Thirteen Portraits

In 1806 Madame de Fontanges, daughter of the recently deceased Jean-Samuel Depont, passed through the large bedchamber on the second floor of her father’s town house on the rue des Filles Saint-Thomas. She asked the notaries who were making the inventory of family effects to reserve a row of portraits for her own keeping. Whether these thirteen portraits were carted off to her husband’s modest town house in Auriac or kept in a Paris apartment, we do not know. Nor are we told whom they represented. But in the light of what we do know about the Depont family, let us speculate about who these thirteen people must have been.

Surely there was a Fontanges contingent—a bishop of Troyes or Laval—and perhaps the old marshal himself, Madeleine-Pauline’s father-in-law, in military attire with a touch of Auvergnat rusticity. Just as surely there was representation from the Escureul de la Touche family—Jean-Samuel’s father-in-law, the former Intendant des Menus Plaisirs, with the flamboyance and self-assurance of a Parisian man of affairs. Beside him, Pierrette de Cromot, fashionably dressed to befit the daughter of a well-known royal financier. If we turn to the main branch of the family, Paul-François Depont, trésorier de France, would have commanded a prominent place. One imagines a creation of the Dutch School of the previous century, shades of Van Dyke, a stern, sober, tight-lipped man in black with a decided touch of the self-righteous. Close by, Paul-Charles, Jean-Samuel’s elder brother, a rural seigneur and local notable, also sober and taciturn, perhaps a little sad, dressed in the modest riding coat of a gentilhomme from Aunis. Next, Sara Bernon, Jean-Samuel’s grandmother, a strong, willful, self-contained person, the family matriarch, unashamed of her Protestant faith and mercantile origins, a physical contrast to Marie-Henriette Sonnet, the wife of Paul-Charles, a thin, fragile, and worried woman in poor health. Their children might follow—Charles-Louis, much like his father; Virson, young musketeer trying to look military; Pauline with her husband, Froger de l’Equille, the naval officer from Rochefort, both of them flaunting a stubborn ultraroyalism that would end in tragedy on the beaches at Quiberon.
Somewhere in the Depont phalanx would appear the eager, youthful, yet anxious face—collared in ermine, capped with mortarboard—of a young magistrate of the Parlement of Paris. Charles-Jean-François De-Pont had political and diplomatic talent, undeniably a "young gentleman" of promise. Not far from her son's portrait would be Madame L'Intendant. Marie-Madeleine-Sophie L'Escureul de la Touche, not yet forty, must have been striking in pompadour, mouches, and brocade gown, cultivated in the art of conversation and equally at ease at salon soirée and official reception. Finally, Jean-Samuel himself, resplendent, official, a trifle pompous, wrapped in his intendant's sash and clutching a sheaf of royal dispatches. Among the portraits on display in the Marais hôtel surely this Depont looked most satisfied.

Making due allowance for the normal distribution of individual talent and mediocrity, of conditioning circumstance, of good fortune and bad, the Deponts had done rather better than survive a century of change and challenge. They had learned that success in their society required constant adaptation and the mobilization of a whole gamut of resources—material, professional, and psychological. By one avenue or another, they had entered all the elites, established footholds in all hierarchies—land, law, office, finance, high administration, Parisian society, in addition to alliances to old nobility and upper clergy.

With few exceptions the family had amassed those skills and attributes that Sénac de Meilhan, a former intendant of La Rochelle, expressed so well as he looked back on the Old Regime in 1795. "Favor, rank, esprit, agrément, wealth, and talent were equally respected. These diverse principles of esteem appear to have abolished the differences among individuals." Sénac was not alluding to all individuals of course. He was referring to an emerging French notability, a new social amalgam that would survive more than one revolution in the years ahead. The long reign of the "capacités" had barely begun.