have kept in mind, besides the Amiens worthies, the conservative bishop of Arras, Louis-F.-H.-M. de Conzié,²⁸ who made him judge at the Episcopal court of Arras in 1782 at the tender age of 24. We will come back to this part of the story.

As Eugène Déprez wrote, in 1785 the elites of Arras still cherished the memory of a Gresset who, while accompanying Chauvelin, the intendant of Picardie and of Artois, on a visit paid to the city in 1740,²⁹

²⁴ The "static" Spartan society as seen in the eighteenth century is an example of a utopia seen in fact as a uchronia, as a place protected from the ravages of "falling into history."

²⁵ Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province*, 1:172-82.

²⁶ See Emile Lesueur, "Comment Robespierre composa l'Eloge de Gresset," *Annales révolutionnaires* 6 (1913): 635-42.

²⁷ J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 24-25. See also Éric Walter, "Le Vol du perroquet, 1734-1950. Notes pour une recherche sur la totémisation de Gresset et sur l'exercice du pouvoir commémoratif dans les élites amiénoises," *IN'HUI* 10 (1980): 40-58.

²⁸ For de Conzié, ally of Bréteuil and one of the first émigrés, see Nigel Aston, *The End of an Elite: The French Bishops and the Coming of the Revolution, 1786-1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 10, 43-49, 184, 207.

²⁹ See Eugène Déprez in Maximilien Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 10 vols. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1910-1967), 1:81-87.

gently engaged in a sonorous poetical joust with local worthies such as Pierre-Antoine de La Place who announced to the Academy of Arras that:

Chauvelin est ici. N'invoque plus Minerve.
Produis, parle, il est temps, sois digne de ton nom
Et si ce n'est assez pour exciter ta verve,
Sous l'habit de Gresset, il t'amène Apollon.

Gresset answered this compliment of Fénelonian flavor by a mellifluous poetical compliment that described Arras in similarly classical terms as:

Respectable séjour de ces vertus antiques,
Et de ce goût du vrai, l'honneur des premiers temps,
Terre où vont refleurir les arts les plus brillants
Et qui verras ton nom, aux fastes poétiques,
Parmi les temples des talents.³⁰

Born in a respectable although stagnant legal family,³¹ Robespierre had a keen sense for all these pious *pantalonnades* that must have counted so much for someone as dependent on family and patronage networks in the local church and parliament as Robespierre was.

Robespierre's previous minor academic hit, a *Discours sur les peines infamantes* submitted to the *Société royale des sciences et arts de Metz* in 1784, got him a second prize of four hundred *livres*. The production was rightly judged by Max Gallo as the product of a young lawyer "réformateur prudent qui avec gravité et sentencieusement cherche les lauriers

³⁰ Gresset, *Œuvres choisies*, 238. Another academician from Arras, Alexandre Xavier Harduin, emboldened by the fact that one of his fellow citizens, Père Lagneau, had been one of Gresset's teachers, answered Gresset's compliment in the same vein of academic apotheosis: "Toi qui sais manier le sceptre et la houlette,/Toi qui fais résonner la lyre et la musette/Chantre enjoué de l'oiseau de Nevers/.../Sublime et facile génie,/Avec transport j'ai lu les vers/Nouvellement éclos de ta veine fertile,/Ces vers où tu prédis que cette heureuse ville/Verra son nom fameux occuper l'univers./Si quelque jour on écrit son histoire,/On y consignera que Gresset voulut bien/Se dire notre ami, notre concitoyen/Et cent autre cités envieront notre gloire." (Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:81-87).

³¹ What I call "respectable and stagnant" John Hardmann called "modest and declining," in *Robespierre* (London: Longman, 1999), 3.

académiques" with "plates louanges" of Louis XVI and of the "sacred edifice of our laws."³²

If the eulogy of Gresset exuded the same philanthropic sentiments, timidity and sometimes even the same phrases, it had a more conservative character due, at least in part, to Robespierre's methodical approach to winning this prize. Having the benefit of some inside informations, Robespierre attached no muffler to his eulogy. A secular version of the *oraison funebre*, the eulogy replaced God with posterity, that human continuum that relayed the gratitude due to great men by reason of their services to humanity. Robespierre made clear from the first paragraph that his eulogy was not meant to recognize, confer, or tout the merits of Gresset. Gresset's "actions" and his works spoke for themselves. He was merely representing the voice of the nation paying its homage to a man who enhanced the luster of its renown. Addressing the Amiens academicians in clarion tones—"Gresset étoit digne d'un tel hommage... Sa gloire, qui brille avec éclat aux yeux de toute l'Europe, a pour vous quelque chose de plus touchant ; vous la partagez avec lui"³³—Robespierre showed from the start that he was aware of the complicate web of memories, gratitude and humanist immortality that presided over academic eulogies. The character of secular pantheonization is strengthened by the fact that more than, his literary work, what counted most for his academic posterity was Gresset's moral worthiness. Gresset was a secular saint, a model in a eulogy whose purpose was to "propose a model."³⁴ Gresset was more than a "great poet": he was "un homme de bien" whose merits could be sung with a clear conscience since "en vantant tes ouvrages, je ne serai point obligé de détourner mes yeux de ta conduite; la religion et la vertu ne s'indigneront pas contre les éloges donnés à tes talens."³⁵

If Robespierre did not, as it was customary in the provinces,³⁶ spend any time speaking about Gresset's family, he did it in order to better address local patriotism and that corporate identity manifested in the form of the "old school tie." Gresset stood for a certain tradition. Gresset was "né au milieu de vous": it was all of Amiens that loved

³² Gallo, *Maximilien Robespierre*, 50.

³³ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:88.

³⁴ Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province*, 1:171.

³⁵ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:89.

³⁶ Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province*, 1:173.

him, and now it was the whole city that was missing him and that looked for solace in Robespierre's fiery praise.³⁷ Nor did Robespierre forget Gresset's Jesuit education. As former *boursier* of the Abbaye de Saint-Vaast d'Arras, as former Louis le Grand pupil living in Paris under the protection of a canon of Notre-Dame, and as a young judge at the Episcopal court with a numerous clerical clientele and Oratorian friends,³⁸ Robespierre took pains to praise the Church. Deftly using the language of sensibility that would later be used by Chateaubriand for his own brand of Catholic apologetics, Robespierre wrote that Gresset's combination of talent and virtue was the result of his education by the Jesuits, described by Robespierre as: "Cette société célèbre qui avait instruit sa jeunesse, et qui sembloit offrir une si douce retraite aux hommes épris des charmes de l'étude et des lettres." It was thus "dans l'ombre d'un cloître que se forma le poète des Graces."³⁹ But because "une muse aimable et légère n'étoit point faite pour s'attacher au joug monastique," Robespierre noted with a benevolent eye the fact that Gresset, on leaving the Jesuits in 1735,⁴⁰ "leur laissa, dans des vers dignes de son cœur et de ses talents un gage immortel de son estime et de ses regrets... c'est ainsi qu'une congrégation où il laissoit les Brumoi, les Tournemine, les Bougeant et tant d'autres, méritoit d'être quittée." Far from dramatizing the conflict between the poetical and the priestly vocation, or from denouncing the stifling atmosphere of the cloister as a *philosophe* would have done, Robespierre tactfully wrote that one could not "faire resonner le luth des amours dans l'enceinte d'un cloître."⁴¹

In order to demonstrate the value the "luth des amours," Robespierre developed a theory of literary genres founded not upon the dignity of the subject and the complexity of the mode of expression, as was the case with the hierarchies of the epic, dramatic and lyric styles, but on the *génie* deployed in the treatment of even the *bagatelle* decried by Dr. Samuel Johnson. According to this conception, Gresset would stay

³⁷ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:88.

³⁸ In 1777, the Oratorians took over the administration of the Collège d'Arras, a former Jesuit institution until 1764. Robespierre developed significant relationships with the Oratorians that invited him regularly to lecture in front of the pupils. See A. Mathiez, "Deux discours de Robespierre inconnus," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 5 (1928): 470-71. This Oratorian connection could be significant in the context of Robespierre's possible Jansenist leanings, which we will discuss later.

³⁹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:89.

⁴⁰ The Society was banned from France in 1764 and suppressed by Pope Clement XIV in 1773.

⁴¹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:94.

in the eyes of posterity as tall as the greatest tragic poets or dramatists, because a smile could impart as much melancholy wisdom as plumbing the tragic depth of the human condition:

Les muses partagent leurs présens entre leurs favoris ; les couronnes qu'elles leur décernent sont différentes...les roses qui couronnent Anacréon ne sont pas moins durables que les lauriers qui ceignent le front d'Homere ; et si le grand caractère de ces poètes majestueux dont la voix sublime osa chanter les héros et les dieux, impose plus de respect à la postérité ; elle semble aussi sourire avec un plus doux sentiment de plaisir à ces poètes aimables que le ris et les graces ont inspirés.

Romantic in his refusal to recognize any hierarchy of literary genres and in his preference for such categories of sensibility as "sublime" or "génie," Robespierre is still a Rococo man delighted by the *badinage versifié* that he himself, as member of the literary society/Masonic lodge named the *Société anacréontique des Rosati*, produced with an assiduity far exceeding its merit.⁴² For Robespierre, originality was more important than imitating the old models, and Gresset was one of those "écrivains fortunés, que la nature a doué d'un génie vraiment original." The real poet knows how to find the significance that the things have in and by themselves, independent of the system of allegories and bookish allusions that could give significance to an otherwise null matter.

According to Robespierre, Gresset was a genius because he was natural. In reading Gresset's poem about *Ver-Vert*, the nunnery parrot who learned to swear from the sailors that transported him from one convent to another, one was not forced to lean upon erudition: "L'idée d'un Vervet se présente d'elle-même à vos esprits...à ce nom, un souris involontaire semble naître, excité par le souvenir des images charmantes qu'il reveille dans notre mémoire ; et c'est là sans doute le plus bel éloge d'un ouvrage de ce genre." Gresset's masterpiece, the poem *Ver-Vert*, is one of those rarest creations of human spirit, the heroi-comic poem: "Tous les siècles réunis n'avoient produit que quatre ou cinq chefs-d'œuvres en ce genre, et notre langue n'en possédoit qu'un seul ;

⁴² Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:185-94. See also Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 54-56.

lorsqu'un jeune poète, inconnu jusques alors, sembla les surpasser tous par un ouvrage encore plus étonnant." Daring to penetrate the confined space of the monastery, Gresset extended the domain of poetry far into the heart of reality, demonstrating thus that "aisance" that was supposed to be the sign of a great man, and recovering for his readers the problematic beauty of "ces riens importants, nés a la fois de la frivolité du sexe et de l'oisiveté du cloître."⁴³ This subject matter, "neuve, mais aride," demonstrated Gresset's imaginative power, since where Pope or Boileau used allegories and the *deus ex machina*, Gresset succeeded by the sole force of his poetic texture thus proving, according to the classical principle of the "difficulté vaincue," the might of his poetic power and restoring to poetic enchantment otherwise long-abandoned, morose portions of reality:

Au lieu d'adopter la marche imposante de l'épopée, dont la dignité, formant un contraste plaisant avec la petitesse du sujet, offre déjà par elle même une source de beautés piquantes et faciles ; il célèbre la gloire de son héros sur un ton plus simple, plus naïf, et par là même plus difficile ; il semble que son génie, rejetant tous appuis étrangers, cherche à multiplier les obstacles pour les vaincre, et lutter avec ses seules forces contre toute la sécheresse de la matière.⁴⁴

As for *Le Carême improvisé* and *Le Lutrin vivant*, two other poems in the same vein as *Ver-Vert*, they elicit a romantic cry of defiance from Robespierre to their critics: "Censeurs austères et mélancoliques, dédaignez, tant qu'il vous plaira, la petitesse du sujet de ces deux productions...mais pardonnez moi, si je ne puis rougir des ris, qu'obtiennent de moi cet ingénieux badinage."⁴⁵ For Robespierre—allegedly experiencing for the duration of this eulogy bouts of unashamed jolliness in flagrant contradiction with that "Incorruptible" pallor that the Revolution bequeathed—what distinguished Gresset's poetry from that of other poets is that he knew how to follow Horace's *miscere utile dulci* in a particularly cheerful way: "Gresset s'ouvrant une route nouvelle

⁴³ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:90. In the printed version Robespierre discarded the "oisiveté du cloître" (*Œuvres complètes*, 121).

⁴⁴ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:91.

⁴⁵ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:93.

sçut unir la raison au badinage et associer les ris à la sagesse; la poésie légère a pris entre ses mains un plus grand caractère, sans rien perdre de sa grâce et de sa gaieté."⁴⁶

According to Robespierre, if Gresset was wiser than Chaulieu and Chapelle, he was more natural than Voltaire. Gresset's poems demonstrated that their author had "l'amusement et l'instinct du génie," rather than "l'ambition ardente vers toutes les especes de la gloire" that one could feel in Voltaire's poetic endeavors.⁴⁷ As it has become perhaps clearer from the "natural" categories used by Robespierre for praising Gresset's poetry, Robespierre wrote about Gresset in Rousseauist terms, not only about his art but about his character as well.⁴⁸ If Gresset's poetry had a natural grace and was full of sensibility, wisdom and realism, this was because Gresset himself was seen by Robespierre as a "cœur pur, digne de goûter le calme et le bonheur de l'innocence qu'il décrit si bien" in the verses on the Arcadian "bonheurs de l'âge d'or,"⁴⁹ adapted and arranged for music by Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself.⁵⁰ This democratic pastoralism was decisive for Robespierre's judgment of Voltaire. If Voltaire amazed the soul, Gresset nourished it: "Les graces de Voltaire paroîtront plus brillantes, plus parées, plus vives, plus sémillantes; celles de Gresset, plus simples, plus naïves, plus gaies et plus touchantes. Le premier amuse, surprend, enchante mon esprit; le second porte à mon cœur une plus douce volupté." Thus, the contrast between Gresset and Voltaire was that between nature and culture, between sincerity and artifice. If Voltaire's garden showcased the personality of the gardener, Gresset's park exhibited the work of the whole of nature. Cloaked in this gardening terminology was more than a hint of social criticism, because while a garden belonged only to its "opulent" owner, the landscape belonged to the whole world. The landscape did not hide

⁴⁶ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:96. As Robespierre quoted more than once (Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:92, 94) and with approval the fact that "le grand [Jean-Baptiste] Rousseau" appreciated Gresset, it is strange to see him exalting the "correction" of Gresset's verses, this being the only matter that Rousseau constantly criticized in Gresset. See Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, *Œuvres*, 5 vols. (Paris: Lefèvre, 1820), 5:335-39. It seemed as if Robespierre was not really at home in the literary world.

⁴⁷ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:96-97.

⁴⁸ See Ralph Korngold, *Robespierre and the Fourth Estate* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1941), 12-19, 33.

⁴⁹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:95.

⁵⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres*, 25 vols., ed. V.-D. de Musset-Pathay (Paris, 1823-24), 10:462.

any secret corruption; it did not depend on any financial maneuvers to sustain its butaphoric beauty. In a landscape, aesthetic pleasure strengthened political virtue, and natural beauty inspired political freedom:

Les pièces fugitives de Voltaire me causent un plaisir semblable à celui qui fait naître l'aspect d'un jardin délicieux, embelli par le gout d'un propriétaire opulent : je comparerois les sensations que me donnent celles de Gresset à cette douce émotion que cause la vue de ces paysages enchanteurs où la Nature semble prodiguer tous les charmes et faire passer jusqu'à l'ame le sentiment de sa ravissante beauté.⁵¹

The same moralizing sentimentality, democratic pastoralism and cult of Nature formed the basis of Robespierre's discussion of Gresset's misanthropic drama, *Sidney*, in which the main character, an eccentric Englishman, ruminated on the idea of suicide throughout the entire play, only to renounce at it in the end. This play gave Robespierre the possibility to defend a new dramatic species in the name of a new reality, which was neither tragic (symbolic) nor carnivalesc (allegorical), but "bourgeois" (sentimental).⁵²

Je ne sais quelle manie poussa une foule de critiques à déclamer contre ce nouveau genre avec une sorte de fanatisme. Ces fougueux censeurs, persuadés que la Nature ne connoissoit que des Comédies et des Tragédies, prenoient tout ouvrage dramatique, qui ne portoit pas l'un de ces deux noms, pour un monstre en littérature...comme si cette inépuisable variété de tableaux intéressans que nous présentent l'homme et la Société devoit être nécessairement renfermée dans ces deux cadres.

Protesting against the fact that the classic dramatic principles saw only kings and mythic heroes as subjects fit for grave theatrical

⁵¹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:97. For the political meaning of landscape in early modern Europe, see Martin Warnke, "Nature's Freedom as Political Freedom," in *Political Landscape: The Art History of Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7–83.

⁵² For Robespierre's "romantism," see Ernest Hamel, *Thermidor* (Paris: Flammarion, 1897), 3–4.

endeavors, Robespierre vindicated the rights that common people have to "move" us ("attendrir"). And this softening of the heart was the key concept for his dramatic aesthetics because Robespierre was interested not in a purifying catharsis, but in the tears that confirmed our sympathy for our fellow beings. Robespierre argued for abandoning the remoteness of tragedy, the spatial, temporal and ontological distance that separated the spectators from the tragic heroes, in favor of a new, participatory, aesthetic stressing the continuum between spectators and characters.⁵³

Nous éprouvions que nos larmes pouvoient couler avec douceur pour d'autres malheurs que ceux d'Oreste ou d'Andromaque; nous sentions que plus l'action ressemble aux événements ordinaires de la vie, plus les personnages sont rapprochés de notre condition; et plus l'illusion est complète, l'intérêt puissant, et l'instruction frappante.⁵⁴

Robespierre thus called for a dramatic aesthetic that abandoned tragic "liturgy"/*anabasis*, the transfiguration of the spectator in the light of "higher" realities, for a preaching drama that put the spectator in contact with his fellows, that spoke about him and projected him onto the scene.

Interested in innovations, Robespierre did not hesitate to applaud Gresset's drama, even if it contradicted all the good-manners of French theater with its suicide-oriented plot. On the contrary, Robespierre praised Gresset for daring to write successfully about "un sujet si lugubre" and to be the first to present on the French scene "la situation d'un homme fatigué de la vie, occupé des tristes apprêts d'une mort volontaire."⁵⁵ In *Sidney*, Robespierre discovered a combination of ingenuity and melancholy with a philosophy that resembled, in his opinion, that of "le plus sublime Dialogue de Platon."⁵⁶ Robespierre appreciated the fact that Gresset's drama could be read, and his interiorization of aesthetics has to be related to what Bell called an

⁵³ For a convincing analysis of similar themes in Rousseau's *Lettre à D'Alembert sur les Spectacles*, see Marie-Hélène Huet, *Mourning Glory: The Will of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 39-40.

⁵⁴ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:99-100.

⁵⁵ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:100.

⁵⁶ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:100.

"interiorization of religious belief—its relegation to the private consciences of individual believers," a religion described by Rousseau in his *The Social Contract* as the "religion of man" opposed to the more political "religion of the citizen" who used God, and religious ceremonies, as a political bond.⁵⁷ In order to support this transformation of theater from a ritual to a sentiment, in order to support the privatization of the dramatic text, the "erasure of the image" that Huet argued was the aim of Robespierre's revolutionary Festival of the Supreme Being,⁵⁸ Robespierre became the champion of a modern literary genre: the theater of ideas that had to be read rather than played. "Much read and rarely played," Gresset's drama became thus the paragon of Rousseauist aesthetics that discarded all the exterior effects for the benefits of the various nuances of interior light:

Tandis que la foule se portera aux représentations de ces romans absurdes, ou le faste des déclamations philosophiques, les explosions d'une chaleur factice et le fracas des coups de théâtre redoublés, tiennent lieu des vraies et solides beautés qu'elle ne sait point apprécier, les gens de gout se renfermeront avec Sydney, et les reliront dans le silence du cabinet avec un plaisir toujours nouveau.⁵⁹

This Rousseauism with *Alceste*-ian overtones became more evident when Robespierre treated the subject of Gresset's comedy *Le Méchant* which in Robespierre's opinion qualified Gresset as the only true heir of Molière,⁶⁰ superior even to Voltaire: "Voltaire, si léger, si gai, si ingénieux, si agréable, même dans les sujets les plus graves; Voltaire si habile à manier la plaisanterie, à saisir et à peindre le ridicule, semble déployer partout le talent comique, excepté dans ses comédies."⁶¹ In comparison with Voltaire, Gresset was a far better author of comedies: "Quoi qu'il en soit, par tant de malheureuses tentatives, Voltaire prouva que la comédie exige de grandes ressources qui lui manquoient

⁵⁷ Bell, *Cult of the Nation*, 37.

⁵⁸ Huet, *Mourning Glory*, 42.

⁵⁹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:101.

⁶⁰ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:101.

⁶¹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:101.

absolument, et, par un seul ouvrage, Gresset fit voir qu'il les réunissoit toutes au plus haut degré."⁶²

This first arrow in Voltaire's direction was followed by attacks when Robespierre went from literature to discussing and defending Gresset's return to Amiens in 1759 and his religiously motivated public denunciation of his own dramatic works. As Gresset's Catholic contrition made Voltaire one of his most bitter enemies, Robespierre accused Voltaire, in terms resembling very much those of the anti-philosophical abbé and a magistrate in the Parlement of Paris Antoine Sabatier des Castres,⁶³ of secretly envying Gresset for his dramatic triumphs:

J'écris peut être dans un temps où il n'est permis de parler de cette démarche [la retraite de Gresset à Amiens], que pour lui faire le procès : je crois entendre les pamphlets qu'une multitude de gens de lettres lui a prodigués ; je vois le plus célèbre d'entr'eux lui lancer des traits plus absurdes encore qu'injurieux ; je vois l'auteur [Voltaire] de *Charlot*, du *Droit du Seigneur*, de la *Princesse de Navarre*, de la *femme qui a raison*, et de tant d'autres pièces dont les titres mêmes sont déjà entièrement oubliés, oser contester à l'auteur du *Méchant* le mérite d'avoir fait une comédie, et tourner en

⁶² Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:101-2.

⁶³ The abbé Antoine Sabatier des Castres, that Palissot branded as a hack, hateful against the enemies of religion, wrote: "*Vert-vert* sera toujours un Poème charmant & inimitable. Sans souiller sa plume par l'impiété & la licence, qui déshonorent celle de l'Auteur de la *Pucelle*, le Poète a su y répandre un agrément, une fraîcheur & une vivacité de coloris qui le rendent aussi piquant dans les détails, qu'il est riche & ingénieux dans la fiction... *Le Méchant* sera toujours, de l'aveu de nos Connoisseurs, une de nos excellentes Comédies, & un vrai modèle de versification. Le ton de cette Pièce est du meilleur goût, le Dialogue plein d'aisance & de vivacité, le style précis, élégant & varié; les caractères en sont saisis, définis avec finesse & rendus avec vérité. M. de Voltaire a donc eu tort de plaisanter M. Gresset sur ses scrupules au sujet des offrandes qu'il a faites à Thalie. Il étoit très-permis à un Poète, toujours attentif à respecter les mœurs & la Religion, de se repentir publiquement d'avoir exercé ses talents dans un genre que l'austère vertu est très-éloignée d'approuver. D'ailleurs, personne ne devoit être plus réservé sur la plaisanterie, lorsqu'il s'agit de Comédie, que l'Auteur de la *Prude*, de l'*Indiscret*, de la *Femme qui a raison*, du *Droit du Seigneur*, de *Charlot*, ou la *Comtesse de Givry*, du *Dépositaire*, en un mot de toutes les Comédies réprochées qui ont paru sous son nom. Un trait trop honorable aux Lettres pour être passé sous silence, c'est que notre jeune Monarque, touché du sage emploi que M. Gresset a toujours fait de ses talents, lui avoit accordé, peu d'années avant sa mort, des Lettres de Noblesse" (*Les Trois Siècles de la littérature française, cinquième édition*, 4 vols. [La Haye, 1778], 1:192-95).

ridicule une résolution dont s'applaudissoit en secret son inquiet orgueil, allarmé par des talens qui brilloient avec trop d'éclat.⁶⁴

Robespierre wrote that he was not pretending to arbitrate the dispute between "les philosophes qui ont combattu les Spectacles et ceux qui les ont loués," therefore making an allusion to Rousseau's famous *Lettre à D'Alembert sur les spectacles* (published in 1758, only one year previous to Gresset's own denunciation of the theater) in which he mounted a puritanical defense of the prohibition of theatrical representations in Geneva against a D'Alembert who thought that the theater was necessary for the citizens' happiness.⁶⁵ For Rousseau, the theater nourished the vices of society and its place had to be taken by popular festivals. Irritated by Rousseau's stance, Voltaire wrote *La Guerre de Genève* in which he accused Rousseau of provoking the fire that destroyed Geneva's theater in 1768. Fond of theater, Robespierre could not share Rousseau's opinion.⁶⁶ On the other hand, he was too Spartan to share Voltaire's worldliness.⁶⁷ This ambiguity would be recognizable even during his revolutionary reign. He loved the theater too much to ban it, but at the same time he acknowledged the propagandistic value of popular festivals. He would make both theater and popular festivals into pulpits for his ideology.⁶⁸ Joseph Butwin shows how revolutionaries tried to distance themselves from the Old Regime by spectacularly opening the debates to the public. What started in the theaters and judicial discourses analyzed by Sarah Maza ended in the "theatrical conventions and performances" of representative assemblies that met

⁶⁴ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:103.

⁶⁵ See the article "Genève" in Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, eds., *L'Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751-1780), 35 vols. in 5 (New York: Pergamon Reprint, 1969), 2:164-65.

⁶⁶ See Huet, *Mourning Glory*, 39-40.

⁶⁷ For Robespierre's view of the Antiquity as "liberty, equality, and virtue; poverty, austerity, frugality, and courage; and a self-sacrificing love of country, of equality, and of liberty," see Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries: A Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 62.

⁶⁸ See François-Alphonse Aulard, *Le Culte de la raison et de l'Être Suprême, 1793-1794* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1909); Denise Leduc-Fayette, *J.-J. Rousseau et le mythe de l'Antiquité* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 131-37; Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

in the Old Regime's former histrionic venues such as the *Salle du Manège* or the *Salle du Spectacle*.⁶⁹

Having to justify Gresset's decision to quit the theater, Robespierre tried not to become involved in open ideological confrontations. Instead, he skillfully navigated between the ecclesiastical Scylla that approved Gresset's repentance and the philosophic Charybdis that resented it as a backstabbing Tartuffade by appealing to another Rousseauist resort: "la conscience," supreme arbiter and judge of our own actions. Writing that he does not dare to accuse an "homme de bien des sacrifices qu'il croit devoir à la délicatesse de sa conscience, et lui marquer les bornes qu'il doit donner à son amour pour la vertu,"⁷⁰ Robespierre admired the moral energy demonstrated by Gresset's action. In a perhaps not totally ingenuous *Sturm und Drang* fashion, Robespierre declared himself uninterested in the moral of the story, but rather in its intensity:

Que les principes de Gresset aient été trop sévères où non : peu m'importe ; ils étoient les siens, et il eut le courage de les suivre, il crut voir d'un coté sa gloire, et de l'autre son devoir ; et, comme il étoit beaucoup moins philosophe que ses detracteurs, la gloire fut immolée au devoir... je déclare que ce qu'il a de grand et d'héroïque rachete amplement à mes yeux le tort de n'avoir pas eu une aussi haute idée que vous des études dont vous êtes épris... la gloire d'être le premier des poètes comiques ne balance point à mes yeux le mérite de sçavoir dédaigner ce titre.⁷¹

Scandalized by seeing so often "le génie déclarer la guerre à la vertu," Robespierre found an easy consolation for Gresset's failure to publish anything after his return to Amiens and his subsequent marriage: "Si le reste de sa carrière m'offre peu de productions littéraires, je m'en console aisément; elle me présente des objets plus intéressans: le

⁶⁹ Joseph Butwin, "The French Revolution as *Theatrum Mundi*," *Research Studies* 3 (1975): 148. See also Marvin A. Carlson, *Theater of the Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); Marie-Hélène Huet, *Rehearsing the Revolution: The Staging of Marat's Death, 1793-1797* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and Huet, *Mourning Glory*, 32-36.

⁷⁰ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:104.

⁷¹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:104.

bonheur et la vertu. L'éloge de beaucoup d'écrivains finit avec la liste de leurs ouvrages; ceux de Gresset sont la moindre partie du sien."⁷²

Gresset's virtue was confirmed even by the wife he chose: "Son ame sensible lui avoit fait connaître le besoin de choisir une compagne digne de lui : il la trouva dans une de ces familles honorables, où le mérite et la probité sont héréditaires, et coula des jours heureux dans une tendre union que l'inclination et l'estime avoient formée."⁷³

Strange under the pen of a future apostle of Equality who would abolish all privileges, but required in a eulogy that was destined to stress the spirit of corporate solidarity and tradition, Robespierre used this idea of hereditary virtue for praising another virtuous "heredity": that of the Catholic Church.⁷⁴ The person who embodied this virtue was Louis François Gabriel d'Orléans de La Motte, Bishop of Amiens and Gresset's director of conscience. La Motte had played an active role in the condemnation for sacrilege of La Barre.⁷⁵ He was a pillar of the ultramontane party⁷⁶ like Robespierre's patron, the bishop of Arras. If Charles Collé⁷⁷ saw in La Motte the fanatical prelate who exercised a

⁷² Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:105.

⁷³ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:105.

⁷⁴ For the young Robespierre, "l'homme de l'Église," see Gallo, *Maximilien Robespierre*, 42–43. See also Reginald Somerset Ward, *Maximilien Robespierre: A Study in Deterioration* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 273–305, who found that "Robespierre had settled down in the religion of his adolescence, and... he shared Rousseau's belief that an established religion ought to be supported rather than attacked." For a more pro-Catholic Robespierre, see Alfred Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London: Paladin, 1971), 176–78.

⁷⁵ La Barre, decapitated and then burned in 1766 with a copy of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* de Voltaire, was rehabilitated on the 25th of Brumaire year III (15 November 1794) by a Convention who in the meantime had guillotined Robespierre on the 10th of Thermidor year III (28 July 1794).

⁷⁶ See abbé Liévin-Bonaventure Proyart, *La Vie de Mr d'Orléans de la Motte, évêque d'Amiens* (Paris, 1788). Proyart was one of Robespierre's teachers at Louis le Grand in Paris.

⁷⁷ In May 1759, Charles Collé wrote: "M. Gresset a fait imprimer, le 14 de ce mois, une lettre par laquelle il renonce au théâtre. Les gens sensés l'ont blâmé, quelque dévot qu'il pût être, d'avoir marqué cette affectation à publier ses pieuses dispositions ; il pouvoit se contenter de ne plus travailler pour le théâtre, sans faire à ce sujet un éclat qui tient toujours à l'orgueil et au fanatisme. S'il est sincère en ce qu'il dit, comme je le crois (j'ai toujours reconnu M. Gresset comme un bon et galant homme, d'une société très-douce, très-aimable, et de mœurs très-pures), je suis bien éloigné de penser, comme certaines gens qui pensent mal de tout le monde, qu'il ait rendu sa lettre publique par des vues d'ambition et l'espérance de pouvoir augmenter sa fortune ; sa conduite et la vie qu'il mène à Amiens, dont il ne sort presque jamais, me paroissent une preuve du contraire ; il est bien plus simple de penser que, retiré et vivant là-bas avec son Evêque, saint homme, mais un peu bête, et dévot très-chaud et très-zélé, entouré d'ailleurs de nombre d'autres caillettes pieuses, il se soit échauffé lui-même la tête. Il a l'imagination très vive, il est un peu foible ; il a été élevé dans de grands sentiments de

harmful influence upon Gresset, the embodiment of the religious staleness that ruined Gresset's poetic genius, Robespierre saw a venerable old bishop embodying the virtues of the primitive Christianity:

Mais comment s'occuper des vertus de Gresset, sans penser à ce respectable prélat dont il fut le disciple et l'ami ? Lamothe et Gresset, que vos noms...volent ensemble à la postérité la plus reculée pour l'honneur et pour l'instruction de l'humanité ; que Gresset soit à jamais le modele des gens de lettres, et Lamothe l'exemple des prélats ! Lamothe !... Votre zele étoit pur ; votre cœur étoit doux, votre esprit aimable et éclairé ; votre vie fut le modèle des peuples soumis à votre autorité et votre mort fut honorée par leurs larmes...c'étoit la destinée de l'église d'Amiens d'être gouvernée successivement par des eveques faits pour donner à un siecle corrompu le spectacle des vertus qui ont illustré le berceau du christianisme.⁷⁸

In the printed version, Robespierre was even more pious and wrote about La Motte as "un de ces saints Évêques qui, jadis, illustrèrent le berceau du Christianisme," and who came to "revivre au milieu de nous pour consoler la Religion éplorée, et affermir la piété chancelante."⁷⁹

What is interesting in this paragraph is that Robespierre managed to serenade an ultramontane bishop (if not La Motte, who was dead, than de Conzié, who lived to run and fight another day) in quite

dévotion, que dans sa jeunesse il avoit déjà poussé très-loin, puisqu'il s'étoit fait jésuite. Qu'a-t-on besoin de supposer à cette âme honnête d'autres motifs ? Pourquoi vouloir le juger inhumainement, et lui attribuer des vues intéressées, quand jusqu'ici, par ses mœurs, sa candeur et toute sa conduite, il a fait preuve du contraire ? Sa lettre, au reste, est écrite d'un style de prédicant et d'enthousiaste, que l'on ne prend point lorsqu'on n'est point persuadé ; on l'imité, mais on ne l'a pas : ce qui prouve encore un coup que c'est un galant homme qui a perdu la tête." On the same page, speaking of Voltaire's *Cantique des cantiques*, the impartial Collé wrote that it was "l'ouvrage d'un vieillard qui a perdu ses sens" (*Journal et mémoires*, 3 vols., ed. H. Bonhomme [Paris: Firmin Didot, 1868], 2:184-85).

⁷⁸ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:107-8.

⁷⁹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:139. For Robespierre's religious ideas see Antoine-Pierre-Marie-François-Joseph duc de Lévis Mirepoix, *Robespierre: prophète de la Révolution* (Paris, Librairie Académique Perrin, 1978), 238-45; Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London: Duckworth, 1974), 179-84. More recently, John Hardmann noted that Robespierre, whom Camille Desmoulins called a "republican Jansenist," had "the Jansenist mind-set" as he embraced the idea that "the general will is represented by a persecuted minority" (*Robespierre*, 15).

Jansenist terms. In La Motte he applauded not a conventional piety, nor even religious practice or a churchman, but rather the "father," an antique and natural virtue, and a religious benevolence. In praising La Motte, Robespierre did not praise the Church of his own age, but the "berceau du christianisme," the age of a more "natural" Christianity, the age of a more sincere faith, a sort of a natural state of Christianity that could be seen as a reflex of Rousseau's "golden age" or as a Christian classical republic.⁸⁰ This Jansenist vein did not remain unnoticed since Dubois de Fosseux, a friend of Robespierre⁸¹ and secretary of the Academy of Arras since December 1785, sent one copy of Robespierre's *éloge* of Gresset to the abbé Grandidier, secretary and archivist of the diocese of Strasbourg. Stirred by Robespierre's talents, Grandidier asked Dubois in a letter from 20 December 1786, to assure Robespierre of his admiration for his talents and his "sentiments patriotiques."⁸²

Robespierre wrote that, far from softening him, Gresset's retreat to the provinces intensified his acuity and sense of moral indignation against the pernicious contemporary doctrines: "Cette vigoureuse indignation que le vice inspira toujours aux âmes droites étoit encore fortifiée dans celle de Gresset par l'habitude de cultiver la vertu au sein de la retraite, loin de cette ville immense dont les mœurs accoutument nécessairement nos yeux au spectacle de tous les excès."⁸³ Robespierre applauded Gresset for returning to the provinces in another instance of Rousseauist emulation. For while Voltaire or Charles Pinot-Duclos

⁸⁰ For the possible sources and the circulation of such ideas, see Dale K. Van Kley's forthcoming "Classical Republicanism in Clerical Garb: Gallican Memoires of the Early Church and the Project of Primitivist Reform, 1719–1791." See also Dale K. Van Kley, "The Estates General as Ecumenical Council: The Constitutionalism of Corporate Consensus and the 'Parlement's' Ruling of September 25, 1788," *The Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989): 1–52; and Monique Cottret, "Aux origines du républicanisme janséniste: le mythe de l'église primitive et le primitivisme des lumières," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 31 (1984): 98–115.

⁸¹ In order to console Robespierre for not winning the prize of the l'Académie d'Amiens with his eulogy, Dubois de Fosseux sent Robespierre a poem that began with: "Du chantage de vert-Vert je prissais les talents:/ Mon oreille, attentive à ses tendres accens,/ Ne pouvait se lasser d'écouter cette lyre/ Que n'inspira jamais un coupable délire./ Mais combien il parut sublime à nos yeux/ Depuis que, possesseur d'un écrit précieux,/ Je puis, guidé par toi, mieux régler mon suffrage" (Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:151–52).

⁸² L. Berthe, "Les Académies d'Arras et de Metz: leurs relations au temps de Robespierre," *Revue du Nord* 43 (1961): 44–51, quoted in Joseph I. Shulim, "The Youthful Robespierre and His Ambivalence toward the Ancien Régime," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 5 (1972): 398–420.

⁸³ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:110.

saw the spirit of France embodied in the Parisian elites, Rousseau discovered the "genius" of France in the "provinces," in the "country-side," in the "people of the countryside."⁸⁴ Strengthened by patriarchal virtues and "far from the maddening crowd" as a Rousseauist/classical sage should have been, Gresset, as president of the French Academy, justly attacked his corrupt age that "en dépit de toutes les lumières dont il se vante" was only a "débordement de désolantes doctrines [qui] a renversé toutes les digues des passions, irritées par les énormes besoins de luxe."⁸⁵

Despite such widespread corruption, Gresset enjoyed his fair share of recognition from virtuous monarchs. Thus, Frederick the Great knew how to appreciate Gresset's talents:

Ce prince pour qui nul des grands talens qui brilloient dans l'Europe n'étoit étranger, sçut apprécier et ses éloges et son génie. Plusieurs rois avant lui avoient honoré les sçavans par des largesses; Frédéric sçut donner à Gresset une preuve d'estime plus flatteuse et plus décisive; il composa lui même une ode à sa louange⁸⁶ et lui accorda l'honneur d'être célébré, à la face de l'Europe, par un grand roi et par un Héros.⁸⁷

But more important than the foreign recognition were the "lettres de noblesse" that Gresset received from Louis XVI. This event offered Robespierre a new occasion for some wistful musings about the beginning of the reign of Louis XVI⁸⁸ and the hopes that it stirred in the

⁸⁴ Bell, *The Cult of the Nation*, 144.

⁸⁵ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:110. On page 59 of this edition we found the same idea in Robespierre's previous *Discours sur les peines infamantes*.

⁸⁶ Glossing on this poem, Charles Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu wrote drily: "Le roi de Prusse écrivit à Gresset une lettre comme un poëteureau l'écrivait. Les bonnes lettres des rois sont des lettres de change" (*Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols., ed. André Masson [Paris, Nagel, 1950-1955], 2:641).

⁸⁷ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:109.

⁸⁸ It is perhaps not without importance that on 5 June 1774 Gresset, as president ("directeur") of the French Academy, read to Louis XVI the tribute of this company on his advent to the throne. In 1775, Robespierre, then a young student, was selected by the College Louis le Grand to read to the new king, coming to Paris from his Reims *sarve*, the address in Latin verses that the faculty prepared for celebrating the crowning. See Joseph I. Shulim, "The Youthful Robespierre," 401.

"nation's" bosom and perhaps in those well-educated young men wasted in the "stress zones" of social mobility:

Cette grace, l'une des premières que ce monarque ait accordées, n'étoit pas un des traits les moins dignes de signaler le commencement d'un règne, sur lequel la nation fondeoit de si douces espérances. Quel heureux présage pour les peuples de voir le jeune prince qui alloit faire leur destin ; du haut du trône où il venoit de monter, jeter pour ainsi dire les yeux autour de lui, pour chercher les hommes illustres qui fesoient l'ornement de son empire, et distinguer dans la foule un citoyen modeste et paisible, pour couronner à la fois dans sa personne et les talens et les vertus !⁸⁹

Related to this official recognition was another late eighteenth-century Jansenist chord that Robespierre struck just at the end of his discourse: that of patriotism and of the rewards that, in a virtuous "patrie," a virtuous and patriotic citizen is bound to reap.⁹⁰ Robespierre declared that his allegiance was not to the academic or aesthetic values, but to the patriotic ones:

L'éloge d'un homme illustre est un monument élevé à la gloire de sa patrie, et la couronne que vous devez décerner m'a paru faite, messieurs, pour exciter l'ambition d'une ame noble ; parce que je l'ai moins regardée comme la récompense du talent, que comme le prix glorieux d'un acte patriotique. Ce

⁸⁹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:112. Discussing this ennoblement, Louis-François Mettra wrote on 4 February 1775: "Les Français ayant repris les représentations du *Siège de Calais*, M. du Belloi, son auteur, a reçu du Roi une gratification de 1200 livres. A cette preuve de l'estime que notre jeune Monarque accorde aux gens de Lettres, ajoutez celle des Lettres de Noblesse accordées à M. de Gresset, non-seulement à cause de ses talens, mais aussi parce que dans ses ouvrages, il a toujours respecté la religion & les mœurs" (*Correspondance Littéraire Secrète*, 7 janvier – 24 juin 1775, ed. Tawfik Mekki-Berrada [Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1986], 19).

⁹⁰ Parker observed that by 1784 Robespierre "realized that in France many careers were closed to talent. He believed, furthermore, that such had not been the case in republican antiquity, 'where the careers leading to glory and to office were always open to talent'" (*The Cult of Antiquity*, 48).

sentiment a échauffé mon zèle, que l'appas d'un simple laurier littéraire eut laissé froid et languissant.⁹¹

What Robespierre presented to the Amiens academicians was thus not a philosophical or a Catholic version of Gresset's accomplishments, but a patriotic one. Robespierre fashioned a Gresset that was an honest citizen who married a virtuous wife, a superior poet who was equally modest, willing to "se faire oublier dans un tems où la mode et l'intrigue ont tant de part à la vogue des auteurs vivans." Gresset's modesty was also evident in the fact that, when named "perpetual president" of the Academy of Amiens that he helped create and incorporate, Gresset "se montra digne de cette distinction en la refusant; et sa conduite prouva, ce me semble, sa justice et son estime pour la compagnie dont il étoit membre... Il pensa que la dictature ne convenoit pas à la constitution d'une république littéraire."⁹²

We know of course that Gresset behaved "despotically" on the occasion of poet Jacques Delille's election in the Academy of Amiens,⁹³ and that, far from refusing the honors, Gresset corresponded assiduously and unctuously enough with the King's brother, the comte d'Artois, and with the royal aunts, Madame Élisabeth and Madame

⁹¹ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:115. Bell mentions that 895 French language works published between 1700 and 1789 have "nation" or "national" in their title, while 277 have the words "patrie," "patriote," "patriotique," compared to 105 and 16 before 1700. Did Robespierre's eulogy mention any of these words? (*The Cult of the Nation*, 12). For the complicated convergences between the parlement milieu and Jansenism, Gallicanism, and the patriotic rhetoric, see Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: from Calvin to the Civil Constitution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 258-74, and the forthcoming "Religion and the Age of Patriot Revolutions."

⁹² Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:112.

⁹³ Jean François La Harpe circulated an anecdote that was supposed to prove "le despotisme" with which Gresset ruled the Académie d'Amiens: "L'abbé Delille, alors fort jeune, et professeur au collège de cette ville, avait désiré d'être de cette académie, et avait été élu en l'absence de Gresset. Celui-ci piqué qu'on eût fait quelque chose sans lui, vint à l'académie, trouva moyen de faire casser l'élection sous quelque prétexte d'un défaut de forme, et fit recevoir son chirurgien" (*Œuvres*, 16 vols. [Paris, 1820], 10:459-60). For a discussion of this anecdote and other meetings between Gresset and Delille, see Édouard Guitton who wrote that for Gresset, "confit en dévotion et certainement bien informé, Delille a le tort majeur d'appartenir au parti philosophique, ce qui, dans le climat de guerre ouverte où l'on vit, peut suffire à justifier son exclusion," (*Jacques Delille (1738-1813) et le poème de la nature en France de 1750 à 1820* [Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1974], 195).

Adélaïde.⁹⁴ Gresset had a vivacious youth and enjoyed a maturity and a senectute full of Parisian honors and provincial dignities. But Robespierre did not want to talk about any of this, fashioning instead the image of a Rousseauist hermit, of a tender-hearted sage who turned his back to the world and confronted the malice and gossip of the "beaux-esprits" with a serene countenance. Robespierre seemed to believe that his eulogy of Gresset was an enterprise that would raise a lot of criticisms from the philosophical circles and the men of the world who harbored more appreciation for a witty repartee than for an austere provincial virtue.⁹⁵

J'ai fait un mérite à Gresset des choses mêmes qui lui ont attiré les sarcasmes d'un grand nombre de gens des lettres ; j'ai osé insister sur sa vertu ; sur son respect pour les mœurs, sur son amour pour la religion ; je me suis donc exposé aux ridicule, aux yeux d'une foule de beaux esprits ; mais, en même temps, je me suis assuré deux suffrages faits pour me dédommager de cet inconvénient : celui de ma conscience et le votre [les académiciens d'Amiens].⁹⁶

One of Robespierre's better known sayings is that: "The kings who make the destiny of the earth fear neither great geometers, nor great painters, nor great poets, but they dread stern philosophers, and the defenders of humanity."⁹⁷ It was thus not merely for academic fame or money that Robespierre wrote this *Éloge de Gresset*, but as an essay in a kind of Rousseauism in motion. Gresset's figure could be enlarged to become a "poster-boy" for the kind of virtue that Robespierre tried to draw from his readings of the classics and of Rousseau. He identified with Gresset as he identified with Rousseau.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ L.-N.-J.-J. de Cayrol, *Essai historique sur la vie et les ouvrages de Gresset*, 2 vols. (Amiens, 1844), 2:128-30.

⁹⁵ For Robespierre's warm sentiments toward the lower clergy and popular religiosity, see Frank Tallett, "Robespierre and Religion," in Colin Haydon and William Doyle, eds., *Robespierre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 97-99.

⁹⁶ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:114.

⁹⁷ Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 10:444, quoted here in Huet's translation from *Mourning Glory*, 24.

⁹⁸ Robespierre's "identification [with Rousseau] was in fact almost total," argued J. L. Carr in *Robespierre* (London: Constable, 1972), 119, while Norman Hampson wrote about the "touch of fellow-feeling" in Robespierre's eulogy of Gresset (*The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, 14-15).

The Rousseauization of Gresset was all the easier in that Gresset had met Rousseau whom he treated kindly in a period when the author of *Emile* had very few friends. Robespierre did not forget to persecute Rousseau's adversaries during the Revolution. Robespierre wrote that though the philosophes had "fought and ridiculed priests, they had nonetheless courted the Nobility and adored Kings from whom they received considerable benefit; and who can ignore their relentless persecution of virtue and Liberty in the person of Jean-Jacques, whose sacred image I see here. He was the one and only Philosopher who, in my opinion, deserved the public homages that have been since prostituted by intrigues to glorify political charlatans and despicable heroes."⁹⁹ As Huet wrote: "For Robespierre, philosophical enlightenment, however desirable it may be, had made common cause with despotism and could in no way be considered the forerunner of the Revolution."¹⁰⁰ That is why Robespierre persecuted Charles Palissot de Montenoy, an enemy of Rousseau. During the French Revolution Robespierre made sure that Palissot did not obtain a "certificat de civisme" because he wrote the comedy *Les Originaux* (1755) in which he ridiculed Rousseau among other philosophes.¹⁰¹ Robespierre also destroyed Helvétius's bust at the Jacobin Club on the grounds that Helvétius "would never have embraced the cause of liberty."¹⁰² On the other hand, Robespierre did not forget Rousseau's protectors. And Gresset was one of them.

On 8 July 1767, Henri-Etienne Roques Bouchard, marquis de Clausonnette, had written to George Simon Harcourt, viscount Nuneham—who had visited Rousseau in January 1766 in London—a letter about the whereabouts of Rousseau who had just left England after accusing his English hosts of trying to plot against him: "L'on ignore ici les lieux qu'habite Rousseau. Il fut accueilli à Amiens avec la plus grande distinction ; le corps de ville lui donna à diner. C'est le devot Gresset qui lui a valu cette reception, il en demandera un jour

⁹⁹ Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes*, 8:309–10, quoted here in Huet's translation from *Mourning Glory*, 22.

¹⁰⁰ Huet, *Mourning Glory*, 22.

¹⁰¹ See Pascale Pellerin, "La Place du théâtre de Diderot sous la Révolution," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 27 (1999): 93.

¹⁰² See Darin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 99, 228 n. 26; Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution*, 152.

pardon a La Vierge comme d'avoir fait des comedies."¹⁰³ The echo of this meeting between Gresset and Rousseau had spread rapidly in England and had been commented on with alacrity by William Whitehead who, on 8 August 1767 wrote to the same Lord Nuneham¹⁰⁴ "[t]hat the devout Gresset should entertain Monsr. Rousseau the great Genius, I am not at all surprised; but that the humble, the philosophical the contented Rousseau should so far get the better of his love of solitude, & contempt of the pomp and vanities of the world, as to admit of such public attentions, is, I own, amazing."¹⁰⁵

In the wake of Robespierre's entry in the Amiens competition a review of Père Daire's *Histoire littéraire de la ville d'Amiens* (1782)¹⁰⁶ in the 14 October 1783 issue of the *Mercur de France*¹⁰⁷ recalled the passing of Rousseau through Amiens and the pomp and circumstance of the moment:

Nous n'avons cependant oublié avec quelle distinction le Corps municipal d'Amiens reçut le malheureux J.J. Rousseau, qui fuyoit poussé par un décret, & qui dut la liberté au prince de Conti, qui veilloit sur lui bien plus en ami qu'en protecteur. Le Magistrat en robe longue offroit au philosophe l'hommage qu'il n'accorde qu'aux Princes, aux Rois & aux Commissaires du Monarque ; c'étoit le present qu'on appelle *le vin de Ville*. Gresset accompagnoit le Magistrat.

It was during this May 1767 visit that Rousseau met Gresset for a private conversation. We do not know what the two adversaries of the *philosophes* discussed, nor the tenor of a meeting that, without giving any reference, A.-A. Renouard described as friendly:¹⁰⁸

Gresset et J. J. Rousseau ne s'étaient jamais vus, et se quittèrent fort contents l'un de l'autre. – Je suis persuadé, dit

¹⁰³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Correspondance complète*, 53 vols., ed. R. A. Leigh (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1965–2000), XXXIII, letter 5968, 206–7.

¹⁰⁴ From 1757 to 1785, Whitehead was England's "poet laureate" after Gray, incidentally a great admirer of Gresset, declined that vatic sinecure that would have ruined his Cambridge tranquility.

¹⁰⁵ Rousseau, *Correspondance complète*, XXXIV, letter 6017, 23.

¹⁰⁶ Louis-François Daire, librarian of the Celestin order, wrote the first *Vie de M. Gresset* (Paris: 1779).

¹⁰⁷ 30–39.

¹⁰⁸ Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset, *Œuvres*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1811), 1:lxix.

Rousseau en sortant, qu'avant de m'avoir vu, vous aviez de moi une opinion bien différente ; mais vous faites si bien parler les perroquets, qu'il n'est pas étonnant que vous sachiez apprivoiser les ours. – Ce mot, aussi obligeant que spirituel, a été, dans plusieurs notices sur Gresset, travesti en une maussade dureté que bien gratuitement on prête à JJ. On y prétend que dans sa visite à Gresset, celui-ci avait à pure perte tâché d'être aimable ; que le Genevois n'avait pas ouvert la bouche, et qu'en sortant il dit à Gresset. – Vous avez fait parler un perroquet ; mais vous n'avez pu faire parler un ours.¹⁰⁹

That the meeting must have been friendly could be confirmed by the fact that, in *Les Confessions*, Rousseau wrote very kindly about Gresset, a fact inconceivable if the irritable "Jean-Jacques" would have suspected Gresset of not being on his side:

Autant à mon précédent voyage j'avois vû Paris par son côté défavorable, autant à celui-ci [de l'automne de 1741] je le vis par son côté brillant, non pas toutefois quant à mon logement ; car sur une adresse que m'avoit donnée M. Bordes, j'allai loger à l'hôtel St Quentin rue des Cordiers proche la Sorbonne, vilaine rue, vilain hôtel, vilaine chambre ; mais où cependant avoient logé des hommes de mérite tels que Gresset, Bordes, les Abbés de Mably, de Condillac, et plusieurs autres dont malheureusement je n'y trouvai plus aucun.¹¹⁰

That room in the Rue des Cordiers, with its mythology passing from Gresset through Rousseau, remained a staple of the confessions written by writers affected by a Rousseauist sensibility, as indicated for example by a paragraph from Jacques Salbigoton Quesné's *Confessions*:

Je m'arrangeai promptement dans ma nouvelle demeure, consistant simplement dans une grande chambre à deux lits, au premier, sur le derrière. Il est remarquable que plusieurs

¹⁰⁹ Cayrol, without any proof, supported the last version (*Essai*, 2:223–24).

¹¹⁰ *Œuvres Complètes*, eds. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–64), 1:282.

hommes d'un mérite supérieur aient, depuis moins d'un siècle, demeuré dans cette rue des Cordiers, et peut-être au même lieu : ce sont Gresset, Bordes, Mably, Condillac, J.-J. Rousseau, Marmontel, Morellet.¹¹¹

With visiting the houses of great men came a new interest in the biography of great men, in the private source of those virtues that would shine in their public accomplishments. Diderot wrote lines that came close to resacralizing the eulogy as an *imitatio*:

Une sorte de reconnaissance délicate s'unit à une curiosité digne d'éloge, pour nous intéresser à l'histoire privée de ceux dont nous admirons les ouvrages. le lieu de leur naissance, leur éducation, leur caractère, la date de leur productions, l'accueil qu'elles reçurent dans le temps: leur penchants, leurs goûts, honnêtes ou malhonnêtes, leurs amitiés, leurs fantaisies, leurs travers, leur forme extérieure, les traits de leur visage, tout ce qui les concerne arrête l'attention de la postérité. Nous aimons à visiter leurs demeures; nous éprouverions une douce émotion à l'ombre d'un arbre sous lequel île se seraient reposes; nous voudrions voir et converser avec les sages dont les travaux ont augmente le pouvoir de la vertu et les trésors de la vertu.¹¹²

¹¹¹ *Confessions, depuis 1778*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1828–1835), 1:174. This importance accorded to the “relics” of a writer, the whole fashion of pilgrimages to Ermenonville, strengthen the impression of a modern-day “saint” that Rousseau had and indicates perhaps not so much a secularization, as a change of allegiance, a change of destination for the popular or elite piety of the eighteenth-century that complemented an “enlightened” and “rational” Christianity with such “medieval” pieties and relic-hunting in the case of “great men” moved to Pantheon. See Olivier Nora, “La visite au grand écrivain,” in *Le lieux de mémoire*, II, Part 3, 563–87; Anna Ridehalgh, “Preromantic Attitudes and the Birth of a Legend: French Pilgrimages to Ermenonville, 1778–1789,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 215 (1982): 231–52. It is important to note that Rousseau himself shaped this cult when he prostrated himself on the threshold of Buffon’s study room that later sported this inscription: “Passant prosterne-toi! C’est devant cet asile/qu’aux pieds du grand Buffon tomba l’auteur d’*Emile*” (Bonnet, *La naissance du Pantheon*, 209, 153, and 244–51, where he discusses the maison-museum, the pilgrimages, and the secretaries of great men, from Boswell to Eckermann).

¹¹² Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* (1782), in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, Hermann, 1986), II, chapter 3.

Gresset's idyll "Le Siècle pastoral," published in his first book of original poems, *Les Poésies de M. G* (Blois, 1734), provided Jean-Jacques Rousseau with an inspiration for his pastoralism. Setting that idyll to music, Rousseau replaced Gresset's original last strophe with six strophes of his own in order to "remplacer la dernière qui présentait à l'imagination de notre philosophe une idée trop chagrine."¹¹³ The "morose idea" is that of original sin in the name of which Gresset, still a Jesuit and a good Catholic at the date of publication of the poem, denied the myth of a golden age by evoking the history of Caïn killing his brother Abel, the "first shepherd":

J'y lis que la terre fut teinte
Du sang de son premier Berger ;
Depuis sa jour, de maux atteinte,
Elle s'arma pour le venger.
Ce n'est donc qu'une belle fable :
N'envions rien à nos ayeux ;
En tout tems l'homme fut coupable,
En tout tems il fut malheureux.¹¹⁴

Rejecting Gresset's biblical sources, Rousseau found in his conscience the proof of the existence of a bucolic age. Printed for the first time in 1781, in *Les Consolations des misères de ma vie*, Rousseau's verses had earlier circulated in manuscript, as proved by a letter of René-Louis, marquis de Girardin, to Marie-Françoise, comtesse de La Mark. The letter, dated 23 August 1778, bore in its tone and orthography the signs of the great suffering caused by the death of Rousseau to his disciple:

Par ce seul couplet qu'il a substitué au[x] derniers couplets de
L'idille de Gresset du siècle pastoral,
Mais qui nous en transmet l'histoire
de ces tems de simplicité...
Qu'un savant des fastes des ages
fasse La regle de sa foy
je sens de plus surs temoignages
de La mienne audedans de moy

¹¹³ Rousseau, *Oeuvres*, 10:462.

¹¹⁴ Gresset, *Oeuvres*, 2 vols. (London, 1765), 1:160.

Ah qu'avec moy le Ciel rassemble
appaissant enfin Son Courroux
Un autre cœur qui me ressemble
L'âge d'or renaitra pour nous.

Qu'on juge si celui qui l'a fait peut être un mauvais Cœur.¹¹⁵

That Gresset is mentioned in *Les Confessions* (1782) and in *Les Consolations des misères de ma vie* (1781), two of the crucial texts for the edification of the "Jean-Jacques" myth, could be very important for determining the period in which Robespierre read Rousseau for the first time. As Carol Blum argued, Robespierre's cult for Rousseau centered on the autobiographical texts of the Genevan writer, on the "Rousseau myth" as the "republican orator of the virtuous society" more than on his political ideas.¹¹⁶ While the historiographical consensus seems to be that Robespierre read Rousseau around 1788, a close reading of this text suggests a rather earlier date, closer to 1782–1784. Robespierre's hint at the debate between Rousseau and D'Alembert and Voltaire concerning the theater, his continual slighting of Voltaire, his continuous appeal to conscience, these could be interpreted as signs of Rousseauism. Or it could be that he wrote the eulogy of one of the few writers who emerged unscathed from Rousseau's autobiographic writings. Norman Hampson wondered why Robespierre chose this subject when "there were more political subjects going elsewhere."¹¹⁷ The answer could be that he chose Gresset for his impeccable Rousseau connection and for his antiphilosophical allure. Robespierre might have also thought that he could advance his career and satisfy his conservative ecclesiastical patron by writing a eulogy of a conservative writer. Robespierre failed to win the prize because he wrote a Rousseauist/Jansenist *laudatio* for ultramontane consumption. If it was a tame *éloge*, it is an interesting example of that winning ambiguity that made Robespierre the emblematic figure of the French Revolution. "Incorruptible" yes, but also savy.

¹¹⁵ Rousseau, *Correspondance complete*, XLI, lettre 7276, 220–21.

¹¹⁶ Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 35–37; Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 83.

¹¹⁷ Hampson, *Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, 14.

If all the evidence seems to indicate that the relationship between Gresset and Rousseau was as amiable as it was superficial, it is important that a reader such as Robespierre could overcome the obstacle of their significantly different religious beliefs by means of a Jansenist-Rousseauist synthesis directed against a common philosophical enemy. On the one hand, Robespierre managed to praise bishop La Motte in terms that were in fact those of his Jansenist adversaries. Even if Robespierre's discourse was not academically successful, his decision to publish it along with his successful appeal to "patriotic" public opinion are significant for the degree to which this rhetoric was accepted and valued. On the other hand, Robespierre's patriotic and religious sentiments expressed here were almost identical with those that accompanied and justified his revolutionary political action. More interesting, the failure of these leitmotifs in a prerevolutionary academic context and their success in the revolutionary process could offer us a further proof of what Lynn Hunt called "the unique magical quality" of revolutionary language, its capacity to institute, however temporary, a new reality and to legitimate what we might call a "logocracy."¹¹⁸

In 1784, Robespierre had just published his two resounding judicial discourses in defense of De Visser's de Bois-Valé's lightning rod.¹¹⁹ At that moment, Robespierre's argument was of a decidedly non-Rousseauist character, arguing for art against nature, for reason against instinct.¹²⁰ Furthermore, Huet showed that for Robespierre scientific superstition was of a piece with religious superstition, and that the God of thunders was not to be replaced with a lightning rod.¹²¹ If we are to take a teleological stance, then this *éloge* would perhaps allow us to advance the period in which Robespierre's "revolutionary conscience" emerged from 1788 and the Louis-Marie-Hyacinthe Dupond trial¹²² to this 1784-85 academic eulogy of Gresset that pitted patriotism, austere virtue, and the republic of letters against "tyranny" and a corrupt and

¹¹⁸ Revolutionary language was a "replacement for the charisma of kingship," wrote Lynn Hunt, in *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 21.

¹¹⁹ Huet, *Mourning Glory*, 13.

¹²⁰ Huet, *Mourning Glory*, 16-17, 18: "The Arts and Sciences are the richest gift that Heaven has made to men."

¹²¹ Huet, *Mourning Glory*, 17-18.

¹²² See David Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 29.

atheist urban society, Robespierre not only appealed to public opinion, but indignantly blamed it for the ridicule heaped upon Gresset's virtuous actions. For Robespierre, public opinion was not the voice of *beaux-esprits*, but rather the rewards that France bestowed, even through letters of ennoblement conferred by a king, for literary merit an civic virtue.

Robespierre's eulogy of Gresset seems to indicate that while the monarchy sponsored the cult of Great Men this did not mean that all those engaged in these thuriferary activities came more than half the road to meet the official intentions. The fact that this cult was one of the tools used by the monarchy did not mean that the writers who used it could not suit their own purposes. As Bell shows, the authors of eulogies took increasingly as their subjects writers, scientists, artists and doctors instead of great princes, statesmen and military commanders.¹²³

This shift accompanied the transformation of patriarchal monarchy into a paternalist monarchy. As Bonnet argued the image of the father, precisely because of its familiarity and universal character, became the abstract, natural sign of a new morals: "Ainsi, de la peinture de genre à la peinture d'histoire, du drame bourgeois aux éloges des grands hommes, s'opère insensiblement, et par des voies secrètes, le passage du père de famille aux pères de la nation...Car dans cette figure du père les privilèges s'abolissent et le roi lui-même retrouve la nature."¹²⁴

In the hands of Robespierre, Gresset became from a very interesting intellectual character of the Old Regime a monotonous father of the nation. While Gresset was eulogized by Robespierre, he was subtly transformed, he became a recoverable bit of the past. The language of Jansenist-Rousseauist patriotism that helped operate this transformation, while banal and conformist enough so long as it maneuvered within the "monde" of privilege and patronage by means of the rhetorical vehicle of the eulogy, acquired a potentially revolutionary force as soon as it came unstuck from these matrixes and found its voice in the logocentric power of the French Revolution.

¹²³ Bell, *Cult of the Nation*, 134.

¹²⁴ Bonnet, *Naissance du Pantheon*, 24-27.