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EDITORIAL NOTE

We are continuing our policy of including some of the papers held at our regional symposia. Four contributions, by Alex Metcalfe, Andrew Jotischky, Naomi Tadmor and Michael Beckerman, come from the symposium 'Edges of Europe: Frontiers in Context' organised at the University of Lancaster on 16–17 June 2011. The article by Michael Beckerman and his collaborators represents a new departure for us, as the lecture was accompanied by a series of audio recordings which are available on the Cambridge University website (<http://journals.cambridge.org/rht>). It is generically rather different from the material we normally publish, but we think it is an exciting piece.

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TRANSACTIONS OF THE
ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By Colin Jones

FRENCH CROSSINGS: III. THE SMILE OF
THE TIGER

READ 25 NOVEMBER 2011

ABSTRACT. This paper continues the theme of ‘French Crossings’ explored in other Presidential Addresses by focusing on the border zone between the human and the animal. The focus is on the allegedly tiger-like character attributed to Maximilien Robespierre, particularly after his fall from power and his execution in 1794. This theme is explored in terms of Thermidorian propaganda, French Revolutionary historiography and the ancient discipline of physiognomy, which was reactivated by Johann-Caspar Lavater in the late eighteenth century and was still influential through much of the nineteenth. Robespierre’s animal rather than human status was also held to emerge in his inability to smile or laugh, a significant point also in that the meaning of the smile was changing in the same period.

On 6 February 1834, an old woman died on the Rue des Fontaines in Paris. Her full name was Marie-Marguerite-Charlotte Robespierre. Charlotte (1760–1834) was the younger sister of Maximilien and Augustin Robespierre. Some forty years earlier, on 28 July 1794, following the *coup d'état* of the previous day, 27 July 1794 (9 Thermidor Year II in the Revolutionary Calendar), Charlotte’s two brothers, Maximilien and Augustin, had perished together on the guillotine. The *coup d'état* of 9 Thermidor led to the overthrow of the Committee of Public Safety on which Maximilien had been a leading light, and which had directed the Terror. Celebrations would be instantaneous, launching a tidal wave of attacks in print. *Le triomphe des Parisiens* and the *Portraits exécrationnels du traître Robespierre et ses complices*, complete with images of the severed heads of Maximilien and his brother and their alleged accomplices from the Committee of Public Safety, Saint-Just and Couthon, are characteristic

examples (Figures 1 and 2).¹ Much blame would focus – and has continued to focus in history-writing down to the present day – on Maximilien’s role within the Committee of Public Safety, which had implemented violently repressive policies as a way of winning the war within France and without, and of instituting, so it was held, a ‘republic of virtue’.²

In memoirs published posthumously in 1835, Charlotte Robespierre sought to rehabilitate her brothers from the calumnies which had buzzed like flies about their heads, ever since those heads had fallen into the guillotine basket over forty years earlier. She had taken to the grave a profound irritation in particular at the ways that Maximilien’s physical appearance was generally described.

Brother Augustin [she stated] was big, well made and had a face full of nobility and beauty. Maximilien did not share these features to the same extent. He was of average height and of delicate complexion. His face exuded sweetness and goodness, but was not as regular nor as fine as his brother’s. He was nearly always smiling.³

Warming to her theme of a sweet, good, ‘nearly always smiling’ Maximilien Robespierre, she went on to excoriate the way that her brother had been portrayed since his death. One particular portrait, that had accompanied apocryphal memoirs published in 1830, drew her particular scorn. It was, she stated, ‘an ignoble caricature’ (Figure 3). ‘His physiognomy is there disfigured, just as as his cowardly enemies have disfigured his character.’ In fact, ‘[Maximilien’s] physiognomy exuded sweetness and he had an expression of goodness which struck everyone who saw him.’⁴ We can just about glimpse the faintest of smiles playing

¹ *Le triomphe des Parisiens dans les Journées des 9 et 10 Thermidor* (n.p., n.d.) and *Portraits exécrables du traître Robespierre et ses complices* (n.p., n.d.). Much of this post-Thermidor literature, cited below, does not signal either a place or date of publication. Unless otherwise indicated, one can assume that the pamphlets were published in Paris in late 1794. I have drawn extensively on the famous Croker collection at the British Library (BL), the largest collection of French Revolution publications outside the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. I have given the BL call-marks in the relevant cases, to assist in location of these ephemeral and not easily locatable pieces.

² An excellent entrée into the life and ideas of Robespierre, his role within the Committee of Public Safety and the circumstances of his death, is provided by two stimulating recent biographies: Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (New York, 2006), and Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven and London, 2012). Their bibliographies give a sense of the huge volume and wide range of reactions Robespierre has always evoked. We also now have the first biography of Maximilien’s younger brother, Augustin: Sergio Luzzatto, *Bonbon Robespierre: Il Terrore dal volto umano* (Turin, 2009). The literature on the Terror is similarly immense. Helpful perspectives are provided by David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution* (New York, 2005).

³ *Mémoires de Charlotte Robespierre sur ses deux frères*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1835), 68. Throughout, all translations from the French are my own.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38, 159–60. The volume she attacked was *Mémoires authentiques de Maximilien Robespierre, ornés de son portrait tiré de ses mémoires* (Paris, 1830). The work is thought to be the work of Charles Reybaud.

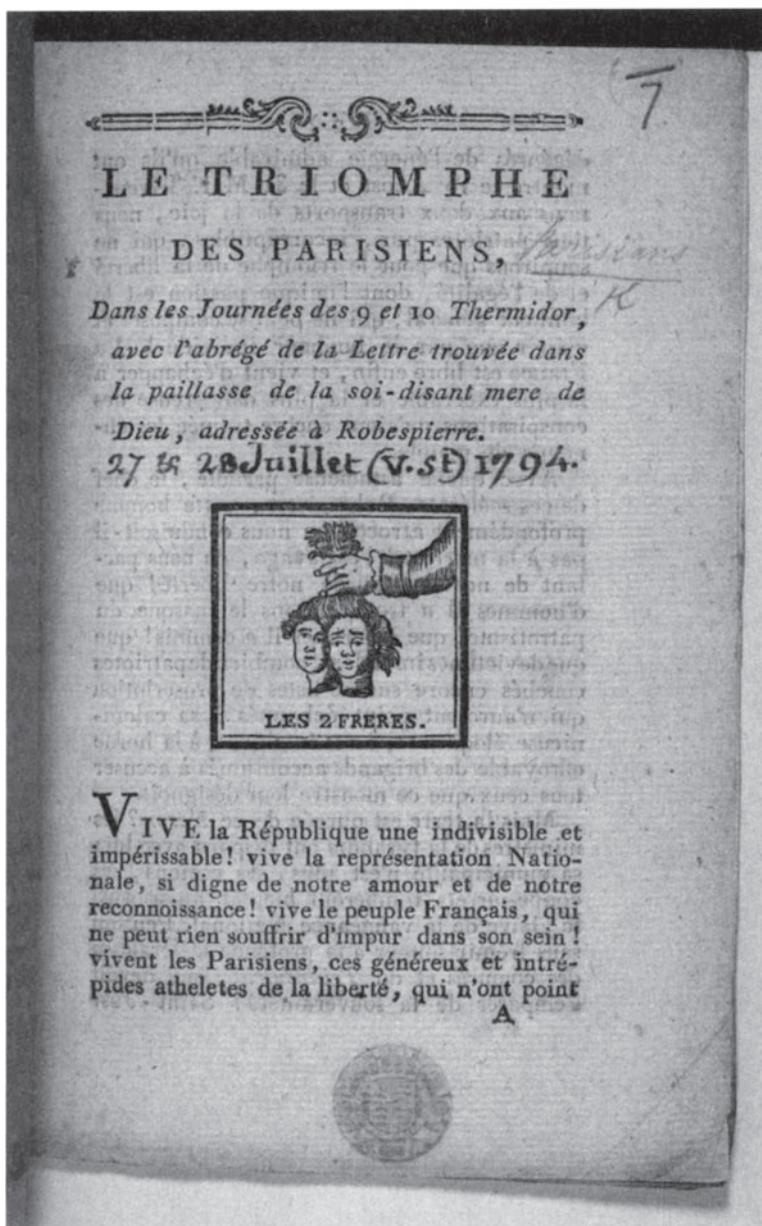


Figure 1 *Le triomphe des Parisiens* (Paris, 1794). © British Library Board: FR 598.

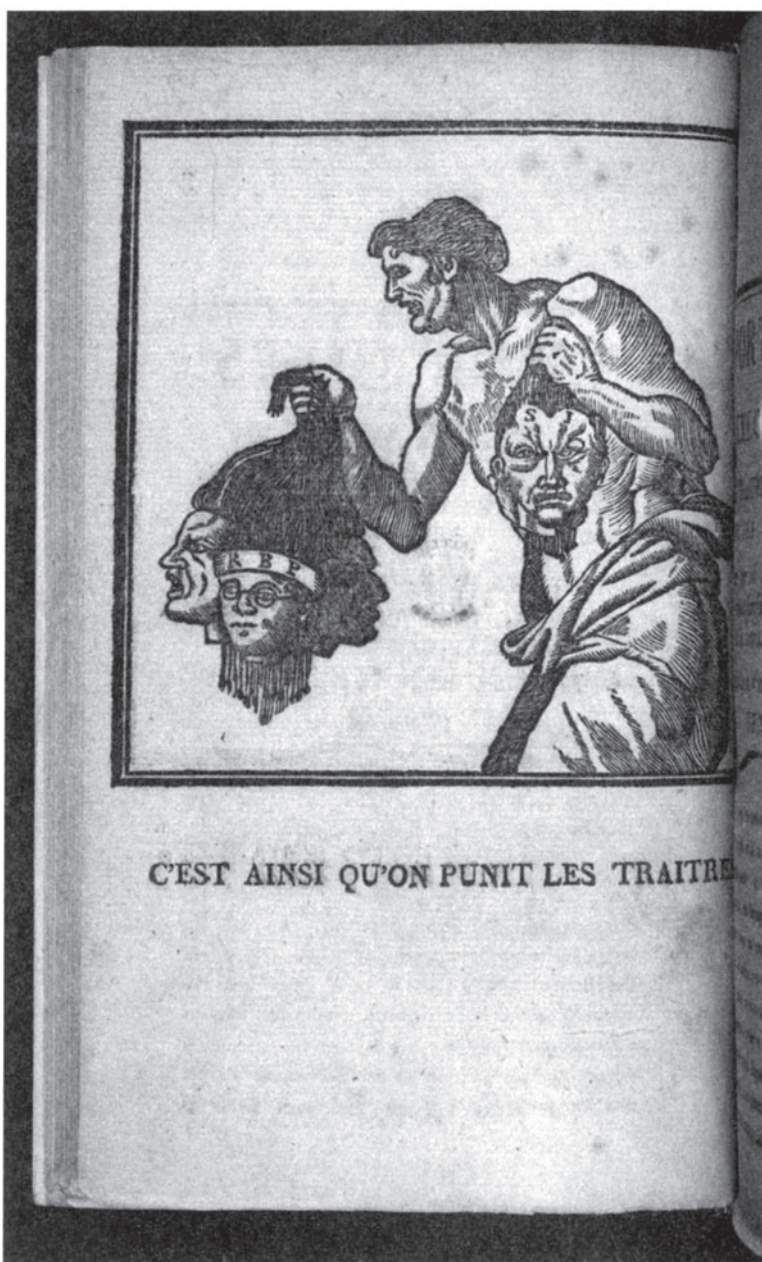


Figure 2 *Portraits exécrables du traître Robespierre et ses complices*. © British Library Board: F856.

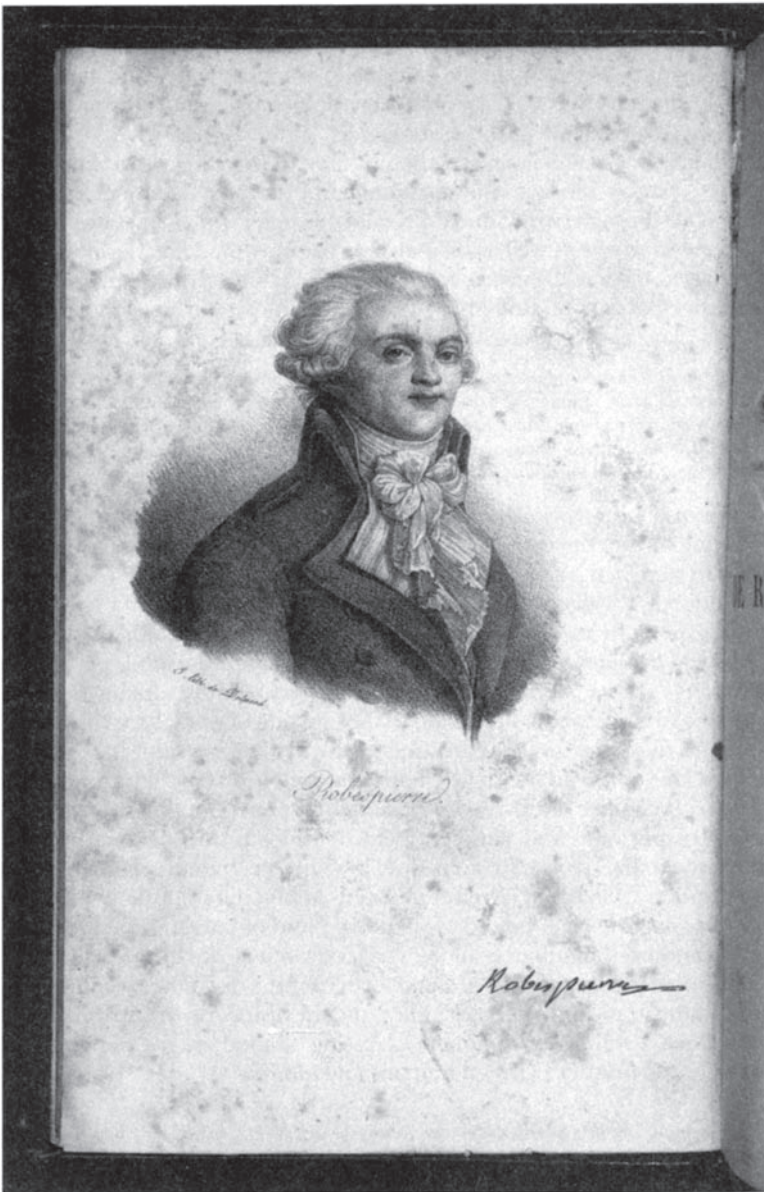


Figure 3 Portrait of Robespierre, from *Mémoires authentiques de Maximilien Robespierre, ornés de son portrait tiré de ses mémoires* (Paris, 1830). © British Library Board: 010661.c.28.

lightly around the lips of a number of the portraits of the future arch-terrorist, such as Adelaide Labille-Guiard's famous 1791 painting of him in his costume as deputy in the National Assembly.⁵ Yet, loyal Charlotte's sisterly memory has cut little historiographical ice, and historians ever since have scoffed at the thought of sweet, smiley Robespierre.

Charlotte was attacking the attempt to read the alleged wickedness of Robespierre in his face. Physiognomical portraiture – the detection of character through bodily, and especially through facial, depiction – could be done in words as well as by pencil or paintbrush. An early, influential textual example of the genre, written just weeks after Robespierre's death, was the 'Portrait of Robespierre' by Antoine Merlin de Thionville, a deputy who had sat alongside him in the National Convention:

People who like to find relationships between faces and moral qualities, between human faces and those of animals, have noted that just as Danton had the head of a mastiff, Marat that of an eagle, Mirabeau that of a lion, Robespierre had the face of a cat. But the face altered its physiognomy; at first it was the anxious but fairly soft look of a domestic cat; then the wild look of a feral cat; and then the ferocious look of a tiger.⁶

We may be surprised to think of a Robespierre who smiled. And by drawing on the conventions of physiognomy in this Revolutionary bestiary so as to make a tiger of him, Merlin de Thionville was of course adding to our doubts. For tigers do many things; smiling is not conventionally held to be among them. The smile of a tiger is a simple impossibility.

In my Presidential Addresses, under the general heading of 'French Crossings', I have taken the idea of crossing very broadly, ranging from the crossing of territorial boundaries, to the crossing of disciplinary frontiers, through to the meaning of crossing in the lives of my subjects. In 2009, I used the differential, Anglo-French reception of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, and his own personal Channel-hoppings, to explore issues of personal and national identity under a transnational prism.⁷ Last year, the book of comic drawings of the obscure French court embroiderer, Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, allowed me to examine the crossing of social boundaries and the role of laughter in sometimes transcending, sometimes reinforcing, class frontiers.⁸ In the present paper, while incidentally passing back and forth over the disciplinary boundaries separating visual from textual studies, and the history of art and the history of science, I will be examining the crossing of another type of boundary, namely, the frontier between humans and animals.

⁵ Adelaide Labille-Guiard, *Maximilien Robespierre en habit de député du Tiers Etat*. There is a good if outdated account of Robespierre's pictorial representations in Hippolyte Buffenois, *Les portraits de Robespierre* (Paris, 1910).

⁶ Merlin de Thionville, *Portrait de Robespierre*, 1 (BL, F852(1)).

⁷ Colin Jones, 'Tales of Two Cities', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 20 (2010), 1–26.

⁸ Colin Jones, 'Laughing over Boundaries', *ibid.*, 21 (2011), 1–38.

Yet, is the term ‘frontier’ justified in regard to human–animal relations? In recent years, a number of continental philosophers – Giorgio Agamben, Emmanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and others – have explored the human–animal relationship in an avowedly ‘post-humanist’ spirit that posits as its foundation porosity rather than rupture.⁹ Oddly, early modern French society in some ways prefigured this. While people certainly viewed with horror monstrous beings that incorporated within their bodies human and animal components, suggesting a sense of incommensurability, yet at a more everyday level they were also well habituated to less extreme and prejudicial ideas involving the crossing of the human–animal frontier.¹⁰ One of these was physiognomy, a discipline which historians have too often lost from view, and on which Merlin was drawing in composing his Revolutionary bestiary. Flourishing particularly between *c.* 1500 and *c.* 1850, physiognomical writing and analysis provided a space in which individuals could explore what united humans and animals and what differentiated them. It thus offers an appropriate lens through which to explore changing views of the human–animal relationship. Significantly, moreover, although we may (foolishly) imagine that smiling lies beyond historical analysis¹¹ and (misguidedly?) surmise that it is quintessentially human (and therefore presumably non-animal), the smile was a source of much physiognomical reflection. The putative smile on the face of an alleged tiger will thus allow us to reflect on the human–animal relationship while also considering the pressing political, ideological and historiographical issues in play concerning the French Revolutionary Terror in which physiognomy came to be caught up.

Considering how widespread and influential physiognomy has been as a form of knowledge which had currency for an exceptionally long period

⁹ Key texts include Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, 1998); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, 1990); Jacques Derrida, ‘The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’, *Critical Enquiry*, 28 (2002), 369–418; Emmanuel Levinas, ‘The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights’, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (1990), 151–3. A good anthology of this literature is Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, eds., *Animal Philosophy. Essential Readings in Continental Thought* (2004). Joanna Bourke, in *What It Means To Be Human. Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (2011), seeks to historicise these approaches. See also Martin Kemp, *The Human Animal in Western Art and Science* (Chicago, 2007).

¹⁰ Arnold Davidson, ‘The Horror of Monsters’, in *The Boundaries of Humanity. Humans, Animals and Machines*, ed. James J. Sheehan and Morton Sosna (Berkeley, 1991). Cf. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (Oxford, 1983); Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (New York, 1999); Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (New York, 1998); and Jean-Jacques Courtine, ‘Le corps inhumain’, in *Histoire du corps*, 1: *De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, ed. *idem*, Alain Corbin and Georges Vigarello (Paris, 2005), 373–86.

¹¹ See however Angus Trumble, *A Brief History of the Smile* (New York, 2004).

across an impressively wide range of cultures, it remains surprisingly under-studied.¹² The discipline has a venerable pedigree in western and Arabic cultures, as well as long-established traditions in India, China, Japan and elsewhere. The earliest existing physiognomic dicta are to be found on Mesopotamian clay tablets carved over 3,000 years ago. They propound things such as: ‘If a man has curly hair on his shoulders, women will fall in love with him’, or ‘If a man with a contorted face has a prominent right eye, far from home dogs will eat him.’¹³ Physiognomy always had an air of pseudo-empirical non-falsifiability, that is evident in the shards of the discipline which remain in our own culture (such as the idea of individuals with red hair having fiery tempers). The basic notion behind physiognomy is that one can grasp an individual’s character, identity and even destiny by close informed scrutiny of their outward physical appearance, especially their face. Developed in Antiquity, physiognomy was taught in medieval universities; it gained in intellectual cogency during the Renaissance; it was found in manuscript and printed sources in just about every European language in the early modern period from Icelandic to Welsh; and it was published in every imaginable print format from learned in-folios through to cheap almanachs and broadsheets.

One reason for physiognomy’s astonishing longevity and cultural reach has been its capacity for adapting its precepts to harmonise with current ways of understanding the world. Like Galenic medical theory which for much of the early modern period still provided the standard way of thinking, about states of bodily health, for example, physiognomy was grounded in a cosmology expressing itself in correspondences between substances and qualities both within and between the supra- and sub-lunar worlds. This encompassed correspondence between humans and animals. A hoary physiognomic truism had it that one of the ways that character could be read was through detecting human resemblances with animals.

¹² The subject of physiognomy within the west European tradition has come increasingly into focus in recent decades, but still represents a poorly covered field. Much recent work has focused on the later phases of the movement, dating from the work of Lavater in the late eighteenth century (see below, n. 26). For the medieval and early modern period, particularly useful are Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul. The Art of Physiognomy in European Culture, 1470–1780* (Oxford, 2005), and Jean-Jacques Courtine and Claudine Haroche, *Histoire du visage: exprimer et taire ses émotions, XVIe–début XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1988). See too Paolo Getrevis, *Le scrittura des volto. Fisiognomica e modelli culturali dal Medioevo ad oggi* (Milan, 1991); Lucia Rodler, *I silenzi mimici del volto* (Pisa, 1991); Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen, *L’invention du corps: la représentation de l’homme du Moyen Âge à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1997); Ian Maclean, ‘The Logic of Physiognomy in the Late Renaissance’, *Early Science and Medicine*, 16 (2011), 275–95; Jean-Jacques Courtine, ‘Le miroir de l’âme’, in *Histoire du corps*, ed. Courtine, Corbin and Vigarello. See too Martial Guédron, *L’art de la grimace: cinq siècles d’excès de visage* (Paris, 2011), 303–9.

¹³ Porter, *Windows of the Soul*, 48.