

THE RITES OF CANNIBALISM AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Beyond the normal attraction which a new field of research holds for the scholar, the one I am about to present¹ offers the historian of the French Revolution the added prospect of possibly resolving a difficult on-going, debate between the supporters and detractors of the revolutionary experience.

While searching for new directions for study, I had the fortune to come across a previously reported episode which failed to attract the interest of scholars because it did not fit in with the interpretation dominant at the time.

I am speaking of an incident which seems at first to be a clear case of ritual cannibalism. The document from which it has been drawn is of the maximum historical reliability; it consists of the court records, conserved to this day, of hearings held on the case.

According to a psychoanalyst I have conferred with, we are actually dealing with a case of oral sadism rather than a case of cannibalism in the strict sense. Recognising this variant, however important for the clinical diagnosis of a person who has committed such an unsettling act, might seem irrelevant to the historian. On the contrary, in certain aspects it lends more weight to the whole sordid affair, for it highlights the question of sovereignty and its destruction or, in psychoanalytical terms, aggressiveness towards the parental figure.

Before describing the incident, as far as I have been able to reconstruct it, I would like to make a point concerning the historical debate which seems pertinent to this singular research.

Every historical era has its own particular counter-revolutionary attitudes: for Taine it was horror at the unleashing of the plebians' base instincts; for Burke, rejection of an abstract egalitarianism. On the occasion of the bicentennial, a great deal of literature has been devoted to criticism of the Jacobin system of power; a system to which is ascribed the invention of state violence, the manipulation of the masses and the concentration camp mentality. According to this view, the Jacobins transformed their own political vision into totalitarian control of civic life and politics and, in so doing, suffocated all good that might

¹ The narration of this story occupies a chapter of my book, *Il trono vuoto*, Einaudi, Turin 1989; this essay is based upon that chapter.

have emerged from the revolutionary forces under the weight of a regime guilty of «crimes against humanity».

Indiscriminate repression, as well as the use of any and all methods, even genocide, in order to annihilate adversaries are, therefore considered Jacobin inventions. It is clear that this view would have to be altered if a mass outbreak of deep-rooted anxiety originating in destructiveness aimed at authority figures could be demonstrated. If it could be shown that, as I suspect, the destruction of the monarchy provoked a whole series of intollerable transgressive actions, then the terrorist government could be interpreted as more than a mere reaction towards an external threat to the revolution. It would, instead have stemmed from the establishment of a new authority as a substitute for the paternal one represented by the monarchy, clergy and lords who came to so frightening an end during the revolution. In this case, the mechanism of a defensive reaction towards a presumed aristocratic plot would not suffice to explain the Great Fear, as Lefebvre maintains. We must also consider the feelings of guilt and mourning produced by the transition of sovereignty from the monarchy to the people.

It seems to me that the concept of popular rule, although of limited interest from the legal or institutional points of view, becomes much richer if considered in its symbolic and ideological sense. I would like to know what went through people's minds when they were told that from then on the power to govern would be in their own hands. And when I say «the people», I mean everyone at any social level; from the peasants to the politicians, from the artisans to the intellectuals. I believe that pursuing the answer to this question could open up new possibilities for research which would furnish answers of a different sort.

I consider the episode I am about to describe a piece in this larger puzzle. Some of the pieces of this puzzle are well-known, while other pieces, like this one, are less so. At any rate, I think that the general pattern has been partly misrepresented. Popular violence has usually been explained by social, or even functional reasons, but hardly ever from a symbolic point of view. The problem of revolutionary alliance has consequently provided the frame of the «neo-Jacobin» interpretation: the sans-culottes were hungry, therefore afraid, and thus wanted to defend themselves; the Jacobins were able to build on this basis the main strength of the revolutionary alliance. They gave bread and security for political support to the destruction of the old regime. I do not mean to underestimate the cultural import of this argument, according to which the Jacobins are consciously in control of the whole process and deserve all the credit for it. Nonetheless, this position has encouraged the reversal of its premises. In fact for those who theorize the French Revolution as the site of the invention of modern politics, the Montagnards also bear the brunt of the responsibility for the revolutionary process itself and for its dreadful deviations. If, instead we can show that the irrational element of fear had a predominant role, we will have a different picture; if the Jacobins had to submit to «necessity», it was not to the necessity of the transi-

tion to a new mode of production, but that of the recovery of some form of civilized life in French society.

Perhaps the peasants of a village near Lyon felt themselves betrayed by the monarch when the latter fled to Varennes. Their already conflict - ridden relationship with the local sovereign was thereby thrown into a state of anxiety of unimaginable dimensions.

Here, therefore, are the events which took place as far as I have been able to piece them together.

Anne-Aimé Guillin du Montet was born in 1730 to a family of magistrates in Lyon. It was unusual for the son of a «procureur du Roi» to embark on a military career as did Guillin, who was no more than a child when he set out on his first war ship as a deck-boy. At the age of sixteen, during the Austrian War of Succession he found himself aboard a privateer frigate engaged in battle with two English ships. The ship was hit and a powder keg caught fire. The French ship seemed doomed, but Guillin, running through the flames to reach the powder keg, threw it overboard. This deed earned him the Cross of Saint Louis, a decoration normally reserved for His Majesty's best officers at the end of their career.

His career as a sailor and adventurer was long and profitable: first, the captain of a vessel of the Indies Company; then, a regional governor in Africa where he grew rich through his involvement in the slave trade. On the threshold of his sixtieth year, he returned to France, bringing with him his singular brand of experience, his wounds, his decorations and a black servant. He married a girl barely past her adolescence who bore him two sons and he purchased the seigneurie of Poleymieux, a village situated a few kilometres north of his native city.

The new Lord of Poleymieux began to do what nearly all the lords of the time did, revise usage and the acquired rights enjoyed in his territory according to his own interests. Each year the community traditionally donated a hen to their lord. He re-interpreted this as a tribute owed him by each and every member of the community; one hen from each peasant. He moreover began hoarding community goods and fencing off property which had either always belonged to the parish or which inhabitants had been able to use since time immemorable. He seized a road, fenced off the church cemetery and, falsely promising to relocate the graves, desecrated them by scattering the unearthed bones. The fruit of the sixteen walnut trees growing there had been used to supply the oil for the lamps of the parish church. Guillin considered this land his and he intended to cultivate it.

He then had the trees cut down in order to sell their precious wood which was stacked in the courtyard of his manor. The saints of the church, he said, should make do with a daylight worship and give up their lamps. Peasants who trespassed on what he considered his land, incurred insults and violence. One day a young girl passing by with an ass was met at gun point by the lord. He shot the animal and it seems that he would have killed her too, had the black slave not intervened.

So, Guillin du Montet was harsh, but perhaps not altogether evil. It seems that he was author, more or less secretly, of some acts of kindness and his young wife was loved and respected by the townspeople. He was, nevertheless, an old slave-driver who thought to apply to his dominion the methods he had used as a sailor and slaver trader. When the revolution broke out he was hardly the sort to get enthusiastic about the rights of man. Nor was he the sort to turn the other cheek. He paraded a total scorn for the new authorities. On the occasion of the Great Fear and the sacking of many castles, he derided the cowardice of the nobility «qui se laissaient griller comme des agnaux dans la cuisine de leurs manoirs»².

The laws governing the abolition of feudal rights provoked serious disputes between him and the township of Poleymieux regarding the verification of documents. The litigation arrived before the Constituent Assembly whose administrators wrote:

Le sieur Guillin du Montet venait d'être gouverneur du Sénégal lorsqu'il fit l'acquisition de la terre de Poleymieux. Il se persuada malheureusement que l'empire qu'il avait exercé loin des lois devait être le même sur ses nouveaux habitants, au coeur de la France, et que sa conduite ne devait avoir d'autre règle qu'un despotisme oriental, ses actions de mesure que sa volonté la plus arbitraire, et la plus absolue. Rempli de ces principes, il a été facile au sieur Guillin d'imposer le joug le plus dur à des pauvres habitants d'autant plus religieux doux et timides, qu'ils ont su se respecter en respectant sa propriété, dans un temps ou la licence se permettait tant de désordres. Si une place, des chemins public, l'ancien cimetière étaient un obstacle aux projets de sa grandeur, il n'a eu besoin, pour le faire cesser que de son autorité absolue. Tout a été renfermé dans son clos. La terre de l'ancien cimetière a été exportée dans ses fonds, sans respect pour les cendres des morts, et les larmes que versaient les pauvres parossiens à la vue de leurs pères foulés aux pieds n'étaient que des larmes de faiblesse dont le sieur Guillin s'amusait.

Le sieur Guillin, trop mémoratif du traitement des nègres, ne sait jamais élever la main sans le bâton, ni la voix sans menacer du fusil. Il s'exerce à tirer tantôt sur les chiens, tantôt sur les brebis, tantôt sur les chevaux. Il existe actuellement une plainte contre lui, pour avoir tué en dernier lieu, une jument qui pâturait sur un tertre communal. Au moment où l'Assemblée nationale a déclaré les droits de l'homme et qu'ils sont sanctionnés, le sieur Guillin ne se croit lié par aucun de ses décrets dont les principes sacrés sont dans la nature³.

² A. Belleydier, *Histoire politique et militaire du peuple de Lyon pendant la révolution française*, Paris, 1845, 3 vol., I, p. 39 «who let themselves be grilled like lambs in the kitchens of their own manors».

³ *Archives Nationales* (D XXIX 65). The sieur Guillin du Montet had just completed a period as governor of Senegal when he acquired the land of Poleymieux. Unfortunately he was persuaded that the dominion he had enjoyed outside the control of the laws could be maintained with the inhabitants of this land, in the heart of France, and that his conduct could follow no other rule than that of eastern despotism, his actions obeying only his most arbitrary and absolute will. Acting on these principles, the sieur Guillin easily imposed the hardest of yokes on the poor inhabitants, who being pious, gentle and timid conceived their self respect to be in respecting his property, at a time when licence allowed so many disorders. If a square, a public road, or the old cemetery got in the way of his grand plans, he needed only his absolute authority to remove the obstacle. So everything was consolidated into his property. The soil of the ancient

Was Guillin a counter-revolutionary? Of course he was, among other things. But this is not the point which was brought up in this letter, which can be dated to the end of April, 1790. It was instead that the lord of Poleymieux was a brutal man, guilty of sacrilege and treason towards the people of his village.

One of the five signers of this letter was a certain Botton whose son would, sixty years later, feel compelled to write in justification of the peasants' actions in bringing about the tragic end of the last lord of that land⁴. Among his father's papers, Botton the son found a letter in the crude, nearly incomprehensible vernacular of the peasants to their lord. It recounts Guillin's crimes and puts forth the possibility of legal recourse:

Monsieur, vous nous avée trompé. Vous nous avée fait antandre que vous feryez un vaste simthière au clox et que vous renverceriez les sandre de l'ancien dedand et au contere vous avée antrenné dand vostre terrein tous nos ansaitres, cest ce qué le plus désastreux (...) Si vous rendé justice de vous meme il serà anclox il s'an parlerà plus et si vous mété sou vos pieds nous écriron a la grande justice. (...) Se ne pas pour nous que nous le demandons cé pour l'église, cé pour l'église (sic)⁵.

In these and earilier lines can be found the explanation of that which was about to happen. They would turn to the courts, but to what justice and according to what laws? Everything was in flux during the revolution; new laws and institutions swept away the earlier ones; the authorities were in hiding, all sovereignty had dissolved and the peasants found themselves alone face to face with their enemy, their cruel and sacrilegious lord.

Antoine Guillin de Pougelon, Guillin's elder brother by a year, had followed in his father's footsteps and made himself a solid and relaxed career as a man of law *d'ancien regime*. He had become a solicitor, rector of the Hotel-Dieu, *échevin*, *notable bâtonnier* of the Lyonnaise lawyers. In 1790, while his brother was desecrating the parish cemetery, he was busy with more serious matters. He was the protagonist in one of the first counter - revolutionary conspiracies which sought to sow disorder to re-establish absolute monarchy.

cemetery was carried into his fields, with no respect for the ashes of the dead, and the tears shed by the poor parishioners when they saw their fathers being trampled were but tears of weakness, mocked by the *sieur* Guillin.

The *sieur* Guillin, who remembers too well the way he treated the blacks, never lifts his hand without a stick nor his voice save to threaten to fire a gun. He practices shooting at dogs, at sheep, at horses. He has been denounced for killing a mare that was grazing on the common. While the National Assembly has declared the rights of man and they have been sanctioned, the *sieur* Guillin does not deem himself bound to any of its decrees whose sacred principles are in nature itself.

⁴ L.A. Botton, *Le dernier seigneur de Poleymieux*, Lyon, 1853.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 23-25. Sir, you have deceived us. You gave us to understand that you would build a vast enclosed cemetery, and that you would deposit there the ashes of the old one; but you have dragged all of our ancestors into your land, which is the worst of disasters (...) If you do us justice yourself it will be forgotten, not to be talked about again, but if you trample everything under your feet we will write to the law. (...) We do not ask this for ourselves, it's for the church, for the church.

The counter-revolution planned to make Lyon the centre for the vindication of a court humiliated by a year and a half of revolution. France was not yet at war and not many people suspected the king of intending to flee. Thus the conspiracy would anticipate by several months that which was destined to occur the following year. Sardinian troops, on the orders of French princes who had emigrated to Turin, were to concentrate their forces on the border near Lyon. At the same time, the French forces were to ammass in the valley of the Saône in order to protect King Louis XVI who leaving the capital in secret would arrive in the city to meet the Count of Artois and the prince of Condé, both arriving from Savoy. Preparations had already been made for a popular insurrection at Lyon on December 8, during which the people would request the reduction of the price of bread to one livre a pound and would force the township to ask Artois and Condé to return and the king to take up residence at Lyon.

The new mayor was to be none other than Guillin de Pougelon, the only civilian to take part in the conspiracy along with two officers of the line, the Marquis of Escars and Terrasse de Tessonnet. Thanks to an informant, the plot hatched between Lyon and Turin by the émigrè princes, army officers, several lyonnais notables, and the prelates who were ex-counts of Lyon was discovered. On the night of December 4, d'Escars, Terrasse and Guillin de Pougelon were all arrested. This last seemed to be the very cornerstone of the whole operation, and was henceforth referred to as «l'ennemi, le fléau et le boutefeu de votre cité»⁶.

Those arrested were immediately indicted and sent to Paris to be prosecuted «suivant la sévérité de lois, pour crimes de lèze-nation». They were to be tried for a new imputation, «Lèze-Nation». This had been substituted for the old «Lèze-Majesté» with ease and without debate, the moment that power had passed from the monarchy to the people. First among the accused was «ledit Guillin de Pougelon reconnu surtout de tout tems, pour le plus grand scélérat de la bande, et dont les crimes ont pu seuls et sans craindre la concurrence, lui mériter le titre de capitaine parmi les conjurés»⁷.

However this «sévérité des lois» which was supposed to befall the conspirators had yet to be precisely defined. The court Châtelet in Paris, before which at first crimes of offence to the nation were deferred, had not been granted the necessary legislative tools. A special court was later created at Orléans, but it, too was in effect paralysed by the lack of adequate laws. During these first years of the revolution, counter-revolutionaries often escaped the

⁶ *Grande conspiration découverte à Lyon, où tous les patriotes devaient être égorgés avec des poignards fabriqués à Turin*, s.l.n.d. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (8° Lb39 9592) «the enemy, the scourge, the incendiary of your town».

⁷ *Jugement patriotique et en dernier ressort, qui condamne les nomnés Guillin de Pougelon, d'Escar, Terrasse de Tessonnet et consorts à être punis, suivant la sévérité des lois, pour crimes de lèze-nation*, Lyon s.d. (ma 14 décembre 1790), Paris, B.N. (8° Lb39 9596) «according to the severity of the laws, for crimes of offence to the Nation» «the aforementioned Guillin de Pougelon, known long and in particular as the most wicked of the gang, and whose crimes were of themselves enough to gain him the unrivaled title of captain among the conspirators».

punishment which they, according to the general opinion, deserved. Special legislation had to be instituted and there was reluctance to create it. It was discussed at the Constituent Assembly in July of '89, when the Assembly was at risk of being overthrown and again in February of '91 when militant monarchists, the «chevaliers du poignard», became a threat, but nothing ever came of the discussions. On the contrary, the amnesty of September '91 set all of them, including our Lyonnaises, free. As we all know, it was the Convention which finally did create the instruments effective in dealing with conspirators. But it did so under the pressure of the intollerable excesses on the part of popular justice. It did, nevertheless, catalyse an extremely significant and irreversible transformation in the conception of sovereign authority.

Guillin de Pougelon was therefore freed by the amnesty of September 16, 1791, after having been held in Paris, ostensibly for reasons of health. He evidently enjoyed protection, because in this manner he managed to avoid being transferred to Orléans. In '93 he was again taken into custody at Mantes. Times had now changed and suspects, as is well known, ran much greater risks. But by luck or protection he remained, forgotten in prison and survived until the 9th Thermidor⁸, so he was able to witness the end, not only of the revolution but of the reign of Napoleon as well. He closed his eyes for the last time, at nearly ninety years, with the satisfaction of having seen the restoration of the regime to which he had proven himself so faithful. It is an irony of destiny or, perhaps, a profound contradiction of the revolutionary movement, that of the two brothers, the one who died in his own bed, victorious and at peace, was the more dangerous one, the more serious enemy of the people. But he was also the one furthest and most protected from the material severity of the justice of the sovereign crowd.

So Guillin du Montet's troubles began in December of 1790, not only with the peasants whom he used to beat and whose cemetery he had usurped, but also with the law of Lyon and the regional patriotic club who had begun to suspect him as brother of a notorious counter-revolutionary. On December 14, his castle at Poleymieux was searched for hidden arms. Guillin allowed the search but demanded that a report be filed listing the arms which he possessed: knives, pistols, rifles, halberds and two large calibre, short-barreled guns. He insisted that these were merely for self-defense. Naturally he resented the search and filed a complaint at the Department which dealt with the incident by telling him to claim damages from the town.

At this point there were two levels, so to speak, of aversion towards the lord of Poleymieux. On one hand, there was the rational political level of the Jacobins in their vigil against the counter-revolutionary scheming of the two brothers; on the other, the deep and emotional hatred of the peasant masses at war with their enemy. Georges Lefebvre stressed the political and rational nature of revolutionary violence with its underlying theme of vigilance. By giving primary importance to the first of the two levels, he underestimated the

⁸ Cf. L. Maynard, *Dictionnaire de lyonnaises*, Lyon, 1982.

second and thus ignored the ritual nature of popular violence as well as its macabre aspects. In the case at hand and, I believe, in many others, these aspects demand more attention from historians and ethnologists.

Months passed without incident until the flight of the king to Varennes which aggravated the situation on both levels I have mentioned: it set in motion the mechanisms of revolutionary vigilance because the fear of plots had become present again. At the same time, it dismayed the masses who realised that they had been truly and irrevocably deserted by their king. «La France se sentait abandonnée, orpheline. Il lui parut que le roi avait emporté avec lui un talisman préserveur. Des terribles dangers furent aperçus. La France se vit envahie et, sans chef, perdue»⁹. This point, well taken by Aulard, was scornfully refuted by Lefèbvre.

News of the king's flight reached Lyon on June 23, 1791. In that city, as elsewhere, it provoked a wave of revolutionary mobilization as well as fear among the masses. Searches were ordered in numerous homes of well-known counter-revolutionaries. Predictably, it was decided to «pay a visit» to the château of Poleymieux. It seems that this decision was made on the night of Saturday the 25th. It also appears that patriots from various neighbouring towns made a sort of rendezvous which included the mobilization of the regional national guard. During Mass the next day, Guillin and his wife were warned of what was being prepared but, despite the evident explosiveness of the situation, they deemed it unnecessary to leave.

In the early afternoon the manor was surrounded by a crowd of peasants and the national guard. A delegation from the constituted authorities of Poleymieux asked to be admitted in order to carry out the search. Guillin retorted that his guns had already been put on record and he furthermore demanded to see the warrant authorizing such illegal entry. There was, however, no warrant and the old sailor had no intention of voluntarily submitting to a further intrusion of his privacy by people he disdained and on the basis of principles he detested. A pistol shot rang out and Guillin barricaded the doors. An exchange of fire ensued between the castle and its besiegers. The crowd swelled, some were wounded and intentions became more and more hostile.

Guillin's wife tried to negotiate an agreement between the lords and the peasants. From Guillin, she obtained authorization for a «visit»; from the crowd, their promise to abstain from violence. Mrs. Guillin was escorted out at this point, taken to safety and held hostage. Her testimony as to the events that followed is therefore vicarious.

In his reconstruction of the events, Botton adds a detail which I have been unable to find any mention of in the minutes of the hearings. It corresponds to a stereotype commonly used to blame on the «mob», on the drunken crowd,

⁹ Cf. A. Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution française*, Paris, 1901, p. 118. Cf. anche G. Lefèbvre, *Le meurtre du comte de Dampierre*, in *Etudes sur la Révolution française*, Paris, PUF, 1954, p. 288. «France felt abandoned, orphaned. She felt that the king had taken away with him a preserving talisman. Terrible dangers were perceived. France saw herself invaded, and, without a head, lost».

the responsibility for acts which are indefensible. According to this account, Mrs. Guillin had handed over the keys to the cellar as a gesture of peace and goodwill, unaware that this would provoke a catastrophe. This version, almost certainly false, is nonetheless very interesting in its implications for revolutionary ideology; an ideology visible in the son of Botton, a man who had participated in, and given testimony of, an event whose conclusion was unacceptable.

On the one side, was the ever-ready revolutionary vigilance; on the other, an orgy of blood; the former belongs to the historiography of the left; the latter is the subject of reflection for the right. On one hand, as well, there were the militant people, on the other the blood-thirsty dregs. All such episodes during the French Revolution, and there are many, in which this distinction is so difficult, are particularly embarrassing for the historians who all too often end up censoring the truth.

Thanks to the agreement reached by his wife, Guillin let the delegation enter the castle to check for arms. It seems that the only ones discovered were those that had already been found and recorded, but now they were loaded and ready for use¹⁰. According to a document produced in defense of the attackers, they also found poison-tipped arrows, which brought to mind Guillin's colonial past, as well as piles of stones ready to be dumped on any would-be intruders¹¹. The scene was more consistent with a hastily prepared defense against an obscure threat than an efficient counter-revolutionary plot.

The delegates remained at length inside the castle, without informing the crowd outside as to what was going on, exactly as had happened at the Bastille on July 14 1789. As on that occasion, the crowd began to fear that the delegation, instead of doing their duty, had been corrupted by Guillin, or, paradoxically, that they were being held hostage and their lives were in danger. At this point the succession of events becomes confused. Guillin may have shown himself at the window or begun insulting the crowd or even started shooting. More probably, a sudden loud noise made the crowd think that something terrible was happening inside the castle.

Whatever the precipitating event, it is certain that the fight was taken up again with greater fury and that the crowd succeeded in breaking down the door and then set fire to the building. According to some sources, Guillin, deciding to fight to the bitter end, was eventually trapped in a tower which was ablaze. However, since there was only one death among the attackers, and it was not due to wounds but to the collapse of part of the building, it is more likely that Guillin entrusted himself to the members of the delegation who had promised his wife that he would not be harmed.

¹⁰ Rolland e Clouzet, *Dictionnaire illustré des communes du département du Rhône*, Lyon, 1903, II, p. 302-309.

¹¹ *Rapport des Commissaires des Amis de la Constitution établis à Trévoux, département de l'Ain, concernant les faits arrivés le 26 juin 1791 dans le village de Poleymieux, département du Rhône et Loire*, s.l.n.d. B.N. (8° Lb40 3040).

Addressing himself to Grand, the mayor of a nearby town, he is said to have exclaimed, «Grand, sauve moi la vie, ta fortune est faite», to which the other replied, «Monsieur, je ne le puis, il est trop tard»¹². The crowd was then upon him and the leaders of the national guard and the constituted authorities, among whom were Botton the father, Grand and others, in order to save themselves, had to take care not to appear won over by the enemy. To anyone proposing clemency the people answered:

«Non! non! il a trente fois fait feu sur la troupe; il a blessé beaucoup de monde; il nous aurait tous écrasés s'il avait été aussi fort qu'il est méchant. Il est le chef des contre-révolutionnaires; si nous le manquons aujourd'hui, il ne nous manquera pas demain. C'est un homme accoutumé à tuer; sa vie est connue, il tire indifféremment sur les bêtes et les hommes. Nous nous rappelons qu'en sa qualité de ci devant seigneur, il a exhumé les cadavres encore fumants pour en bonifier ses fonds. Il serait renvoyé d'Orléans. Voyez son frère: il ne sera jamais jugé. Point de grace! point de grace!»

And another voice exclaimed: «Ce vieux scélérat ne mérite pas de vivre; mon époux était à peine enterré, qu'il a forcé à coups de bâton ses ouvriers à porter ses tristes restes au pied d'un de ses arbres»¹³.

Guillin fell, wounded in the head and his body was left to the fury of the mob. If anyone objected that they had gone too far, he was told: «qui êtes vous pour prendre le parti de Guillin, de cet homme méchant qui n'avait des égards pour personne?».

A certain Saignant, a butcher from Chasselay came forth and took possession of the cadaver. «Allons, vous autres» he said to those around him «laissez-moi faire mon métier. Le reste ne vous regarde pas». A quarter of an hour later, Claude Grand saw Guillin's head on a bayonette and a leg being carried off on someone else's shoulders¹⁴. In the end, the pieces were thrown on the very same stack of walnut wood which in the cutting had so outraged the community and the whole thing set afire¹⁵.

On the thirteenth of August, the window Guillin went before the Constituent Assembly with a petition compiled by a lawyer for compensation for dama-

¹² Botton cit. p. 76-77 «Grand, save my life, your fortune is made», «Sir, I can't, it's too late».

¹³ Ibidem, p. 99, 101. «No! No! he fired thirty times at the troops; he wounded a good many people; he would have crushed us all if he had been as strong as he is wicked. He is the leader of the counter-revolutionaries; if we don't get him today, he will get us tomorrow. This is a man used to killing; his life is well-known, he shoots at beast and man without distinction. We remember all too well that as a former lord he exhumed still warm bodies to fertilize his soil. In Orleans they would let him go. Look at his brother: he will never be tried. No mercy! no mercy!

«This evil old man does not deserve to live. When my husband had only just been buried, he beat his workers until they took up his sad remains and dumped them at the foot of one of his trees».

¹⁴ Lyon, Archives Départementales du Rhône, 37 L 35. *Procédure relative à l'assassinat d'Aimé-Anne Guillin du Montet, chevalier de Saint-Louis, et au pillage de son château par la garde nationale de Poleymieux. Information.* 212 p.

«Who are you to side with Guillin, with this evil man who had no respect for anyone?»

«Come on, all of you» «let me get on with my job, the rest is no business of yours».

¹⁵ Botton cit. p. 78.

ges incurred through the devastation of her property and the loss of her husband; both of which had rendered her unable to provide for her children. She was therefore requesting a pension for herself and the release of her brother-in-law, Guillin de Pougelon, named tutor of her two orphaned children. She based her petition on a report of what had occurred on the 26th of June at Poleymieux to which was added an even more terrifying account of the dismembering of the body: «Enfin les cannibales se retirent; où vont-ils grand Dieu! renouveler le festin d'Atrée, faire rôtir les membres de leur victime et les dévorer ensuite»¹⁶.

Understandably, the Assembly was shocked and seriously considered the possibility of immediately voting to give a positive answer to both of Madame Guillin's requests. It took two interventions, one on the part of Camus, the other, by Rewbell, to block the temporary release of Pougelon and postpone the vote until the Comité des Rapports could verify the facts.

The legislative body never readdressed this incident. Instead a competent board of judges was named to hold hearings which were, however, interrupted by the amnesty of the following September.

Since Mrs. Guillin was not an eye-witness to the facts, her testimony was not recorded in the minutes of the Assembly by the examining judge. Even though it was being talked about by everyone, only a few lines attest to the fact that any mention was made of cannibalism in the deposition: «Il est d'autres faits dont la dame Dumontet ne peut rendre compte, l'information les constatera. Des antropophages seuls pouvaient s'en rendre coupables et ce sont des français qui les ont commis». In the context of an event rather common during the French Revolution, the taking of a castle, a detail was inserted which caused the judge to recoil in horror. Over the course of many days he listened to dozens of witnesses and, through patient work which has been conserved, was able to reconstruct the true events.

A ritual meal did not take place as stated in the memoirs presented to the Assembly. However, the occurrence of cannibalism was confirmed by three witnesses, a hair-dresser, a baker and an officer of the national guard, all three of whom were from Neuville-sur-Saône, only a few kilometres from Poleymieux.

Between five and six in the evening, the first witness saw a crowd gathered in the square of Neuville round the tailor, Berthier and the weaver, Dru, both of whom had a piece of Guillin's cadaver, a forearm and an amorphous lump,

que Dru et Berthier montrant ces deux morceaux de chair humaine y portaient les dents, les baisaient; croit le déposant s'être aperçu que Dru en mangea réellement et que Berthier se contenta de mordre plusieurs fois le morceau qu'il avait; qu'ils criaient l'un et l'autre: 'voilà une partie du corps de ce f. aristocrate de Guillin,' qu'ils se promènèrent ensuite dans toute la ville en montrant à tout le monde ces morceaux de chair humaine.

¹⁶ *Archives Parlementaires, première série, XXIX, 421-24.* «Finally the cannibals withdraw. Where are they going, God Almighty! They renew Atræus' feast, they roast their victim's limbs and then devour them».

The second witness confirmed the testimony of the first, specifying:

que Dru et Berthier criaient à haute voix: – voilà des morceaux du corps de l'aristocrate Guillin Dumontet –; que Berthier mettant l'avant bras au bout d'une épée, le montrait au peuple, que Dru après avoir fait aussi examiner son morceau en coupa une partie avec ses dents, la mâcha, et la souffla ensuite en l'air; qu'ils tenaient l'un et l'autre les propos les plus horribles contre M. Guillin de Poleymieux; que Berthier mordit aussi plusieurs fois l'avant bras; qu'ils chantaient et proferaient de temps à autre, en jurant, toutes sortes d'imprécations contre le mémoire de M. Guillin Dumontet; que quelqu'un ayant observé à Berthier, que la conduite qu'il tenait était indigne d'un honnête homme, que son père allait être instruit; Berthier répondit – mon père n'est pas foutu, pour m'empêcher de manger la chère de cet aristocrate de seigneur¹⁷.

The testimony of the third, the national guardsman who was responsible for the arrest of Dru and Berthier (they escaped, or were permitted to escape, immediately afterwards) informs us that the former was in the military and at the time of his arrest was wearing his uniform and carrying a regulation sabre. One of the pieces of human flesh found on the tavern table where the two crazed men were arrested was examined by a physician. He confirmed that it was, indeed, a human forearm burnt and presenting various fractures.

Despite the eventual outcome, Guillin's body had not been cooked so that it could be eaten, but simply thrown on the fire at the time of the sacking of the castle. The two pieces were then picked up and taken to the other village. We do not know whether this was done with the intention of acting out the macabre ritual described in the testimony. Let us suppose that it was not; that the two young men were seized by a sort of raptus. On the other hand, nothing allows us to infer that the two pieces were selected at random. One was certainly the right hand and forearm, the other, which witnesses could not identify, was never found, so it could not be examined, but it was said to be the heart.

This hearsay cannot be confirmed through documentation but neither can it be denied. However the rumour itself is full of significance, and suggests a reading of the episode of Neuville-sur-Saône in terms of cannibalistic ritual

¹⁷ *Procédure* cit. « There are other facts of which the lady Dumontet cannot bear witness. The inquiry will ascertain them. Only cannibals could stain themselves with such actions but it was Frenchmen who committed them ».

« That Dru and Berthier showed these two pieces of human flesh, bit into them and kissed them. The witness believes he saw Dru actually eating some and that Berthier limited himself to repeatedly biting the piece he held; that they both shouted: Here's a piece of the body of that aristocrat Guillin; that they toured the whole town showing everybody these pieces of human flesh ».

« that Dru and Berthier cried aloud: here are some pieces of the aristocrat Guillin Dumontet's body; that Berthier stuck the forearm on the tip of a sword and showed it to the people, that Dru after having shown his piece tore off a bit with his teeth, chewed it and then spit it up in the air; that they both uttered the most horrible words against Guillin de Poleymieux; that Berthier as well repeatedly bit the forearm he was carrying, but did not eat any; that they sang and swore curses of all sorts against Guillin Dumontet's memory; that somebody told Berthier that his behavior was unworthy of a decent man, that his father would be told. Berthier answered: my father is not so goggled that he would prevent me from eating the flesh of this aristocrat of a lord ».

and not merely as a macabre exploit. Not just any two pieces of the slain lord were taken, but his right hand and his heart. What better parts of the body could have been chosen to incorporate and thus seal the complete victory of the people?

The significance of the incident on the collective level cannot however be ignored. To be sure, the victors did not gather around the remains of their enemy to eat them, but a crowd did gather round the two cannibals out of curiosity and perhaps even with approval. In any case no one stopped the scene from taking place or from being carried on at length. No one assailed nor insulted the two perpetrators of the deed. On the contrary, someone let them, or perhaps even helped them, escape after their arrest. These facts become even more significant in that they take place not in the heat of battle, but hours later and kilometres away.

The two protagonists of the horrible scene are young men. One is in the army and the other is confronted with what his father would say. I do not believe that this is totally irrelevant. During the French Revolution the young found themselves in a rather unique position: the spearheads of revolutionary violence, on the one hand, and progressively pushed out of the centre of events and indeed treated with hostility on the other (perhaps as a consequence). Finally, it can be added that they were eventually excluded from the revolutionary process, and, perhaps consequently, joined the counter-revolutionary wave of the year III. Since an exhaustive study of the relationship between behavior and age has never been made, I am not altogether sure how to evaluate the question of the presumed youth of the two cannibals in the context of this incident. It is noteworthy however that the only documented comment made at the scene refers to the eventuality and importance of paternal judgement: As if to say, «He who has committed such a slaughter of a symbol of paternal authority like the nobility, will have to answer to his own father».

The township and the national guard of Chasselay, capital city of the canton to which Poleymieux belonged, were called to appear before the Constituent Assembly for clarification. They came before the assembly on the 10th of September with a document which had been prepared by the club, «Amis de la Costitution» of Trevoux¹⁸. The text had been conceived in answer to the report submitted by Mrs. Guillin's attorney. The episode is presented within the framework of an impending counter-revolutionary plot. The writers are political leaders who obviously invoke rational political and social motives for popular violence.

On apprend la nouvelle de la fuite de Louis XVI. Il pouvait arriver des ennemis du dehors; il y en avait au dedans (...) Cette attention n'a pas échappé à la municipalité de Poleymieux; une douloureuse expérience l'avait instruite qu'elle renfermait dans son sein un téméraire, implacable ennemi de la révolution, le sieur Guillin, frère

¹⁸ *Arch. Parl.* cit. XXX, 555.

d'un homme de ce nom, détenu dans la conciergerie d'Orléans pour le crime de lèze-nation»¹⁹.

The blame for what had happened was therefore ascribed to the counter-revolution. The evilness of the man is mentioned, the violation of the cemetery, his ill treatment of the peasants and the stock of poison arrows found in his cellar. But these elements, which are of central importance for the peasants and which constitute the true reason for the tragic conclusion of the 26th of June are in a certain sense peripheral in the judgement of the politicians. What counted for them were the known counter-revolutionary intentions of the lord, brother of a convicted conspirator and his provocative attitude towards the sovereign people when he resisted its unquestionable authority to enter the manor and reveal its secrets.

It seems clear from the very outset that this was hardly a peaceful, routine visit of the constituted authorities which ended in tragedy only because of the unreasoning reactions of the victim. It was obvious that the people had intended to take revenge from the beginning. Guillin had even been warned that morning that only flight could save him. As we know, he had derided the other nobles for being a pack of lambs cooked in the kitchens of their own manors.

So it was as clear to Guillin as it was to the attackers that there would be a fight. He had armed his weapons. Not only the national guard, but a crowd estimated at four or five thousand, had been called in as well. The Jacobins of Trévoux, instead, set the entire episode – in a way which was to them perfectly reasonable and coherent – in the framework of prudent revolutionary vigilance which then regrettably degenerated into a death sentence for an enemy of the people only because of his insane and criminal attempt to resist the sovereign people.

Here is how they depicted the final act, the catharsis of the affair, when the constituted authorities finally dragged the guilty party from the castle:

Là on se précipite en foule sur eux, on les entraîne de force, et des coups de fourche, de crosses de fusil font tomber l'audacieux et criminel Guillin dans une balle où le fer et le feu, en terminant son existence récompensent les forfaits dont il avait souillé cette effrayante journée²⁰.

The widow's report of cannibalism was indignantly refuted as false and slanderous and the Chasselay deputation retired having re-established the

¹⁹ *Rapport des Commissaires* cit., p. 3-4. « The news of Louis XVI's flight becomes known. Enemies could come from abroad; there were enemies inside the country (...) The municipality of Poleymieux understood this; it knew from bitter experience that there was in its territory a reckless, unrelenting enemy of the revolution, the *sieur* Guillin, brother to a man of the same name, detained in the *conciergerie* in Orléans for the crime of offence to the nation ».

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 13. « So the crowd rushes towards them, drags them forcibly out and with pitchfork and gun butt blows makes the insolent and criminal Guillin fall on a hay stack where iron and fire put an end to his life and give him his due for the crimes with which he has stained this awful day ».

facts according to the rationality of the revolutionary situation. This was the final and official ruling pronounced on the incident. This obviously biased version did however have the advantage as compared to the version of the opposing party, of reestablishing the people in their physical presence as insurrectional crowd in their position of final source of justice.

Guillin's widow emigrated, as did the Count Dampierre's. There is no evidence to my knowledge to suggest that emigration had already been planned by the couple, as Lefèvre concludes in the case of the Dampierres. She went to Russia where she eventually remarried. On the anniversary of the murder of her husband, she wrote a letter to the town council of Poleymieux asking for justice for the memory of her husband. She said that she trusted the allied forces to restore lawfulness to France and, in her particular case, to punish her husband's assassins.

On the whole the entire affair was soon forgotten; a fact which was rather incredible, considering its gravity. Hardly any mention of it was made in the national newspapers. The «Gazette Universelle», for example, played it down with the following few lines:

Cette séance a été très peu intéressante. On admis à la barre les députés de plusieurs paroisses des bords de Saône qui ont repoussé les inculpations graves faites contre elles par madame Guillin, dans le récit qu'elle avait fait à la barre du massacre de M. Guillin Dumontey (sic) son mari. La députation a diminué dans son exposition l'horreur de la scène qui s'est passée et qu'on avait comparé au festin d'Atrée²¹.

The episode was not particularly present in the counter-revolutionary compaign as part of its repertory of facts illustrating the diabolical nature of the revolutionary forces. In fact, it is not mentioned at all by historians with a few exceptions; Taine being the most noteworthy.

In the mid-nineteen hundreds, it was rediscovered by a local scholar, the author of the history of Lyon during the revolution. He recounted the story imprecisely and with a good deal of bias in Guillin's favour. He did, however, know of the right forearm, a detail rarely mentioned. As was the case of Taine later on, this author knew the contents of an article by Mallet du Pan, who, in turn had been informed by the widow Guillin, herself.

Botton was responding to this version of the facts when he wrote the book to which I have referred a number of times. His account, even though more precise and believable, is no less biased; but this time in favour of the national guard, to which his father belonged. In his version the national guard was depicted as having tried to prevent the butchering of the corpse. As for the rest, the authorities, as well as the people, had acted within their rights against a known enemy of the revolution. It was, of course, out of

²¹ *Gazette Universelle*, 12 settembre, 1791, p. 1020. «This session was of no particular interest. Admitted to the tribune were the deputies of several parishes on the banks of the Saône, who rejected the serious charges Madame Guillin made against them; from the tribune she recounted the massacre of Monsieur Guillin Dumontey (sic), her husband. The delegation belittled the horror of the scene that took place and which had been compared to Atræus' feast».

a sense of civic duty that Botton decided to write so many years after the fact:

Je me regarde en ce moment comme le vengeur du caractère français, outragé dans celui de vingt-cinq mille de nos frères faussement inculpés d'une barbarie bien étrangère à leurs moeurs, dont on voudrait étendre le reproche à la nation entière.

The occurrence of cannibalism is, once again, disdainfully denied: Et ce repas de cannibales? et ce banquet d'Atrée?... Ah s'il fut jamais dans nos, contrées un antropophage, un mangeur d'hommes, c'est, à n'en pas douter, le sieur Guillin²².

A suprisingly peremptory remark! Guillin had acted maliciously towards those he was supposed to protect. He had been a devouring parental figure, a Saturn who ate his own children. This metaphor for his personality was borne out by the true circumstances of his death.

In this way, the allegation of cannibalism, by virtue of its very outrageousness, is rejected out of hand despite the facts having been generally accepted. As a local historian writes, «L'horror même d'une telle action suffit à rendre le fait invrésemblable»²³. Unacceptable truth was made to cede to a rational and acceptable falsehood.

What place does such a horrendous story deserve in the history of the French Revolution? It may certainly be presented as a tessera in the already well-reconstructed greater mosaic of the Great Fear whose successive waves swept across France with each new important event. The flight to Varennes is one such event which endangered the progress of revolution itself. But to do this we must suppose that those who assailed the Poleymieux manor feared Guillin's involvement in his brother's conspiracy, so much so that, with the coincidence of the news about the king's flight, they were moved to radicalize their vengeance.

I do not feel that this fear can be sufficiently documented, despite the fact that it was played up by the Jacobins of Trévoux. Further, a rational fear should have produced equally rational behavior. Yet, in spite of attempts made to ascribe the irrational elements to the drunken crowd, these are so colossal as to colour or indeed, I would say, characterize the entire episode. Rather I see a great dismay of the sort which has possessed the people of France every time that sovereignty has failed its role leaving them alone to face the unknown.

²² Botton, p. 97. «At this moment I see myself as the avenger of the French character, affronted in the persons of twenty five thousand of our brothers falsely charged with a barbarity which is totally alien to their customs, in blaming whom the intention is to reproach the entire nation».

«Cannibal meal? Altraeus' banquet? If an antropophagous man ever existed in our lands, a man-eater, that was surely the *sieur* Guillin».

²³ Rolland e Clouzet, cit. «the very horror of such an action is sufficient to make the fact unlikely».

What happened at Poleymiex reflected, in miniature, what was occurring all over the realm. When Guillin first purchased the village seigneurie, he was welcomed with obedience and even celebration; a fact attested to by all, even Botton. However, their new lord, who was supposed to guide and protect his subjects, progressively disillusioned them: he insulted, beat and swindled them, he profaned everything which they held sacred and treated their constituted authorities with open contempt.

By analogy, the king's deceiving them evoked the treachery of their lord and so, the forsaken and betrayed peasants rose up to take revenge on the only one within their reach. Perhaps there were some leaders with rational political motives but in the crowd there was a desire of vengeance upon their hoped-for protector who not only failed to fulfill their expectations but exploited them, as well. Guillin was their lord, but he was also the effigy of the king. For two of his assassins the symbolic act of justice culminated with the incorporation of fragments of the right hand and heart of the treasonous authority.

For the rest there was perhaps no physical ingestion of the victim, but the ritual dismembering of the corpse and its cremation on that same pile of wood which he had looted from the parish are both rich in their symbolism of purification. The ancient authority existed no longer. It had been torn to pieces and burnt by the new one at very same moment that the monarchy of France had fallen and the king, by now a body devoid of all sovereignty, was entering Paris, a prisoner among the silent crowd.

The violent episodes of the French Revolution can certainly be regarded as the logical response to a state of national peril repeated endlessly wherever the echos of such peril were heard. But perhaps, on the other hand, they can be seen as the reenactment, repeated a thousand times over on a smaller level, of what was to become the transition of sovereignty.

There is, however, another aspect I would like to touch in conclusion. In a certain sense the entire episode we have been talking about takes place «elsewhere», almost in the realm of horror, almost as utopia turned inside out. Elsewhere for historiography, which ignores it; elsewhere because of the «upside down» world to which it refers, a world whose protagonists are the young, the outsiders, the people from the country; finally, elsewhere in the strict sense, for the ritual is performed in another town of which the victim was not a part, where his jurisdiction and his cruelty did not reach. The analogies to the story Alain Corbin examines²⁴ and which occurred during the Franco-Prussian war, are striking. There too the victim does not belong to the place, is no part of the affair which overwhelms him and is a sort of emblem of an enormous misunderstanding. In the case Corbin discusses there is an episode of real, intentional, cannibalism but, beyond this, there is the same shocking explosion of oral sadism which we find in our case. It almost seems

²⁴ A. Corbin, *Le village des cannibales*, Paris, Aubier, 1989.

as though the French rural world, in exceptional moments of crisis and tragedy, lives the relationship between generations as one of so profoundly alienated «otherness» and, at the same time, of so deep a parental nostalgia, that no defenses are left to forestall a disturbing acting out of collective regression to the phase of sadistic orality²⁵.

²⁵ For a series of anthropological-psychoanalytic reflections on the problem of cannibalism, cfr. *Destins du cannibalisme*, «Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse», Gallimard, 1972, n. 6.