

PAINE AND DANTON

by Mariam Touba

Georges-Jacques Danton was a titanic—perhaps *the* titanic—figure of the French Revolution. Passionate and bold to the point that “audacity” was literally his motto, he accepted the violence of the street as essential to revolutionary success. He also established the Revolutionary Tribunal that would eventually turn and condemn him. To this day, opinions vary widely about him, but he is generally understood to have been warm-hearted and loyal. Although they may have differed on tactics, Danton and Thomas Paine shared affection and respect, and a couple of their interactions have entered into French Revolutionary lore.

Upon taking his seat in the National Convention after France was declared a republic in 1792, Thomas Paine’s first significant act was to speak out against Danton’s motion to replace the judiciary. Danton appeared not to take offence, and both men served on the committee to draft a constitution for the new republic. Although not consumed with the details of the work, Danton spoke English, and that was enough for him and Paine to cement their acquaintance. Unlike Paine, Danton voted to put King Louis XVI to death but was known to have suggested that, with bribe money to distribute, he could have found refuge for the king in England.

As subsequent events swiftly unfolded and with Danton at the height of his power, Paine expressed his concern about the course of the Revolution in a May 1793 letter. The letter is significant because so little of Danton’s papers survive, and it has been cited both as an example of good sense and—somewhat simplistically—as a contrast between the savvy, venal street politician, Danton, and the idealistic writer, Paine. Paine offers practical advice about ending the European war, price fixing, and locating the capital. “Despair,” however, underlies Paine’s whole missive over the “misconduct,” “little attention paid to moral principles,” and—most pointedly and prophetically—about the “spirit of denunciation that now prevails.”

“Revolutions cannot be made with rose water”

As the French Revolution veered towards Terror, one of its significant turning points came a few weeks later, between May 31 and June 2, when the sans-culottes of the streets and the National Guard surrounded the Convention Hall and forcibly demanded the expulsion of at least 22 deputies of the Gironde. Among them was Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville—hence contemporaries called them the Brissotin party—and several others who were English-speaking friends of Paine. Paine, in his letter to Danton, had anticipated this, but when Paine approached the Convention on one of those climactic days, he was treated with contempt by the newly-appointed Guard commander who suggested that his pass was good only for creating curling paper. Danton, upon observing this, immediately stepped in and warned Paine not to go in, as he was in danger of being included among the names of his proscribed Girondin friends. Paine’s despondent reaction was to quote one of those Girondins, Pierre Vergniaud, who likened the French Revolution to the mythic god Saturn devouring his own children. Danton’s famous reply, “Revolutions cannot be made with rose water” was also quoting a Revolutionary contemporary, Nicolas Chamfort.¹

Even as he did not enter the Convention that day, Paine did not withdraw entirely from political affairs, as the French archives contain his sensible policy papers written during that summer. Danton, of course, did not step back either as he helped centralize power in the Committee of Public Safety.

However, by fall, Danton found himself sick and exhausted,

and he took a leave to his provincial home. He thus missed one of the bloodiest months of the Terror as both Queen Marie Antoinette and the 22 proscribed Girondins were tried and guillotined that October. Many speculate that Danton left Paris to avoid witnessing the bloodshed that he could not avert.

Danton’s Return

Danton’s return was reported in London papers, and they contain an interesting detail about Thomas Paine:

Danton, whose influence appeared to be wavering during the continuance of his illness, was received with the most unbounded applause when he made his first appearance in the Convention, on the 22nd of November.

Thomas Paine, of whose departure for America the most absurd reports have been circulated, is still at Paris—He seldom frequents the Convention—When Danton made his first appearance on the 22nd of November, he was accompanied by Thomas Paine.

*The reasons that the latter Member of the Convention has never been molested in consequence of his attachment to the Brissotine party [sic] is, his supposed popularity in America—his work on the Rights of Man—and his entire ignorance of the French language, which would render it impossible for him to carry on any intrigues injurious to the unity and indivisibility of the Republic.”*²

I do not believe this episode with Danton is known, as biographers routinely describe Paine as staying holed up in his lodgings at the Faubourg St. Denis in the fall of 1793, while his housemates escape and even his landlord is arrested.³ In fact, when he is later denounced on the floor of the Convention, he is accused of not setting foot there since the Brissotins were barred. But Paine himself, in his tender memoir of the period called “Forgetfulness,” does qualify this by saying [emphasis mine] he “went *but little* to the Convention, and then only to make my appearance” because his colleagues were understandably too intimidated to translate for him. This newspaper report suggests he made an appearance in the Convention just five weeks before being denounced and arrested. It also leaves something to ponder about Danton, who, upon returning and ready to have his “moment,” brings Paine along in a gesture of friendship and—even more important in this context—protectiveness.

In the Luxembourg Prison

The episode adds to the poignancy of their final encounter, in the Luxembourg prison. Paine had already been there three months when Danton and his party were led in on March 31, 1794. For some of the prisoners, Danton’s appearance may have seemed like “just deserts,” but the majority realized with dread that it meant that the Terrorists had gained full control.

Among the first he encountered was Thomas Paine whom he

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greeted in English and added, "That which you did for the happiness and liberty of your country, I tried in vain to do for mine. I have been less fortunate, but not less innocent. They will send me to the scaffold; very well, my friends, I go gaily."^{iv} Danton and his allies were soon transferred to the prison at the Conciergerie for a tumultuous four-day trial before being guillotined on April 5, 1794. The 34-year old Danton had plenty of words, but his last, to the executioner, were characteristic: "Don't forget to show my head to the people. It's well worth seeing."

The Luxembourg encounter finds echoes 40 years later in the 1835 work *Danton's Tod* (Danton's Death) by the modernist German playwright Georg Büchner. Danton's words to Paine

are repeated and followed by philosophical debate over religion, where Paine, for the dramatist's purpose, but inaccurately, expresses atheistic views. Unfortunately, Paine is not depicted in the 1983 French-language film by Polish director Andrzej Wajda, *Danton*, where, in the title role, Gérard Depardieu is greeted by a raucous crowd of prisoners.

Thomas Paine's relationship with Danton makes for a human interest story, but it is also a reminder that Paine, in contrast to his Girondin friends who erred in trying to discredit Danton, recognized Danton's power and importance to the French Revolution and sensed he could appeal to Danton's underlying humanity. It partially belies the common notion that Paine—save for his lack of facility in the French language—was any more "in over his head" as an actor in the French Revolution than all the others who ended up losing their heads.

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- i The source for this anecdote is the English writer Lewis Goldsmith, a man with wildly varying political opinions, who published the story in his *Antigallican Monitor*, February 13, 1814, as cited by Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Man of Reason* (1959) p. 201; 335. Lewis socialized with Paine in Paris around 1801, so it is likely that he got the story from Paine himself.
- ii *The London Packet or New Lloyd's Evening Post*, December 4, 1793. Another London paper, the *Chronicle*, on December 21, 1793, disputed the degree to which Paine was associated with the Brissotin party, but did not contradict the substance of the story. It goes on to say that Paine "is looked upon as a very insignificant person in the National Convention" and that he is "nobody in France."
- iii The exception among Paine's biographers is Aldridge, p. 202. I made this same error in an article in the *Fall Bulletin*, "Paine in the Luxembourg: The Whys and Wherefores of his Imprisonment". (vol. 16, no. 3)
- iv The source for this story is a compilation called *Memoires sur les Prisons*, vol. 2, p. 153, published in 1823. Danton, we know, addressed Paine in English, but, since the publication first appears in French, we lack his exact words. The trope that he took Paine by the hand as he uttered these words, while entirely plausible, is not in the original.

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