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**Fatal Purity**

Ruth Scurr

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## About the Author

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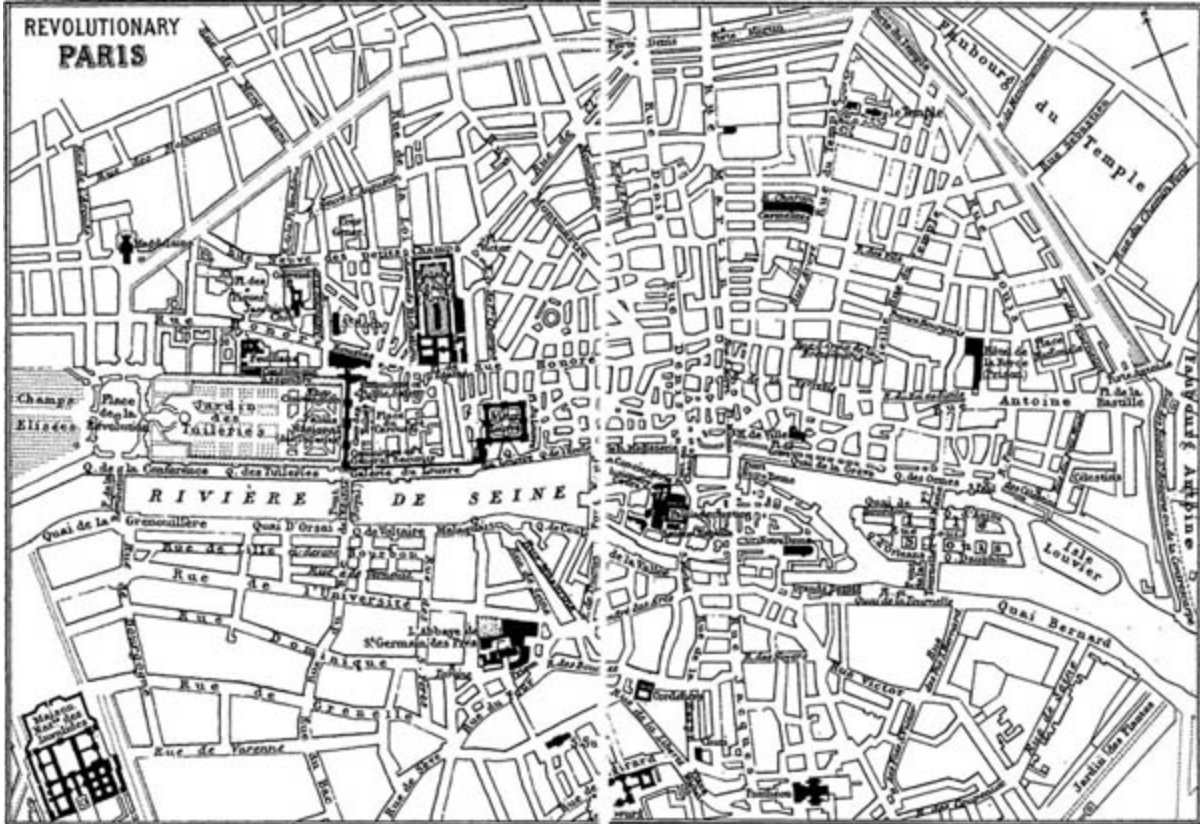
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# *Chronology*

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- 1763 End of the Seven Years War
- 1764 Death of Robespierre's mother, 14 July
- 1769 Robespierre goes to boarding school in Paris at the Collège Louis-le-Grand
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- 1778 France supports the American war of independence
- 1781 Robespierre returns to Arras to practise law
- 1788 The Lamoignon Edicts fail, May  
Louis XVI agrees to the convocation of the Estates General, August

- 1789 Robespierre campaigns for election and is chosen as a representative of the Third Estate, April  
 The Estates General meet in Versailles, May  
 The Third Estate claims the right to represent the nation and renames itself the National Assembly, 17 June  
 Tennis Court Oath, 20 June  
 Storming of the Bastille, 14 July  
 Abolition of feudal rights and privileges, 4 August  
 Louis XVI and the National Assembly move from Versailles to Paris, October  
 Robespierre rents rooms in the rue Saintonge  
 The Jacobin Club established in Paris
- 1790 Proliferation of a network of political clubs throughout France affiliated to the Parisian Jacobin Club  
 Threat of war over Nootka Sound  
 Civil Constitution of the Clergy, July  
 Festival of Federation on the first anniversary of the Bastille's fall, 14 July
- 1791 Death of Mirabeau, 2 April  
 Pope Pius VI condemns the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, 13 April  
 Royal family's flight to Varennes, 20 June  
 Massacre on the Champ de Mars, 17 July  
 Robespierre moves to new lodgings in the rue Saint-Honoré  
 The Jacobin Club splits and moderate members leave to establish the Feuillant Club  
 Louis XVI accepts the new constitution, September  
 National Assembly closes and Robespierre revisits Arras  
 Pétion becomes mayor of Paris, 14 November  
 Robespierre returns to Paris and opposes war-mongering at the Jacobin Club, 28 November
- 1792 Fall of Louis XVI's Feuillant ministry and appointment of friends and associates of pro-war leader Brissot  
 Death of Holy Roman Emperor Leopold II, 1 March  
 Festival in honour of the Châteaueux soldiers, 15 April

France declares war on Francis II (Leopold II's son and successor as Holy Roman emperor), 20 April  
The guillotine is used for the first time, 25 April  
Prussia joins Austria in the war against France, 13 June  
The Duke of Brunswick issues a manifesto threatening Paris if Louis XVI is harmed, 25 July  
Paris's 48 Sections declared in permanent session, 27 July  
Fall of the monarchy, 10 August  
Robespierre elected to municipal Commune governing Paris, 12 August  
General Lafayette flees France  
Longwy falls to Prussia, 20 August  
Establishment of the first Revolutionary Tribunal  
Verdun falls to Prussia, 2 September  
Prison massacres, 2–6 September  
Robespierre elected to new National Convention, 5 September  
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1793 Execution of Louis XVI, 21 January  
France declares war on England and the Dutch Republic, February  
*Enragés* food riots  
France declares war on Spain, 7 March  
Revolt in the Vendée  
Failed insurrection in Paris, 9–10 March  
Establishment of the second and infamous Revolutionary Tribunal, 10 March  
Defection of General Dumouriez after battle of Neerwinden, 18 March  
Establishment of the Committee of Public Safety, 6 April  
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Expulsion of Girondin deputies from the National Convention, 2 June

Jacobin Republican constitution accepted by referendum and adopted, 24 June  
 Danton voted off Committee of Public Safety, 10 July  
 Marat assassinated, 13 July  
 Robespierre voted on to the Committee of Public Safety, 27 July  
 Siege of Lyon begins, 8 August  
 Smashing of royal tombs at Saint-Denis, 10 August  
 Toulon surrenders to the English, 29 August  
 Terror becomes the order of the day, 5 September  
 Law of Suspects, 17 September  
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- Year I Fall of Lyon, 18 Vendémiaire (9 October)  
 Execution of Marie Antoinette, 25 Vendémiaire (16 October)  
 Execution of the Girondin deputies, 10 Brumaire (31 October)  
 Festival of Reason in Notre-Dame, Paris, 20 Brumaire (10 November)  
 Commune decrees closure of Parisian churches, 3 Frimaire (23 November)  
 Constitution of Revolutionary Government, 14 Frimaire (4 December)  
 First issue of Desmoulins' *Le Vieux Cordelier*, 15 Frimaire (5 December)  
 French recapture Toulon, 29 Frimaire (19 December)  
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- Year II Robespierre ill, 22 Pluviôse–22 Ventôse (10 February–12 March)  
 Execution of Hébertists, 4 Germinal (24 March)  
 Recall of Fouché from Lyon, 7 Germinal (27 March)  
 Execution of Dantonists, 16 Germinal (5 April)  
 Robespierre runs the Police Bureau after Saint-Just leaves on mission to the army, 9 Floréal (28 April)  
 Cécile Renault attempts to assassinate Robespierre, 4 Prairial (27 May)  
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To John

RUTH SCURR

# **Fatal Purity**

Robespierre and the French Revolution

VINTAGE BOOKS

London

*Death is the beginning of immortality.*  
(Robespierre's last speech, 26 July 1794)

## *Preface*

MY DEAR CROKER,

I wish you would think seriously of the History of the Reign of Terror. I do not mean a pompous, philosophical history, but a mixture of biography, facts and gossip: a diary of what really took place with the best authenticated likenesses of the actors. (...)

Ever yours,

ROBERT PEEL (1835)<sup>1</sup>

Soon after he received this letter from his friend Sir Robert Peel, the once and future Tory prime minister, whom he had known for many years, John Wilson Croker packed his bags for a seaside holiday. Although he was a prominent literary and political journalist and was hoping to work as he sat on the beach, Croker took with him none of his collection of rare and fascinating books about the French Revolution that is now one of the glories of the British Library, only the list of those condemned to death during the Reign of Terror.<sup>2</sup> He perused it against the rhythmic sound of waves breaking on the shore.



- Twenty-two impoverished women, many of them widows, convicted of forwarding ‘the designs of the fanatics, aristocrats, priests and other agents of England’, guillotined.
- Nine private soldiers convicted of ‘pricking their own eyes with pins, and becoming by this cowardly artifice unable to bear arms’, guillotined.
- Jean Baptiste Henry, aged 18, journeyman tailor, convicted of sawing down a tree of liberty, guillotined.
- Henrietta Frances de Marbœuf, aged 55, convicted of hoping for the arrival in Paris of the Austrian and Prussian armies, and of hoarding provisions for them, guillotined.
- James Duchesne, aged 60, formerly a servant, since a broker; John Sauvage, aged 34, gunsmith; Frances Loizelier, aged 47, milliner; Mélanie Cunosse, aged 21, milliner; Mary Magdalen Virolle, aged 25, hair-dresser: all convicted for writing, guillotined.
- Geneviève Gouvon, aged 77, seamstress, convicted of ‘various conspiracies since the beginning of the Revolution’, guillotined.
- Francis Bertrand, aged 37, convicted of producing ‘sour wine injurious to the health of citizens’, guillotined.
- Mary Angelica Plaisant, another seamstress, guillotined for exclaiming, ‘A fig for the nation!’

Relaxing into his holiday, Croker continued reading through the long list of dubious charges against the several thousand victims of the Revolutionary Tribunal of Paris, from its institution on 10 March 1793 until the fall of Maximilien Robespierre on 27 July 1794. He compiled some grimly fascinating statistics: in the last five months of Robespierre’s life, when he supposedly secured tyrannous power over France and the Revolution, 2,217 people were

guillotined in Paris; but the total condemned to death in the eleven months preceding Robespierre's personal Reign of Terror was only 399. On the basis of these statistics, Croker concluded that the executions 'grew gradually with the personal influence of Robespierre, and became enormous in proportion as he successively extinguished his rivals'.<sup>3</sup> In awed horror he recalled, 'These things happened in our time - thousands are still living who saw them, yet it seems almost incredible that *batches* (*fournées* - such was the familiar phrase) - of *sixty* victims should be condemned in one morning by the same tribunal, and executed the same afternoon on the same scaffold.'

Although Peel pressed his friend to write a popular and accessible book about the French Revolution, Croker never did so. When he got back from his holiday in 1835 he published his seaside musings in an article for *The Quarterly Review*. Here he acknowledged the enormity of the problem Robespierre still poses biographers: 'The blood-red mist by which his last years were enveloped magnified his form, but obscured his features. Like the *Genius* of the Arabian tale, he emerged suddenly from a petty space into enormous power and gigantic size, and as suddenly vanished, leaving behind him no trace but terror.'<sup>4</sup>

## *Introduction*

No backdrop can match the French Revolution. It teems with life and burns with human, historical, intellectual and literary interest. More than haunting, it obsesses, because it will not lie down and die. When François Furet, its most famous French historian of recent years, proclaimed in 1978: 'The French Revolution is over,' he provoked great waves of revisionist scholarship across France, beyond the Channel and on the other side of the Atlantic proving that it was still alive. With the Revolution's bicentenary in 1989, and the collapse of communism across Europe the same year, this new scholarship brought a young generation face to face with the vivid hopes of 1789 - liberty, equality, fraternity, popular sovereignty, representative democracy, rights and happiness. Hopes that issued, after just four years, in the Terror: the system of emergency government and summary execution with which no one was more closely identified than Maximilien Robespierre.

A pale and fragile man, Robespierre was anxious, hesitant and principled. Before the Revolution he earned his living as a young lawyer in the city of Arras, in the province of Artois in northern France. He sided consistently with the victimised and fiercely opposed the death penalty. Eloquent in person and on paper, but in a restrained and formal manner, he crossed a great deal out, nervously

perfecting his prose, and had difficulty projecting his voice in public. His appearance was meticulously unflamboyant. His eyes were weak, his mind sometimes vague and his routines colourlessly orderly. He should have drowned in the Revolution's flood of epoch-shattering events and personalities. Instead, Robespierre became the living embodiment of the Revolution at its most feral and justified the Terror as an emanation of republican virtue, a necessary step on the path to the ideal society that he was determined to establish in France. However hopelessly utopian, politically misguided or historically premature Robespierre's vision of this ideal society may have been, he made a unique contribution to events that shaped the future of Europe. To understand him is to begin to understand the French Revolution. It is also to cast light on the uneasy coincidence of democracy and fanaticism present at the birth of modern European politics.

Political turmoil can foster unlikely leaders. The mediocre figure strutting and fretting on the historical stage in the midst of a revolution is always more riveting than the one who merely inherits power or gets elected to it in quieter times. But Robespierre's mediocrity is only incidental: a weapon - of sorts - in the hands of his detractors and enemies, but never the key to the personal and historical mystery that shrouds him. There were more intellectually gifted revolutionaries. There were better writers and speakers, and more sympathetic characters. Many disagreed politically with Robespierre every step of the way, from his election to the Estates General on the eve of the Revolution in 1789, to his death beneath the guillotine in 1794 - often with good reason. But he cannot be explained by what he lacked, or failed to see and do.

Robespierre's private self and his public contribution to the events that inaugurated modern European politics are complex - by all accounts he was remarkably odd, and the French Revolution was spectacularly complicated. No

sooner were his severed remains collected, tossed into an unmarked grave and covered with quicklime than the struggle began to grasp the connection between Robespierre's personality and his role in the Revolution. While his short career in politics was long enough to win him a lasting place in world history, it was not long enough to show conclusively whether his is rightly a place of honour, one of shame, or something more inscrutable in between.

To his enemies - living and dead - he will always be coloured blood red: the first of the modern dictators, the inventor and perpetrator of the Terror who sent thousands to their deaths. One enemy, lucky enough to survive him, predicted:

History will say little about this monster; it will confine itself to these words: 'At this time, the internal debasement of France was such that a bloodthirsty charlatan, without talent and without courage, called Robespierre, made all the citizens tremble under his tyranny. Whilst twelve hundred thousand warriors were shedding their blood on the frontiers for the republic, he brought her to her knees by his proscriptions.'<sup>1</sup>

Vilification and belittlement were inevitable in the aftermath of the Terror, but 'bloodthirsty charlatan' is hardly a satisfactory description of the fastidious lawyer who opposed the death penalty before the Revolution, and afterwards became France's most articulate pacifist when war loomed with the rest of Europe. On the other hand, the subtler shades with which his friends paint him - reserved, enigmatic, highly principled, the first of the modern democrats - do not suffice either. To them he was an unjustly maligned prophet of the political order of the future. Almost fifty years after his death, one of them

wrote: 'I would have given my life to save Robespierre, whom I loved like a brother. No one knows better than I do how sincere, disinterested, and absolute his devotion to the Republic was. He has become the scapegoat of the revolutionists; but he was the best man of them all.'<sup>2</sup> A sympathetic biographer went so far as to insist: 'The more godlike I prove Robespierre's conduct to have been - the greater will be the horror in which his memory will be held by the upper and middle classes.'<sup>3</sup>

By the left in France and elsewhere, Robespierre has been cast primarily as the defender of the Republic and the ideal of social democracy: a passionate witness to the grievances of the poor and the virtues of the meek or oppressed whom history betrays. He was, after all, the revolutionary who tried to change the Declaration of Rights to limit private property and enshrine the right to life and subsistence for all. It was Robespierre who said, 'When will the people be educated? When they have enough bread to eat, when the rich and the government stop bribing treacherous pens and tongues to deceive them ... When will this be? Never.'<sup>4</sup>

But whatever the view, Robespierre's self and the Revolution cannot be separated. It is not only historians, hostile or sympathetic, that insist on their identity. He claimed himself to represent the pure republic of virtue, and even his adversaries recognised the aptness of the sobriquet 'incorruptible'. ('He would have paid someone to offer him gold, so as to be able to say that he had refused it,' one of them sneered.) His identification with the Revolution grew only closer as the Terror intensified. When Robespierre unveiled a new and perfect religion, the Cult of the Supreme Being, at the public festival of the same name, he assumed the central symbolic role of high priest. Two days later he initiated the infamous Law of Prairial that precluded any possible defence before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Summary execution was the order

of the day: Robespierre and the Republic became one and the same tyrant. When exactly did the lawyer from Arras begin to believe in the image that the Revolution reflected back to him? Why did that image become so dangerously hypnotic, for him personally, his contemporaries and posterity? And why is it so hard to break the spell, to understand – perhaps imperfectly, but at least clearly – who Robespierre was and what he meant?

*Fatal Purity* attempts to answer these questions. It expresses neither partisan adulation nor exaggerated animosity; instead it is motivated by the open-minded interest Robespierre deserves. It tries, whenever possible, to give him the benefit of any rational doubt. Though Robespierre died over two hundred years ago, he still makes new friends and enemies among the living. I have tried to be his friend and to see things from his point of view. But friends, as he always suspected, can be treacherous; they have opportunities for betrayal that enemies only dream of.

As far as it goes, the evidence about Robespierre's life is a mass of personal, political, historical and literary detail, some robust, some not, to be arranged on either side of the argument, for or against: you can tell the story one way, or you can tell it another, as any lawyer knows. The real challenge of explaining him arises not from any paucity of facts, but from something deeper – a question of interpretation that reaches down to the roots of modern democratic politics. In 1941 one historian pleaded for a truce: 'Robespierrists, anti-Robespierrists, we've had enough. We say, for pity's sake, simply tell us what Robespierre was really like.'<sup>5</sup> This is easier said than done.

His astonishing story begins very slowly, deep in the provinces of eighteenth-century France, and only starts to pick up speed with the coming of the Revolution in 1789.

Then it accelerates, like the Revolution itself, tearing wildly through ever more frightening personal and political dramas, to end abruptly beneath the guillotine, one warm day in July 1794. The rhythm of his life is a violent crescendo and its shape is extremely lopsided. He was thirty-six when he died. Volume upon volume has been written about his last five years – astounding times by anyone’s standard – but little is known about his first thirty-one years, except that they were less than remarkable.

The town of Robespierre’s birth and ancestry offers little to balance this deficit. Wandering quiet streets and buildings dignified by the sense that their time has come and gone, one looks in vain for an image of Arras’s most famous citizen, born there on 6 May 1758. There are no pictures of Robespierre in the shops, none in the public library; none even in the Maison Robespierre, identified as the house he lived in as a young lawyer from 1787 to 1789 by a discreet plaque outside the door. This rather prim stone house in the former rue des Rapporteurs (now the rue Robespierre), with its narrow shuttered windows and tall sloping roof, has been altered over the years, but is still typical of those built during Arras’s eighteenth-century boom. Robespierre only rented it; he never owned a house of his own. Inside the door, finally, there is a large bust of him, but no reproductions of it to take away; and it seems inconceivable that anyone might be so indiscreet as to pull out a camera and use it.

The sense that Robespierre is someone to be ashamed of goes back a long way. After his death, one of his contemporaries, Jean Baptiste Dauchez, a fellow lawyer from Arras, suggested an ‘impenetrable curtain’ should be drawn over all that had passed in the local assembly that elected Robespierre as a representative in 1789 and launched him on a career in national politics with such devastating consequences. Dauchez wanted to forget the story, wanted others not to find out. And his suggestion has



been taken surprisingly seriously in Arras for over two hundred years.<sup>6</sup> Entry to the Maison Robespierre is free, yet visitors leave feeling short-changed, hardly any more informed about the young life of the local revolutionary no one is eager to discuss. Inside, in one corner, are three or four photocopied documents (including Robespierre's birth certificate), a brief summary of his short life, and six tiny buttons with embroidered stag heads from an elegant waistcoat he liked to wear. Nothing more.

From Robespierre's later years in Paris, there is of course a wide range of portraits, engravings and caricatures to give us some notion of what he was like physically. There are also innumerable verbal descriptions of him in the memoirs, diaries and letters of those who knew him more or less well. One contemporary claimed that he had the head of a cat: 'But this face changed its character. At first it had the anxious but rather gentle look of the domestic cat; then the fierce look of the wild cat; and finally the ferocious look of the tiger cat.'<sup>7</sup> There is indeed something feline in the surviving images of his face. He had big almond-shaped eyes, high-arching brows and a long but not peculiarly large or prominent nose that continued the line of his back-sloping forehead, already exaggerated by receding hair and a short and impeccably powdered wig. 'He had a sinister expression of countenance, never looked you in the face, and had a continual and unpleasant winking of the eyes.'<sup>8</sup> He needed glasses, but is only pictured wearing them in one unusually dishevelled sketch, the last done in his lifetime, on the day he fell from power. At an earlier, quieter time another artist drew him with his glasses carefully balanced halfway up his forehead, far enough below the wig to avoid powder smears, looking every bit as affected as someone in a holiday snapshot with sunglasses on his head. Under the drawing are the words 'green eyes, pale complexion, green striped nankeen

jacket, blue waistcoat with blue stripes, white cravat striped with red’.

Many allude to Robespierre’s vanity and fastidiousness about clothes. Before the Revolution he was registered as a customer in a clothing shop in Arras, but he was not rich, and his purchases there were few and modest. Later political power did not diminish his preoccupation with appearance. At the height of his career he wore a beautiful sky-blue coat more suited to the courts of the old kings of France than a revolutionary assembly negotiating with violent mobs in the streets.<sup>9</sup> But Robespierre would make no sartorial concessions to the times. He was particularly fond of elaborately embroidered waistcoats – an unlikely taste in a political activist who rose to power championing democracy and the rights of the poor in the face of aristocratic privilege.

‘He was five feet two or three inches tall,’ someone else remembered, not especially small by eighteenth-century standards:

He held his body stiffly upright; and walked firmly, quickly, and rather jerkily; he often clenched his hands as though by a kind of contraction of the nerves, and the same movement could be traced in his neck and shoulders, which he moved convulsively to right and left. His clothes were neat and fashionable, and his hair always carefully dressed. There was nothing remarkable about his face, which wore a rather discontented expression; his complexion was livid and bilious, his eyes dull and melancholy; whilst a frequent flickering of his eyelids was perhaps a result of the convulsive movements that I have already mentioned. He always wore green-tinted glasses. He had learnt how to give artificial softness to a voice that was naturally sharp and harsh, and to make his Artois accent sound

attractive; but he never looked an honest man in the face.<sup>10</sup>

He looked at his audience though. He carried a second pair of large rimmed eyeglasses to fit on top of the green-tinted ones when he wanted to fix his listeners better with his feeble green eyes. He was both short- and long-sighted, so everything he saw was slightly blurred. His glasses helped him focus, they filtered the harsh sunlight, and they were also props used to dramatic effect as he spoke at the tribune. 'His delivery was slow, and his phrases so long that every time he paused and pushed his glasses up onto his forehead one might have thought that he had no more to say; but, after looking all around the Hall, he would lower his spectacles again, and add a phrase or two to sentences which were already long enough when he broke them off.'<sup>11</sup>

For the last years of his life Robespierre lived in a house in the rue Saint-Honoré with a Parisian furniture-maker and his family, the Duplays. They adored him. Here he was surrounded by representations of himself: a little god in a domestic setting. There were many mirrors, his full-length portrait, his bust in metal or terracotta, and - rumour has it - print after print of him all over the walls.<sup>12</sup> It was the kind of shrine that Robespierre's remaining friends would still like to have. I hope one day we get it. It would be very interesting to see what it feels like to be in a room dominated by him; to look again at all those images of him; to stand by the window and wonder what it was he saw, gazing at obsessively repeated representations of himself as the French Revolution unfurled outside the door. It is the pictures in Robespierre's mind that are the key to his story. Two of them are more vivid than any of the others: his picture of an ideal society and his picture of himself. The Revolution superimposed these two pictures and he believed, to the point of insanity, that he was the instrument of Providence, delivering France to her exalted

future. If the French were not yet worthy of such a future, it was clear to him that they must be regenerated - through virtue or terror - until they became what destiny demanded of them. And yet he hesitated, holding something back, even in this extreme and fanatical state of mind. He knew that his ideal society was ultimately greater than himself. If his life had coincided with its birth, if he had played his part in realising it in history, he could go tranquilly to his death, as he did, many times, in his imagination, before his body went under the guillotine.

*Part I*

*Before the Revolution*  
*(1758-1788)*

*Child of Arras*

ROBESPIERRE'S STORY BEGINS in the small city of Arras, in the province of Artois, in northern France. For centuries Arras was on the border between France and the Netherlands, changing hands many times before it was firmly annexed by the French monarchy in 1659. Then the city walls were fortified and Arras settled down to a more peaceful existence as the province's ecclesiastical and judicial centre. It was known as 'the city of a hundred steeples' because visitors approaching across the surrounding fields, or on the fine gravel road from the nearby town of Béthune, saw from afar the tall spires of Arras's gothic bell tower, the cathedral, the abbey, eleven parish churches, over twenty monasteries and convents, numerous hospices, chapels and charitable institutions.<sup>1</sup> Conservative piety pervaded the narrow cobbled streets like the smell of incense, as some twenty thousand men, women and children went about their daily devotional duties.

Robespierre's birth in 1758 coincided with the beginning of an economic boom in Arras: work had begun to connect the eastern and western sides of the city, which were separated by a branch of the river Crinchon. There were ambitious schemes to clean the river, a seething