

Marat: Historian of the French Revolution?

Joseph Zizek

In mid-October 1792, Jean-Paul Marat—newly-elected member of the National Convention and fiery proprietor of *L'ami du peuple*—issued a prospectus for his collected political writings.¹ Among the works on offer was *L'école du citoyen*, which the prospectus billed as a “philosophical history of the Revolution, from the opening of the Estates-General to the National Convention,” and which was promised for delivery in February 1793 as a work with a mission:

This history offers the tableau of the enemies of the *patrie*, conspiring to place the people back under the yoke; it shows the constant plotting of the court and its supporters; it shows the dark machinations of the counter-revolutionary majority of the first two Legislatures ... This history traces the Constituent Assembly's deceitful policy to restore the monarch's powers and re-establish despotism. This history recapitulates the vices of the Constitution [of 1791], vices which have ever since been France's misfortune, and it shows the measures needed to establish liberty and public happiness on an unshakeable foundation.

This new work, the Prospectus promised, would comprise the “choicest morsels” from *L'ami du peuple*, including “more than 300 predictions, published by the author well in advance, dealing with key figures and events of the revolution.” Leaving modesty behind, the advertisement concluded:

we do not fear to present *L'école du citoyen* as an indispensable book to all the French who desire to learn of their rights, to know the schemes put into play to mislead the people, enslave it “constitutionally,” reduce it to misery ... [and] deliver the State to the disorders of anarchy and everywhere ignite the fires of civil war.²

Joseph Zizek is Senior Lecturer in European History at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His current research examines contemporary constructions of history and memory during the French Revolution. For their helpful comments and suggestions for revising the initial conference paper, the author would like to thank André Lambelet, Katharine Norris, and Tracy Adams.

¹ Marat's newspaper went through several title changes in its lifetime—for example, it was renamed *Le journal de la république française* in September 1792—but I will refer to it as *L'ami du peuple* in this essay, since that is the appellation by which newspaper and journalist are both best known.

² *Oeuvres politiques et patriotiques, de Marat l'ami du peuple, député à la Convention nationale, proposées par souscription. Prospectus* ([N.p.], [n.d.]), 3; reprinted in Jean-Paul Marat, *Oeuvres politiques, 1789-1793*, eds. Jacques de Cock and Charlotte Goetz, 10 vols. (Brussels, 1989-1995), 4918-22 [Hereafter cited *OP*. In the interest of consistency, citations in this essay are made to this edited collection; volume numbers have been omitted in accordance with the editors' own citation practices, in which page

L'école du citoyen was never published, and we do not know whether this failure left its potential subscribers bereft or relieved. No manuscript survives—the last record of its existence comes from a property inventory taken after Marat's death in July 1793—and its content and substance remain matter for conjecture.³

Yet its very absence, however tantalizing, also makes *L'école du citoyen* an effective marker. This vanished work testifies, on the one hand, to the ingredients that made Marat an infamous figure during the Revolution: denunciation, paranoia, extreme verbal violence. But it also indicates, on the other hand, an unexpected ambition: Marat's desire, declared publicly and repeatedly, to offer his readers a "history" of contemporary events.⁴ This seems surprising for several reasons. Marat identified himself as many things during a checkered eighteenth-century life, but he never claimed to be a historian. While contemporaries during the Revolution called him everything from "prophet" to "cannibal," they never went so far as to accuse him of writing history. Indeed, Pierre Lacretelle, one contemporary who did become a reputed nineteenth-century historian, unkindly described Marat as a creature "on whose forehead heaven seems to have written: flee this crazed atrocity [of a human being]!"⁵

Modern scholarship, while neither endorsing nor escaping Marat's "black legend," has chosen to emphasize his singularity and explore the political styles that he helped inaugurate. Influential interpretations thus present Marat as, variously, an exemplar of the democratic possibilities of revolutionary journalism, a precocious "herald" of the Terror, a formative voice of denunciation, and a proponent of "classical republicanism."⁶ These interpretations have done much to transform our understanding of Marat and his place in revolutionary culture; but I would also argue that these interpretations become even more illuminating if we add to them an appreciation for Marat as the exemplar of a distinctive kind of revolutionary historical "sensitivity." Despite the fact that it is impossible to recapture precisely what he intended for *L'école du citoyen*, it is possible to use Marat's journalism to sketch a

numbering is cumulative across volumes and page references to the *guide de lecture* are denoted by "*". While this critical edition represents an admirable achievement, I have observed the caveats advanced by Olivier Coquard, *Marat* (Paris, 1993), 490-91. A prospectus for *L'école du citoyen* appeared earlier, in March 1792, but at that time the work was not framed as a "histoire philosophique," even though the language of revelation was essentially the same; for the earlier prospectus, see *OP*, 3817-21.

³ Jacques de Cock notes that the post mortem inventory of Marat's possessions describes a work supposedly entitled "L'école du citoyen, ou Histoire secrète des machinations de la Cour, de l'assemblée constituante, du Club monarchique, des généraux et des principaux ennemis de la liberté qui ont figuré dans la Révolution." See A.N. F7/4385; cited in *OP*, *1183-97. The most plausible hypothesis, advanced by Olivier Coquard and supported by Marat's own fleeting references, is that this vanished work represented a compendium of articles drawn from his prior journalism. See Coquard, *Marat*, 473 note 5.

⁴ Marat's earliest acknowledgement of a project for an "Histoire de la Révolution" comes in a letter of 28 Jan. 1790, describing the documents placed under judicial seal at his residence. Repeated hints of this project, which Marat sometimes defined as "mon histoire," appear in Marat's legal correspondence; see *OP*, 646-7. Marat was not alone in the ambition to write a history of the Revolution; radical journalists such as Louis-Marie Prudhomme, proprietor of the *Révolutions de Paris*, repeatedly advertised the intention to produce a "philosophical" history of the Revolution.

⁵ Charles de Lacretelle, *Histoire de France au XVIème siècle*, 12 vols. (Paris and Strasbourg, 1821-1825) 10: 8; cited in Coquard, *Marat*, 368.

⁶ For examples of these perspectives, see (respectively) Jeremy Popkin, *Revolutionary News: the Press in France, 1789-1799* (Durham, 1990); Patrice Gueniffey, *La politique de la Terreur. Essai sur la violence révolutionnaire, 1789-1794* (Paris, 2000); Antoine de Baecque, *Le corps de l'histoire. Métaphores et politique (1770-1800)* (Paris, 1993); and Keith Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001): 32-53.

portrait of the tasks and responsibilities that he envisioned for history and for the revolutionary historian. Two distinct issues deserve emphasis: first, Marat's journalism reveals a powerful (and powerfully strange) conception of revolution as a process unfolding in time; second, Marat's depiction of this unfolding process raises vexing questions about the relationship between the revolutionary journalist and his presumably revolutionized audience. Marat's journalism provides an extraordinary example of the possibilities, as well as the limits, of contemporary attempts to make "historical" sense of the Revolution.

* * *

Enough of Marat's career as an eighteenth-century man of letters has been recovered to suggest that it was marked neither by dramatic success nor by Darntonian distress. Marat, like many compatriots, built upon the ingredients of an intellectual life in the ancien regime to articulate new individual and public identities in Revolution. Marat's self-refashioning began on 12 September 1789, with the launch of the newspaper that would become *L'ami du Peuple*. (Initially entitled the *Publiciste parisien*, his journal took its more familiar name within its first week). From the outset, Marat and his newspaper were simultaneously traditional and innovative: Bill Murray, for example, argues that *L'ami du peuple* showed the persistence of the "pamphlet style of attack," and, indeed, the paper seems "little more than pamphlets delivered in (more or less) weekly installments."⁷ Jeremy Popkin has shown that, unlike many of the newspapers founded in 1789, *L'ami du peuple* intentionally minimized the role of the National Assembly by privileging Parisian concerns over the reportage of political debates; but more important, the newspaper creatively melded typographical and narrative traditionalism with an unremitting verbal violence, in which conspiracy, suspicion and denunciation figured prominently.⁸

Marat's revolutionary journalism, controversial from the outset, quickly drew attention for its attacks on the Constituent Assembly and its scurrilous treatment of men such as Necker, Lafayette, and Brissot. Marat was, in return, targeted by judicial proceedings as early as January 1790; the next three years of his career were marked by a growing political mystique bred of exile, clandestine operation and affiliation with the Cordeliers Section. In this climate, what is perhaps most surprising about Marat's early denunciations is that they were, in effect, historical. His vicious attacks on men such as Necker and Lafayette—and I shall touch on these very briefly—routinely took the form of capsule "histories" of public (rather than private) behavior since the outbreak of the Revolution. Marat's notorious excoriation of Necker in February 1790, for example, dwelt primarily upon the minister's presumed attempts to "starve" the people since returning to power; Necker's pre-revolutionary career was in this light relevant only as evidence of the constancy of his ambitions.⁹ It is not

⁷ Bill Murray notes that Marat and Hebert remained proponents (on the radical side) of "the pamphlet style of attack." See W.J. Murray, "Journalism as a Career Choice in 1789," in *The Press in the French Revolution, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 287, eds. Harvey Chisick, Ilana Zinguer, and Ouzi Elyada (Oxford, 1991), 170.

⁸ Modern readers frequently find disorienting the narrative and temporal structure of Marat's journalism (and revolutionary journalism more generally), since it was based on what would today be called "burying the lede." On such themes, see the excellent discussion in Popkin, *Revolutionary News*, 146-51. Tellingly, Marat first published his famous "principles of denunciation" on 13 Nov. 1789; see *OP*, 297-98.

⁹ *OP*, 582-618. In his litany of accusations against Necker, Marat claims to be acting as a prescient yet impartial observer, judging Necker in advance of posterity: "je ne serai ici qu'un historien fidèle qui aura

surprising that Marat was willing to minimize the indictment value of deeds prior to 1789—after all, this was a man whose pre-revolutionary career had involved stipendiary service to the comte d'Artois's household—but he was also unwilling to make the connection between “private” corruption and political malfeasance that has become a central aspect of scholarly understandings of eighteenth-century discourse.¹⁰ Indeed, Marat apologized to his readers for venturing into the details of Lafayette's private life in the course of a savage indictment of “Motié” in 1791, and even his apostrophe to Louis XVI after the latter's flight to Varennes focused explicitly on public rather than private misdeeds.¹¹ Although Marat's indictments-by-capsule-biography deserve more study, even a cursory engagement with them reveals a historical sensibility in which the equation of private corruption and public malfeasance is minimized rather than emphasized.

Yet if Marat eschewed such proxy condemnations, he supplied something else. Marat turned the problem of regenerating a newly-liberated people into a project that was simultaneously pedagogical *and* historical. Granted, the pedagogy was strange. After all, one of the most striking features of a newspaper that dubbed itself “friend” of the people was its hectoring tone. *L'ami du peuple* plaintively and repeatedly deplored the frivolity of the French, their seeming passivity, their inability to secure the gains won in 1789, and their consequent vulnerability to omnipresent conspirators. Such statements are inescapable in even the most casual reading of Marat's journalism. But there is often more to this complaining than initially meets the eye. To take one example from many: on 8 November 1790, Marat discussed the proper means to form “public spirit” to ensure the triumph of liberty:

In order for the people to exercise its rights, the people must know them: it is a matter of instruction. In order for the people to avoid the traps laid for it, the people must perceive them: it is a matter of education.¹²

Initially, Marat's diatribe seems to echo the familiar eighteenth-century distinction between imparting skills (*instruction*) and forming citizens (*éducation*)—but wait. Marat offered a striking description of the task of fashioning a free people:

The people understands things poorly; it rarely sees things as they are, even more rarely does it grasp their totality, and it almost never calculates the sequence of events [*suite des événements*]. This is the result of the people's lack of enlightenment. ... In order for the people to avoid being placed once more under the yoke, it is necessary for it constantly to be ready to evaluate its rulers at their deeds. Freedom will only be fully guaranteed once public spirit is mature; that is to say, when the people knows its rights and duties, when it understands men and the passions that actuate them, when it has the appropriate understanding of the agents of power to penetrate their schemes and perceive the traps they set. This is the point to which publicists must bring the nation.¹³

Marat effectively suggested that revolutionary pedagogy—communicating an

devancé son siècle,” *OP*, 588.

¹⁰ In this sense, Marat eschewed the contemporary indictments based on connections between private depravity and public corruption; for an influential interpretation of such connections, see Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: the Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1993).

¹¹ *OP*, 1841-45, 1985.

¹² *OP*, 1723.

¹³ *OP*, 1724-25.

understanding of the “suite des événements”—was the security of liberty, but that such pedagogy faced obstacles. This awareness perhaps explains Marat’s vitriol against Necker, his attacks on the Chatelet, his exposés of Lafayette’s military ambitions and even his tiffs with other patriotic journalists; what was at issue was the belief not only that the people were being played for dupes, but that the “people’s friend” was being persecuted precisely because of the truths he sought to proffer and the education he sought to provide.

Yet Marat invested both the pedagogical and the historical projects with a sense of urgency tempered by pessimism. Marat repeatedly argued that, in winning liberty in 1789, the French had merely been lucky; the problem of securing that liberty was at the foundation of Marat’s constant tone of martyred resignation, a tone that became more pronounced after the Royal Family’s abortive flight to Varennes, and persisted well beyond the fall of the monarchy. Driven into hiding by a decree of accusation in 1791, Marat was, by July 1792, pessimistically tracing the “plan of the revolution totally squandered by the people.” He insisted that, after three years’ struggle for liberty, France was more enslaved than ever, and he stressed the consistency of politics under old and new regimes: “Cast an eye on the theatre of State. The decorations alone have changed; it is always the same actors, the same costumes, the same intrigues, the same measures.” Marat offered a sketch of the divisions that had plagued the Revolution from its inception, suggesting that the people’s political ignorance left it helpless before the “Machiavellianism” of its enemies: “From the outset, the revolution has been for the Court and its adherents, nothing but an enduring pretext for seduction, fiscal predation, corruption, schemes, traps, assaults, assassinations, poisonings, and disastrous conspiracies.” Marat summed up by inscribing the Revolution in the context of a much longer-term struggle:

The foundation of liberty has ranged against it the very dispositions of the human heart ... The tendency of constituted authorities to despotism is, alas, only too natural, but nothing in the world is as difficult as returning men to freedom.¹⁴

Powerful reinterpretations of Marat by Patrice Gueniffey and Keith Baker have recently revisited this fusion of anxiety, lassitude, and pessimism. Gueniffey, for example, reads Marat’s violent denunciations as an expression of the “exteriority” of people from power; that is to say, Marat incarnated the fundamental impossibility of grounding revolutionary liberty in institutional legality. The relationship between people and government remained structured by the logic of denunciation, violence, and the virtuous purge (provocatively, Gueniffey suggests, “from 1790, Marat thus writes in advance the history of the *an II*”).¹⁵ Baker has argued, on different but converging grounds, that Marat represented a crucial stage in the transformation of the political idiom of “classical republicanism.” The anxieties and even the tenor of Marat’s revolutionary journalism, Baker convincingly notes, were prefigured by his initial venture into political writing, *The Chains of Slavery*, originally published in England in 1774 as part of the Wilkesite agitation for Parliamentary reform.¹⁶ What changed after 1789, Baker argues, is that the collapse of the ancien regime removed the institutional and intellectual constraints on what had formerly been a “discourse of

¹⁴ *OP*, 4088-89, 4101, 4104-5, 4116, 4118-19. On the importance of these arguments, see Louis Gottschalk, *Jean-Paul Marat: A Study in Radicalism* (1928; Chicago, 1967), 112-13.

¹⁵ Gueniffey, *La politique de la Terreur*, esp. 74-77.

¹⁶ *Chains of Slavery* was expanded in late 1792 and republished in French in early 1793. See note 19 below.

opposition,” enabling Marat’s fear of popular lassitude and corrupting governments to be projected into the unbounded revolutionary future as the recurrent denunciation of omnipresent enemies.¹⁷ There is no doubt that these remain powerful reinterpretations of Marat’s significance, although these readings can helpfully be tempered by the awareness that conspiratorial mentalities among revolutionary elites were gradually (rather than suddenly) elaborated, and that institutionalized practices of denunciation often departed in significant ways from Marat’s language of suspicion and excess.¹⁸

It may also be useful to reappraise Marat’s conspiratorial sensibility by analyzing it in terms of the historical modalities that Marat claimed to perceive in the Revolution’s own workings.¹⁹ To return, for a moment, to *Chains of Slavery*; it is well known that Marat eventually reedited this text (probably in late 1792) and added sections designed to make it relevant to the experience of a country in revolution. Both the original and edited versions contain striking indictments of the role played by corrupted men of letters—particularly historians—in supporting despotic princes; but one of the explicit additions made to the edition of 1793 used the recent experience of revolution to meditate on the danger of historical amnesia to a people: “once peoples cease to know the history of their governments, they form the falsest ideas concerning government; these false ideas contribute greatly to despotism.”²⁰ The key point, Marat insisted in his newspaper (in language strikingly evocative of the *Chains of Slavery*) was that it was not enough to cherish liberty; one had also to instruct the people, one had to “uncover the artifices” of politics, but this was difficult precisely because of the way despotism worked:

It is not by sudden exercises of power [*coups d'autorité*], or by attempts at violence, that the enemies of the *patrie* initially work to destroy it; they do so by ruses, by

¹⁷ Baker, “Transformations of Classical Republicanism,” esp. 43, represents perhaps the most persuasive recent interpretation of *Chains of Slavery*, a text that has long elicited questions. Louis Gottschalk, for example, saw *Chains of Slavery* as precocious evidence of Marat’s commitment to popular sovereignty; Gottschalk, *Jean-Paul Marat*, 19–21. Michel Vovelle similarly regarded it as an essential—but ahistorical—step towards the formulation of a “theory of insurrection.” See Vovelle, “Introduction” in *Marat: Textes choisis* (Paris, 1963), 15–16. By contrast, Olivier Coquard reads *Chains of Slavery* as an important but uneven synthesis of arguments drawn from Rousseau and Montesquieu; see Coquard, *Marat*, 71–80.

¹⁸ Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789–1792,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 691–713; Colin Lucas points out that the language of excess is not a good description of denunciatory process, particularly as the latter was colonized by committees during *an II*; see Lucas, “The Theory and Practice of Denunciation in the French Revolution,” *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 768–85. For influential discussions of the extent to which conspiratorial mentalities were a shared eighteenth-century sensibility, see Gordon Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 401–41; and Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: the French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford, 2001). See also Barry Coward and Julian Swann, eds., *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: from the Waldensians to the French Revolution* (Aldershot, 2004), which unfortunately could not be consulted for this essay.

¹⁹ It can be argued that “classical republicanism” was historically minded in its pessimism and its emphasis on corruption, but the political idiom itself did not define precisely how a historical sensibility could or should be deployed from within the process.

²⁰ Marat, *Les Chaînes de l’esclavage. Ouvrage destiné à développer les noirs attentats des princes contre les peuples, les ressorts secrets, les ruses, les menées, les artifices, les coups d’État qu’ils emploient pour détruire la liberté, et les scènes sanglantes qui accompagnent le despotisme* ([Paris], an I [1793]), 283; reprinted in *OP*, 4165–4663.

incredibly calculated artifices, by traps concealed behind the veil of the common good.²¹

It is possible, in fact, to make the case that Marat viewed this vulnerability precisely as a failing of historical vision (and here the hectoring tone returns): “blind people, leaderless, unguided, lacking judgment, lured astray by the whims of adroit deceivers! Idiotic people, unable to learn in the school of adversity, for whom the lessons of experience will be forever lost! Childish people.”²²

Marat, in effect, described the historical problem of liberty as coupled: on the one hand, the people could not, without aid, “read” the meaning of unfolding events; yet on the other hand, the historical patterns that gave meaning to those events were occluded, deliberately masked by evildoers who misled and deceived the populace. Marat’s condemnations of frivolity and lassitude thus effectively posed the question: how were the French to remember and act upon the bitterly won lessons of experience? Marat’s answer was to make an exemplary figure of the patriotic journalist, who served simultaneously as privileged interpreter of history and as severe instructor of the public. Marat remarked in late November 1792 that with despotism apparently destroyed and Louis XVI imprisoned, “everything seems to proclaim the triumph of the Republic; nevertheless, the *patrie* is far from triumphing and liberty is far from assured.” Responding to the confident declarations of those who proclaimed victory, Marat insisted, “all this might convince the superficial observer, but the *philosophe* versed in the history of revolutions and the politics of Courts is far from being comforted by these glittering appearances!”²³ By March 1793, Marat was reiterating earlier demands for severity with claims that the *patrie* was at the abyss, but also pointing to his own status as observer at the disposal of the people:

I am accustomed to writing according to what I feel. For it is the spectacle of new arbitrary acts, ceaselessly reiterated, that has so many times spurred my demands, deepened my despair, and led me to demand what I feel are the only measures that can end our woes ... Behold the key to all of my behavior. According to the histories of the different peoples of the globe, the lights of reason, and the principles of healthy political life, I have demonstrated that the only way to consolidate the Revolution is for the adherents of liberty to crush their enemies.²⁴

Yet if Marat claimed interpretive expertise as a philosophically informed observer of history, able to extract lessons from the experiences of other nations, this did not resolve the problem of how to communicate the Revolution’s historical lessons. How could a historical truth about the Revolution be demonstrated? An early indication is visible in Marat’s open letter to his journalistic competitor, Camille Desmoulins, in May 1791. In that letter, published in his newspaper, Marat defended

²¹ *OP*, 4104.

²² *OP*, 2334. This notion was reiterated constantly by Marat; see especially *OP*, 2255, 4116-21.

²³ *OP*, 5119-23. See also the open letter of the Paris deputies reprinted by Marat in *OP*, 5715-7. A similar equivocation is apparent in Marat’s strident critique of misplaced mercy (sparing conspirators, for example) and his championing of harsh measures, including a temporary dictator and larger and larger harvests of traitorous heads. Such calls, Marat insisted in late September 1792, were grounded on his political experience: “tout homme instruit de l’histoire des révolutions sent l’indispensable nécessité.” *OP*, 4751.

²⁴ *OP*, 5876.

the effectiveness and importance of precocious denunciations, inveighing against the mentality that required absolute proof:

In order to judge men, you [Desmoulin] always need proof positive, clear, and precise. For me, their inaction or their silence on great occasions is sufficient. In order to believe in a conspiracy, you demand judicial evidence; for me, it is enough to see the general course of events, the relationships between enemies of liberty, the comings and goings of certain agents of power.²⁵

Mona Ozouf has seen this episode, I think persuasively, as an example of the inductive and hence boundless nature of denunciation.²⁶ Yet this is not enough to exhaust Marat's meaning; what is perhaps more significant is that his inductive reading of conspiracy is *historical*. For Marat, the true significance of events is revealed only as part of a process unfolding over time, and, because conspiracies by their nature share premeditation and duration, this recognition depends on historical awareness, an ability to see and render connections across time. But this also meant that a truly powerful historical sensibility was by its very nature specialized. Marat repeatedly differentiated between observational facts that could easily be apprehended by everyone—such as a simple sequence of events—and facts that required deeper powers of penetration, which required the observer to plumb hidden motivations and distinguish feints from real blows.²⁷

Ultimately, Marat's confidence in reading the secret undercurrents of events led him to underline his own singularity. In early 1793, he modestly noted that, when the Revolution arrived he was "perhaps the only person in France" to recognize the conspiracies then unfolding, and, if his message was not properly heard at the outset, that was because "the truths which I published were not within the grasp of ordinary readers ... most often, it was only after events proved me right that the public justly gave me credit, and dubbed me 'prophet.'"²⁸ Marat's confident self-presentation as an observer able to unveil the deep secrets of the political world became, ultimately, an instrument that he (and others) could use to inscribe falsity in *any* revolutionary career—the litany of idols smashed by Marat included Necker, Lafayette, Louis XVI, Dumouriez and Brissot. But it also became, in Marat's hands, an argument for the indispensability of the crusading journalist-historian. It is striking that Marat's own claims to trustworthiness were grounded in resistance to the conspiratorial history unfolding around him: Marat's use of a Rousseau-like language of suffering, poverty and simplicity, and his declarations of heartfelt identification with the people, are perhaps best read as a means of immunizing the journalist himself from accusations of complicity in the process of misleading the people.²⁹ Marat's historical vision served to propagate a distinctive pedagogical vision but also to buttress a newly fashioned

²⁵ *OP*, 2826. This was a constant theme to which Marat returned in late 1792; see *OP*, 5052.

²⁶ See Mona Ozouf, "Marat" in *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, eds. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 250.

²⁷ For examples of this reasoning, which evolved over time, see *OP*, 494, 661, 917, 1225, 1241, 2037, 2275.

²⁸ *OP*, 5586. At least one correspondent repeatedly addressed Marat with the salutation "prophet." For a sensitive reading of this metaphor, see Jean Massin, *Marat* (Paris, 1960), 5.

²⁹ Marat's most coherent response to charges of corruption, extremism or aspirations to dictatorship can be found in his famous "Portrait de L'ami du peuple, tracé par lui-même," of 14 Jan. 1793; see *OP*, 5497-5503. For an early declaration of persecuted virtue see *OP*, 1726. In this sense, too, Marat's pessimism and severity can be seen as a rhetorical lever used to claim credibility in the face of powerful, omnipresent conspirators.

revolutionary identity: the journalist-observer, astutely on guard for the nation, whose credibility was vested in virtuous devotion.

* * *

To return to my title: it seems clear, on the one hand, that to call Marat a “historian” of the French Revolution is patently ludicrous, if by that we mean the term in any familiar acceptation. But if we expand “historian” to encompass a sensibility that traces connections, posits causation and offers a set of interpretive protocols ... well, under those conditions the appellation makes limited sense. It is possible to see in Marat’s journalism a powerful conception of the revolution as a series of human-scale events, unfolding in a finite period of time, whose real meaning can only be inferred accurately by the philosophic, historically-minded observer. Marat’s conception of history was unremittingly voluntarist, but it was also double-edged as a result. Events with human causes were in principle intelligible and communicable to a people striving for liberty. Yet Marat articulated a practical tension embedded in any voluntarist vision of history: if the patterns of despotism could be grasped by the savvy gaze of *L’ami du peuple*, it was much harder to communicate these lessons to an oblivious people, ignorant of the deep meaning of events aimed against it. Popular lassitude was cultivated, if not created, by human action, as the Revolution’s own enemies worked to hide the nefarious history they were making. How, then, in the face of this dilemma, could the patriotic writer teach a proper “reading” of history? Marat’s response was to invoke the “marche générale des affaires,” a pattern well suited to the day-to-day periodicity of the newspaper. By emphasizing patterns and sequences, Marat opportunely reiterated prior warnings, singled out “prophecies” that had come true (and conveniently elided those that had not), and constructed a scaffolding of reliability. This strategy can be glimpsed in Marat’s representational metaphors, which communicate linkages of past and present that are visual as much as verbal. The keywords of the prospectus for *L’école du citoyen* are here once more illuminating: to present a “tableau,” in which conspiracies are “developed” and political maneuvers are “traced,” in a book that is proclaimed “indispensable” and “instructive.” Even if *L’ami du peuple* was not a historian, he was fabricating an unusual kind of history for his audience, one designed simultaneously as description and diagnosis.

This is why Marat’s historical sensibility matters. While Marat was in no sense a representative figure—precisely the opposite—he does show us the surprising ways in which conspiratorial anxieties, denunciations and discursive violence re-inscribed history in the revolutionary political universe. These fears and anxieties also reinserted the historian in the history: Marat’s interpretive vision, by its very nature, made the “philosophic” observer a participant in an intricate chain of events and meanings. In Marat’s hands, history became a powerful mode of thinking—pessimistically, fearfully, coercively, self-righteously—about the extraordinary demands that the Revolution placed upon patriots and peoples entrusted with its defense. To a revolutionary audience seeking to understand those demands, whether to exhort their achievement or bemoan their neglect, Marat offered a vision suffused by the intractable connection between the Revolution’s historical perils and its future possibilities.