HOW TO DO THINGS WITH OATHS: MILITANCY AND LOYALTY IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Abstract: French Revolutionary oaths constituted one of the most common political practices during the revolutionary decade 1789-1799. They have drawn the attention of some of the most influential interpreters of the age of revolutions, who have tended to analyze their use in specific circumstances without considering the personal stakes these solemn promises implied. By looking at the social history of oathtaking and the emotional engagement embodied in its everyday practice, this article highlights how recourse to oaths gave meaning to revolutionary experiences and enabled the rise of a new conception of political loyalty.

Keywords: loyalty, oaths, emotions, revolution, France, political culture

The history of the Revolution is the history of its oaths, those actually taken and those only imagined. This article follows some of the threads that connect the fictive oaths with the real ones that structured the political life of France during the revolutionary decade 1789-1799. Many were the oaths taken at that time; too many for us to analyze them all in depth here and describe why all the different agencies that promoted them did so. In most cases, these speech acts served to mark an occasion.[1] They were one of the many ways French revolutionaries consciously and proudly tried to *make history*, that is to be in control of the unfolding of the events in a time of sudden changes. That being said, they were far more than a ceremonial expedient. Taking an oath had consequences and it was the awareness of those consequences that eventually made them such a powerful

1 On speech acts and the performativity of language, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

device to bond citizens.[2] Trusting oaths meant for French revolutionaries trusting the idea that words mattered. Investigating the role played by oathtaking in those years hence means investigating the power that revolutionaries attributed to language – a power that they tried to evoke and master every time they pronounced or proposed an oath.

The study of oath-taking practices has become a classic theme of French revolutionary historiography. Mona Ozouf focused on its ceremonial function and emphasized its bureaucratic nature, suspecting it had few implications for individual consciences.[3] In contrast, Timothy Tackett's study of the oath required by the civil constitution of the clergy demonstrated how social actors took those formulas seriously: taking or not taking an oath defined the place one had in society and the relationship with one's community.[4] Bronisław Baczko and Lynn Hunt contributed to that debate by focusing on the linguistic character of revolutionary oaths, while other historians such as Pierre Serna, Anne Simonin and Charles Walton drew attention to the material and ideological consequences that recourse to oaths had, whether by excluding enemies from the legitimate political community or by exposing them to public shaming.[5] Building on these diverse contributions, this article will demonstrate that analyzing revolutionary oaths enables us to shed light on the rise of a new conception of political loyalty, strictly connected with personal and emotional militancy.[6] It is that new idea, I will argue, that lies behind the grandiloquent words of oath formulas that historians have been trying for years to unpack.

2 Francesco Buscemi, "The Importance of Being Revolutionary: Oath-taking and the 'Feeling Rules' of Violence (1789-1794)," *French History* 33, no. 2 (2019): 218-35.

3 Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

4 Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1985).

5 Bronisław Baczko, "Serments et parjures," in *Politiques de la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 72-91; Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Pierre Serna, *La République des girouettes (1789-1815 ... et au-delà): Une anomalie politique: la France de l'extrême centre* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2005); Anne Simonin, *Le déshonneur dans la République: Une histoire de l'indignité 1791-1958* (Paris: Grasset 2008), 213-21; Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 146.

6 For more on this approach, see also Francesco Buscemi, "Feeling Political in Public Administration: French Bureaucracy between Militancy and *Sens de l'État*, 1789-2019," in *Feeling Political: Emotions and Institutions since 1789* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 25-57.

I

An obvious point of departure for a study for oath-taking and its artistic representation is Jacques-Louis David's *Serment du Jeu de Paume* (1791) (Fig. 1), the most iconic representation of the ethos of revolutionary oaths and one which acquired additional significance because of its unfinished character. David had started to develop a new iconography for oaths even before the Revolution with his *Horaces* (1784-85).[7]

Fig. 1. Jacques-Louis David, *Serment du Jeu de Paume, le 20 juin 1789*. After 1791. Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Histoire de Paris, inventaire P67.

For the composition depicting the Tennis Court Oath, the painter worked with his friend and comrade Edmond Louis Alexis Dubois-Crancé to obtain the support of the Society of the Friends of the Constitution (the Jacobin Club) and the critical

[7] Jean Starobinski, "Le serment: David," in *1789: Les emblèmes de la Raison* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 81-93.

funding needed for his ambitious project.[8] He even wrote the speech that Dubois-Crancé gave at the Club to present the project on 28 October 1790.[9]

In his account of his long stay in Paris, the German Gerhard Anton von Halem included the session of the Jacobins at which Dubois-Crancé presented his plan to raise a subscription to support the subscription for David's painting. The reaction of some of those present is noteworthy:

> The Abbé Dillon stepped forward first and claimed his right to be in the picture. He was one of the few ecclesiastics who had gathered at the National Assembly before the day of the oath. He had had to guard the otherwise insignificant records of the clergy on June 20, and it was for this reason alone that he was not present. He appealed to the testimony of those present, members of the National Assembly, and his request was recognized as legitimate. Noailles spoke after him and approved the idea of glorifying the act of these brave citizens. "But alas!" he said, "the *ci-devant* nobility sees itself excluded, and yet how many of us were attending this session from the heart! If only the painter could represent them, in the distance, with their souls burning and full of the desire to be among those who took the oath!" A third rose and wished also to be represented on the canvas. A fourth did not want to see there those *misérables* who were present at such a scene and who, however, had abandoned the good cause. David, at this point, thanked everybody from the *tribunes*, but he said that "historical truth and unity were necessary for the painting". It was unanimously applauded.[10]

As this description of the meeting shows, performing the oath at the Jeu de Paume transformed the protagonists of the Revolution into characters of a play, models

8 *Description du serment et de la fête civiques célébrés au bois de Boulogne par la Société du Serment du jeu de paume de Versailles, des 20 juin 1789 et 1790* (Paris: Granéry, 1790), 5. See also Albert Mathiez, *Les origines des cultes révolutionnaires, 1789-1792* (Paris: Bellais, 1904), 49; David Lloyd Dowd, *Pageant-master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1948), 36

9 Edmond Louis Alexis Dubois-Crancé, *Prospectus d'une souscription civique, proposée aux Amis de la Constitution, pour l'exécution d'un Tableau de 30 pieds sur 20, représentant le serment fait à Versailles dans un jeu de Paume, par les Députés des Communes, le 20 juin 1789* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1790). See the manuscript of the speech, handwritten by David, in Philippe Bordes, *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume de Jacques-Louis David* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musée Nationaux, 1983), document 10A.

10 Gerhard Anton van Halem, *Paris en 1790: voyage de Halem*, ed. and trans. Arthur Chuquet (Paris: Libraire Plon, 1896), 251-52. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

to be imitated and reinterpreted. The process of imitation had begun even before David's painting was composed. A year after the oath, on 20 June 1790, the Hall of the Jeu de Paume became the destination of an actual pilgrimage, accounts of which explicitly compared it to a journey to Mecca for a Muslim. It was organized by the *Société du Jeu de Paume*, an association whose mission was to immortalize "ce serment qui sauva la France" (this oath that saved France).[11] The emotional contagion aroused by the deputies' gesture had not yet died out, and indeed could be fueled precisely by evoking and repeating it. On that first anniversary, gathered in the small town on the outskirts of Paris were members of the Société, representatives of the municipality of Versailles, a Flanders regiment, militiamen of the National Guard, National Assembly personalities and some Bastille volunteers, who brought with them memorabilia from its ruins, treated as relics to be obsequiously preserved in the new temple of the homeland. The pilgrimage culminated just inside the hall of the Jeu de Paume and with a collective performance of the same oath taken a year earlier by the deputies alone, the words of which were engraved on a plaque hung on the wall that very day.

The performance of that pledge, however, was by no means a cold reenactment of the event. Instead, it was an act of ritual, almost religious, significance:

> O love of fatherland! O virtue! you alone can inspire such sentiments! When they had taken the oath, a religious emotion [*saisissement*] seized their souls; they shouted to the sky in joy, thanking it for the freedom they hoped to enjoy.[12]

Once the ceremony was over, this rather heterogeneous assembly moved to the Bois de Boulogne, where the emotional temperature did not drop during a patriotic banquet set up for the occasion. The participants first listened to the minutes of the Jeu de Paume as they were read aloud, but even more significant was the proclamation of the first two articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, because it took the form of a revolutionary prayer to be recited before eating, instead of a religious *Benedicite*. The president of the Société, Gilbert Romme, took charge of the reading, and the assembly immediately responded to him loudly with an "*Ainsi soit-il*." From those early years on, in short, the deputies' oath acquired a political-religious dimension that expressed what the revolutionaries were experiencing. For this reason, too, the rite could be repeated and relived at each new celebration, by those who had already sworn the oath or by those who

11 *Description du serment et de la fête civiques*, 2.

12 *Description du serment et de la fête civiques*, 2-3.

wished to be possessed by the same emotion as the heroes of the homeland by imitating their gestures.

It is not surprising, then, that David's painting initially met with a favourable reception. The French public, and the Parisian public in particular, already had sufficient experience to correctly interpret the scene portrayed. Press reports and pamphlets invited French people to experience the burning passion of the oath by having the canvas in front of them. As the author of one of the pamphlets commenting on the Salon where David presented the draft of his painting put it:

> Frenchmen, run, fly, leave everything, rush to attend the oath of the Jeu de Paume; and if you are not burned, consumed by the patriotic fire at this burning hearth, you can rest assured that you are not worthy of freedom. [...] Ah! if our *emigrés* saw this scene, which electrifies even priests, they would soon become children of the fatherland [*enfants de la patrie*]; and why not send them Mr. David, with his talisman, which would have the opposite effect of Medusa's head: I am certain, once again, that if they saw it, they would kneel before it, asking for mercy for the present and for the past.[13]

The power of the oath did not just give courage to the representatives of the Third Estate. Thanks to paintings, ephemeral literature and theatrical pieces everybody could potentially find that same courage. Having David's work in front of one's eyes was like witnessing that event firsthand: being electrified by the same passion that had motivated the deputies during their oath of office. It was not just a visceral way of approaching a work of art, however. What for Diderot was merely a mode of aesthetic reception now set the relationship between citizens and politics.

In revisionist studies of the Revolution, it has become almost commonplace to highlight the intrusiveness in people's lives of the new politics.[14] The fact, though, that the relationship between the individual and public sphere had become increasingly close was not due solely to the enlargement of the latter since 1789. It was, on the contrary, the spread of a Romantic sensibility that was the decisive influence, inducing one to look at politics through the same lens through which one got lost inside a Samuel Richardson novel. As literary scholars have taught historians, during the eighteenth century the registers of affectivity enhanced

[13] Jean Joseph Pithou de Loinville, *Le plaisir prolongé. Le retour du salon chez soi et celui de l'Abeille dans sa ruch* (Paris: chez l'Auteur et chez Fabre, 1791), 28-29.

[14] Apart from the classic references, see more recently Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right. Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2009).

aesthetic enjoyment in all areas of literature, theatre and art. With the Revolution, this same affective language coloured the exercise of political power, with disruptive effects on actors' motivations and sense of identity. If politics gained new spaces, it was largely because it began to speak in a more personal language that could intimately engage people. The new aesthetics of politics owed more to the emergence of a "revolutionary consciousness" than to the supposed inherent authoritarianism of Enlightenment culture or the leading exponents of the Patriotic Party.[15] For the revolutionary political culture, in short, we should apply the same considerations expressed by a scholar of comparative literature, Cecilia Feilla, about the theatre of those same years: it would be characterized not so much by the infiltration of the political on all areas of public and private life, but by the "externalization of private affective forms and conventions in public discourse and performance."[16]

One effect of this was to create a revolutionary identity, which deputies found themselves wearing and solemnly sanctioning by taking the oath. The experience of the June 20 oath marked a point of no return in the ways of understanding loyalty and participation in public life: by taking the oath, the actors committed themselves to incorporating the political turn on a personal level, to live as revolutionaries.

The profound self-transformation that the deputies imagined they were enacting, however, was not a solipsistic process, a work on one's personal inclinations that the individual had to carry out alone. Identities are relational: they are defined by contact with others and the sharing of experiences; they create a community. What is more, the conceptualization of one's own image helped redefine that of others, often in antagonistic terms. Those who took the oath began to think of themselves as revolutionaries and to exclude others from that community. The aristocrats, the reactionaries, the sectarians, the hypocrites: anyone who did not participate in the revolutionary transformation could be dismissed with one of these labels, and it was from confrontation with them that the deputies found greater motivation for their commitment. Satirical images representing the effects of the power of oaths on the enemies of the Revolution offered a visual representation of this mechanism. Aristocrats and reactionary priests not participating in the revolutionary effort were represented as annihilated

15 On this new understanding of politics, see George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

16 Cecilia Feilla, *The Sentimental Theater of the French Revolution* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2013), 15.

by the enthusiasm of the oath-takers, as in the print from 1790 where the effect of the solemn oath ceremony on the altar of the Festival of the Federation (14 July 1790) was to confound and defeat all the counterrevolutionaries (Fig. 2). Other popular representations emphasized how oaths had the power to reveal those who profited from the ambiguity of political allegiances in the old régime. The new sense of loyalty promoted by the revolutionaries required full transparency: no discrepancy between the convictions of the heart and the words coming out of the mouth was deemed legitimate. Those who tried to take oaths but lacked conviction made their discomfort evident, as is suggested by a print from 1790-91 targeting different kinds of nobles, judges, and ecclesiastical authorities (Fig. 3).

It is from this perspective that the oath constituted a decisive element of revolutionary identity, understood in its two facets, one internal, the other external. On the one hand, oaths were expected to arouse in individuals a sense of self in line with the changed political framework: the Revolution was also to be a regeneration of oneself. On the other hand, they set up the boundaries of the community; that is, they defined the group of *jureurs* in relation to the rest of the world.

Fig. 2. ***Les Aristocrates desesperés d'appercevoir la Fête du 14 juillet au Champ de Mars*** **(detail). Paris, 1790. French Revolution Digital Archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France / Stanford University.**

Fig. 3. ***Serments de MM.rs les Aristocrates*** **(detail). 1790-91. French Revolution Digital Archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France / Stanford University.**

II

At this point, it should be clear that effective oaths entailed a certain level of staging: people promised to act like the person described in the formula. This cross-over between the staging of loyalty in public and actual theatrical stages informed most of the revolutionary decade. It was particularly evident in the aftermath of the Festival of the Federation, when the city of Paris saw a booming of plays offering interpretative frameworks for the oaths taken by the different militias of the National Guard who gathered at the Champ de Mars on 14 July 1790. Michel Biard has collected data demonstrating the scale of the phenomenon.[17] It is perhaps not surprising that six performances based on the theme of the Federation took place on 14 July, but the number of shows re-elaborating the same experience remained high (three to four performances per day) until the first week of August with a significant tail until the end of the month. Not all these plays were planned in advance. Many saw the light of day precisely on the emotional wave of the oaths taken on 14 July. The images of the Champ de Mars so inspired Olympe de Gouges that she started writing three scripts about the Festival of the Federation that same day.

[17] Michel Biard, "La fédération des ombres. Fête patriotique et théâtres parisiens dans l'été 1790," in *La fête de la fédération*, ed. Pascal Dupuy (Mont Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2012), 43-59.

The main purpose of these theatrical performances was to show how to interpret revolutionary symbolism. The interpretation of the oath-takers' gestures and the rituals performed at the Champ de Mars and during the procession needed not to be left to chance. By going to the theatre men and women could relive the experience of patriotic festivals and oaths, giving new weight to the enthusiasm they felt. What is more, by associating those rituals with the deepest aspects of their personal lives, they bound themselves to their political identity – people would take their political oaths when taking their marriage vows, for instance. Family controversies got entangled with political ones. The link between one's self and one's place in the community had never been tighter.

Despite this very close connection between familial and political ties, sanctioned even by the centrality of the civic oath, Lynn Hunt argued that the ceremonial of the Parisian federation, and of similar festivals celebrated in the provinces, marked the atomization of political life.[18] Citizens would enter the nation as individuals, not through their family ties or other social structures. Since the Jeu de Paume, oaths would bind isolated individuals to the nation: precisely because of the contractual nature of power, one had to consider citizens as legal personalities in their own right. What Hunt recognizes as atomistic is the personal character of the oath, i.e., the responsibility falling on the individual, as affirmed by "natural law" theory in the eighteenth century, reasserted here in other terms. But as in the iconography so successful in earlier years, even during the Revolution the oath took on meaning only if taken before a community willing to recognize its value (Fig. 4).

No one swore allegiance to the king, the law and the nation – the triadic formula of the federation oath – alone, in the silence of their own rooms. It was in the gatherings of federation festivals or in the public ceremonies of administrative and government offices that the pledges took on value. Only the presence of witnesses and the sharing with others of the same faith made them binding for the individual. Even in plays that re-enacted the event, actors did not take the oath as a monologue. Rather, they enacted the collective federation for those who did not

[18] "The engravings of the Festival of Federation thus portray the new individual-state relationship envisioned by the liberal ideology that was taking root through the legislation of the Constituent Assembly; individuals relate to the state as individuals, through contracts (in this case oaths of allegiance, which were the centerpiece of the ceremony). […] The public exhibition of art in the Salon of 1791 shows similar tendencies. The prints depicting the festival showed […] virtually atomistic individuals linked to the nation through their oaths rather than by their families or other particular ties." Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 46.

witness it at first hand or revived it for those who did. What was at stake was the individual internalization of a social bond, not its devaluation. The sentimentalization of love of country proposed by revolutionary rhetoric helped to personalize the citizen's public commitment: one had to surrender to *fraternité* as one surrenders to a familial feeling, as if to conjugal or filial love.[19]

Fig. 4. Jacques François Joseph Swebach, Louis Le Coeur, *Serment federatif du 14 juillet 1790: vue de l'autel de la patrie et d'une partie du Champ de Mars à l'instant où M. de La Fayette prononça au nom de toutes les Gardes nationales de France, le serment d'être à jamais fideles à la nation à la loi et au Roi* (detail). Paris, 1790. French Revolution Digital Archive, Bibliothèque Nationale de France / Stanford University.

[19] See, for instance, the scenes related to the oath in Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois, *La Famille patriote, ou la Fédération* (Paris: chez la Veuve Duchesne et Fils, Libraire, 1790).

Moreover, at the Champ de Mars the oath had not been taken individually at all. Individuals had taken the oath gathered in their own groups as citizen-soldiers from the ranks of the National Guard divided by departments or as deputies from the ranks of Assembly members seated next to the king. Even the last oath, the oath as ordinary citizens taken by all participants, had been taken only after that of the sovereign: with their *Je jure* and arms outstretched from all sides of the square toward the altar, those present recognized themselves as brothers because they were part of the same political community. Not only had the oath been taken as a dialogue between the different parts of the state, but it had also provided an opportunity to frame the relationship between citizens in terms that were morally binding.

Taking seriously these social aspects of the revolutionary oath is important not only for understanding how the political symbolism of the time worked. It also enables us to understand what it means to swear allegiance, what force is actually in play when pronouncing a formula during a ceremony: how one binds oneself to an institution in the new world opened by the Revolution. By analyzing revolutionary rhetoric with the tools offered by narratology, Lynn Hunt set the standard among historians by identifying a kind of magical quality to words, showing how they could function as revolutionary spells capable of replacing the charisma of royalty.[20] This approach certainly shed new insight into the dynamics of revolutionary politics, but it risks misunderstanding what the performativity of the language actually implies. It is not for its *magical* force that revolutionary rhetoric was so powerful and so capable of conditioning an entire era. Its power came from the possibility of describing politics through the lens of elemental experiences of human existence. That is how patriotic words and revolutionary rhetoric could aspire to bind consciences. Swearing allegiance to nation, law and king was a performative act the more this act was associated with the deepest aspects of human life. In revolutionary rhetoric, an oath acquired meaning because it was taken as a father, a son or a husband – an active and committed (most often male) citizen within a local community. To swear meant to take one's place in the social world. Theatrical plays helped make this connection evident to the public attending the festivals.

The theatricality of oaths was not confined to festivals or the re-enactment of the first revolutionary moments. Members of the revolutionary assemblies kept using oaths as vehicles for their political actions. Revolutionary eloquence, for instance, continually resorted to oaths to seal the emotional climax created by the speaker. An oath taken at the right moment could transfigure reality. That was

[20] "Words came in torrents, but even more important was their unique, magical quality." Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*, 20.

what basically happened on 20 June 1789 at the Tennis Court of Versailles, or on 4 October 1791, when the members of the Legislative Assembly ended swearing to live free or die.

On the latter occasion, they spent a long time accurately composing the oath-taking ritual. In their interventions, the members held two diverging positions. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to renew the oath taken in Versailles in 1789, this time in front of the original document of the constitution. They wanted to define the ritual according to a rigorous ceremonial apparatus seemingly modelled on Catholic liturgy: by requesting the presence of the document, the members of the Assembly would have paid homage to its text and its living truths, as Catholics do with the Eucharist during Mass. The words of the constitutional pledge were to be carved into the courtroom like a sacred inscription in a temple. On the other hand, there were those who adopted a more spiritualist approach: the hearts of the deputies were already imbued with political faith and their oath was only its natural expression. It did not need excessive formalization; an elaborate ritual would compromise its genuineness, and the oath had to seem spontaneous in order to achieve the sublime.[21] Taking into consideration these debates is extremely important for those who want to analyze revolutionary rhetoric. When we as historians and interpreters of these speech acts wonder if their strict formalization harmed their performativity, we are not too far from questions that these historical actors asked themselves when pronouncing those words and taking those oaths. They were extremely aware of the challenge they were putting on language and it is this awareness that allows us to say today that the Revolution was also a linguistic event.

III

At the beginning of the Napoleonic era, in 1799, Joseph-François-Xavier Droz's *Essai sur l'art oratoire* tried to synthesize the rhetorical ethos of the revolutionary man. Never before, Droz wrote, had the orator been entrusted with such a responsibility: to attack the enemies of the fatherland, to uphold the principles on which society was to be founded:

> The speaker's success will depend very much on his character. He must be great, like the undertakings that the public good may require, superior to

[21] I refer here to the debate at the Assemblée Nationale Législative of Tuesday 4 October 1791, in *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 a 1860: Recueil complet des débats des Chambres Françaises, Deuxième Série (1800 à 1860)*, Vol. 34: *Du 1er Octobre au 10 Novembre 1791* (Paris: Libraire Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1890), 71-72.

> the obstacles that would be in their way: strength and elevation of soul must be the foundation. […] An elevated soul is passionate and inflamed by all that is beautiful, useful and just; tyranny, as well as everything that offends its ideas of order and harmony, outraged it; it is for it [the soul] that virtue, freedom and glory shine with all their charms […].[22]

A political speaker had to demonstrate his moral superiority by making sure that the audience believed he was feeling the emotions he was evoking. Oaths could be the seal of such staging of emotions. On 14 January 1792, for example, a spokesman for the diplomatic committee submitted a report on the state of relations with Austria, explicitly calling for war.[23] Among other things, it hinted at a plot hatched by some foreign powers to convene a congress to overthrow the French constitution. Élie Guadet, who was presiding over the session of the Assembly which received the report, asked to speak in his personal capacity on the matter. He delivered an incendiary speech which he ended by calling for the nation's vow to defend to death the constitution against the enemies of Europe. The Assembly's enthusiastic reception of his speech was recorded in the *Archives Parlementaires*:

> Let us therefore teach, Messieurs, all the princes of the Empire that the French nation is determined to maintain its Constitution in its entirety; we will all die here… (Yes! yes! loud applause.)
>
> (At these words, all the members of the Assembly, animated by the same sentiment, stood up and exclaimed: Yes, we swear it! This movement of enthusiasm reached every soul and warmed every heart. The ministers of justice and foreign affairs, the ushers, the citizens present at the sitting, joined the representatives of the people, stood up, waved their hats, extended their arms towards the President's desk and took the same oath. The cries of: Live free or die, the Constitution or death [*Vivre libre ou mourir, la Constitution ou la mort*], can be heard, the room resounds with applause.)
>
> M. GUADET. […] Let us teach the intriguers, the perverse men, that they may well seek to mislead the people, that they may well try to cast suspicion on the purity of the intentions of its representatives, but that we,

[22] Joseph-François-Xavier Droz, *Essai sur l'art oratoire* (Paris, chez Merlin et Fayolle, an VII [1799]), 3.

[23] *Archives Parlamentaires*, Vol. 37: *Du 2 au 28 Janvier 1792* (Paris: Libraire Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1892), 410-12.

> charged with defending the Constitution against their calumnies, will guard its deposit with inviolable fidelity and that we will fulfil with the zeal and energy of free men the honourable task that the French people have entrusted to us. In a word, let us mark out in advance a place for traitors, and let that place be on the scaffold.[24]

In a climax of rhetorical emphasis, Guadet linked the deputies' sworn commitment to defend the French constitution to their duty to fight its enemies to death, their own or that of their enemies. To be loyal to the French nation meant to fight with all the zeal that was necessary to guarantee its freedom. Such an oath sealed the war option in an emotional climate that was comparable to that of the Tennis Court Oath.

In the following years, after the oath of 10 August 1792 and the foundation of the Republic, the members of the Assemblies improvised all kinds of oaths depending on circumstances: on 20 January 1793, they swore to suppress the ancien régime, the day before Louis XVI's execution; on 31 May 1793, to die rather than betray the rights of the people; on 20 November 1793, to have no other cult but that of Reason, Liberty and Equality; on 21 January 1794, to maintain the republic *une et indivisible*. At the end of the session of Thermidor 9 year II, the day on which when Robespierre, Saint-Just, Couthon, Bonbon Robespierre and Lebas were arrested, they vowed to save the motherland or to die at their posts, symbolically marking the date and giving meaning to that day's developments.

What was the point of these oaths? What was an oath in the storm of the Revolution? Was swearing really a way to authoritatively impose the ideology of the revolutionaries by giving it the sign of eternity? Or did it only function as a useful screen to hide the violence of having the Rousseauian idea of unanimity and the general will transformed into forced obedience? Was the oath a coercive weapon in itself, or rather was it a flexible tool in the hands of revolutionaries, to be adapted to the situation of the moment and the value system that was being prioritized at that particular time?

The use of oaths and their material experience reveal not the inherently authoritarian nature of revolutionary politics, but rather a new way of understanding politics, a new field of action for public affairs. Of course, the instability of those years created the conditions for this political passion to degenerate into violent episodes. But what first and foremost the accounts and memoirs of those oaths reveal is the incursion of a new dimension into politics, the emotional one. The old regime asked for a simple submission to the king or to superior authority. After

[24] *Archives Parlamentaires*, Vol. 37, 413-14.

1789, oaths progressively served to give voice to ideal enthusiasms, channelled collective passions into individual consciences. Oaths were before the privileged means of expression for communicating the emotions aroused by the tremendous revolutionary events and share them in a community.

In one of his best-known books, the philosopher Stanley Cavell sought to clarify what it means to embody appropriate linguistic expressions:

> When you say "I love my love" the child learns the meaning of the word 'love' and what love is. *That* (*what you do*) will be love in the child's world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when love is sought *that* will be sought.[25]

A child who learns language does not merely become familiar with words, but also absorbs the criteria that order them and are normative. One learns through fragments of speech, but one also learns to produce new utterances that are comprehensible to those who share the same language. This is also true for the language of the new politics. Those who had direct experience of it in those years – by attending civic festivals, listening to a patriotic speech or swearing allegiance to the republic – acquired much more than its immediate contents. Inside the formula of an oath they would find and embody the deep sense of change, the programme of regeneration, the ambition of revolutionaries, the order of society, the division of roles in the family, how to refer to transcendence. For all men and women involved in the Revolution, oaths were a repertoire of possibilities. They represented the opportunity to learn and embody the emotional lexicon of modern politics that gave meaning to their experiences as citizens.

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[25] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 177.

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