

**LES TROIS URNES,
OU LE SALUT DE LA PATRIE.**

Par un VOYAGEUR AÉRIEN.

The Three Urns, or the Welfare of the Motherland.
By an Aerial Voyager.¹

My name is *Toxicodindron*; I come from the land of lunacy via Monomotapa: I have roamed the four Corners of the World, more in a reverie than in reality for life is but a dream. Everywhere I found the same men, idiots and aggressors, dupes and scoundrels; a world full of crime and error, so to speak. But because extremes are so similar and because excessive evil always gives birth to good, it seems that revolutions essentially regenerate governments through their excessive depravity. French people stop; read; I have many things to tell you.

I very much doubt that the world began with Adam and Eve, or that it must end with the French Revolution. These are tales used by the corrupt priests of the Ancien Régime to stupefy our credulous females.

However it is reasonable to assume, as ancient and modern history shows, that no peoples have ever died out at the moment of their regeneration. Meanwhile France, divided by three governmental parties, seems to be close to dissolution. But the supreme desire of an invisible being, who presides over the great destinies of empires, seems to act as a brake on the patricidal furies of the villains of all factions who only want to tear apart the republic and share out the remains. But truly! If we are really worthy of being republicans then what can they achieve?

'What can a crashing wave do against a rock?
Did Hercules succumb to the exertions of the Pygmy?
Olympus sees Mont Etna smoking peacefully!'...²

Oh French, what has caused your dissension? The death of the tyrant? Well, he is dead! All factions must fall with his head and, despite myself, your extravagant criminality recalls to my mind the panoply of great revolutions: I place it before your eyes; dare to observe it.

The Syracusans having dethroned their tyrant told him to flee far from their shores, or stay and become their equal; they allowed him to be master of his fate, the chap obeyed his sovereign and became a schoolteacher. The Roman republic chased out the Tarquins: in vain did they attempt to arm their tyrannical friends against a people who wanted freedom; they died itinerant vagabonds. The English, whom you try so hard to *mimic*, sent Charles I to the scaffold. This historic act of justice could not free them from tyranny for the dying Charles perpetuated royalty in England. Alas, oh French, such is our actual state: Louis Capet is dead, yet Louis Capet still reigns among us. Stop pretending it is not so, it is time for the mask to fall and for each of you to freely pronounce, openly, if you do or do not want a republic. It is time to put a stop to this cruel war that has only swallowed up

¹ *Les Trois Urnes, ou le salut de la patrie, par un voyageur aérien* produced on 19 July 1793 was responsible for de Gouges's arrest and eventual execution. In it she challenges the concept of the Republic, one and indivisible, by suggesting a democratic vote throughout the country to choose a truly representative form of government. This act had been made treasonable and punishable by death in March 1793. De Gouges's insistence that the present system was leading France towards bloodshed and civil war, along with fighting foreign powers, was too clear for those in power to ignore.

² A quote from *Métromanie, ou Le poète* by Alexis Piron (1689 - 1773): a five-act comedy written in 1736 and played at the Comédie Française in 1738.

your treasure and harvested the most brilliant of your young men. Blood, alas, has flowed far too freely!

Spouting republicanism with hearts full of royalism you arm region against region little caring about the denouement of this bloody drama. Despite seeing the thoughtlessness and imprudence of your horrible dissimulation I still want to serve you and save you.

A well-meaning God seems to be inspiring me at present. Yes, oh French, he cries from the heart of my soul. Here is what he is saying, remember his words: 'Dissipate your fear, *the day of happiness and universal peace is at hand*. I care for the mass of humankind that I placed in the world to live in peace and equality and if, at times, I allowed great tribes to give themselves leaders it was so that they might ceaselessly watch over their welfare and not usurp my sacred rights and create, around them, castes of parasitic privileged men supported by the State. I know not what crime made the priests purloin half of the public wealth, making me say things I had never meant, or how the nobles managed to erect palaces next to pleasing farmsteads and insult, through their ostentation and depravity, the indigent labourer, or virtuous cultivator, who watered the fields that fed these vain prideful men with sweat and tears.

'Oh! How much I prefer the rustic stature
Of the labourer, driven by simple Nature!
His uncouth trappings hide a generous heart:
Like gold,.....buried beneath sodden dirt.'³

Crime has finally broken my patience: I have struck these sacrilegious hordes; I have put men back where they belonged; I have started in France; I will go around the world and finish in the antipodes. But I want to purify my experiment: I want to *skim* the Revolution like a liqueur that, having soaked for a long while all the detritus of ideas that made up its body, becomes a nectar as healthful as it is sweet. I used crime to fight crime, one attacking the other; I had to make sacrifices of the great, that is my secret. Find a prompt and efficient solution.' 'The divided French,' he added, 'are fighting for three opposing governments; like warring brothers they rush to their downfall and, if I do not halt them, they will soon imitate the Thebans, ending up by slitting each others throats to the last man standing. I want them to live in more auspicious times. I do not want posterity to say what did they understand, these French: throat slitting, massacring, embezzling, exhausting the most productive and richest of climes; I do not want foreigners, jealous of their glory, greedy for their treasures, to come and invade their territory. It is neither the death of Louis Capet, nor the nobles' slighted pride, nor the upturned altars that caused the coalition of tyrants to *arm their slaves*: it is to divide up France and eclipse her splendour; it is to strengthen their own crown that they want to place on the throne, not a *king of spades* but a *king of diamonds*.⁴

Oh tyrants of the world, tremble; I am not on your side! If the fate of a divided people is, at last, to understand the necessity of definitively choosing a form of government, one which must, unchallenged, quieten all opinions, then I want the French, at the very least, to be masters of their choice so that they offer themselves the government that best suits their character, their customs and their climate in order that their revolution forever serves as a lesson to tyrants and not to peoples.

The French can no longer procrastinate: the day of reckoning has arrived. Now is the time to establish a decent government whose energy comes from the strength of its

³ A quote from *Épître au peuple* by Antoine-Léonard Thomas (1732-1785).

⁴ Traditionally French court playing cards represented historical figures, the King of Spades representing King David and the King of Diamonds Julius Caesar. I have not been able to establish the meaning de Gouges was ascribing to these two suits.

laws; now is the time to put a stop to assassinations, and the suffering they cause, for merely holding opposing views. Let everyone examine their consciences; let them see the incalculable harm caused by such a long lasting division (the total upheaval of the motherland) and then everyone can pronounce freely on the government of their choice. The majority must prevail. It is time for death to repose and anarchy to return to the Underworld.

Several *départements* are rising up in favour of federalism; the royalists are strong both in and out of the country; the constitutional government, one and indivisible, is in a courageous minority. Blood flows everywhere, this struggle is appalling and dreadful in my view. It is time for the combat to cease.

I would like the Convention to express the spirit of the Decree that I will dictate to you. The Convention, deeply upset so see France divided by opinions and beliefs on the form of government that must save her Motherland, proposes, in the name of humanity, that for an entire month the rebels be denied arms, even those abroad, in order that the entire nation has the time to pronounce on the three forms of government dividing it. All the *départements* must be enjoined to convoke primary assemblies: three urns must be placed on the President of the assembly's table, each one labelled with one of the following inscriptions: *republican Government, one and indivisible; federal Government; monarchic Government.*

The President will proclaim, in the name of the endangered Motherland, the free and individual choice of one of three governments. All voters will have three ballot papers in hand, their choice will be written on one of them: it will not be possible to make a mistake, either on the urn or on the paper, that the voters' probity dictates. They will place a ballot paper in each urn. The government that obtains the majority of votes will be sworn in by a solemn and universal oath of allegiance; this oath will be renewed on the urn for every citizen, individually. A civic celebration will accompany this solemnity; this sensitive and decisive act will calm passions and destroy factions...the rebels will disperse themselves; the enemy powers will ask for peace; the universe, as surprised in its admiration as it was attentive, for so long, to the dissension in France, will cry out: *the French are invincible!*

Yes, citizens, a God spoke to me on your behalf; now the author will speak: remember that I am an aerial voyager coming from the land of lunacy, I can therefore discuss with you; yes, like you, by saying foolish things in the name of humanity, I can achieve good things; like you, I love the Motherland and Equality; I would be delighted to live under a truly republican government, but this government, as you know, has to be led by virtuous and disinterested men. Who is the mortal, the genius, who will enable you to understand this truth? Is it you, Hérault-Séchelles?⁵ Will you implement my wishes? Examine without trembling, if you can, the suffering of France. Do you see those arms ripped from this fertile soil; see the cultivators, in their thousands, fall on the battle field. See our finances, all our means, used up; see the entire dissolution of France. See those perfidious men, thirsty for blood, sell us to the enemy Powers; swearing on the Republic but awaiting the height of disorder in order to proclaim a king.

A prompt remedy is needed for so much hardship. The national wish must, finally, be solemnly pronounced, and the choice no longer put into question, so that neither the rebels nor the foreign powers can any longer say that the majority of French want a

⁵ Marie Jean Hérault de Séchelles (1759 – 1794) a rich, attractive and intelligent lawyer, this revolutionary aristocrat was successively a Feuillant, a Girondin and a Montagnard. In July 1793 he took over from Danton as head of Foreign Affairs; as President of the Convention he had reluctantly been forced to call for the arrest of the Girondins on 2 June 1793. He was the hero of the celebration of 10 August 1793 which, along with his independent attitude, led Robespierre and St Just to distrust him resulting in his inevitable execution. Olympe de Gouges sent a copy of this text to him with a covering letter that clearly set out her compromising opinions; this missive was used as evidence against her in her trial. Hérault de Séchelles, away from Paris at the time, was quick to deny any connection with the accused.

monarch, or some other form of government. I will remain anonymous for now but, if I can save my Motherland from the abyss I can see her about to fall into, I will name myself as I rush to be by her side.