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## ‘André Chénier’s “Dernières poésies”’: Animism and The Terror’

### Abstract:

Starting from the premise that André Chénier’s poetry is fundamentally pantheist in nature, this article identifies animism as one of its most important modes of expression. The pantheist belief structures and animist dynamic also inform his final poems written during the Terror (1793-1794). Yet in this psychologically constraining and physically violent world, they produce a deeply ‘uncanny’, often bestial, vision of the Revolution and its actors. What is more exceptional is that this animism also inspires the figure of the Jacobins’ unwavering enemy, a figure at once of Aristotelian magnanimity and implacable animosity towards the revolutionary regime. Chénier’s last poems thus institute a corrective ‘justice’ to the perceived abuses meted out by the Jacobins’ executive and judicial systems. They do so, moreover, by appropriating the revolutionaries’ own performative and nominative speech acts, making Chénier a poet-legislator paradoxically close in character to Rousseau’s mythic law-giver in *Du contrat social*.

Keywords: André Chénier, animism, Terror, poetry, French Revolution, pantheism

Nineteenth-century critics and readers were frequently tempted to portray the poet André Chénier as an unreconstructed Hellenist, barely touched by late eighteenth-century French civilization. As Arsène Houssaye colourfully put it in 1845: ‘André Chénier est un Grec né vers la quatre-vingt-septième olympiade. [...] il n’en faut pas douter, tout est grec, tout est païen, tout est antique chez André Chénier’.<sup>1</sup> On a first reading Chénier’s verse would seem to bear this observation out: his poems are riddled with dense and varied allusions to the cultures of antiquity. Yet, as Francis Scarfe has remarked, unlike some contemporary poets, such as Jacques Delille or Ponce Denis Échouchard ‘Pindare’ Lebrun, Chénier is not given to simple neoclassical posturing.<sup>2</sup> His engagement with antiquity was not only erudite, it was also emotional; his prolific use of classical references was part of a concerted attempt to articulate beliefs and affects in the manner of the ancient Greeks. Philosophically, this would suggest that, far from being the ‘athée avec délices’ of sympathetic post-revolutionary recollection, Chénier is in fact a confirmed pantheist.<sup>3</sup> For him the natural world was suffused with the divine spirit; humankind, creatures, trees and stones, the elements, all partook of this omnipresent numinous force.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, Greek polytheism provides the poetic declensions of his pantheist vision: Zeus, Diana, Hercules, Hermes, Thetis et al are just so many ‘modes’ of expressing and bodying forth the divine spirit. Crucially, too, unlike

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<sup>1</sup> Arsène Houssaye, *Poètes et philosophes* (Paris: Charpentier, 1845), p. 198. Cited in *André Chénier: le miracle du siècle*, ed. Catriona Seth (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2005), p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Scarfe ‘Introduction’, in *André Chénier: Poems*, ed. Francis Scarfe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), pp. vii, xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, ‘Poètes et romanciers modernes de la France. LII: Chênédollé’, *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, II, 1 June 1849, pp. 717-71 (p. 737). For the vagaries of attribution of this mot, see Géraud Venzac, ‘André Chénier: “Athée avec délices”?’ *Cahiers de l’Association internationale des études françaises*, 10:10 (1958), 200-210.

<sup>4</sup> See especially his notes for the unfinished poem, ‘Hermès’: ‘Il faut magnifiquement représenter la terre sous l’emblème d’un grand animal qui vit [...]; dans le chaos des poètes, chaque germe, chaque élément est seul et n’obéit qu’à son poids. Mais quand tout cela est arrangé, chacun est un tout à part et en même temps une partie du grand tout [...] Quand la terre forma les espèces animales, plusieurs périrent par plusieurs causes à développer. Alors d’autres corps organisés (car les organes vivants secrets meuvent les végétaux, minéraux et tout) héritèrent de la quantité d’atomes de vie qui avaient [sic] entré dans la composition de celles qui s’étaient détruites et se formèrent de leurs débris’. [his italics] André Chénier, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Gérard Walter (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), pp. 406-07. All subsequent references are to this edition. (The mention here of ‘atomes de vie’ might suggest a Lucretian atomism, but the overriding conception of how these pulses of life infuse and suffuse the universe is organicist and animistic).

Houssaye's reductive reading of the poet's world view, Chénier's pantheism is not just exclusively or narrowly Hellenist in inspiration. Elisabeth Quillen has claimed that, from his school days onwards, the poet's thought is equally informed by his exposure to the philosophy of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English free-thinkers, including John Toland, author of a scandalous *Pantheisticon* (1720).<sup>5</sup> We could add that, insofar as pantheism posits a universe animated by a single manifoldly expressed life-force, it also carries echoes of the German chemist Georg Stahl's 'animism', and even more so of Paul Joseph Barthez's 'vitalism', centred on the notion of a 'principe vital' common to all life-forms.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that Chénier's shape-shifting gods, shepherds, nymphs and naiads in his 'Bucoliques' are the contemporaries of Antoine Mesmer's all-pervasive 'magnétisme animal'.<sup>7</sup> This makes the poet's pantheism not so much simply mythological as mythopoeic: it constructs a mythical universe of its own just as much as it borrows from established classical sources. It thus channels what Maria do Rosário Pontes has called 'le pouvoir démiurgique de la parole poétique' in order to articulate 'une poésie de la nature qui obligera à entrevoir, sous la multiplicité des formes naturelles, la secrète unité du Tout'.<sup>8</sup>

This sense of an all-pervasive world spirit is also key to Chénier's conception of the creative process. In his 'Épître sur des ouvrages', for instance, the poet is presented as a

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<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth M. Quillen, 'L'idée de liberté dans la pensée et la poésie d'André Chénier', *Neohelicon*, 1:3-4 (Sept 1973), 351-63 (p. 352).

<sup>6</sup> Georg Ernst Stahl's main ideas on animism are summed up in his *Theoria medica vera* (1708). On this subject, see Jacques Roger, *The Life Sciences in Eighteenth-Century French Thought*, trans. R. Ellrich (Stanford CA.: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 343-49. For Barthez's vitalism, see his *Nouveaux éléments de la science de l'homme* (Montpellier: Jean Martel l'aîné, 1778); see also Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, MA.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) and Roselyne Rey, *Naissance et développement du vitalisme en France de la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle à la fin du premier empire*, SVEC 381 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> The best study on Mesmer is probably still Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968). Interestingly, Gérard Walter suggests that Chénier's dramatic fragment, 'Les Charlatans', alluded to Mesmer and Cagliostro. See *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 573-78, 942.

<sup>8</sup> Maria do Rosário Pontes, 'André Chénier et la poésie cosmogonique', *Repositório Aberto da Universidade do Porto* (1993), 163-77 (p. 169, her italics). See: <http://hdl.handle.net/10216/7968>

smelter in a foundry, casting his verse in diversely running rivulets of fiery inspiration.

Subsequently, however, his model reverts to the classical:

Je m'abreuve surtout des flots que le Permesse

Plus féconds et plus purs fit couler dans la Grèce;

Là, Prométhée ardent, je dérobe les feux

Dont j'anime l'argile et dont je fais des Dieux. (p .159)

Creator and creature, poet and poems are no longer separate entities: they interpenetrate one another. He imbibes poetic waters ('je m'abreuve') and, more strikingly still, pictures himself as a burning Prometheus ('Prométhée ardent'), not just a thief of fire but ablaze with the very element he has stolen and with which he sparks life in both humans and gods. As he writes in 'L'Invention', 'l'âme est partout; la pensée a des ailes' (p. 126): this poetic fire or animating spirit is protean and omnipresent, neither reducible to brute materialism nor divisible in the manner of Cartesian dualism. It thus accommodates wonderfully the seamless metamorphoses which abound in Chénier's work: gods usurping animal form, humans transformed into animals and vice versa, satyrs spying on streams transfigured into naiads, etc. It is also operative in more subtle ways, as when old Homer's song makes the branches sway to its cadences in 'L'Aveugle' (p. 46), or when the lamented young lovers of the 'Bucoliques' and the 'Élégies' do not so much die as become one with the animate, fluid elements of air, water or wind which continue to carry their voice or speak their name (e.g., 'Néære', pp. 10-11). At the heart of Chénier's pantheism there is a profoundly animist power. This animism is beautifully circumscribed in the closed, atemporal world of the 'Bucoliques';

it is imagined as an irresistible creative drive in didactic poems such as ‘L’Invention’ or envisaged as an historically enlightening force in the unfinished ‘Hermès’. Yet my principal contention here is that this same pantheist vision, and especially this same animist power, become dangerously volatile, reversible and terrifying in the uncharted, increasingly violent world of the Revolution. This is acutely the case in the everyday psychopathology of the Terror.

As Sigmund Freud made clear in his essay on the ‘Uncanny’ [‘Das Unheimliche’], when violent, destabilizing reality thrusts us back into what he calls the ‘old, animistic conception of the universe’, the inanimate or mechanical comes alive just as living beings appear as statues, waxworks, machines or the walking dead.<sup>9</sup> In other words, those ‘animistic beliefs of civilized people’ long thought to have been ‘surmounted’,<sup>10</sup> return with hallucinatory force and transform our view of the world around us. In the atavistic mental universe of the Terror, this would suggest that Chénier’s animism is visited insistently, troublingly and fully on revolutionary Paris, its politicians and its people. Here his familiar, classical pantheism returns in dangerously unfamiliar, threatening guise.

An early revolutionary instance of the poet’s animistic vision occurs when statuary appears to come thrillingly to life. This is a sort of ‘Pygmalion’ moment, which is not in itself darkly menacing. Indeed, it forms part of a paean to new artistic freedoms made possible by the political regeneration of 1789 and specifically concerns the painter, Jacques-Louis David’s, epic attempt to capture on canvas the ‘Serment du Jeu de Paume’, or the solemn oath sworn collectively by the deputies of the self-appointed national assembly to remain

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<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, in *Art and Literature*. Penguin Freud Library, vol 14 (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 335-76 (p. 362). Freud goes on to list ‘a severed head’ among the manifestations of the Uncanny which draw on ‘its proximity to the castration complex’ (p. 366).

<sup>10</sup> Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, p. 372.

together until they had provided France with a new constitution. This poem, one of only two published in Chénier's lifetime, acclaims David's art:

La palette offre l'âme aux regards enivrés.

Les antres de Paros de Dieux peuplent la terre.

L'airain coule et respire. En portiques sacrés

S'élancent le marbre et la pierre. (p. 166)

The poem thus begins with the inert materials of art brought to life by the revolutionary demiurge channelled by David. Of course, as is well known, the poem subsequently becomes much more ambivalent about the political and social forces unleashed by the Revolution, warning in particular of the dangers of untrammelled popular rule. In this much, it prefigures the living statuary, the 'marbres vivants' (p. 183), fleetingly evoked in the first stanza of Chénier's 'Ode à Versailles' written in the late summer of 1793. Yet if this poem seems more of a sombre reflection on the once glorious royal parks, now abandoned to a poet-lover's melancholy, its final stanza in particular brings crashing back into this elegiac universe all the horrors of violent revolution. In its last lines, the grounds of Versailles are thus suddenly overrun, invaded by a spectral crowd of victims murdered by the Jacobin Revolution: 'J'y vois errer l'ombre livide/ D'un peuple d'innocents, qu'un tribunal perfide/ Précipite dans le cercueil' (p. 185). We have moved from wistful living statues to the dreadful walking dead; and the intervening poetic refuges of a deserted palace and a lover's fancy fail to establish any real or imaginative distance from the turmoil of revolution in nearby Paris, depicted here as a world of lawless abjection, best captured in that one adjective 'livide'. (On the basis of

an alternative reading to the one undertaken here, it would be interesting to see whether a case could be made for the Revolution, and especially the Terror, tipping the ‘classical’ Chénier in the contemporary Gothic).<sup>11</sup>

‘L’Ode à Versailles’ was written at more or less the same time as political ‘Terror’ was declared to be ‘à l’ordre du jour’ (5 September 1793). In this increasingly anxious climate, a sense of historical perspective is often effaced in Chénier’s poetry, with classical references clashing with revolutionary allusions. A superb Greek past and a sordid French present come ever more antagonistically to life in the same verses. A striking example of this is the consonance which both couples and contrasts Paros, the ancient Greek island famous for its pure white marble, and Paris, heaving hotbed of insurrection, associated in Chénier’s last poems with overflowing tides of blood and filth. In his ‘Iambe IV’,<sup>12</sup> Paros is superimposed on Paris so that the sculptor’s dazzling white likenesses of men and gods stand as stark rebukes to the ‘noirs ivrognes de sang’ (p. 190) numbered among the poet’s wretched revolutionary contemporaries. What is more, Chénier also finds on Paros an alternative poetic model: not the impassive sculptor, but the embittered ancient Greek satirist, Archilocus, author of mocking-jolting iambs. Consequently, Paros is superimposed on Paris a second time, resurrected not in sculpted stone now but in crafted words, in the scathing, satirical iambic form in which Chénier couches his unrelenting denunciation of his Jacobin enemies.

One of the more disquieting features of the ‘uncanny’, as Freud noted, was its reversibility, its highly unstable signifying power capable at any moment of an instant

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<sup>11</sup> An initial consideration here might be those moments in Chénier’s last poems where terror spills over into horror, depicting lugubrious prisons as charnel-houses and even Jacobins as ‘vampires’ (p. 190); or where classical satire gives way to self-portraits of a poet defiant in his scornful, brooding solitude.

<sup>12</sup> The numbering of Chénier’s ‘Iambes’ here follows Walter. It differs markedly from Scarfe’s numbering of the ‘Iambes’ in his edition of Chénier’s selected verse. Scarfe also suggests that Walter ignored a note left by the poet which would indicate that Walter’s ‘Iambe V’, ‘Ils vivent cependant et de tant de victimes’, is in fact the prelude or opening lines to ‘Iambe IV’. See Scarfe, *André Chénier: Poems*, pp. 141-42.



inversion to mean its opposite, as ‘heimlich’ signifies ‘unheimlich’ too.<sup>13</sup> Chénier’s animistic poetry of the Terror is peculiarly attuned to these alternating currents of meaning. A horrible example of this might be found in his ‘Iambe VI’, probably composed in February-March 1794, decrying the mass drowning of up to 4000 suspected counter-revolutionaries in Nantes by the merciless représentant-en-mission, Jean-Baptiste Carrier.<sup>14</sup> The boatloads of naked, chained innocents scuttled in the freezing Loire estuary represent the haunting return of the tried-and-tested poetic topos of the drowned beauty or shipwrecked fisherman depicted in a number of Chénier’s ‘Bucoliques’ and ‘Élégies’. Classical poetry becomes in an instant revolutionary ‘anti-poetry’, as Francis Scarfe calls it.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere in his ‘Iambes’ an animistic reversibility of meaning produces a gruesome travesty of his earlier pastorals, where shepherds are now indifferent to the bloody plight of their flock; and children that might have merrily played with lambs eat them without a further thought (‘Iambe VII’, p. 192). Worse still, shepherds themselves are now penned like sheep to be tried by ‘des juges tigres’ (‘Iambe VIII’, p. 193), whose judgement is a foregone conclusion. Like many other instances of human-animal metamorphoses in Chénier’s poetry of 1793 and 1794, the debasement of men into beasts implicitly informs another important metaphor employed both by the Jacobins and against them, namely, that of cannibalism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, pp. 341-45.

<sup>14</sup> The death toll in the ‘Noyades de Nantes’ is widely disputed. Alain Gérard, drawing on figures given by nineteenth-century historians hostile to the Revolution, cites as many as 4860 victims. See his *La Vendée: 1789-1793* (Paris: Éditions Champ Vallon, 1993), p. 287.

<sup>15</sup> Scarfe, ‘Introduction’, p. xxiii.

<sup>16</sup> See ‘Iambe VII’: ‘Mille autres moutons, comme moi./ Pendus aux crocs sanglants du charnier populaire./ Seront servis au peuple roi’ (p. 192); or Chénier’s description of Carrier and his ilk ‘Qui mange, boit, rote du sang’ (p. 191). For the range of revolutionary discourses on human-animal imagery and the cannibal metaphor, see Antoine de Baecque, *Le Corps de l’histoire: Métaphores et politique (1770-1800)* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1993); and From the Royal to the Republican Body in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France, ed. Sara E. Melzer and Kathryn Norberg (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1998). For specific instances of these discourses, see Olivier Ritz, ‘Metaphors of popular violence in the revolutionary debate in the wake of Edmund Burke’, in *Representing Violence in France 1760-1820*, ed. Thomas Wynn (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), pp. 35-47; and Béatrice Didier on René-Jacques Hébert’s *Le Père Duchesne*, in *Écrire la Révolution 1789-1799* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989), pp. 114-15.

Yet if predatory packs ('cette horde impure', p. 190) and passive herds ('troupeau lâche et sans âme', p. 180) feature in Chénier's poems written during the Terror, another human-animal transformation is highly individual: that of the man-monster. Marat is the supreme case in point here. In his 'Ode à Marie-Anne-Charlotte Corday', Chénier successively depicts 'l'ami du peuple' as 'reptile', 'noir serpent', 'tigre' and 'monstre' (pp. 178-180). While his murderess lives on in imagined Greek choruses of praise and in brilliant statuary, Marat rots horribly in death just as he had crawled and slithered in life. Corday is returned to pure spirit; Marat condemned to foul matter. This is less an inadvertent return to a Cartesian dualism of material body and immaterial soul than the representation of the pantheist life-force drawn in two diametrically opposed directions: the 'fille grande et sublime' (p. 179) tends towards the pure ether of an ideal whereas 'ce brigand farouche' (p.179) drags everything into the mire. If anything, this distinction of two contrasting animations of the world-spirit prefigures the 'système de l'âme et de la bête' whimsically developed in Xavier de Maistre's subtly counter-revolutionary *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1795).<sup>17</sup>

In an elaboration on this bestial depiction of Marat, Chénier's 'Iambe II'<sup>18</sup> has Jacques-Pierre Brissot, whom the poet also despised, give an imaginary account of Marat's death, witnessing the demagogue's soul exhale from his body. Yet his soul proves incapable of transcending vile, material form:

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<sup>17</sup> Xavier de Maistre, *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), p. 52. See also Gilbert Durant, 'Le voyage et la chambre dans l'œuvre de Xavier de Maistre', *Romantisme*, 2:4 (1972), 76-89; and David McCallam, 'Xavier de Maistre and Angelology', in (Re-)Writing the Radical: Enlightenment, Revolution and Cultural Transfer in 1790s Germany, Britain and France, ed. Maike Oergel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 239-250.

<sup>18</sup> This 'Iambe' is often subtitled 'Marat au Panthéon' (see Scarfe, *André Chénier: Poems*, p. 98), and is indicative of the way in which the pantheist Chénier is particularly stung into writing by the Jacobins' clamorous, vulgar and frequently revised 'panthéonisations').

[Brissot] Dit avoir vu dans l'air d'exhalaisons impures

Un noir nuage tournoyer,

Du sang, et de la fange, et toutes les ordures

Dont se forme un épais borbier;

Et soutient que c'était la sale et vilaine âme

Par qui Marat avait vécu. (p. 188)

Ultimately, this is no metamorphosis at all: in death Marat simply reveals himself to be what he has always been – a lumpen, earthbound monster. He is not a man who has become a snake, but a snake who has been disguised all the while as a man. The dissembling ‘Gods’ have been found out by Corday’s bold and fatal knife-thrust, ‘Quand d’un homme à ce monstre ils donnèrent les traits’ (p. 179). Chénier’s animist vision of man-monsters is far from exceptional here, recalling in particular the unforgiving pen-portraits of ‘monstres à figure humaine’ sketched in Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *Le Nouveau Paris* (1798-1799) where the human and animal are merged in disturbing assimilations of a Marat-bird or a Robespierre-cat.<sup>19</sup> The chain of signifiers is superseded here by the man-animal – one might say the ‘humanimal’ – symbol, this is the Revolution mythologized in monstrous emblems or troubling hieroglyphs.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), pp. 790-91: ‘Robespierre ressemblait, il est vrai, à un chat sauvage; Marat à un oiseau de nuit [...]’. See also David McCallam, “‘Monstre à figure humaine’: portraits des révolutionnaires dans *Le Nouveau Paris* de Louis-Sébastien Mercier’, in *Le Mâle en France 1715-1830: Représentations de la masculinité*, ed. Katherine Astbury and Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 219-31.

<sup>20</sup> For Chénier’s fascination with hieroglyphs and his allusions to them in ‘Hermès’, see the highly deconstructionist article by E. S. Burt, ‘Cracking the Code: The Poetical and Political Legacy of Chénier’s “Antique Verse”’, *Yale French Studies*, 77 (1990), 210-242.

In these poems written during the Terror, animism concerns almost exclusively the animalistic. Yet in the face of this pervasive animality, Chénier does not abandon his pantheist beliefs, but attempts to reclaim the common ‘soul’ or anima that he shares, despite himself, with the most base and brutal of his contemporaries. He does this in a double movement. Firstly, he celebrates those individuals who stand out from the herd, those nobler persons great of soul, the magnanimous – possessing magna anima – whether Ancients like blind Homer, the ‘sage magnanime’ (p. 44), or the fearless enemies of the Jacobins like Charlotte Corday whose ‘langage simple et magnanime’ (p. 180) confounded her scheming, petty interrogators. And in what is generally regarded as his final ‘Iambe’, often subtitled ‘Comme un dernier rayon’, Chénier intimates that he, ‘l’honnête homme [...] victime de l’outrage’ is also of this number; he who ‘Dans les cachots, près du cercueil,/ Relève plus altiers son front et son langage,/ Brillants d’un généreux orgueil’ (p. 194). What better paraphrase for this Aristotelian sense of magnanimity might there be than ‘un généreux orgueil’?<sup>21</sup> A further ‘vers épars’, copied in his mother’s hand and preserved at the Bibliothèque municipale de Carcassonne, attempts to federate yet further those great of soul against the baleful Jacobin regime, giving collective expression to the poet’s bitter, solitary resistance:

Tu dors, ô mon genie! Un Dieu t’appelle; accours,

Éveille-toi. La vie échappe; et de nos jours

Il ne reste après nous que ces heures sublimes

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<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin Books, 1959), pp. 120-26. This chapter deals with the Greek ‘megalopsuchia’ or Latin ‘magnanimitas’. As the translator notes, ‘It is not magnanimity in the modern sense, but something like “justifiable pride”’ (p. 120).

[Où dans] la sainte ardeur de nos chants magnanimes

D'un invincible acier notre cœur revêtu

A terrassé le crime et vengé la vertu. (p. 595)

However, as I have suggested, there is a second part to this movement to reclaim the soul or anima from those bestial contemporaries who have debased it and dragged it into the gutter. For Chénier does not only celebrate greatness of soul or magnanimity; he also draws on the Latin root of the term to valorize an implacably just animosity towards the bloody Jacobin regime.<sup>22</sup> This animosity is nowhere more expressive than in the vengeful, embittered, but no less noble and austere, iambics that redirect Archilochus's classical ire and indignation.<sup>23</sup> The iambic form is perfectly suited to this task. Unlike the balanced alexandrine couplets of the 'Bucoliques' or the 'Élégies', the classical iambic has a hastening-halting metre, alternating lines of alexandrines and octosyllables, which, as James Petterson has pointed out, mimics and mocks the slow rise and swift fall of the guillotine blade.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the guillotine is a privileged interlocutor in Chénier's iambic verse. In the atavistic, animist universe of the Terror, it is little wonder that the dreadful and dreaded machine itself comes to life. But it does more than that in Chénier's poetry: the guillotine, in its animated incarnations as 'gibet' (p. 188) and 'hache' (pp. 192-93), speaks. And its word is a performative speech act. When it addresses – or as Louis Althusser would say, when it

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<sup>22</sup> Le Petit Robert (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1994), p. 85, indicates that the term 'animosité' derives from the low Latin 'animositas' and that in the fifteenth and even sixteenth century it still retained a meaning of 'courage'.

<sup>23</sup> Scarfe cites a manuscript note in which Chénier describes Archilochus's iambics as having a power that was more than just the vicious flourish of a 'satyrique amer et ingénieux'; it was, rather, 'pur et austère, fécond et varié dans les pensées, fier et vrai dans l'expression, grave et élevé dans le style'. (André Chénier: Poems, p. 136).

<sup>24</sup> See James Petterson, *Poetry Proscribed: Twentieth-Century (Re)Visions of the Trials of Poetry in France* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2008), p. 72.

‘hails’ or ‘interpelle’<sup>25</sup> – its victims in the name of the state, they are struck dead on the spot. To be called by the guillotine is to be called to die; with each death it proclaims ‘I am’ in the name of the one and indivisible state, just as it ensures at the same time that its victims’ voicelessness and dismembered bodies signify ‘I am no longer’. This is the discursive dynamic of the fatal ‘appel nominal’ (p. 188) imagined in ‘Iambe II’. Initially, this speech act constituted a means of public vote with each speaker asked to pronounce his personal verdict before the assembly, as at the trial of Louis XVI in the Convention.<sup>26</sup> Yet, in the Terror, as in Chénier’s poetry, the ‘appel nominal’ is more readily associated with the dreaded prison roll-call of names of those to be carted off and tried the same day. It is the awful question on the prisoners’ lips each time the prison door creaks open in ‘Iambe VIII’: ‘Quelle sera la proie/ Que la hache appelle aujourd’hui?’ (p. 193).

From a more general point of view, the asymmetry of the iambic form also replicates the fundamental imbalance of power expressed in Chénier’s verse: on one side, the Jacobin state, its judicial and executing machines, its mob and violence; on the other, the poet, his apparent powerlessness and lone voice. Yet Chénier remains consistently clear: Jacobin law is a mob-enforced sham. From his first iambics, the published ‘Hymne aux Suisses de Châteaueux’ (pp. 164-66) of April 1792, he denounces the travesty of the legal process that can fête Swiss mercenaries who had mutinied against army orders and shot the national guards who had come, in the name of the law, to quash their violent revolt. That the mercenaries’ release occasioned a wave of Jacobin demagoguery in their honour only confirmed Chénier in his opinion that there can be no true liberty where there is no legality. In his poetry he appeals instead to a Montesquieu-inspired notion of ‘justice’ that comes

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<sup>25</sup> See Louis Althusser, ‘Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État. Notes pour une recherche’, in *Positions* (1964-1975) (Paris: Les Éditions Sociales, 1976), pp. 67-125.

<sup>26</sup> See Anne Simonin and Corinne Lechevant-Gomez, ‘L’appel nominal, une technique pour la démocratie extrême (1789-1795)?’, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 357 (juillet-septembre 2009), 67-101.

before any specific rule of law, one which is a fortiori more legitimate than the abusive Jacobin legislature of ‘Ces bourreaux barbouilleurs de lois’ (p. 194).<sup>27</sup> This is a philosophical conception of justice drawing on the Natural Law tradition of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It posits an inherent sociability in mankind driving it to unite for mutual aid and comfort against threats that would overwhelm and destroy the individual. Justice is, in a sense, the ‘natural’ expression of this communal living when the common good takes precedence over private interests. Montesquieu also calls it ‘équité’ and ‘vertu’,<sup>28</sup> and no doubt Chénier has in mind this conception of ‘vertu’ in his last ‘Iambe IX’ – ‘Toi, Vertu, pleure si je meurs’ (p. 195) – as a deliberate means of reappropriating a value that the Jacobins, and Robespierre in particular, sought incessantly to incarnate.<sup>29</sup> Indeed ‘Justice’ is likewise personified and apostrophized in the same poem (p. 194). Yet if the poet appeals to a primitive sense of justice which precedes the grotesquely perverted forms of legal process instituted in the Terror, he also imagines a future rule of wise and just laws which will come to pass after the Jacobin regime has been definitively overthrown. This is most clearly articulated as the secularized last judgement called ‘postérité’,<sup>30</sup> an ultimate enlightened redress projected into the future, and a vision shared by many impotent victims of the Terror. For instance, Madame Roland’s *Mémoires*, hastily penned in prison in late summer 1793,

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<sup>27</sup> Chénier’s reading of Montesquieu emerges most clearly from his *Essai sur les causes et les effets de la perfection et de la décadence des lettres et des arts*, which Walter dates to the whole period 1780-1790. Its prefatory remarks were first published posthumously as a large fragment in Chénier’s *Œuvres complètes* of 1819, before being reconstituted in more definitive form by Abel Lefranc in the *Revue de Paris* in 1899. See especially the *Essai*’s chapter on ‘Des lois’, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Gérard Walter, pp. 628-32.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Charles-Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (Paris: Garniers Frères, 1960), Lettre 83, pp. 174-76.

<sup>29</sup> For an excellent recent study of the concerted attempts of revolutionaries to embody public virtue, see Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> See ‘Iambe IV’, ‘Que des passants pleins de tes vers,/ Les siècles, l’avenir, que toute la nature/ Crie à l’aspect de ces pervers:/ Hou, les vils scélérats! les monstres! les infâmes!’ (p. 190); or ‘Iambe IX’, ‘Mais quoi!/ Nul ne resterait donc pour attendrir l’histoire/ Sur tant de justes massacres?’ (p. 195).

subtitle her relation of revolutionary events from August 1792 as an ‘appel à l’impartiale postérité’.<sup>31</sup>

What, however, marks out Chénier’s last poems from other vehement denunciations of the Jacobin regime of 1793-1794 is their systematic, persistent redeployment of the revolutionaries’ own deadly rhetorical devices against them. He turns the Jacobins’ speech acts back on them. As Jacqueline Millner puts it, ‘his words attempt to do [to his persecutors] what has been done to him’.<sup>32</sup> For instance, he appropriates the nominative function of the Terror’s fatal roll-call or ‘appel nominal’, calling out those who are most wont to denounce others: Marat, Collot d’Herbois, Barère. He makes his own poetic speech acts explicitly performative too. A lot of his poems in this period enact what their words describe, making poetic enunciation the very form of their denunciation of the revolutionary government: ‘La patrie allume ma voix’ (p. 187); ‘Au pied de l’échafaud j’essaye encor ma lyre [...]’ (p. 193). At their extreme of verbal violence, his verses inflict what they depict. Thus, he asks rhetorically, will no one else raise their voice against these abhorrent Jacobin ‘brigands’ ‘Pour cracher sur leurs noms, pour chanter leur supplice?’ (p. 195) In response to the guillotine that appears at once to name and kill, Chénier’s words aspire to a similar physical efficacy, likened frequently to deadly weaponry, specifically to arrows and whips. The whip in particular recalls those wielded by the so-called ‘Mastigophores,’ charged with restoring public order in ancient Greece when the people were running amok during drunken festivities. In ‘Iambe II’, even as he sarcastically hails Marat’s obsequious Jacobin champions, Chénier takes a new sobriquet for himself, becoming the caustically satirical ‘citoyen Archiloque Mastigophore’ (p. 189). His is now the whip-hand raising ‘le triple fouet,

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<sup>31</sup> See Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland, *Mémoires*, ed. C. A. Dauban (Paris: Plon 1864), pp. 186-87.

<sup>32</sup> Jacqueline Millner, ‘André Chénier’s Astonishing Revolutionary Language in the “Iambs”’, *Dalhousie French Studies*, 57 (Winter 2001), 10-24 (p. 20).



le fouet de la vengeance' (p. 195), a lash wielded mercilessly, as though revenge were the only primitive form of justice left in barbarous, lawless times.

In short, Chénier's poetry in the Terror privileges nominative and performative speech acts. The lyrical outdoes the speciously legal by resorting to the same discursive devices, yet doing so with more vigour and aplomb, with more 'greatness of soul', one might say. Thus Jacobin accusers are accused, villainous sans-culotte juries sworn out rather than in, and corrupt judges judged. 'C'est un pauvre poète [...] / Qui seul, captif, près de la mort, / [...] / Dénonce aux juges infernaux / Ces juges, ces jurés qui frappent l'innocence, / Hécatombe à leurs tribunaux' (p. 190). We arrive at the paradoxical situation of hearing a prisoner lay down the law and condemn without any right of appeal those who claim the authority to try and judge him. The very impotence of the poet's situation empowers him. As a prisoner who knows he is about to die, he is able to speak from the impregnable position of imagining that he were already dead.

In the last two years of his life, then, Chénier becomes a poet-legislator who arrogates to himself via his poetry the role that Rousseau's mythical 'Législateur' occupies in *Du contrat social*.<sup>33</sup> (This is also, incidentally, the transcendent function that Robespierre sought to confer on his revolutionary deity at the Fête de l'Être Suprême on 8 June 1794).<sup>34</sup> In order to hand down justice to the people, Rousseau's imaginary law-giver has to find a voice that is neither that of the magistrate nor the sovereign. He must appeal to another order of authority which invariably leads him to invoke the 'Gods' of one tradition or another. As Rousseau puts it:

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social, ou principes de droit politique*, in *Collection complète des œuvres*, 17 vols (Geneva: 1780-1789), I, pp. 232-37. Consulted online, 22 November 2014: <http://www.rousseauonline.ch/pdf/rousseauonline-0004.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> See Caroline Weber, *Terror and its Discontents: Suspect Words in Revolutionary France* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 102.

Cette raison sublime qui s'élève au-dessus de la portée des hommes vulgaires est celle dont le Législateur met les décisions dans la bouche des immortels, pour entraîner ceux que ne pourrait ébranler la prudence humaine.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to demagogues, charlatans and rabble-rousers whose dominance derives from whipping up the feverish passions of a moment, Rousseau's Legislator must embed his laws in a deeper, more dispassionate 'sagesse'. After all, 'il n'appartient pas à tout homme de faire parler les Dieux'.<sup>36</sup> And, crucially, at this point where Rousseau has in a sense rolled the poetic and legislative functions into one – their shared power to speak with the voice of the Gods – he offers up no other guarantee of the Legislator's unique ability to do so than his greatness of soul. 'La grande âme du Législateur', he writes, 'est le vrai miracle qui doit prouver sa mission'.<sup>37</sup> In this much at least, the mythical law-giver and the unjustly imprisoned poet are one and the same 'homme juste et magnanime' (p. 185).

Hence in his final poems, Chénier achieves a sort of paradoxical poetic empowerment – one might even say a poetic apotheosis, in light of his pantheism. It is a transformation that he had already described most beautifully in one of his early 'Bucoliques', modelled on a passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this verse, he relates the swift sublimation of Hercules from mortal to god.<sup>38</sup> With a little licence the words could also apply to the pantheist poet climbing the steps to the guillotine:

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<sup>35</sup> Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, p. 236.

<sup>36</sup> Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, p. 236.

<sup>37</sup> Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, p. 236.

<sup>38</sup> It is a further historical irony that Hercules became a virile Jacobin icon in the Terror, and in more transcendent form, was also present at the Fête de l'Être Suprême atop a large column on the artificial mountain raised as an altar in the Champ-de-mars from which Robespierre addressed the crowds. See Warren Roberts, Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Louis Prieur, *Revolutionary Artists: The Public, The Populace, and Images in the French Revolution* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 305-07.

Il monte [...]

Attend sa récompense et l'heure d'être un Dieu.

Le vent souffle et mugit. Le bûcher tout en feu

Brille autour du héros; et la flamme rapide

Porte aux palais divins l'âme du grand Alcide. (p. 27)

In holding true to his pantheist worldview, Chénier invests his depictions of the Revolution in 1793-1794 – its monstrous demagogues, killing machines and sheep-like victims – with an animism privileging a horrible bestiality. In this much, he was far from unusual, as is evidenced by the tremendous outpouring of phantasmagorical re-imaginings of the Terror in its immediate aftermath. However, what does set Chénier apart is that this same animism also breathes life into the figure of the heroic poet-legislator, a person, or rather persona, great of soul but also moved by a just animus against the Jacobin state and its grotesque perversions of the law.<sup>39</sup> In his final poems, then, Chénier recuperates the Jacobins' own rhetoric, even possibly their own Rousseauist archetype of a law-giver, the better to condemn and damn them beyond all possibility of appeal.

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<sup>39</sup> Terms such as 'animus' and 'persona' in this study are intended to be understood in an everyday sense; they do not allude to the concepts of the same name in Jungian psychology. Having said that, an alternative Jungian reading of Chénier and the Terror could prove interesting, considering, for example, Charlotte Corday's imputed masculinity or 'animus' in the ode dedicated to her.