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Review

## Danton and Double-Entendre

By **Robert Darnton**

*Danton*

written by Jean-Claude Carrière, directed by Andrzej Wajda

At the beginning of the political year last September, when Frenchmen returned from their vacations to face a declining franc, an escalating arms race, a crisis in the Middle East, and trouble everywhere on the home front, François Mitterrand summoned his ministers to the Elysée Palace and lectured them on the sorry state of history—not the current turn of events but the history that French children were failing to learn in school. No doubt the president had other worries. But the crisis that he placed at the top of his agenda was the inability of the electorate to sort out the themes of its past. What would become of a citizenry that could no longer distinguish between Louis XIII and Louis XIV, between the Second Republic and the Third, or (and this seems to have been what really hurt) between Robespierre and Danton?

Mitterrand may not have mentioned the controversy aroused by Andrzej Wajda's film, but he probably had *Danton* on his mind. He had disapproved of it when he saw it at a private screening before its release in January 1983. It had outraged his supporters on the Socialist—Communist left when it was shown at the Assemblée Nationale. And for the next half year it provided left-wing intellectuals with an opportunity to score points in the popular press by demonstrating their ability to set the historical record straight and their determination to overhaul the curriculum of secondary schools.

While the opposition gloated—"Thank you, Monsieur Wajda," crowed Michel Poniatowski of the Gaullists—the left thundered with indignation. "What history!" exclaimed Pierre Joxe, the leader of the Socialist deputies in the Assemblée Nationale. And the worst thing was that it could be taken as truth by French schoolchildren. Victims of curricular reforms that had "cut them off from history," they "will not be able to know who Danton was after having seen him portrayed like that." Louis Mermaz, the Socialist president of the assembly, issued the same warning: "The teaching of history has become so bad ... that the young people of today lack the knowledge of chronology that the men of my generation were fortunate enough to acquire from primary school onward. The film is misleading.... It makes me want to

make a plea for the revival of the teaching of history, something essential for a nation, for a civilization."

Such vehemence may seem puzzling to the American viewers of *Danton*. We know that the French take their history seriously and that it doesn't do to tamper with their Revolution. But why should the Socialists disavow a version of the feud between Danton and Robespierre that puts Danton in a favorable light? Could not Danton's attempts to stop the Terror be seen as a heroic foreshadowing of the resistance to Stalinism? Is not Wajda a hero of Solidarity? And shouldn't Wajda's *Danton* be expected to appeal to the moderate left in France, the champions of socialism with a human face, the party that covered billboards during Mitterand's campaign with pictures of a rose extending from a fist?

Now that *Danton* has crossed the ocean, it seems appropriate to pursue those questions, for they take us into the strange symbolic world of the European left, a world in which intellectuals become entangled in the myths they have created and where lines easily cross, even when they are strung out with the best of intentions between the *bien pensants* of Paris and Warsaw.

**D***anton* grew out of both capitals, like a contemporary tale of two cities. Having survived the repression of Solidarity, Wajda devoted his next film to a historical theme, one located safely back in Paris, two centuries before the *zomos* stamped out the last remnants of free speech in the streets of Warsaw. The film opens with some grim scenes in the streets of Paris at the end of 1793. Danton arrives from his country estate in order to turn back the Terror that he himself had helped to create after the overthrow of the monarchy in August 1792. Soon he is engaged in a desperate struggle over the course of the Revolution, which pits the moderates or "Indulgents" against the hard-liners around Robespierre in the Committee of Public Safety. The film dramatizes Danton's inability to stop the guillotining and ends with his own execution on April 5, 1794.

In order to compress such a complex story into a movie, Wajda had to trim the historical record and to cut his text. He worked from a Polish play by Stanislawa Przybyszewska, which celebrated Robespierre as a champion of the people and which had served as a rallying point for the Polish left in the 1930s. In adapting the play for the screen, Wajda used a French screenwriter, Jean-Claude Carrière, and the French ministry of culture contributed three of the twenty-four million francs in his budget. The actors, evenly divided between Poles and Frenchmen, spoke their native languages, leaving it to the dubbers to create an illusion of a mutually comprehensible dialogue. (In the version shown in the United States the sound is in French and the subtitles in English, while the lips of the Polish actors follow the rhythm of their own tongue.) As a result, *Danton* became intensely Polish and intensely French. It also

appeared as a quasi-official production of the Mitterrand government, as if the Socialists wanted to align the French revolutionary tradition with the quasi revolution of Solidarity. The mixture of ingredients was perfectly suited for scrambling meanings and confounding critics.

Wajda quickly disposes of the simplest version of what the film might mean to the Poles. It was not an allegory, he stated over and over again to interviewers from the French press. "Let one thing be clear," he told *Le Monde*. "Danton is not Lech Walesa and Robespierre is not Jaruzelski!" "If you must find historical analogies, you should look for them in a completely different period," he said to *Le Matin*. "Those two years of Solidarity were not a revolution, or in any case not of the same nature as the French Revolution."

**T** rue, one could construct parallels between the two pairs of political rivals. Robespierre's personal fastidiousness and unbending dogmatism evoke the ramrod stiffness of the Polish general, and Danton's earthy conviviality suggests the popular manner of the hero from the Gdansk dockyards. But Wajda refuses to let his story fall into a simple formula—the apparatchik versus the man of the people—and produces plenty of incriminating evidence against Danton. If Gérard Depardieu were acting out an apology for Walesa, it would be foolish to insist on Danton's corruption at the very time when the Polish government was attempting to blacken Walesa's reputation by accusing him of pocketing funds from Solidarity.

The fact remains, however, that Danton and Robespierre personify two kinds of revolution and that the film tilts the balance in favor of Danton. "Robespierre is the world of the East; Danton is the Western world," Wajda told *Le Matin*. "The attitude and arguments of [Danton] are very close to us. The clash between these two men is exactly the moment we are living through today." Depardieu's powerful acting makes Danton the dominant and the more sympathetic figure, but his insistence on Danton's self-indulgence could be taken as bourgeois decadence. When he meets Robespierre for dinner to discuss their differences he gets sloppily drunk. His inability to take decisive action against the Reign of Terror in the crisis of March and April, 1794, might even suggest the failure of the West to rescue Solidarity in 1981.

But the film is too ambiguous to provide a precise moral for the present. One cannot even gauge how much Wajda cast his weight on the side of Dantonism, because the texts of the original Polish drama and the screenplay are not available for comparison. Nonetheless, one can spot the points at which the film deviated from the historical record. Three of them would probably stand out clearly to a Polish audience.

Near the beginning of the film, a small boy, the picture of innocence, stands naked in a tub, trying to recite the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen while his older

sister bathes him. Whenever the words fail to come, he holds out a hand and she slaps him over the knuckles. She is not so much washing him as brainwashing him in order to ingratiate herself with her father's distinguished boarder, Citizen Robespierre. Soon afterward, Robespierre orders some thugs from the secret police to destroy the shop in which Camille Desmoulins has been printing *Le Vieux Cordelier*, the journal that popularized the Dantonists' attempts to turn back the Terror. Having dwelled on the pain etched on the face of the boy, the camera picks up every detail in the smashing of the presses. Neither episode took place—and, as far as one can tell, did not occur in the Przybyzewska play. But the Polish viewer would not have to know that Wajda invented them in order to see them as a comment on thought control at home.

The third episode provides an even clearer indictment of Stalinist indoctrination. Robespierre, wrapped in the robes of a Caesar, is posing for his portrait in David's studio. He stops to berate the prosecutor of the Revolutionary Tribunal, who is having difficulty rigging Danton's trial. Then he notices a gigantic canvas, where David has begun to paint his famous version of the Tennis Court Oath of June 20, 1789. In the crowd of patriots, Robespierre spies the freshly painted head of Fabre d'Eglantine, who is then being tried along with Danton. "Wipe it out," he orders. "But he was there," David objects. Nonetheless, Robespierre insists and so Fabre disappears like all the victims of Stalinist historiography. Yet this scene never happened. Fabre did not participate in the Tennis Court Oath, because he was not a deputy to the Estates General in 1789. Wajda seems to have been so intent on exposing the falsification of history by the Stalinists that he was willing to falsify it himself.

**W**ajda's Polish viewers could not be expected to know a great deal about the biography of an obscure character like Fabre d'Eglantine; but they would be certain to have strong views about history, because national consciousness is passionately historical in Poland. From the first moments of its existence, Solidarity tried to free the past as well as the present. Having been educated in the historical ideology that the regime used to legitimate itself—above all the line that leads from Robespierreism to Bolshevism—the shipyard workers of Gdansk demanded the right to strip their history of dogma and to confront facts, especially the awkward facts that extend from the Soviet massacre of Polish officers at Katyn in 1940 to the partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century.

Wajda staged a production of *Danton* in the shipyards in 1981. His early films showed that he shared his countrymen's passion for the past. *Landscape after Battle* (1970) linked a popular uprising to a play-within-a-play, one that commemorated the Polish victory over the Teutonic knights at the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410, and *Man of Marble* (1977) recounted the attempt of a film maker to recover the true story of a proletarian hero from the rubbish of Stalinist propaganda. An audience familiar with that theme might see a similar message in Wajda's dissection of Robespierist

mythology.

Of course no one can know what the Poles see in *Danton* without interviewing large numbers of them at a safe distance from the police. But it seems likely that many episodes of the film would take on special meaning in the conditions after the suppression of Solidarity. The bread lines of Parisians muttering against the Committee of Public Safety could be cursing the military dictatorship in Warsaw. Danton hurling defiance at the Revolutionary Tribunal could be Walesa in the shipyards of Gdansk: "The people has but one enemy: the government." Robespierre's justification of the Terror—the need for tyranny in the service of democracy—could be Jaruzelski's. As Bernard Guetta, the former Warsaw correspondent of *Le Monde*, reported after seeing the film, "A hundred things in it have a resonance that Poles, or anyone who has lived among them for the last few years, could not fail to pick up."

Picking up that resonance is not a matter of spotting allegories or detecting a secret code. The Poles have learned to live with veiled meanings and ambiguous protests. Their much-hated six o'clock news has taught them to be sophisticated in reacting to images on screens, and they can be expected to note the way the imagery is weighted in *Danton*. It adds up to an overwhelming indictment of government oppression.

Although the film allows Robespierre a few moments of triumph from the rostrum, its camera work undoes the effect of his words. While he cows the deputies of the Convention with the official line on Terror and Virtue, the screen fills with a close-up of his dainty shoes. He rises to the climactic moments of his speech on tiptoe, more like a dancing master than a champion of the people, in contrast to Danton, who roars to the crowd in the courtroom like a caged lion.

If Robespierre scores any points in the debates, they are wiped away in the end by the guillotining. The blade comes down on Danton's neck with sickening inexorability. Blood gushes into the hay below the scaffold. The executioner holds the severed head before the crowd, and the camera dwells on it in a sequence of overexposed shots, taken from below and into the sun, that leave the viewer feeling dizzy and nauseated. Then the scene shifts to Robespierre, sweating like a madman in his bed, while the young boy, who at last has learned his catechism, recites the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. As he parrots the words, the boy's voice is drowned out by dissonant background music; and on that harsh note the movie ends.

**D**espite little publicity and few reviews, *Danton* has been showing to packed houses everywhere in Poland. One can only guess at its reception, but it is difficult to imagine an audience leaving the theater without a revived sense of loathing for the Polish government. In France, everything seemed disposed to make *Danton* a hit. Wajda was lionized; Solidarity had captured the heart of the public; and the newly

elected Socialist government was eager to present the film as its overture to the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989.

Yet *Danton* created a scandal, especially on the left, where the uneasy alliance between the Socialists and Communists leaves some uncertainty about who may represent the Revolutionary tradition. The Communists tried to mount the strongest condemnation of the film: "It is counterrevolutionary," wrote a critic in *L'Humanité*. Not to be outdone, the Socialists replied in kind. "It disfigures everything most beautiful [in the Revolution]," Philippe Boucher declared in *Le Monde*. And Pierre Joxe added: "[Wajda's] history is not ours."

"Our" history was that of the left, a great tradition developed by a succession of great historians—Michelet, Jaurès, Mathiez, Lefebvre—and taught to many generations of schoolchildren since the triumph of the *école laïque* in the nineteenth century.<sup>[1]</sup> In order to make their pupils into citizens; the teachers of the old school drilled a great many facts into their heads. The children gave the chronology a preliminary going-over in elementary school, often using the little textbooks of the "Petit Lavisserie" series, which served up the work of the great historians in easily digestible portions. Then they settled down to systematic study in the *lycée*.

By the end of their *cinquième*, a class composed mainly of thirteen-year-olds, they had got through the barbarian invasions. They entered the "modern" era, the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, in *troisième*. Then in *seconde*, at age sixteen, they spent a full year studying the Revolution and the Empire—and they frequently returned to it in *terminale* (age eighteen). The Revolution served as the keystone to the whole sequence. When the students left to face the *baccalauréat* or the Boches, they knew what had happened between 1789 and 1799, and especially in the supreme crisis of 1793–1794. Although the textbooks varied, the message remained the same: in the year of the Terror, a republican France had stood up against the combined forces of a feudal Europe and had defeated them.

**D**anton occupied an important place in this vision—not the Danton of the September Massacres but the Danton of "*Il nous faut de l'audace*," who still defies the foreign forces invading France from a pedestal off the Boulevard Saint-Germain. He had been put on a pedestal by Alphonse Aulard, the first historian to occupy the chair of the French Revolution created in the University of Paris in 1891. Aulard's student and successor, Albert Mathiez, turned against his master and tried to knock Danton off his perch by proving that he had sold himself to the counterrevolution. In his place, Mathiez erected Robespierre, the ideological strategist who formed an alliance with the common people in order, Mathiez maintained, to force France down the road to social revolution.

Mathiez's Robespierre fit nicely into Leninism and the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Mathiez's successors, Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul, a Marxist and a Marxist-Communist, made sure that Robespierre maintained his place in what soon hardened into an orthodox version of the French Revolution and of revolutions in general, which henceforth were supposed to follow a course leading from class war to Terror and socialism, unless diverted by a Thermidorean reaction of the kind that followed the overthrow of Robespierre in July 1794.

This orthodoxy still shapes the history taught in Eastern Europe; hence the audacity of Wajda's rehabilitation of Danton. But it never swept aside rival interpretations in France. Most French historians today probably would concede that Danton's finances do not stand up to close scrutiny. In 1789 he was a not especially successful lawyer loaded down with at least 43,000 livres in debts. In 1791 he paid off his creditors and bought an estate worth 80,000 livres without an ostensible improvement in his practice or the acquisition of another legitimate source of income. He probably took money from the court. But a politician may fatten his purse without betraying his country, and Danton certainly led the resistance to the invading armies after the overthrow of the monarchy on August 10, 1792. His statue still stands in the Place Danton as the embodiment of patriotism. It could be Wajda's Man of Iron.

Robespierre does not occupy a comparable place in his countrymen's imagination, although he still dominates their historiography. "Despite the considerable historical role played by Robespierre, he has not won much acceptance as a personage in France," Louis Mermaz explained in *Le Monde*. "It should be noted that there is no rue Robespierre in Paris." As if to answer, Jean Marcenac put the Communist case before the readers of *L'Humanité*: "I live in Saint-Denis, the only city in France where there is a statue of Robespierre.... I shall buy three red roses and place them at the foot of his bust in the Square Robespierre. It's on my path. That has always been my path. Wajda has lost his way."

The heavy symbolism of such statements shows how much the Revolution retains its mythical force in France. To control the myth is to exert political power, to stake out a position as the authentic representative of the left. The Revolution established the basic categories of French politics, beginning with the distinction of left and right, which derives from the seating pattern of the Constituent Assembly. The politicians sitting in the *Assemblée Nationale* today understand that they can head off challenges by manipulating the categories. Like Robespierre, they try to speak in the name of the sovereign people and to outflank their enemies on the left.

**T**he left flank of the Socialists looked vulnerable when *Danton* opened in January 1983. The government had changed course and had adopted economic policies closer to those of Raymond Barre or Margaret Thatcher than to the radical program on which

Mitterrand had been elected. Its temporizing smacked of Dantonism, and the Communists began to snipe at it from the left, just as Robespierre had done when he attacked the moderates in the Convention, aligning himself with the popular demands of the sans-culottes. The Socialists needed to prove their ideological purity. So they rushed to the defense of the orthodox view of the French Revolution. They fell over themselves in the scramble to denounce the heresies in *Danton*. It was an extraordinary spectacle, party stalwarts haranguing one another about history as if they were schoolmasters lecturing to a class. Every point scored against Wajda could be counted toward a victory over the opposition and a demonstration of one's superior faithfulness to the true revolutionary tradition.

Everyone could play at this game—everyone, that is, with a good old-fashioned education. Wajda, it was charged, had made the Terror seem gratuitous by eliminating all references to its context: the civil war in the Vendée, the federalist revolts in the provinces, the counter-revolutionary intrigues in Paris, and the invasion about to burst across the border. Wajda had ignored Robespierre's campaign against the left-wing extremists led by Jacques René Hébert, thereby making nonsense of the leftist opposition to Robespierre in the Committee of Public Safety and obscuring the political rationale for Robespierre's stroke against the Dantonists: a need to preserve the allegiance of the sans-culottes and to prevent the Revolution from veering to the right after the purge of the Hébertist left. Wajda had even cut out the sans-culottes themselves. The common people hardly appear in the film, yet the French Revolution was an uprising of the masses, not a parliamentary duel between a few bourgeois orators. (In fact, Wajda had planned to film some crowd scenes in Cracow, but the Polish government, which had its own crowds to worry about, refused to let him do so.)

Finally, the critics raked over the film in search of anachronisms. Saint-Just wore an earring and cavorted about like a modern hippie instead of the grim "Angel of Death" in the orthodox history. He threw his hat into the fire in Robespierre's room, whereas that fit of rage actually took place during a dramatic debate in the Committee of Public Safety. Robespierre and Danton were not called "Maxime" and "Georges" by their followers, since the revolutionaries rarely used first names even after adopting the democratic *tu*.

**T**hese details offended the critics not because of their inaccuracy but because they made the leaders of the Revolution look more familiar and less heroic than the figures in the history books. Billaud-Varenne was too unshaven, Desmoulins too weak, Danton too drunk. Wojciech Pszoniak's portrayal of an icy, neurotic, inhuman Robespierre seemed especially offensive, because Robespierre was the touchstone of orthodoxy in interpretations of the Revolution. Equally important, he was the model of

the modern intellectual. He personified *engagement*. A theorist turned man of action, he laid out party lines and devised strategy in the interest of the masses.

The Socialist leaders think of themselves as intellectuals of that kind. Mitterrand likes to be considered a man of letters and lets it be known that he keeps a copy of Michelet's history of the Revolution at his bedside. In one of his first key appointments, he named Claude Manceron, the historian of the Revolution, to be his *attaché culturel* charged with a special mission to prepare a spectacular celebration of the bicentennial, one that could also serve to celebrate the Socialists' victory in the presidential election of 1988. Max Gallo, the government spokesman, is a former history professor who wrote a biography of Robespierre that reads like Mathiez spiced up with Freud.

These men and many others at the top of the Socialist party find it natural for intellectuals to exercise power. Indeed, they assume that power is intellectual, at least in part, as Michel Foucault has argued in a series of influential books.<sup>[2]</sup> Thus Jack Lang, a former theater director now minister of culture and the man behind the French sponsorship of *Danton*, decided that one way to cope with the recession was to convoke a gigantic jamboree of intellectuals in Paris. They made speeches at one another for two days last winter and disbanded with the hope that they had raised the country's morale if not its GNP. But spirits flagged, so in the summer the government issued another general appeal for support from the intellectual left. Even then things failed to improve; and at the last party congress a delegate rose to his feet, pointed a finger at the leaders, and quoted Robespierre on the need for heads to roll.

Such talk makes sense in a political culture that still bears the imprint of 1794. Thus the debate about *Danton* really concerned symbolic power, even though it seemed to turn on questions of fact that could be settled from the primers of the Third Republic. In appealing to the facts, however, the politicians exposed themselves to some difficulties raised by their fellow travelers from the intelligentsia. The primers were out of date. Worse, factuality itself had been consigned by the avant-garde to the scrapheap of outmoded notions like liberalism and positivism. Foucault and a host of literary critics had dissolved facts into "discourse," and the most fashionable historians, those identified with the *Annales* school and based in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, had turned their backs on politics and events in order to study structures and *mentalités*.

**L**ong before the opening of *Danton*, the split between the new and the old history had been dramatized by a feud between two of the leading historians of the Revolution, Albert Soboul and François Furet. Soboul, a Communist and professor at the Sorbonne, stood in the direct line of descent from Mathiez. Furet, a former Communist and eminent Annalist from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, attacked the

entire tradition from Mathiez to Lefebvre as a myth perpetrated in the cause of Stalinism.

The polemics shook the Left Bank for several years in the 1970s. But they had subsided by the time the Socialists and Communists cooperated to elect Mitterrand. In the autumn of 1982 Soboul died. His funeral was a sad affair, a high Communist mass with red roses and black suits at the Mur des Fédérés, the most sacred territory of the left in the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise. It seemed to mark the end of a vision of the Revolution that had inspired Frenchmen for more than a century.

Insofar as any other vision now prevails, it derives from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. Furet, now president of the Ecole, has attempted to rethink the Revolution as a struggle for the control of political discourse.<sup>[3]</sup> In one of the few favorable articles on *Danton*, he praised Wajda for puncturing the myth of Robespierreism and exposing its ties to Stalinism.

Meanwhile, as the professionals were settling scores, the schoolchildren had to get their homework done and make it through the *baccalauréat* examination. They could not do so by poring over the texts that had tortured the memories of their parents, because history had disappeared from the curriculum. After a devastating series of reforms, it had been swallowed up in the *sciences humaines*, modernized out of existence. French children no longer work their way chronologically through the entire past of their country. They study themes like urban society, comparative peasantries, and ecological systems. Strong on discourse and weak on events, they cannot tell the difference between Robespierre and Danton.

**S**o in debating *Danton*, the politicians were caught in a double bind. They appealed to an old-fashioned kind of history that no longer seemed tenable to their intellectual avant-garde and no longer existed for their children or grandchildren. They had brought that trouble on themselves, for they had commissioned a hero of the left, an intellectual of the purest anti-Stalinism, to celebrate their Revolution, and he had denigrated it. What was the world coming to? The Socialists could only shake their heads and lecture one another about Wajda's heresies, unaware that their indignation demonstrated how much they remained prisoners of their own mythology.

In search of a way out of this dilemma, they took the predictable course: another school reform. An "Estates General" of historians has already met and has proposed new changes in the curriculum. Refreshed by his reading of Michelet, the president of the republic wants history to be placed at the core of the new system—a rigorous history with the facts set straight and the heroes slotted into the correct categories.

However, there still remains a problem about how to straighten facts. Having adhered

so convincingly in the old orthodoxy and suffered so much from the last rounds of revisionism, they may resist further modernization. But one thing seems clear from the debate on *Danton*: Facts do not speak for themselves. The film could be seen in completely different ways. It was not the same in Warsaw and in Paris. Its ability to generate double-entendre suggests that meaning itself is shaped by context and that the significance of the French Revolution will never be exhausted. The debate may look like harmless shadowboxing, but there is life in the shadows yet. The ghosts of Robespierre and Danton still haunt the European left, and we all may have to come to terms with terror between those symbolic dates, 1984 and 1989.

## Notes

[1] For a recent version of this tradition, see the *Nouvelle Histoire de la France Contemporaine* published by Le Seuil. Volume 2 in that series has just been published in translation by Cambridge University Press: *The Jacobin Republic, 1792–1794*, by Marc Bouloiseau.

[2] For example, see Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (Pantheon Books, 1980).

[3] See François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

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