The Demon of Writing: Paperwork, Public Safety, and the Reign of Terror

Au fond, le papier, le papier, le papier.
—Jacques Derrida

In 1802, the journalists Charles-Guillaume Etienne and Alphonse Martainville published a history of the French theater from the beginning of the Revolution. One of its footnotes told a strange story, reproducing a letter from Collot d’Herbois, of the Committee of Public Safety, to Fouquier-Tinville, of the Revolutionary Tribunal, ordering the prosecutor to sentence the former members of the Comédie Française on July 1, 1794. Sure of the verdict, the crowds gathered along the streets to watch these celebrities being escorted to the guillotine. But they never showed up. The trial had been postponed because the files on the accused had gone missing. They had been stolen, Etienne and Martainville wrote, by “a simple employee of the Committee of Public Safety named Charles Hippolyte Labussière, who, risking his life, removed all the documents that were supposed to form the act of accusation.” Not only had he removed these documents, he had then destroyed them “in the most ingenious way.” The clerk “went to the baths, soaked all of the documents until they were almost reduced to paste, and then launched them, in small pellets, through the window of the bathing room into the river.” The Terror came to an end before new papers could be drawn up. The footnote concluded by claiming that the members of the Comédie Française had not been the only ones rescued by Labussière: “More than two hundred people owe him their existence.”

Interest was piqued. A skeptical reader sought out Labussière in person to confirm the footnote’s claims and left the meeting convinced that the clerk had in fact rescued even more people than the two hundred or so already attributed to him. The reader sent a long letter to the quasi-official...
Journal des débats in June 1802 sharing the dramatic details of how Labussière, as an employee in the Committee of Public Safety’s Prisoners Bureau, had managed to soak and shred the files of prisoners before they reached the Revolutionary Tribunal. The letter called on all of France to celebrate “the humanity of a simple individual to whom we owe the preservation of more than twelve hundred victims condemned to perish for their virtues, their wealth, or their talents.” And so France did. In 1802 Labussière’s portrait appeared in the Salon. In 1803 the Comédie Française staged a benefit performance of Hamlet—the first in France in more than a decade—to an audience that included Napoleon and Josephine Bonaparte, who seem to have believed that she too was one of those saved by the clerk. In 1804 the authorized biography, Charles, ou Mémoires historiques de M. de la Bussière, ex-employé au Comité de salut public, hit the shelves of French booksellers with a long list of Terror survivors who had him to thank. And over the next two centuries the story would be novelized, dramatized, serialized, filmed, even made for television. Politicians, historians, and critics would debate its meaning and merits. A bronze plaque in Labussière’s honor is affixed to the wall of the Comédie Française, a seafood dish in his honor is a fixture of French cuisine.

The Terror and its traumas have been credited with everything from the rise of new dance fads to the emergence of modern liberalism. It would certainly be possible to read this story and its reception as another example of the collective effort by the French to work through the terrible things that they had done to one another in their desperate efforts to secure the nation from its enemies. The postrevolutionary celebrations of Labussière’s heroics seem to provide, to borrow a phrase from the film critic J. Hoberman, “feel-good entertainment about the ultimate feel-bad experience.” This article, however, will pursue a more materialist line of interpretation. Labussière’s story, I will argue, tells us less about individual agency than about the conditions under which it can emerge; the story’s reception tells us less about how the French relived or relieved past traumas than about how they invented new myths to resolve the contradictions in those conditions. This is a story about the materiality of communication; a story, in a word, about paperwork. Between the summers of 1793 and 1794, Year II of the Republic, year of the Terror, the Committee of Public Safety deployed incalculable numbers of pens and papers in the name of national security. And time and again its forces failed it. The medium that made state power possible also sporadically, spontaneously rendered it impossible. In the months and years following the Terror, participants would come forward with harrowing tales of this paperwork. Former committee members would recount how it had overwhelmed their physical and moral faculties. Former clerks would relate how it had enabled daring acts of subterfuge and sabotage. One of these
clerks, Labussière, would become a lasting symbol of paperwork and its contradictions. This article will place his story in context before returning to consider its implications for our understanding of the powers and failures of the modern state.

The Demon of Writing

On October 10, 1793, Saint-Just took the floor of the National Convention to request emergency powers for its Committee of Public Safety. “Your wisdom and the just wrath of patriots have not yet vanquished the evil that everywhere contends with the people and the Revolution,” he told his fellow deputies. The Republic faced war in Europe, rebellion in the provinces, tumult in the capital, and shortages of raw and cooked materials nearly everywhere. Finally, there was too much paperwork. “I have no idea how Rome and Egypt governed without this resource; they thought a great deal, and wrote little,” he said. “The prolixity of the government’s correspondence and orders is a sign of its inertia; it is impossible to govern without brevity.” With a metaphorical flourish, he conjured up a “demon of writing” to account for these troubles: “The demon of writing is waging war against us, we are unable to govern.” When he was done, the deputies, whether persuaded, intimidated, or both, agreed to his demands, suspending the new constitution and declaring the government “revolutionary until the peace.” The dictatorship was in place.

Saint-Just may well have had Rousseau in mind as he composed his speech. The philosopher had repeatedly warned against paperwork’s deleterious effects. “The books and all of the accounts of financial administrators serve less to detect their infidelities than to disguise them,” Rousseau had written in his article on political economy for the *Encyclopédie*. “So set aside the registers and papers, and put the finances back in faithful hands; this is the only way that they might be faithfully managed.” Elsewhere he heaped contempt on “the terrifying multitudes of edicts and declarations that one sees emanating daily from some courts,” which showed the people that “even the sovereign does not know what he wants.” The writing practices that were meant to extend the power of the sovereign across space and time simultaneously threatened sovereignty’s unity and integrity. Such concerns reflected Rousseau’s critique of writing as such as the “dangerous supplement” to sincerity, authenticity, self-presence, and other virtues, a critique that resonated throughout revolutionary political culture, particularly the Jacobin subculture from which Saint-Just had emerged.

However, this declaration of war against the demon of writing was not only motivated by metaphysics. Since the summer of 1789, the deputies had indeed tried entrusting not just finances but all administration to more
faithful and capable hands. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen had promised that officials would be elected or selected on the basis of their merits and talents alone. But while the Revolution had made real progress against venality, for example, it remained almost entirely helpless against a far more mundane and pervasive form of corruption, the corruption of its texts. Even the most talented and meritorious public servant found himself producing and reproducing official documents in much the same way as a medieval monk, taking a surface made from soiled rags or animal skins and applying an ink derived from a tree parasite with a feather plucked from the left wing of a goose. \(^{12}\) Ink smudged, handwriting crimped, signifiers slipped, copies drifted, files vanished—Saint-Just’s demon metaphor was not at all a bad one. Meanwhile so much had come to depend on paperwork’s success. “Each hour that you consecrate to this work, each line that you inscribe in the register, is a step forward for the Revolution; each obstacle that you alleviate is a victory against the enemies of the country,” the philosopher-legislator Condorcet exhorted local administrators in February 1792. “Let these painstaking and tiresome functions take on a grander character in your eyes; let them be ennobled by the idea that circumstances have attached to them the fate of French liberty, and perhaps that of the human species.” \(^{13}\) Thousands and thousands of men—nobody knew exactly how many, or how to contact them all—were struggling to complete their paperwork promptly and accurately, a daunting task even under the best of circumstances. \(^{14}\) What would happen as circumstances worsened? As war raged, sedition spread, and hunger gnawed? National security was deferred and destabilized by the letters, notices, reports, tables, and registers upon which it depended.

From its inception, the Committee of Public Safety was as concerned with paperwork as it was with public safety per se. Its first responsibility, when the National Convention voted it into existence in April 1793, was to ensure “the surveillance and acceleration” of the administration. \(^{15}\) The deputies hoped that paperwork’s intractable materiality, its painstaking and tiresome functionality, could be surmounted through sufficiently rigorous measures of time- and work-discipline. But the mandate contained a crucial contradiction. Surveillance and acceleration were compatible in principle but incompatible in practice. Every additional report or receipt required by the committee from national or local administrators necessarily prevented them from the rapid performance of their other duties. Thus the more the committee tried to exercise its powers of surveillance, the more it risked delays in the administration, and the more it tried to accelerate the administration, the more it risked wavering in its surveillance. This contradiction would organize and disorganize the revolutionary government throughout the year of the Terror. An order from July 1793 reads, “The Committee of Public Safety notifies..."
citizens that given the multitude of affairs with which it is overburdened, it is now only able to accept requests in writing."\(^{16}\) The number of clerks assisting the committee with its writing increased from about forty the first summer to more than four hundred the following one; the demand for labor was so great that many employees were hired without presenting their *certificats de civisme*, the attestations of republican virtue required for government service.\(^{17}\) The law of 14 Frimaire (December 4), which institutionalized the dictatorship in the aftermath of Saint-Just's attack on the demon of writing, only exacerbated the contradiction between surveillance and acceleration. On the one hand, the law contained a series of measures aimed at speeding the rhythms of the state. It set detailed deadlines, for example, for proofing, printing, dispatching, and publicizing a new daily legal bulletin; delays were punishable by five years in irons. On the other hand, the law implemented a comprehensive new program of administrative surveillance that required authorities across the nation to set aside whatever they were doing in order to report back to Paris every ten days—the *décade* of the revolutionary calendar—with a full account of their activities. New national agents were appointed to monitor compliance; they too were to report back every ten days. In the law's most extraordinary measure, conversation between officials was now prohibited: “All relations between all public functionaries can no longer take place except in writing.”\(^{18}\) It was an implausible, even impossible demand, but it reflected the committee’s need—both real and imagined—for the kinds of knowledge and power that could only be worked out on paper.

Some sense of how this paperwork was supposed to work is conveyed by a flowchart for the Bureau for the Surveillance of the Execution of the Laws, which was opened in late 1793 to process the reports arriving every ten days from throughout France.\(^{19}\) At the top of the chart was “General Surveillance,” which was divided between the “external surveillance of all public functions” and the “internal surveillance of the operations of the bureau.” External surveillance took place through “investigations,” “correspondence,” and “expedition.” Investigations relied on the “examination of the laws and decrees of the committee,” “tables of the same organized by subject,” “review of analyses of responses and accounts of ministers,” “tables of the backlog of laws and decrees predating 14 Frimaire,” “examination of claims of the failure to execute laws and decrees,” and finally “verification and comparison of all ten-day reports in one group, organized by subject.” Correspondence involved “letters concerning measures to take and accounts to make,” “drawing-up circulars,” “making copies of letters and circulars for signature,” and “sending documents to be signed and returning those that have been signed.” And the last operation of external surveillance, expedition, involved maintaining “a journal of the operations of public functionaries,” “records of active and
passive execution,” and “the table of these two registers.” The operations of internal surveillance were still more intricate. After listing the various titles of clerks within the offices of the Committee of Public Safety who assisted in the task of surveillance of execution—rechercheurs, vérifacteurs, releveurs des lois, releveurs d’arrêtés, correspondants, copistes, expéditionnaires—the chart proceeded to classify the documents these clerks handled, from “the original copies of letters of ministers, the executive council, and administrators organized by constituted authority” to “notices of the reception of laws” themselves divided by “communes, cantons, and districts” and then subdivided by “square division of France into east, south, north, and west.” It was a system of remarkable sophistication. What new forms would the demon of writing take?

The Physical Impossibility of Doing Otherwise

On July 26, 1794, Robespierre threatened another purge of the National Convention. On July 27, better known by the revolutionary date of 9 Thermidor, the deputies deposed him, deposed Saint-Just, deposed Georges Couthon. On July 28, this “triumvirate” was sent to the guillotine. And on July 29, the arduous process of political, juridical, and cultural reckoning began, exposing the nation to shocking details about the worst excesses and darkest recesses of the national security state. The Convention formed commissions, organized tribunals, scrutinized records, summoned witnesses, and issued reports on some of the most notorious episodes and institutions of the Terror. Fouquier-Tinville, the lead prosecutor of the Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris, was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by the court he had once controlled. So too was Carrier, the noyau de Nantes, after a trial that lasted two months and involved more than two hundred witnesses.20 In December 1794 came the turn of three of the surviving members of the Committee of Public Safety: Barère, Billaud-Varenne, and Collot d’Herbois. A legislative commission was established under the direction of the deputy Jean-Baptiste-Michel Saladin, himself a former political prisoner, to compile evidence and formulate charges. After two months of research and debate, the commission recommended that the Convention charge the three with “tyrannizing the French people” and “oppressing their representatives.”

The commission’s report included seventy-five appendices reproducing a small sample of what it had uncovered in the archives: arrest warrants, rendition orders, prisoner lists, interrogation transcripts. One document after another concluded with the signatures of the accused.
Of the many crimes detailed in Saladin’s report, one struck contemporary observers as especially sinister. This was the formation of a Bureau for Administrative Surveillance and General Police, better known simply as the General Police Bureau. Established in April 1794 to strengthen the surveillance of government agents—the Bureau for the Surveillance of the Execution of Laws had proven too passive—the office soon exceeded its formal mandate to become a shadow security service directed by Saint-Just, Robespierre, and Couthon personally, allowing them to circumvent the already weakened protections of revolutionary justice. In the right-hand column of the bureau’s registers, clerks summarized incoming reports and accusations: “The commune of Faucon sends its list of former nobles as required by the decrees of 27 and 28 Germinal; there is only one, named Paul Henry de Mouret de Reviglias, chevalier of Barroux.” In the left-hand column, Saint-Just, Robespierre, or, more rarely, Couthon scrawled a response: “Transfer this ex-noble to Paris.” Any difficulties implementing these orders were also recorded: “It was not possible to find the department where Faucon is located.”

Arrest warrants were prepared either by a member of the Committee of Public Safety; by Augustin Lejeune, the bureau chief, whom we will encounter again shortly; or by one of the clerks working under Lejeune’s supervision. In theory, though not always in practice, a minimum of three signatures—a primary signature and two cosignatures—was required for the warrant to become legal. By cosigning the bureau’s warrants, the commission alleged, Barère, Billaud-Varenne, and Collot d’Herbois had colluded in its crimes.

Then as now, pursuit of high elected officials for crimes committed while in office required a certain degree of procedural improvisation. Rather than entrusting the case to the tribunals, the National Convention resolved to try the accused within its own halls, opening debate on March 22, 1795. The first witnesses to speak were two former colleagues from the Committee of Public Safety, the deputies Lindet and Carnot. Lindet had been in charge of provisions and subsistence during the Terror; Carnot had masterminded the war effort. They had been exempted from formal charges but were nevertheless worried that evidence would emerge implicating them, too, in the activities of the General Police Bureau. In fact, their cosignatures appeared on multiple arrest warrants next to those of Barère, Billaud-Varenne, and Collot d’Herbois. By testifying for the accused they were testifying for themselves. They were also attesting to their experiences managing the mass production, reproduction, and exchange of official documents in wartime.

Lindet’s testimony on the first day of the trial lasted six hours. He hardly mentioned his colleagues on the Committee of Public Safety at all. Instead, he provided a detailed account of his own activities during the year of the Terror.
These had been the activities of a conscientious functionary, he insisted, not a reckless ideologue. The year had been spent "continuously enclosed in the committee, aware only of what I read in the reports sent to us by the minister of the interior, the departments, and the municipalities." Even his mission to Caen to put down the federalist revolt there had consisted mainly of completing "decrees, proclamations, instructions, letters, memoirs, projects, correspondence...I did not eat at anyone's home, I did not go to any parties, to any plays; I was only the representative of the people, at every moment, day and night." The speech avoided any direct reference to the General Police Bureau, making only one allusion to it, at the very end of the day's testimony. "No doubt," he told the deputies, his voice by now barely audible, "they will search through the twenty thousand signatures that I gave to find some text to serve as the basis for an act of accusation against me." But given so many decrees, proclamations, instructions, and other paperwork, how could one or two signatures be held against him? Lindet's strategy, in effect, was to subsume each of his signatures in the context of his twenty thousand signatures, to subsume his twenty thousand signatures in the context of the twelve-times-twenty thousand signatures of the Committee of Public Safety as a whole, and to subsume those twelve-times-twenty thousand signatures in the context of a brand new Republic struggling to make its way in a hostile world. He seems to have hoped that the inflation of signatures would lead to a reduction of their value, that is, to a diminution of the personal responsibility that such signatures were supposed to signify.

A lawyer by training, Lindet must have believed that he could win sympathy by presenting himself as a devoted legislator who had done his best under impossible circumstances. Carnot, by contrast, was a mathematician, engineer, and military strategist; his testimony reflected his more calculating sensibility. "People of ill will try in vain to cite some signatures made by me on acts that they find reprehensible," he said when it was his turn to speak. "It must be explained once and for all to the National Convention what a signature in the Committee of Public Safety was. This explication is necessary not only to prevent the accusations that might be directed against members of this committee who are not among the indicted, but also because it weakens the charges made against those who are, by delimiting the boundaries of the personal responsibility of each one of them." According to Carnot, signatures—or to be more precise, cosignatures, the kind most often cited by the commission as evidence—were simple formalities. A cosignature indicated only that the document in question had been *seen* by another member of the committee, as required by law. It was "a purely mechanical operation that proves nothing, that attests to nothing, except that the reporter, that is to say, the primary signer of the draft decree [minute], had acquitted himself..."
of the prescribed formality of submitting the document in question for the examination of the committee. It was a brilliant attempt at redescription. The presence of a cosignature on an illegal act did not mean that the cosigner had done something illegal; it meant that all the signers had done something legal.

Carnot even contended that the commission’s report presented a variety of documents bearing his signature that he never had read, and that he would never have signed had he read them. “You might ask,” he said, “why, in the former Committee of Public Safety, we signed in this way documents with which we were not familiar? I respond: By absolute necessity, by the physical impossibility of doing otherwise.” Here he returned to the defense set out by Lindet. He and his colleagues were simply overwhelmed by the volume of work. “The number of matters ordinarily reached four or five hundred a day. Each one of us handled, or had handled by the bureaus, those matters that belonged to his domain, and normally brought them to be signed by the others towards two or three o’clock in the morning.” Under this de facto division of labor, he was no more responsible for his colleagues’ offices than they were for his. Absorbed as he was in his own work, how could he ever have “guessed that it pleased Robespierre and Saint-Just to plot against the rest of us in their General Police Bureau?”

Saladin was incredulous, and rightly so. Lindet and Carnot’s explanations elided their real responsibility not only for the activities of the Bureau for Administrative Surveillance and General Police but also for terrorist measures more generally. While there was a significant division of labor within the committee’s offices, it was never as strict as the members asserted. The surviving drafts of the General Police Bureau’s decrees prove their involvement (some are even in Carnot’s handwriting). But the accused, following Lindet and Carnot’s lead, vigorously defended themselves with seemingly commonsensical descriptions of their paperwork. “It has been observed with a sort of affectation that the signatures of the accused can be found on almost all of those acts provoked by Robespierre,” Collot d’Herbois told the Convention. “The reason for this is simple: it is because we were more assiduous than the others; we were always at the committee, and so we could always be found to sign documents.”

Barère and Billaud-Varenne argued along similar lines. There was too much paperwork; they were forced to divide their labor; their signatures were insignificant; they were not responsible. Were the deputies convinced? They never reached a final verdict. On April 1, 1795, following another uprising in the capital, the Convention declared a new state of emergency, deploying the military to maintain law and order. Barère, Billaud-Varenne, and Collot d’Herbois were ordered into exile without further debate. Lindet and Carnot went on to become ministers.
Tiresome Details, Barbarous Concision

The registers indicate that the Bureau for Administrative Surveillance and General Police processed approximately four thousand reports between April and July 1794. One of these reports involved an inhabitant of the Department of the Aisne, a wealthy former nobleman named Lauraguais. As a man of the Enlightenment, Lauraguais had first welcomed the Revolution, then grown uneasy with its progress. In an act of extreme audacity, if not stupidity, he had filed a complaint against local villagers for uprooting a tree on his property without permission. The villagers had selected it as their Liberty Tree. Citing Lauraguais’s lack of patriotism, the General Police Bureau issued a warrant for his arrest on July 16, 1794. Lauraguais was taken into custody, transported to Paris under military escort, and imprisoned in the Conciergerie to await judgment by the Revolutionary Tribunal. Fortunately, the Terror came to an end before he could be tried. He was still angry about his experience, though, and in the months after Thermidor he published two pamphlets denouncing those responsible for his persecution. One of those singled out was Augustin Lejeune, chief of the General Police Bureau.

Lejeune could not have been happy to see his name in print. He and Saint-Just had first met in 1791, striking up a conversation one evening at an inn outside Laon, capital of the Aisne. At the time, Saint-Just was a local poet, playwright, and pamphleteer; Lejeune was a clerk in the departmental administration with similarly literary ambitions. The following year, as Saint-Just entered politics as deputy from the department to the National Convention, Lejeune joined the army, rising to the rank of sergeant. Wounded at Neerwinden, he moved to Paris to take a job in the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He had been working there for six months when his friend, now one of the most powerful men in France, asked him to take over the Committee of Public Safety’s new office. It was April 1794, the height of the Terror. Lejeune was just twenty-three years old. One year later, with Saint-Just dead and reviled, he found himself publicly exposed as the supervisor of this terrifying instrument of political violence. Although he was not legally responsible for his work as bureau chief, there were always other, less formal kinds of retribution to fear as the Terror turned from Red to White. He came to his own defense in a memoir addressed to his fellow citizens in the Aisne.

Lejeune contended that he had ignored the first two summonses to work for the General Police Bureau. Saint-Just had finally come in person to the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to demand his services. No longer able to refuse, Lejeune packed his desk and moved to the Committee of Public Safety to take control of the new bureau. According to the memoir,
Saint-Just’s instructions were simple. Every report had to conclude with one of three words: “moderate,” “aristocrat,” or “counter-revolutionary.” The clerks’ appraisals would serve as the basis for the deputies’ decrees. One of Lejeune’s subalterns protested that these orders went against the rule of law. The clerks could describe the individuals involved, weigh the evidence included in the dossiers, develop the case for and against. But they could not be judges or jurors: “How can you invest us with the power of life and death by asking us to apply the words that will determine your judgment? This task is beyond our abilities! We can only analyze documents and provide you with reports.” 34 Saint-Just promptly ejected the man from the offices. The clerks had their orders and they were to follow them exactly.

Lejeune, however, had other plans. Once Saint-Just had safely departed, he told his clerks “to maintain the most exact fidelity in their reports, but also to enter into the most minor details that might exculpate and save the citizens whose destiny was in their hands.” He was not so naive as to believe that these minor details would convince the committee of anyone’s innocence. His hope, rather, was that by overproducing details, the bureau would underproduce reports, and thus slow down the procedures of revolutionary justice. Thus his clerks “presented five innocents for every six people denounced, and with that, tiresome details, infinite justifications.” Saint-Just and Robespierre kept demanding lists of victims. Instead they received reports, thorough reports, with all the relevant details and a few irrelevant ones as well. By Lejeune’s accounting, twenty thousand denunciations arrived at the bureau: “That would have been twenty thousand citizens, some sent to the prisons, others to the scaffold, if in accordance with the wishes of Saint-Just and Robespierre we had given our operations a barbarous concision.” 35 But he maintained that only 500 reports were analyzed by the General Police Bureau during this period. Of these, only 250 resulted in arrests. And of these, only 130 were brought to Paris to be judged by the Revolutionary Tribunal, a number that included Lauraguais.

What could be done to help these prisoners? Procedure dictated that Lejeune pass the relevant papers to the Revolutionary Tribunal for prosecution. “I sent nothing,” he explains. “I allowed it to remain unaware that they were destined for it; the tribunal received neither notification, nor copies of the rendition orders, nor documents to serve as the basis for judgment and so all of them escaped its ferocious teeth.” 36 Addressing himself to Lauraguais directly, he swore, “Your existence is my proof.” Saint-Just had wanted his blood but “a human being was there to prevent you from appearing before this tribunal of death. This human being is me.” 37 Lejeune proceeded to reproduce a list of other notables from the area who had been singled out by local sansculotte militants as “good for the guillotine.” Robespierre had told him to draw up acts of accusation against everyone whose name appeared there.
“I shuddered reading this list. I brought it home with me, I lifted up a paving stone, and buried it, determined to perish rather than allow it to reach its destination.”\textsuperscript{38} Nor was this the only time his personal intervention had saved citizens from certain death. Paperwork could take lives, but it could also save them.

Lejeune’s specific claims are unreliable at best. He inflated the number of incoming reports fivefold; he reduced the number of outgoing decrees by half.\textsuperscript{39} Nevertheless, even as the former bureau chief tried to minimize his culpability, he attested to the conditions and contradictions inside the Committee of Public Safety. The clerks were caught between the imperatives of surveillance, with its “tiresome details,” and acceleration, with its “barbarous concision.” The General Police Bureau had been the final, failed attempt to sublate this contradiction, investing the powers of surveillance and acceleration in Robespierre, Saint-Just, and Couthon personally. But paperwork had continued to defer and displace the object of power. Did Lejeune intentionally slow down the pace of political violence by burying it under paperwork? Did he then halt the violence altogether by burying the paperwork itself? No, but he could have. He seems to have recognized, if only belatedly, that the proliferation of documents and details presented opportunities for resistance as well as compliance. To his credit, he ceased making his claims, at least in print, once he was out of danger. He returned to work, rising to the highest ranks of the Empire’s and then the Restoration’s tax administration. A friend of the popular dramatist Eugène Scribe, he would devote his spare time to writing novels, the last of which was a fictional attack on the Republic and its regicides. His description of his months inside the Committee of Public Safety would apparently not be published until the 1890s, when it appeared as a “revolutionary curiosity” in an antiquarian journal. It would be left to another clerk, with a story at once more simple and more bizarre, to capture the public’s imagination.

As Simple as It Was Bizarre

The 1802 letter to the \textit{Journal des débats} from the anonymous correspondent who had met Charles-Hippolyte Labussière in person would provide the basis for all subsequent versions of the story. Labussière, the letter explained, had been hired as a clerk in the Committee of Public Safety’s Prisoners Bureau two months before the Thermidor coup. Each day, at two o’clock in the afternoon, he handed over documents to an agent of the Popular Commission, which had been formed earlier that year to hasten the work of the Revolutionary Tribunal. The agent neither inventoried nor provided a receipt for the twenty to twenty-five files that he was supposed to
receive from the clerk at the appointed hour. His haste made possible Labussière’s embezzlement. Nobody would notice if a file or two had been subtracted from the delivery, and if later it was discovered, nobody would be able to tell how, when, or where the files had gone. The imperatives of acceleration had subverted the rigors of surveillance.

Labussière began by hiding the documents in his desk. After the first week or so, however, this proved too dangerous. So he settled on the scheme that would make him famous. Late at night, around one o’clock, while the committee members were deliberating in another room, the clerk “would climb up to his office, go to his hiding-place, take the documents, soak them in a bucket of water, and make six or seven balls out of the paste, which he would put in his pockets.” Toward six o’clock in the morning he would leave the offices for the public baths, “where he would soak these same balls of paper some more.” Labussière would finally “subdivide them into smaller balls which he would then toss into the Seine through the window of his bath.” Thus soaked, shredded, and flushed, they vanished forever. The letter built toward the night of June 27, when Labussière discovered the files of the members of the Comédie Française. Narrowly evading detection, first in the offices, then on the street, he destroyed them too, saving the French theater. After the coup of Thermidor, he had taken a position as an assistant to Louis Legendre, a sympathetic member of the Committee of General Security. In this capacity he helped liberate still more political prisoners. He then returned to private life until Etienne and Martainville rediscovered him in their book on the theater.

That year Labussière’s portrait, now lost, appeared in the Salon. The year after that the Comédie Française held a performance in his honor. The tax farmers responsible for the theater company wrote a letter pledging one tenth of their share of the proceeds. “We see with pleasure,” they wrote, that the actors were at last “acquitting the debt of recognition that the majority of them owe you for having included them in the great number of people whom you saved from the revolutionary axe.” After the play, Labussière expressed his gratitude to all involved in the theatrical newspaper the Courrier des spectacles:

During this bloody period, horrible to remember, I had the pleasure of saving many victims from the revolutionary axe, at the risk of my life. How happy I would have been if this had not also involved the cruel necessity of risking the lives, more than once, of my comrades in the Prisoners Bureau, where I was hired as a copy clerk. I used a stratagem as simple as it was bizarre! I avow that, without their courageous humanity, all of my efforts would have been useless. They unofficially closed their eyes to my thefts and, through their silence, associated themselves with the glories and dangers of my enterprises. The tigers that drank the blood of men, although seized by fear and suspicion, were not careful enough to suspect me. My neglected exterior and my frank and joking tone gave me an air of simplicity.
that made me seem unimportant in their eyes. I dared to be human in an era when humanity was a crime; and I arrived at saving an infinite number of people whose names I did not know, 1,153 prisoners.42

The blood and hyperbole belonged to the post-Thermidor pornography of political violence, yet there was more to the letter than that. Wittingly or not, the clerk was contributing to his own mythologization by casting himself as a figure from French folklore. Etienne and Martainville had described him as a “simple employee.” The author of the letter to the *Journal des débats* had referred to him as a “simple individual.” Labussière was now calling attention to his own “air of simplicity,” to his “stratagem as simple as it was bizarre.” This was no simple simplicity, however. It was the duplicitous simplicity of the trickster, identified by Robert Darnton as a “master theme of French culture.”43 This simple clerk had thwarted the most powerful men in France relying on his cunning alone. While everyone else was looking through the files for orders or for information, he looked at them, and recognized them for what they really were: ink and paper. With their fearsome deployment of paperwork and political violence, the members of the Committee of Public Safety represented a new kind of villain. They had been humiliated by an old kind of hero.

This trickster trope would be spun ad nauseam in the 1804 biography, *Charles, ou Mémoires historiques de M. de la Bussière, ex-employé au Comité de salut public*. The police official who was obliged to read it before publication was alarmed by its glamorous depictions of state sabotage. “This infidelity, no matter what one calls it, would still be unworthy of an honest man,” he wrote in his report. He took solace in the fact that “the work is too miserable to produce any dangerous effects on public tranquility.”44 The book opened with a letter from the author to Labussière explaining how he had happened upon a manuscript containing various anecdotes about the clerk’s life and was waiting only for his permission to see it into print. Labussière replied that he had no interest whatsoever in the matter; the author was free to do as he pleased. The biography then recounted Labussière’s life in four small volumes of treacly prose. He had been born in 1768 to an ennobled family protected at court by the famously ill-fated Princesse de Lamballe. His greatest passion was the theater, and by the 1780s he was taking part in small productions in Paris. The Revolution provided him with a new opportunity for acting out: he would disrupt section meetings by introducing absurd motions; he would attract large audiences in the gardens of the Palais-Royal by denouncing the latest conspiracy to steal—he would reveal once the suspense had built sufficiently—his handkerchief. These stories always concluded with his narrow escape from the humiliated sansculotte mobs.
The book does not explain how Labussière ended up working for the Committee of Public Safety, except to tell us that his friends, concerned that he was endangering himself with his street theater antics, arranged for the position. Like Lejeune, he initially refused the offer. Once he arrived, though, he discovered that many of his coworkers felt much as he did. He noticed, for example, “that every time the bureau chief received orders to send documents, tears rolled down his cheeks, and often, under the pretext of a headache or terrible migraine, he would cover his face with his hands, look down at the desk, and cry.” This man was Fabien Pillet, who after the Revolution would become one of Labussière’s foremost advocates. It was Pillet who suggested to Labussière that “the occupations of the employees, far from harming the unfortunate detainees, can help them. This office is nothing, and yet it is a lot.” Nothing because, to all appearances, it was simply a brief stop for a small number of the documents circulating within the revolutionary government. A lot because “we can sometimes suspend the voracious activities of the Revolutionary Tribunal by working slowly and multiplying obstructions. At the slightest pretext we can delay, as long as possible, the transfer of documents to the Popular Commission. This way we give the detainees time to have their relatives or friends intervene by bribing committee members who are the absolute masters over the lives of men.”

On May 11, 1794, the biography tells us, the clerk removed the first six documents. Over the following days he removed sixty more. He acted cautiously at first. “But once experience had shown him how little order the commission placed in collecting its documents, he resolved to work on a grander scale.” The biography explains his procedure in greater detail than ever before. He would put the files of those whom he had determined to save in a drawer that he then locked with a key. Every three or four days he would return to the offices very late at night, flashing his entry card, and grope his way through the darkness to his desk. He would soak the files in the bucket of water kept there to cool the lunchtime wine. After pocketing the pulp, he would proceed to the nearby Vigier Baths, the large floating bathhouse at the bottom of the Pont Royal, where he would finish the deed. “These ingenious methods were the only ones possible during these times of rigorous surveillance,” the biography assures the reader, “because burning the documents was impractical, especially during the heat of summer, when fire would seem unnecessary or suspect; because transporting the documents in their natural state would have been imprudent, given their volume and the guards’ strict orders.” As for the final shredding of the documents in the public baths, it was necessary because the larger pellets dried quickly in the summer heat and might float to the top of the Seine exposing his sabotage. By mid-June, Labussière had
disposed of eight hundred files. By the end of June, he had rescued the French theater. And by the end of July, it was over. Labussière resigned from the Committee of Public Safety after making sure to “efface even the slightest traces of his hard work.”

Was it true? François-Alphonse Aulard, the first great archival historian of the French Revolution, professor at the Sorbonne, editor of the weighty twenty-eight-volume edition of the selected acts of the Committee of Public Safety, thought not. In 1891, during a revival of interest in Labussière coinciding with the revolutionary centennial, he dismissed the clerk as an “ingenious mystifier” and an “extortionist.” He pointed to discrepancies in the biography, which were easy enough to find, but ultimately based his argument on his experience and credibility as a professional historian. “I would add that, having lived for years in the middle of the papers of the Committee of Public Safety, which I have undertaken to publish, this committee seems to me to have always maintained a habit for meticulous order and a tendency towards extreme simplification of paperwork.” In such an environment, Labussière would never have had the opportunity to delay, divert, or destroy files undetected. It was a damning judgment, though perhaps not as final as it believed itself to be. It would soon come to light that Aulard, misled by the existence of multiple, conflicting registers, had overlooked thousands of documents in his research, including those of the Prisoners Bureau. Unfortunately, these archives do not settle the question either. There appear to be no traces of Labussière’s activities inside the offices of the Committee of Public Safety, except for the payroll records confirming that he was hired when he said he was hired and worked where he said he worked. In the end, whether he was an ingenious mystifier remains an open question. That he was an ingenious demystifier, however, is beyond a doubt. Labussière revealed the material instability at the basis of the national security state.

The Sovereign and the Supplement

What does paperwork do for power? What does it do to power? In recent decades, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and other scholars of the state have labored to understand the new forms of governmentality that emerged throughout much of the world beginning in the eighteenth century. Michel Foucault emphasizes the importance of “small techniques of notation, of registration, of constituting files, of arranging facts in columns and tables.” Pierre Bourdieu encourages us to consider how the state pursues “a homogenization of all forms of communication, including bureaucratic communication (through forms, official notices, etc.).”
Anthony Giddens reminds us that “all states have been ‘information societies,’ since the generation of state power presumes reflexively monitored reproduction, involving the regularized gathering, storage, and control of information applied to administrative ends.”

James C. Scott describes how statecraft involves “rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format.”

Thanks to their efforts, and to the efforts of those whom they have inspired and provoked, we now have at our disposal rigorous and sophisticated accounts of how paperwork made it possible for the state to tax and spend, protect and serve, discipline and punish, expand and contract.

Yet even as these accounts have gestured toward the materiality of communication, they have remained largely indifferent to the exigencies of the materials themselves. Long after print culture had achieved its hegemony over Europe’s public spheres, scribal practices persisted, not only in private—letters, diaries, laundry lists, and the like—but also at the very center of the modern nation-state. Split quills ruined important calculations; spilt ink delayed urgent communiqués. The development of wood-based paper, synthetic inks, and metal nibs in the nineteenth century may well have reduced the incidence of such mishaps but could never eliminate them entirely. The manual labor required to transform these raw materials into files, registers, and finally power itself is slow, hard, and prone to error. All those small techniques of notation and registration, all those homogenous forms of bureaucratic communication, all those regularized routines for the gathering, storage, and control of administrative information, all those convenient formats of standardization and rationalization—in short, all those modern forms of state power—depend on an activity that is both numbingly tedious and maddeningly unpredictable.

We must refrain, of course, from succumbing to the heady temptations of technological determinism. This medium does not, to take Friedrich Kittler’s maxim, “determine our situation,” at least not in any straightforward sense. Although paperwork sporadically forces the state along paths not of its choosing, these paths are erratic, aleatory, frayed by différence. The state arrives too soon, too late, or not at all, or arrives at the right time at the wrong place, or arrives at the right place at the right time only to find that it has come unprepared for the task at hand. Paperwork syncopates the state’s rhythms, destabilizes its structures. Under ordinary conditions the mishaps are corrected, rhythms restored, structures restabilized. But under emergency conditions—war, revolution, natural disaster—even the most minor technical error can have irreparable social and political consequences. Officials are left unready, soldiers unequipped, citizens unprotected. The demon of writing wreaks havoc.
All states struggle with this demon, though these struggles are not necessarily conducted in the same ways. Their strategies must be understood in the context of historically specific cultures of paperwork, that is, the material, semiotic, and ideological conditions of state-sponsored document production, reproduction, and exchange. By ensuring the surveillance and acceleration of the administration, the Committee of Public Safety was supposed to put an end to the chronic deferrals and displacements that prevented the full and prompt execution of the Republic’s political will. It was meant to establish, in other words, a much longed-for immediacy, presence, and plenitude of sovereignty against the dangerous supplementarity of paperwork. The founding of the revolutionary dictatorship, its institutionalization with the law of 14 Frimaire (December 4), and the formation of the Bureau for Administrative Surveillance and General Police, followed this same impulse. Still, France remained vulnerable to paperwork’s tedium and unpredictability.

Despite the opportunism that runs through their accounts, Lindet, Carnot, Lejeune, and Labussière all attest to the effects of the demon of writing, including the most enigmatic effect of all, the agency-effect. “How can you invest us with the power of life and death by asking us to apply the words that will determine your judgment?” an unnamed clerk protests to Saint-Just in Lejeune’s memoir. “We can only analyze documents and provide you with reports.” The power of life and death—sovereignty itself—seemed to have been corrupted and corroded by the committee’s reliance on paperwork; the political relation between men had taken the form of a material relation between things, a distressing phenomenon that French dictionaries, at the end the eighteenth century, were only just beginning to call “bureaucracy.” This material relation did not simply eliminate individual agency, however. Rather, agency was refracted through the medium. Thus Lindet and Carnot wanted to believe, or at least wanted it to be believed, that it was physically impossible to do otherwise than they had done. The combined but contradictory imperatives of surveillance and acceleration resulted in far too much paperwork needing to be completed far too quickly for there to be proper consideration of the political and moral consequences of any one signature. But Lejeune and especially Labussière’s stories would illustrate the flaws in this defense, one that has since become sadly familiar. The materiality of paperwork in fact presented unmistakable opportunities for resistance to the terrorist regime through everyday strategies of deferral and displacement; its superabundance meant that such opportunities presented themselves over and over again. This was Labussière’s simple but radical insight: Not only was state power resistible, it was water soluble.
The most reliable account of Labussière’s later years was provided by Fabien Pillet, his friend, supervisor, and possible accomplice. Writing the entry for Joseph François Michaud’s *Biographie Universelle* in the 1840s, Pillet described how the benefit performance of *Hamlet* had raised fourteen thousand francs for the former clerk. “But, unable to economize, Labussière soon dissipated this sum, and, despite the secret aid of the Empress Josephine, via the hands of Madame de la Rouchefoucauld, he fell into a state of extreme misery. Following a violent attack of paralysis, his intellectual faculties became so deranged that the police were forced to keep him locked up in a madhouse, where he died soon after, entirely forgotten even by those for whom he most risked his life.”

(Pillet himself went on to become a noted arts critic, dying in 1855. Of his own revolutionary experience, Michaud’s encyclopedia mentions only that he had “the good fortune to pass unnoticed during the reign of terror.”)

The trickster lived on, however, in national mythology. Alexandre Dumas père considered turning his story into a novel. Unfortunately, the task fell instead to a far less talented writer, Jules Claretie of the Académie Française, who incorporated Labussière into his revolutionary potboiler *Puyjoli*. Published as France celebrated the Revolution’s centennial, the novel emphasized the ethical ambiguity of Labussière’s actions. “One scruple stopped him: To violate the law! It was the law, law of marble, venerated, a sovereign goddess reigning. The law! And brows furrowed. The law! And armed men dropped their weapons. The law! And the nation responded, I will obey.”

How could a simple clerk dare defy it? “Above human law, eh! citizen—there is Humanity!” Claretie’s novel was soon followed by his fellow academician Victorien Sardou’s play *Thermidor*, which had to be shut down after opening night when protestors led by Hippolyte-Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray—the great chronicler of the Paris Commune, and greatly frustrated suitor of Eleanor Marx—objected to what were perceived as its antirevolutionary sentiments. It was during the parliamentary debates over whether to ban the play from the French stage that Clemenceau made his famous speech declaring that “The Revolution is a bloc,” providing a slogan for republican historiography for the next century. Censored in France, the play traveled abroad, including to New York, where a condescending editorial in the *New York Times* offered the episode as yet another example of all that was wrong with French politics and culture. The ban was finally lifted in 1894; a restaurant on the Boulevard Saint-Denis celebrated reopening night by placing on its menu a new culinary creation, lobster Thermidor.

Twentieth-century variations of this myth range from a biography published in England under the title *A Whoreson Mad Fellow* to an essay by the Polish
director Zygmunt Hubner to an entry in the French-language Wikipedia. One version, though, stands out above the rest, Abel Gance’s cinematic bio-epic *Napoléon* of 1927.68 The scene featuring Labussière opens with a shot of files stacked to the ceiling inside the offices of the Committee of Public Safety. A man suspended from a rope apparatus travels up and down the towering shelves, retrieving dossiers, which he passes to a clerk who is ordered to hurry: there must be three hundred heads a day. The camera then pulls back to reveal a cluttered, chaotic office. The clerk scurries to his desk and sets to work, quill in hand. He soon comes across a dossier with the name Josephine de Beauharnais, the future empress. The camera closes in as he looks around to make sure he is not being observed, and then bites into it, laboriously chewing, swallowing, and digesting the pages. The clerk next to him watches in wonder and then follows his lead, soon devouring the dossier for Napoleon Bonaparte. “Happily, Labussière watches over them, this strange character who, out of humanity, became a thief of dossiers,” an intertitle tells us. “Not a thief, but a *chewer*, risking his life at every instant to save the lives of unknowns.”69 The destruction of a dossier becomes a founding moment for modern France.

**Notes**

This article was written while I enjoyed the incomparable hospitality of the Society of Fellows at Princeton University. I would like to thank everyone there, especially Leonard Barkan, Anthony Grafton, Mary Harper, and Michael Wood, for their intellectual, moral, and material support. Keith Baker, Carla Hesse, and Joan Scott provided critical insight as I formulated and reformulated these arguments. Finally, Andrew Jainchill, Dana Simmons, Nicole Stahlmann, and the *Representations* editorial board offered invaluable comments on the article’s final drafts.

5. The most important account of Thermidorian political culture is Bronislaw Baczko, *Comment sortir de la Terreur: Thermidor et la Révolution* (Paris, 1989). On dancing, see Ronald Schechter, “Gothic Thermidor: The *Bals des victimes*, the Fantastic, and the Production of Historical Knowledge in Post-Terror France,”
Representations 61 (Winter 1998). The Terror’s role in the formation of modern liberalism is one of the principal themes, for example, of François Furet, Revolutionary France, 1770-1880 (Oxford, 1995).


7. I take the phrase “materiality of communication” from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds., Materialities of Communication (Stanford, 1994).


12. For a historical overview of medieval and early modern writing implements, see Christopher de Hamel, Scribes and Illuminators (Toronto, 1992).


14. The lack of a national directory of functionaries was decried in a decree issued by the Committee of Public Safety on 7 Germinal Year II (March 27, 1794). See François Alphonse Aulard, Recueil des actes du Comité de Salut public avec la correspondance officielle des représentants en mission et le registre du Conseil exécutif provisoire, 28 vols. (Paris, 1889–1951), 12:211.


17. These numbers are calculated from the Committee of Public Safety’s payroll records, Archives Nationales, AF II 23B, doss. 191B. For evidence of the failure to collect the certificats de civisme, see AF II 23A, doss. 181, item 27, “Tableau des
secrétaires-commis du Comité du salut public de la Convention nationale”
(the final entry in the table is dated 21 Nivôse [January 10, 1794]).


19. Archives Nationales, AF II 65, doss. 438, item 11, “Bases de l’organisation du
bureau de la surveillance de l’exécution des lois, Comité du salut public.” The
chart is also reprinted in Augustin Cochin and Charles Charpentier, *Les actes du
1:550–51.

20. On these trials, see Baczkó, *Comment sortir de la terreur*, chap. 3, as well as
Guennifey, *La politique de la terreur*, 130–32. The number of witnesses at Jean
Baptiste Carrier’s trial is provided by Jacques Dupâquier, “Le procès de Carrier,”
in Michelle Vovelle, ed., *Le tournant de l’an III. Réaction et terreur blanche dans la

28 Ventôse Year III [March 18, 1795]), 5. Marc-Guillaume Alexis Vadier, former
president of the Committee of General Security, was also accused, but went
into hiding before the trial and was rarely mentioned in the debates.

22. See Arne Ording, *Le bureau de police du Comité du salut public: Étude sur la terreur*
(Oslo, 1930). Ording’s book, which originated as his dissertation under the
Robespierrist historian Albert Mathiez, is to my knowledge the only compre-
hensive study of the General Police Bureau.

23. Archives Nationales, F 7 4437, entry dated 29 Prarial Year II (June 17, 1794).

24. J. B. R. Lindet, *Discours prononcé par Lindet sur les dénonciations portées contre l’ancien
Comité de salut public et le rapport de la commission des 21* (Paris, 1795), 19.


6 Germinal Year III [March 26, 1795]). This part of the transcript differs
slightly from the printed version in Lindet, *Discours*, 119.

27. *Le Moniteur*, 24:50 (7 Germinal Year III [March 27, 1795]).

28. Ibid.

29. Ording was able to locate 121 drafts of the bureau’s 464 decrees. Of these, 31
were either in the handwriting of a committee member other than Robespierre,
Saint-Just, and Couthon—including Carnot—or else bore the primary signature
of one of those other members. Ording, *Bureau de police*, 92.


32. The first pamphlet appears to be lost. The second pamphlet, from which the
story is reconstructed, consists largely of official correspondence between the
various participants in the case. Louis-Léon-Félicité, duc de Brancas, comte de
Lauraguais, *Recueil de pièces relatives au gouvernement révolutionnaire et au despotisme
des comités avant le 9 Thermidor* (n.p., n.d., but signed “Chauny, ce 26 Pluviôse,
lan III de la République Française” [February 14, 1795]).

33. Augustin Lejeune’s memoir is entitled “Conduite politique de Lejeune, natif
de Soissons, ci-devant chef des Bureaux de la surveillance administrative et de
la police générale, à ses concitoyens de Soissons.” The text, along with biog-
graphical information on Lejeune, is published in Alfred Bégis, “Curiosités

34. Lejeune, “Conduite politique,” 74.
35. Ibid., 74–77.
36. Ibid., 77.
37. Ibid., 78.
38. Ibid., 79.
40. *Journal des débats et loix du pouvoir législatif et des actes du gouvernement*, 5 Messidor Year X (June 23, 1802), 2–3.
43. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1985), 64.
44. The report is reprinted in *L’Intermédiaire des chercheurs et curieux*, June 10, 1896, 125.
46. Ibid., 3:95–96.
47. Ibid., 3:109.
48. Ibid., 3:132.
50. On the weaknesses of Aulard’s editorial methods, which were nevertheless heroic, see the bibliographical essay by R.R. Palmer, “Fifty Years of the Committee of Public Safety,” *Journal of Modern History* 13, no. 3 (September 1941): 376–78.
51. Archives Nationales, AF II 23B, doss. 191B. The records note that Labussière entered the Prisoners Bureau on 16 Prarial (June 4, 1794).


62. Ibid., s.v. “Pillet (Fabien).”

63. Dumas’s intentions are mentioned in the dedicatory epistle to Jules Claretie, *Puyjoli* (Paris, 1890), vi.

64. Ibid., 498–500.

65. On the play and the ensuing controversy, see *L’Illustration théâtrale* no. 38 (August 25, 1905) as well as Eugen Weber, “About Thermidor: The Oblique Uses of a Scandal,” *French Historical Studies* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1991). In his article, Weber argues that the decision to censor the play had less to do with its content—which he describes as “about as politically provocative as George and Ira Gershwin’s *Strike up the Band*” (332)—than with contemporary parliamentary struggles connected to the *Ralliement*. Weber does not seem to realize, however, that Labussière was anything other than a figment of Sardou’s imagination.


