**THE KISS OF LAMOURETTE**

*Note to students: To celebrate the bicentennial anniversary of the French Revolution (1989), Robert Darnton was asked by the New York Times to write an essay giving an overview of the French Revolution's significance. It is a perfect introduction to the subject. The New York Times, however, rejected Darnton's article because the editors thought it too difficult for their readership. You judge.*

 What was so revolutionary about the French Revolution? The question might seem imperti­nent at a time like this, when all the world is congratulating France on the two hundredth anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, the destruction of feudalism, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. But the bicentennial fuss has little to do with what actually happened two centuries ago.

 Historians have long pointed out that the Bastille was almost empty on July 14, 1789. Many of them argue that feudalism had already ceased to exist by the time it was abolished, and few would deny that the rights of man were swallowed up in the Terror only five years after they were first proclaimed. Does a sober view of the Revolution reveal nothing but misplaced violence and hollow proclamations—nothing more than a "myth," to use a term favored by the late Alfred Cobban, a skeptical English historian who had no use for guillotines and revolutionary slogans?

 One might reply that myths can move mountains. They can acquire a rocklike reality as solid as the Eiffel Tower, which the French built to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the Revo­lution in 1889. France will spend millions in 1989, erecting buildings, creating centers, producing concrete contemporary expressions of the force that burst loose on the world two hundred years ago. But what is it?

 Although the spirit of '89 is no easier to fix in words than in mortar brick, it could be charac­terized as energy—a will to build a new world from the ruins of the regime that fell apart in the summer of 1789. That energy permeated everything during the French Revolution. It transformed life, not only for the activists trying to channel it in directions of their own choosing, but for ordinary persons going about their daily business.

 The idea of a fundamental change in the tenor of everyday life may seem easy enough to accept in the abstract, but few of us can really assimilate it. We take the world as it comes and cannot imagine it organized differently, unless we have experienced moments when things fall apart—a death perhaps, or a divorce, or the sudden obliteration of something that seemed immu­table, like the roof over our heads or the ground under our feet.

 Such shocks often dislodge individual lives, but they rarely traumatize societies. In 1789 the French had to confront the collapse of a whole social order—the world that they defined retrospec­tively as the Ancient Regime (i.e. Old Regime)—and to find some new order in the chaos surround­ing them. They experienced reality as something that could be destroyed and reconstructed, and they faced seemingly limitless possibilities, both for good and for evil, for raising a Utopia and for falling back into tyranny.

 To be sure, a few seismic upheavals had convulsed French society in earlier ages—the Black Plague in the fourteenth century, for example, and the religious wars in the late sixteenth century. But no one was ready for a revolution in 1789. The idea itself did not exist. If you look up "revolution" in standard dictionaries from the eighteenth century, you find definitions that derive from the verb to revolve, such as "the return of a planet or a star to the same point from which it parted."

 The French did not have much of a political vocabulary before 1789, because politics took place at Versailles, in the remote world of the king's court. Once ordinary people began to partici­pate in politics—in the elections to the Estates General, which were based on something approximat­ing universal male suffrage, and in the insurrections of the streets—they needed to find words for what they had seen and done. They developed fundamental new categories, such as "left" and "right," which derive from the seating plan of the National Assembly, and "revolution" itself. The experience came first, the concept afterward. But what was that experience?

 Only a small minority of activists joined the Jacobin clubs, but everyone was touched by the Revolution because the Revolution reached into everything. For example, it recreated time and space. According to the revolutionary calendar adopted in 1793 and used until 1805, time began when the old monarchy ended, on September 22, 1792—the first of Vendemiaire, Year I.

 By formal vote of the Convention, the revolutionaries divided time into units that they took to be rational and natural. Now there were to be ten days to a week, three weeks to a month, and twelve months to a year. The five days left over at the end became patriotic holidays, jours sans-culottides. given over to civic qualities: Virtue, Genius, Labor, Opinion, and Rewards.

 Ordinary days received new names as well, which suggested mathematical regularity: primidi, duodi, tridi, and so on up to decadi. Each day was dedicated to some aspect of rural life so that agronomy would displace the saint's days of the Christian calendar. Thus November 22, for­merly devoted to Saint Cecilia, became the day of the turnip; November 25, formerly Saint Catherine's day, became the day of the pig; and November 30, previously the day of Saint Andrew, became the day of the pick. The names of the new months also made time seem to conform to the natural rhythm of the seasons. January 1, 1989, for example, would be the twelfth of Mivose, Year 197, Nivose being the month of snow, located after the months of fog (Brumaire) and cold (Frimaire) and before the months of rain (Pluviose) and wind (Ventose).

 The adoption of the metric system represented a similar attempt to impose a rational and natural organization on space. According to a decree of 1795, the meter was to be "the unit of length equal to one ten-millionth part of the arc of the terrestrial meridium between the North Pole and the Equator." Of course, ordinary citizens could not make much of such a definition. They were slow to adopt the meter and the gram, the corresponding new unit of weight, and few of them favored the new week, which gave them one day of rest in ten instead of one on seven. But even where old habits remained, the revolutionaries stamped their ideas on contemporary consciousness by changing everything’s name.

 Fourteen hundred streets in Paris received new names, because the old ones contained some reference to a king, a queen, or a saint. The Place Louis XV, where the most spectacular guillotining took place, became the Place de la Revolution; and later, in an attempt to bury the hatchet, it ac­quired its present name, Place de la Concorde. The Church of Saint Laurent became the Temple of Marriage and Fidelity; Notre Dame became the Temple of Reason; Montmartre became Mont Marat. Thirty towns took the famous revolutionary journalist Marat's name—thirty of the six thousand that also tried to expunge their past by name changes. Montmorency became Emile, Saint-Malo became Victoire Montagnarde, and Coulanges became Cou Sans-Culottes ("anges" or angels being a sign of superstition).

 The revolutionaries even renamed themselves. It wouldn't do of course, to be called Louis in 1793 and 1794. The Louis called themselves Brutus of Spartacus. Last names like Le Roy (king) or Lévesque (bishop), very common in France, became La Lois or Liberte. Children received all kinds of names foisted on them—some from nature (Pissenlit or Dandelion did nicely for girls, Rhubarb for boys) and some from current events (Fructidor, Constitution, The Tenth of August, Marat-Couthon-Pique). The foreign minister Pierre-Henri Lebrun named his daughter Civilization-Jemappes-Republique.

 Meanwhile, the queen bee became a "laying bee" (abeille pondeuse); chess pieces were renamed, because a good revolutionary would not play kings, queens, knights, and bishops; and the kings, queens, and jacks of playing cards became liberties, equalities, and fraternities. The revolu­tionaries set out to change everything: crockery, furniture, law codes, religion, the map of France itself, which was divided into departments—that is, symmetrical units of equal size with names taken from rivers and mountains—in a place of the irregular provinces.

 Before 1789, France was a crazy-quilt of overlapping and incompatible units, some fiscal, some judicial, some administrative, some economic, and some religious. After 1789, those segments were melted down into a single substance— the French nation. With its patriotic festivals, its tri­color flag, its hymns, its martyrs, its army, and its wars, the Revolution accomplished what had been impossible for Louis XIV and his successors: it united the various elements of the kingdom into a nation and conquered the rest of Europe. In doing so, the Revolution unleashed a new force, nation­alism, which would mobilize millions and topple governments for the next two hundred years.

 Of course, the nation-state did not sweep everything before it. It failed to impose the French language on the majority of the French people, who continued to speak all sorts of mutually incom­prehensible dialects, despite a vigorous propaganda drive by the revolutionary Committee of Public Instruction. But in wiping out the intermediary bodies that separated the citizen from the state, the Revolution transformed the basic character of public life.

 It went further: it extended the public into the private sphere, inserting itself into the most intimate relationships. Intimacy in French is conveyed by the pronoun tu as distinct from the vous employed in formal address. Although the French sometimes use tu quite casually today, under the Old Regime they reserved it for asymmetrical or intensely personal relations. Parents said tu to children, who replied with vous. The tu was used by superiors addressing inferiors, by humans commanding animals, and by lovers— after the first kiss, or exclusively between the sheets. When French mountain climbers reach a certain altitude, they still switch from the vous to tu, as if all men become equal in the face of enormousness of nature.

 The French Revolution wanted to make everbody tu. Here is a resolution passed in Novem­ber, 1793, by the department of Tarn, a poor, mountainous area in southern France:

 "Considering that the eternal principles of equality forbid that a citizen say vous to another citizen, who replies by calling him tu, decrees that the word vous. When it is a question of the singu­lar, is from this moment banished from the language of the free French and will on all occasions be replaced by the word tu."

 A delegation of sans-culottes petitioned the National Convention in 1794 to abolish the vous, "...as a result of which there will be less pride, less discrimination, less social reserve, more open familiarity, a stronger leaning toward fraternity, and therefore more equality." That may sound laughable today, but it was deadly serious to the revolutionaries: they wanted to build a new society based on new principles of egalitarian social relations.

 So they redesigned everything that smacked of the inequality built into the conventions of the Old Regime. They ended letters with a vigorous "farewell and fraternity" ("salut et fraternite") in place of the deferential "your most obedient and humble servant." They substituted Citizen and Citizeness for Monsieur and Madame. And they changed their dress.

 Dress often serves as a thermometer for measuring the political temperature. To designate a militant from the radical sections of Paris, the revolutionaries adopted the revolutionary dress from the working class clothing of the sans-culotte. one who wears trousers rather than breeches. In fact, workers did not generally take up trousers, which were mostly favored by seamen, until the nine­teenth century. Robespierre himself always dressed in the uniform of the Old Regime: culottes, waistcoat, and a powdered wig. But the model revolutionary, who appears on broadsides, posters, and crockery from 1793 to the present, wore trousers, an open shirt, a short jacket (the carmagnole). boots, and a liberty cap (Phrygian bonnet) over a "natural" (that is, uncombed) crop of hair, which dropped down to his shoulders.

 Women's dress on the eve of the Revolution had featured low necklines, basket-skirts, and exotic hair styles, at least among the aristocracy. Hair dressed in the "hedgehog" style ("en herisson") rose two or more feet above the head and was a zoo. One court coiffure was arranged as a pastoral serene with a pond, a duck hunter, a windmill (which turned), and a miller riding off to market on a mule while a monk seduced his wife.

 After 1789, fashion came from below. Hair was flattened, skirts were deflated, necklines rose, and heels lowered. Still later, after the end of the Terror, when the Thermidorian Reaction extinguished the Republic of Virtue, fast-moving society women like Madame Tallien exposed their breasts, danced about in diaphanous gowns, and revived the wig. A true merveileus. or fashionable lady, would have a wig for every day of the decade: Madame Tallien had thirty.

 At the height of the Revolution, however, from mid-1792 to mid-1794, virtue was not merely a fashion but the central ingredient of a new political culture. It had a puritanical side, but it should not be confused with the Sunday school variety preached in nineteenth-century America. To the revolutionaries, virtue was virile. It meant a willingness to fight for the fatherland and for the revo­lutionary trinity of "liberty, equality, and fraternity."

 At the same time, the cult of virtue produced a transformation of family life. Taking their text from Rousseau, the revolutionaries sermonized on the sanctity of motherhood and importance of breastfeeding. They treated reproduction as a civic duty and blamed bachelors as being unpatriotic. "Citizenesses! Give the Fatherland Children!" proclaimed a banner in a patriotic parade. "Now is the time to make a baby," admonished a slogan painted on revolutionary pottery.

 Saint-Just, the most extreme ideologist on the Committee of Public Safety, wrote in his notebook: "The child, the citizen, belong to the fatherland, Common instruction is necessary. Children belong to their mother until the age of five, if she has breast-fed them, and to the Republic after­wards... until death."

 It would be anachronistic to read Hitlerism into such statements. With the collapse of the authority of the Church, the revolutionaries sought a new moral basis for family life, They turned to the state and passed laws that would have been unthinkable under the Old Regime. They made divorce possible; they accorded full legal status to illegitimate children; they abolished primogeni­ture (i.e. giving one's property only to the first born.) If, as the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" proclaimed, all men are created free and equal in rights, shouldn't all men begin with a equal start in life? The Revolution tried to limit "paternal despotism" by giving all children an equal share in inheritances.

 It abolished slavery and gave full civic rights to Protestants and Jews.

 To be sure, one can spot loopholes and contradictions in the revolutionary legislation. De­spite some heady phrasing in the so-called *Ventrose Decrees* about the appropriation of counterrevo­lutionaries' property, the legislators never envisaged anything like socialism. And Napoleon re­versed the most democratic provisions of the laws on family life. Nevertheless, the main direction of revolutionary legislation is clear: it substituted the nation for the Church as the ultimate authority in the conduct of private life, and it grounded the legitimacy of the state in the sovereignty of the people.

 Popular sovereignty, civil liberties, equality before the law— the words fall so easily off our tongues today that we cannot begin to imagine their explosiveness in 1789. We cannot think our­selves back into a mental world like that of the Old Regime, where most people assumed that men were unequal, that inequality was a good thing, and that it conformed to the hierarchical order built into nature by God himself. To the French of the Old Regime, liberty meant privilege that is literally, "private law" or a special prerogative to do something denied to other persons. The king, as the source of all law, dispensed privileges, and rightly so, for he had been anointed as the agent of God on earth. His power was spiritual as well as secular, so by his royal touch he could cure scrofula— the king's disease.

 Throughout the eighteenth century, the philosophers of the Enlightenment had challenged those assumptions, and revolutionary pamphleteers had somewhat succeeded in tarnishing the sacred aura of the crown. But it took violence to fully smash the mental frame of the Old Regime, and violence itself, the iconoclastic, world-destroying, revolutionary sort of violence— this is also hard for us to conceive.

 True, we treat traffic accidents and muggings as everyday occurrences. But compared with our ancestors, we live in a world where violence has been drained out of our daily experience. For in the eighteenth century, Parisians commonly passed by corpses that had been fished out of the Seine and hung by their feet along the riverbank. They knew a mine patibulaire was a face that looked like one of the dismembered heads exposed on a pike by the public executioners. And they could not walk through the center of the city without covering their shoes in blood.

 Here is a description of the Paris butcheries, written by Louis -Sebastian Mercier a few years before the outbreak of the Revolution:

 "They are in the middle of the city. Blood courses through the streets: it coagulates under your feet, and your shoes are red with it. In passing, you are suddenly struck with agonized cry. A young steer is thrown to the ground, its horns tied down; a heavy mallet breaks its skull; a huge knife strikes deep into its throat; its steaming blood flows away with its life in a thick current.... Then blood­stained arms plunge into its smoking entrails; its members are hacked apart and hung up for sale. Sometimes the steer, dazed but not downed by the first blow, breaks its ropes and flees furiously from the scene, mowing down everyone in its path... And the butchers who run after their escaped victim are as dangerous as it is ... These butchers have a fierce and bloody appearance: naked arms, swollen necks, their eyes red, their legs filthy, their aprons covered with blood; they carry their massive clubs around with them always spoiling for a fight. The blood they spread seems to inflame their faces and their temperaments.... In streets near the butcheries, a cadaverous odor hangs heavy in the air; and vile prostitutes— huge, fat, monstrous objects sitting in the streets display their debauch­ery in public. These are the beauties that those men of blood find alluring."

 A serious riot broke out in 1750 because a rumor spread through the working-class sections of Paris that the police were kidnapping children to provide a blood-bath for a prince of the royal blood. Such riots were known as "popular emotions"— eruptions of visceral passion touched off by some spark that burned within the collective imagination.

 It would be nice if we could associate the Revolution exclusively with the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen," but the Revolution was born in violence and it stamped its prin­ciples on a violent world. The conquerors of the Bastille did not merely destroy a symbol of royal despotism. One hundred and fifty of them were killed or injured in the assault on the prison; and when the survivors got hold of its governor, they cut off his head and paraded it through Paris on the end of a pike.

 A week later, in a paroxysm of fury over high bread prices and rumors about plots to starve the poor, a crowd lynched an official in the war ministry named Foullon de Doue, severed his head, and paraded it on a pike with hay stuffed in its mouth as a sign of complicity in the plotting. A band of rioters then seized Foullon's son-in-law, the intendant of Paris, Bertier de Sauvigny, and marched him through the streets with the head in front of him, chanting, “Kiss papa, kiss papa." They mur­dered Bertier in front of the Hotel de Ville, tore the heart out of his body, and threw it in the direc­tion of the municipal government. Then they resumed their parade with his head beside Foullon's. "That is how traitors are punished," said an engraving of the scene.

 Gracchus Babeuf, the future leftist conspirator, described the general delirium in a letter to his wife. Crowds applauded at the sight if the heads on the pikes, he wrote:

 "Oh! That joy made me sick. I felt satisfied and displeased at the same time. This said, so much the better and so much the worse. I understood that the common people were taking justice into their own hands. I approve that justice... but could it not be cruel? Punishments of all kinds, drawing and quartering, torture, the wheel, the rack, the whip, the stake, hangmen proliferating everywhere have done such damage to out morals! Our masters... will sow what they have reaped."

 It also would be nice if we could stop the story of the Revolution at the end of 1789, where the current French government wants to draw the line in its celebrating. But the whole story extends through the rest of the century—and through the following century, according to some historians. Whatever its stopping point, it certainly continued through 1794; so we must come to terms with the Terror.

 We can find plenty of explanations for the official Terror, the Terror directed by the Committee of Public Safety and the revolutionary tribunals. By twentieth-century standards, it was not very devastating, if you make a body count of its victims and if you believe in measuring such things statistically. It took about seventeen thousand lives. There were fewer than twenty-five executions in half the departments of France, none at all in six of them. Seventy-one percent of the executions took place in regions where civil war was raging. Three quarters of the guillotined were rebels captured with arms in their hands; and 85 percent were commoners—a statistic that is hard to digest for those who interpret the Revolution as a class war directed by the bourgeoisie against aristocrats. Under the Terror, the word "aristocrat" could be applied to almost anyone deemed to be an enemy of the people.

 But all in all, such statistics still stick in the throat. Any attempt to condemn a person by suppressing his individuality and by slotting him into abstract, ideological categories such as "aristocrats" or "bourgeois" is inherently inhuman. The Terror was terrible. It pointed the way towards totalitarianism. It was the trauma that scared modern history at its birth.

 Historians have succeeded in explaining much of it ( not all, not the hideous last month of the "Great Terror" when the killing increased while the threat of invasion receded) as a response to the extraordinary circumstances of 1793 and 1794: the invading armies about to over­whelm Paris; the counter revolutionaries, some imaginary, many real, plotting to overthrow the government from within; the price of bread soaring out of control and driving the Parisian populace wild with hunger and despair; the civil war in the Vendee; the municipal rebellions in Lyons, Marseilles, and Bordeaux; and the factionalism within the National Convention, which threatened to paralyze every attempt to master the situation.

 It would be the height of presumption for an American historian sitting in the comfort of his study to condemn the French for violence and to congratulate his countrymen for the relative bloodlessness of their own revolution, which took place under very different conditions. Yet what is he to make of the September Massacres of 1792, an orgy of killing that took the lives of more than one thousand persons, many of them prostitutes and common criminals trapped in prisons like the Abbaye?

 We don't know exactly what happened, because the documents were destroyed in the bombardment of Paris at the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. But the sober assessment of the surviving evidence by Pierre Caron suggests that the massacres took on the character of a ritual­istic, apocalyptic mass murder. Crowds of sans-culottes, including men from the butcheries de­scribed by Mercier, stormed the prisons in order to extinguish what they believed to be a counter­revolutionary plot. They improvised a popular court in the prison of the Abbaye. One by one the prisoners were led out, accused, and summarily judged according to their demeanor. Fortitude was taken to be a sign of innocence, faltering as guilt. Stanislaus Maillard, a conqueror of the Bastille, assumed the role of prosecutor; and the crowd, transported from the street to rows of benches, ratified his judgment with nods and acclamations. If declared innocent, the prisoner would be hugged, wept over, and carried triumphantly through the city. If guilty, he would be hacked to death in a gauntlet of pikes, clubs, and sabers. Then his body would be stripped and thrown on a heap of corpses or dismembered and paraded about on the end of a pike.

 Throughout their bloody business, the people who committed the massacres talked about purging the earth of counterrevolution. They seemed to play parts in a secular version of the last judgment, as if the Revolution had released an undercurrent of popular millenarianism. But it is difficult to know what script was being performed in September 1792. We may never be able to fathom such violence or to get to the bottom of the other "popular emotions" that determined the course of the Revolution: the Great Fear of the peasants in the early summer of 1789; the uprisings of July 14 and October 5-6, 1789; and the revolutionary "days" of August 10, 1792, May 31, 1793, July 27,1794, and April 1,1795. In all of them, crowds cried for bread and blood, and the bloodshed passes the historian's understanding.

 It is there, nonetheless. It will not go away, and it must be incorporated in any at­tempt to make sense of the Revolution. One could argue that violence was a necessary evil, because the Old Regime would not die peacefully and the new order could not survive without destroying the counterrevolution. Nearly all the violent "days" were defensive- desperate attempts to stave off counterrevolutionary coups, which threatened to annihilate the Revolution from June 1789 until November 1799, when Bonaparte seized power. After the religious schism of 1791 and the war of 1792, any opposition could be made to look like treason, and no consensus could be reached on the principles of politics.

 In short, circumstances can account for most of the violent swings from extreme to extreme during the revolutionary decade. Most, but not all—certainly not the Slaughter of the Inno­cents in September 1792. The violence itself remains a mystery, the kind of phenomenon that may force one back into such meta-historical explanations as: original sin (i.e. Christianity), unleashed libido( i.e. Freud), or a cunning historical dialectic(i.e. Hegel-Marx). For my part, I confess myself incapable of explaining the ultimate cause of revolutionary violence, but I think I can make out some of its consequences. It cleared the way for the redesigning and rebuilding that I mentioned above. It struck down institutions from the Old Regime so suddenly with such force that it made anything seem possible. It released Utopian energy.

 The sense of boundless possibility —"possibilism" one could call it—was the bright side of popular emotion, and it was not restricted to millenarian outbursts in the streets. It could seize lawyers and men of letters sitting in the Legislative Assembly. On July 7,1792, A. Lamourette, a deputy from Rhone-et-Loire, told the Assembly's members that their troubles all arouse from a single source: factionalism. They needed more fraternity. Whereupon the deputies, who had been at each other's throats a moment earlier, rose to their feet and started kissing and hugging each other as if their political divisions could be swept away in a wave of brotherly love.

 The "Kiss of Lamourette" has been passed over with a few indulgent smiles by historians who knew that a month later the Assembly would fall apart before the bloody uprising of August 10. What children they were, those men of 1792, with their overblown oratory, naive cult of virtue, their simple-minded sloganeering about "liberty, equality, and fraternity!"

 But we may miss something if we condescend to people in the past. The popular emotion of fraternity, the strangest in the revolutionary trinity of values, swept through Paris with the force of a hurricane in 1792. We can barely imagine its power, because we inhabit a world organized according to other principles, such as tenure, take-home pay, bottom lines, and who reports to whom. We define ourselves as employers or employees, as teachers or students, as some­one located somewhere in a web of intersecting roles. The Revolution at its most revolutionary tried to wipe out such distinctions. The Revolution really meant to legislate the brotherhood of man. It may not have succeeded any better than Christianity Christianized, but it remodeled enough of the social landscape to alter the course of history.

 How can we grasp the moments of madness, of suspended disbelief, when, for them, anything looked possible and the world appeared as a "tabula rasa" (i.e. blank slate), wiped clean by a surge of popular emotion and ready to be redesigned? Such moments pass quickly. People cannot live for long in a state of "epistemological exhilaration" (i.e. to rethink everything). Anxiety sets in — the need to fix things, to enforce borders, to sort out "aristocrats" and "patriots." Boundaries soon harden, and the landscape assumes once more the aspect of stability and immutability.

 Today most of us inhabit a world that we take to be not only the best, but the only world possible. The French Revolution has faded into an almost imperceptible past, its bright light obscured by a distance of two hundred years, so far away that we may barely believe in it. For the Revolution defies belief. It seems incredible that an entire people could rise up and transform the conditions of everyday existence. To do so is to contradict the common working assumption that life must be fixed in the patterns of the common workday world.

 Have we never experienced anything that could shake that conviction? Consider the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. All of us who lived through these moments remember precisely where we were and what we were doing. We suddenly stopped in our tracks, and in the face of the enormity of such an event we quickly felt bound to everyone around us. For a few instants we ceased to see one another through our roles and per­ceived ourselves as equals, stripped down to the core of our common humanity. Like mountaineers high above the daily business of the world, we moved from vous to tu.

 I think the French Revolution was a succession of such events, events so terrible that they shook mankind to its core. Out of the destruction, they created a new sense of possibility— not just of writing constitutions or of legislating liberty and equality, but of living by the most difficult of revolutionary values, the brotherhood of man.

Of course, the notion of fraternity comes from the Revolution itself rather than from any higher wisdom among historians. And few historians, however wise, would assert that great events expose some bedrock reality underlying history. I would argue the opposite: great events make possible the reconstruction of reality, the reordering of things-as-they-are so they are no longer experienced as given but rather as willed, in accordance with convictions about how things ought to be.

 "Possibilism" against the givenness of things—those were the forces pitted against one another in France from 1789 to 1799. Not that other forces were absent, including something that might be called a "bourgeoisie" battling something known as "feudalism," while a good deal of property changed hands and the poor extracted some bread from the rich. But all those conflicts were predicated on something greater than the sum of their parts—a conviction that the human condition is malleable, not fixed, and that ordinary people can make history instead of suffer­ing it.

 Two hundred years of experimentation with brave new worlds have made us skeptical about social engineering. In retrospect, the Wordsworthian moment can be made to look like a prelude to totalitarianism. The poet bayed at a blood moon. He barked, and the caravan passed, a line of generations linked together like a chain gang destined for the gulag.

 Maybe. But too much hindsight can distort the view of 1789 and 1793-1794. The French revolutionaries were not Stalinists or Nazis. They were an assortment of unexceptional persons in exceptional circumstances. When things fell apart, they responded to an overwhelming need to make sense of things by ordering society according to new principles. Those principles still stand as an indictment against tyranny and injustice. What was the French Revolution all about?

**"Liberty, Equality, Fraternity...."**