

FACES OF REVOLUTION IN BRITISH CULTURE: POLITICS, LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

JORGE BASTOS DA SILVA

 U.PORTO PRESS

 CETAPS
CENTRE FOR ENGLISH, TRANSLATION
AND ANGLIC PORTUGUESE STUDIES

 fct
Fundação
para a Ciência
e a Tecnologia

TITLE

Faces of Revolution in British Culture:
Politics, Language and Literature

AUTHOR

Jorge Bastos da Silva

PUBLISHER

U.Porto Press

SERIES

New perspectives – Novas perspetivas

N.º 2

1.ª Edição, Porto, dezembro de 2024

DESIGN

Diana Vila Pouca

ISBN

978-989-746-403-4

LEGAL DEPOSIT

540626/24

PRINT

Greca Artes Gráficas

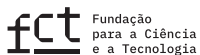
PRINT RUN

200 exemplares

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.21747/978-989-746-403-4/fac>

Financed by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the project UIDB/04097/2020 – CETAPS.



**FACES OF REVOLUTION
IN BRITISH CULTURE:
POLITICS, LANGUAGE
AND LITERATURE**

JORGE BASTOS DA SILVA

1.

Revolutions feature in the world's historical imagination as events of marked ambivalence. On the one hand, they elicit enthusiasm for unrealized possibilities: they promise to emancipate, to provide, to accomplish. On the other hand, they involve disappointment, misdirection, and ruin; they are undermined by the presumption of the enlightened few who believe they have an answer to all problems, or by the rage of the untrammelled many who ravage the heritage of their forebears and do away with all sense of order and stability. Revolutions, therefore, entail a mixture of hope, nostalgia, and shock.

The ambivalence is famously captured in the opening paragraph of Charles Dickens's historical novel of the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like

the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.¹

The irony is twofold. First, writing with the benefit of hindsight in the late 1850s, Dickens suggests that the French Revolution was an event of such magnitude that it might be deemed incommensurate with any other in the history of human affairs – were it not for the fact that any period, observed from up close, presents its own problems and challenges as if under a magnifying glass. Hence, the idea of a great turning point in history is discredited, becoming relative to an exercise in perspective. Second, the story thus announced by the narrator will show that the violence and injustice that prevailed under the Ancien Régime has not been redeemed but simply replaced by the violence and injustice of the revolutionaries. For all the proclamations of Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality, the storming of the Bastille has brought about no significant improvement in the moral fabric of the French nation, and the overthrow of absolutism has failed to produce much-needed changes in the institutions of the state. Far better than a disruptive, perhaps too self-confident, perhaps hypocritical, revolution, the novel seems to advocate, is a

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1988]), p. 7.

sustained course of social and political progress allowing for the unfolding of new relationships of power, gradually securing new rights for the citizenry, and ensuring that collective harmony is not unduly affected.

As hinted in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens's own age bears testimony to the desired compromise between defiance and conformity. The electoral reform acts of 1832, 1867 and 1884 adopted measures in response to unrest and discontent over the so-called rotten boroughs, thereby contributing to a more equitable representation of the people in the British Parliament. Most decisively, such acts extended the franchise by several million voters while preserving qualifications related to status and wealth. Demands like those of the Chartists, who mobilized spectacular numbers of demonstrators in their rallies and were perceived to pose a real threat to public order in the late 1830s and '40s, were met effectively enough to forestall the emergence of anything like the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871 (a radical political experiment that lasted for about two months and ended with the recapture of the capital by the army of the French state in the "Semaine sanglante", the "bloody week" – a milestone deserving of comparison with the "Bloodless Revolution" boasted of by the British, as we shall see). At midpoint in the period, the Springtime of Nations or Springtime of the Peoples of 1848, a cluster

of insurrections across Europe that have been variously described as democratic, liberal, radical, socialist, and nationalistic, not to mention other labels still, brought to the fore the widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo that was especially felt among the urban working classes and the peasantry (in certain countries, the serfs), and the need to accommodate formerly neglected political aspirations, in some instances involving the immediate or eventual reshaping of national borders, and in a number of cases leading to civil wars.

From a mainstream British political perspective, upheavals such as those tend to be more pernicious than fruitful. This was the case long before the Victorian Age, and has perhaps not ceased to be till the present moment.² My survey of the *faces of revolution in British culture*

² Consider, for instance, a speech given by Tony Blair to a Labour Party conference in 1997 in which he proclaims his government's adherence to "[o]ld British values, but [with] a new British confidence". Rather unabashedly, Blair, having recently taken over as prime minister, speaks of the people being "liberated" by electing a new government, and offers the following description: "The result is a quiet revolution now taking place. ... The British don't fear change. We are one of the great innovative peoples. From the Magna Carta to the first Parliament to the Industrial Revolution to an Empire that covered the world. ... Change is in the blood and bones of the British. We are by our nature and tradition innovators, adventurers, pioneers. As our great poet of renewal and recovery, John Milton, put it, we are 'a nation not slow or dull, but of quick, ingenious and piercing spirit, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point that human capacity can soar to.'" The tenor of the speech, which does not entirely evade paradox and ambiguity, is encapsulated in a sentence like the following: "Our new society that we want to create will have the same values as it ever did" (Brian MacArthur, ed., *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches*, 2nd, rev. ed. [London: Penguin, 1999], pp. 512-514).

will offer a series of tableaux focusing on historical developments, ideological debates, and literary depictions of real or envisaged revolutions with the purpose of showing that *the idea of a sudden, clean break with the past* has gained comparatively little purchase.³ Instead, an incremental spirit has predominated. The point is not that revolutions – in the sense mentioned above – were never planned or attempted. It is, rather, that the prevalent approach to the idea of revolution has been one that either denies the revolutionary character of the most profound changes or, if it recognizes it, one that derides revolutions as evils and mistakes. 1688-89 is an example of the former, the Interregnum is an example of the latter.

³ Thomas Paine, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Morris are among the notable exceptions. But even some exceptions prove to be ambivalent, as instanced by the fact that Morris projects his ethical and political aspirations onto a utopian Nowhere.

Where one might expect to find apologetic stances towards the idea of revolution, one often finds just the opposite. The anarchist William Godwin was not prone to endorsing agitational methods, let alone outright violence. He wagers instead on the persuasion of public opinion, not for “partial reforms [which] are of the nature of palliatives” (“They skin over the diseased part instead of extirpating the disease”), but for a comprehensive transformation of society, so that “[w]hen the true crisis shall come, not a sword will need to be drawn, not a finger to be lifted up. The adversaries will be too few and too feeble to dare to make a stand against the universal sense of mankind” (William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], pp. 122 and 123). And, for all the vitalism of his conception of the role of outstanding individuals in history, even Thomas Carlyle submits that “while so many of our late Heroes have worked rather as revolutionary men, ... nevertheless every Great Man, every genuine man, is by the nature of him a son of Order, not of Disorder” (Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, ed. Michael K. Goldberg *et al.* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], p. 175).

Admittedly, this is a matter of preconceptions, but it may be interesting to notice that such attitudes do not fail to have empirical correlatives. As can be seen in the very reluctance of the passing of the parliamentary reform acts in the nineteenth century, British elites evince a long-standing suspicion of social movements demanding change. At the same time, there is a long record of mob violence to be contended with. Historians chronicle riots against taxes and food prices (namely in the face of the Corn Laws), the destruction of industrial and agricultural machinery (the Luddites being the most well-known, but by no means the only, group therein engaged), and anti-Catholic hysteria (as during the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis at the time of Charles II). One may posit a continuum between those who agitate for parliamentary and economic reform, at the political end of the spectrum, and those at the opposite end who stand for misrule pure and simple, like football hooligans in recent decades. In any case, the unruly and disquieting behaviour of the lower strata of British society has proven to be a regular ingredient in national and even international politics. It is an ingredient, however, which in actual fact has never brought about a revolution, if by this we refer to the deposition or replacement of rulers, or to major institutional innovations.

An additional remark worth making previously to my engagement with a selection of texts is a conjecture that I will entirely abstain from substantiating, as it requires a lengthier explanation than can be provided here. The conjecture amounts to this: a vindication of republican values as a recurring factor in British political discourse (both modern and, to an extent, pre-modern) may have precluded the establishment of a sympathetic appraisal of revolutions as historical signposts with positive, progressive connotations. The influential Whig interpretation of history is an element to be reckoned with in this context, for all the scepticism it has been faced with, as it may be supposed to express as well as promote the notion that Britain achieved the condition of a just and free country earlier and under wiser terms than its European counterparts. Ultimately, the inheritors of the Anglo-Saxon witenagemot and the Magna Carta, the beneficiaries of the Bill of Rights and the RAF's "finest hour", did not need a revolution, and might as well dismiss all attempts to overthrow the order of the world as gratuitous, if not downright noxious.

2.

In the early summer of 1606 the theatre company known as the King's Men staged a production of one of William Shakespeare's most gruesome plays at the palace of Hampton Court. The play is believed to have been performed before King James I (James VI of Scotland) and his guest and brother-in-law, King Christian IV of Denmark, both champions of international Protestantism.⁴ It was a new play, and its title, as given in the First Folio, was *The Tragedie of Macbeth*.

The play develops material gleaned from medieval Scottish history (or, perhaps more accurately, from legend), and was evidently written with topical concerns in mind. Barely half a year earlier, on 5 November 1605, a plot had been discovered that meant to assassinate James I as he was presiding over Parliament. One of the conspirators, a Catholic by the name of Guy or Guido Fawkes, was caught while guarding the gunpowder that was stockpiled in preparation for blowing up the Palace

⁴ Some scholars cast doubts on the historical details of the composition (including revisions and interpolations) and early performances, but such doubts do not affect the interpretation of the play for my present purposes. Compare G. K. Hunter, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. G. K. Hunter (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 29-32, with Kenneth Muir, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: The Arden Shakespeare / Methuen, 2005 [1951]), pp. xv-xxv, and Nicholas Brooke, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1990]), pp. 1 and 59-64.

of Westminster. (The 5th of November would soon afterward be declared an official holiday, a holy day,⁵ and Guy Fawkes Night has been commemorated all over England to the present, with the burning of effigies of the Guy on bonfires in festivals of popular exultation which are clearly redolent of pagan and Christian rituals of exorcism. By contrast, the – spurious, of course – “Guy Fawkes mask” lives on in Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, and in some contemporary social protest movements.) Shakespeare, who enjoyed the patronage of the Court, wrote *Macbeth* in the service of a legitimist agenda.

Macbeth dramatizes the story of a Scottish thane who distinguishes himself as a dutiful, heroic follower of his lord, King Duncan, by valiantly facing the invading army of Norway on the field of battle and defeating a traitor, the thane of Cawdor (Macbeth is to step into his shoes by becoming the recipient of the title upon Cawdor’s being sentenced to death). From the outset, however, Macbeth is tempted (or possibly guided, as the extent to which this is a destiny he

⁵ In view of what will be observed below regarding the term “invention”, it is noticeable that the act passed in Parliament “for a public thanksgiving to Almighty God every year on the fifth day of November” describes the plot as “an invention so inhuman, barbarous and cruel, as the like was never before heard of” (qtd. in David Cressy, “Four Hundred Years of Festivities”, in Brenda Buchanan et al., *Gunpowder Plots: A Celebration of 400 Years of Bonfire Night* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 54-55).

cannot avoid is uncertain) by three witches, the “weird” (i.e. wizard) “sisters”, filthy, bizarre female figures in rags and beards who in effect open the play against a background of social and cosmic turmoil (there is the battle, and there is a storm) to introduce the topic of subversion: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair”,⁶ they say, and this becomes a sort of motto that will echo in the very first words spoken by Macbeth, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen”, as if indicating that, even before he meets the witches, he is predisposed to an outlook distorted by confusion or ambiguity (I.iii.38).

Acts I and II of the play delve into the protagonist’s rise to the throne of Scotland through the betrayal of King Duncan. Acts III through V depict Macbeth’s murderous rule of terror, his psychological deterioration, and his downfall at the hands of Macduff, in accordance with the prophecies of apparitions summoned by the three witches. A linchpin in the play’s structure, then, may be located in the last scene of the second act – the bridge between the discovery of Duncan’s dead body in his chambers in Macbeth’s castle, and a time when the latter has already taken hold of the crown.

⁶ Act I, scene I, line 11. Nicholas Brooke’s edition for the Oxford Shakespeare series is followed here. References will henceforth be given in the text.

In a play as full of thrills and horrors as *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene IV is a rather unique scene, in that hardly anything of moment appears to happen. It is as if the action has come to a standstill and the drama is on pause. And yet, as everything slows down from the maelstrom of violence and emotion of the preceding events, we are given a summary of what has been witnessed and of occurrences that have taken place off-stage, together with cues that leave no doubt as to the moral import of the drama. The stage direction says: “*Enter Ross, with an Old Man*”. Ross is a Scottish nobleman (they will later be joined by another one, Macduff) who often fulfils the role of conveyor of news and warnings in the play. The Old Man is one of the few characters who do not have a name, which suggests he may be taken as a type. He is the first to speak:

Threescore and ten I can remember well,
Within the volume of which time I have seen
Hours dreadful and things strange; but this sore night
Hath trifled former knowings. (II.iv.1-4)

He is indeed a very old man by the standards of his time. He carries living memory of a good seventy years, and recalls both what is normal and what is exceptional – but what he has seen this night surpasses everything.

Ross confirms and expatiates upon this:

Ha, good father,
Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threaten his bloody stage. By th' clock 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp;
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,
When living light should kiss it? (II.iv.4-10)

Other portents will be comprised in successive rejoinders: that preys have been seen killing their natural predators; that Duncan's horses, magnificent specimens that they were, have turned wild, fled, and eaten each another. The Old Man's comment sums it all:

'Tis unnatural,
Even like the deed that's done. (II.iv.9-10)

This topic is again resumed by Ross. When Macduff states that it is believed the regicides were Duncan's servants, bribed by Duncan's sons, Ross exclaims:

'Gainst nature still – (II.iv.27)

The Old Man is addressed as “father”, perhaps on account of his age, perhaps because he is a priest. In any case, it is clear that he assumes the character of

tragic chorus, qualifying and passing judgment on the accidents of the plot from a position of moral authority. It therefore makes sense that it is up to him to bring the scene to a conclusion, and to do that with a blessing that translates as a redemptive wish in the face of a world that has become ill with incongruity:

God's benison go with you, and with those
That would make good of bad, and friends of foes.
(II.iv.40-41)

The Old Man's parting words point to the ambition of reverting the witches' injunction that "Fair is foul, and foul is fair". Sadly, it is mere wishful thinking, unless it is perceived in the long run. Indeed, the will to "make good of bad, and friends of foes" will come to fruition only much later, and require the intervention of at least one other hallowed person, the King of England, who is implicitly identified as Edward the Confessor.

Hence, right before Macbeth's accession, the play stresses the ignominy and unnaturalness of his conduct. Of this the audience has already been made aware, and in fact has been made aware that Macbeth himself is alive to the heinousness of his conduct. For Duncan is a virtuous, kind, wise monarch, generous to a fault, grateful to Macbeth for his faithful service, and moreover

his “cousin” (a term which was less specific in Jacobean times than it is today) and his guest. Above all, Duncan is an anointed, sacred monarch (James I is sure to have appreciated this point). He is a figure with supernatural overtones, and murdering him is sacrilege. Macbeth, hypocrite that he is, elaborates on this as he describes what he saw when he entered Duncan’s chambers:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood,
And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature
For ruin’s wasteful entrance; (II.iii.113-116)

The audience is already apprised of all these implications. What Act II, Scene IV adds is a cosmological perspective. Far from pertaining to a strictly political domain (there was no such thing, in fact: regicide amounts to the desecration of a divinely-appointed ruler), Duncan’s murder by a vassal who takes over the throne is a usurpation of the polis no less than a subversion of the cosmos. This is in keeping with the demonic connotations that burden the character of Macbeth, from the presence of the weird sisters in the opening scene to the assistance of a servant named Seyton. Clearly, Satan’s name resonates in that of the servant who helps Macbeth put on his armour for his final fight (is

Satan Macbeth's minion, or is it the other way around, one might ask?). A moral and elemental strife, in effect a metaphysical one, is at stake. When Ross mentions an eclipse (by reporting "That darkness does the face of earth entomb, / When living light should kiss it"), he is hinting at the interconnectivity of experience assumed in a world picture inherited from Antiquity (Ptolemy being a major reference) and still accepted as true by many in the Early Modern Period: a world picture postulating that life on Earth was dependent on the movements and correlations of the "spheres", that is, the planets and the stars; that there were correspondences by means of which what happened to men in their world of contingency derived from what happened at a level situated above and beyond.⁷ This is the rationale of astrology, which is based on a geocentric model of the universe, and for many the horoscope had not yet been cast aside by the telescope. The assassination of King Duncan in *Macbeth* is an act of such unthinkable, far-reaching villainy, that it turns the logic of the zodiac on its head: it causes disturbance in the cosmos, it disrupts the order of the firmament – of the things that are firm. Regicide untunes the heavens by interrupting the punctual *revolution* of the spheres.

⁷ E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Chatto & Windus, 1963 [1943]) is quite possibly still the best short introduction to the topic (see especially pp. 103-129).

The meaning of this ontological disruption can be appreciated on different levels. For one, there is the generic dimension. Macbeth's predicament is a subtle expression of the problematics of fatalism that stand at the core of the tragic genre. Tragedy poses questions such as: Can the individual really choose? Are his/her choices worth anything, are they in any way meaningful? Or is destiny always paramount? And, to bring the issue closer to my concerns here: Can the individual make a difference or is he/she inextricably bound by the cycles of repetition of what is indelibly supposed to be? Is initiative or change always a form of defiance, of transgression, of excess – *hubris* that needs to be neutralized and punished?

The idea that regicide is an outrageous anomaly is, furthermore, an expression of the ordinary individual's predicament as the subject of a divinely-sanctioned social hierarchy, and as a being who is subject to the determinations of the celestial bodies. These assumptions provide a sense of order and render the universe intelligible. Macbeth's individualism is a devilish trait. It is unnatural, it is wrong, and it makes no sense. It is, moreover, an aspect of a wider instability of moral, social and ontological categories suggested in the play. Characters show a penchant for ontological questioning: What is it to be a human being? What is it to be a man?

Or a woman? Or, for that matter, a dog? Tellingly, the characters who indulge in such querying, and who equivocate on such presumed uncertainties, are Macbeth and Lady Macbeth – the villains of the tragedy.

3.

The noun “revolution” cannot be found in *Macbeth*, nor can any of its cognates, such as the verb “to revolutionize”, or “revolutionary”, which works both as a noun and as an adjective in the language as we know it. As pertains to that semantic field, what we do find in *Macbeth* is “rebel”, “rebellion” and “revolt”, as nouns, and the adjective “rebellious”. These words apply to the thane of Cawdor, the original traitor in the play, and connect him with the main character. I am therefore using *Macbeth* as a benchmark: not because the word “revolution” is there but because the play emphasizes an attitude and a worldview that betray the fact that at the turn of the seventeenth century the modern concept of revolution had yet to gain a foothold.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest instance of “revolution” meaning “A complete overthrow of the established government in any country or state by those who were previously subject to it”

dates from the year 1600. The *OED* quotes a passage from *The Historie of the Vniting of the Kingdom of Portugall to the Crowne of Castill Containing the Last Warres of the Portugals against the Moores of Africke, the End of the House of Portugall, and Change of that Gouernment...*, which is Edward Blount's translation of a work from the Italian of Girolamo Conestaggio (*Dell'Unione del Regno di Portogallo alla Corona di Castiglia*). The *OED* misleadingly truncates the passage but I wish to restore it here. It reads like this:

But for that he laboured to assure the kings person aboue all, being entred two daies iourney within the countrey, he sent backe Peter Manrique de Padilla a knight of account, and well experienced in the warre, with two companies of men at armes, and Peter d' Ayala Marshall of the field, an old soldier, with a regiment of Spaniards, who lodged at Eluas, assuring those quarters from all reuolutions that might be feared.⁸

⁸ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, prep. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998 [1991]), Vol. XIII, p. 841; completed by me from Gerolamo Franchi di Conestaggio, *The historie of the vniting of the kingdom of Portugall to the crowne of Castill containing the last warres of the Portugals against the Moores of Africke, the end of the house of Portugall, and change of that gouernment. The description of Portugall, their principall townes, castles, places ... Of the East Indies, the isles of Terceres, and other dependences ...* (Imprinted at London: By Arn. Hatfield for Edward Blount, 1600), p. 175. Retrieved from *Early English Books Online – Text Creation Partnership, University of Michigan Library*, <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A19211.0001.001?view=toc>>, accessed 21 April 2024.

One revealing feature of this sentence is the defining relative clause: a likely interpretation is that the author does not mean to imply that all revolutions are fearful events but is referring instead to specific revolutions. In other words, revolutions are not intrinsically bad because, while some may involve the “overthrow of the established government”, they do not always do so. Arguably, revolutions can be restorative. They do not necessarily produce a world that is turned upside down or backside front. They may not aim to subvert or overthrow but rather to rectify, to make right by retrieving or reestablishing the way things used to be, and ought to be. By a capricious semantic twist, in modern times the noun “revolution” has come to describe the virtual opposite of the repetition – the turning on an axis, the fulfilment of a circular movement – that was its tenor for centuries. By the same token, the verb “to revolve” has acquired an antonym in the verb “to revolutionize”, the former suggesting permanence, the latter transformation.⁹

Ultimately, the new usage of a term like “revolution” bears on the cancellation of cyclical conceptions of history in favour of a narrative of rectilinear progress underlining the significance of landmarks from which

⁹ Alongside the watchword “revolution”, it is useful to consider entries in the *OED* ranging from “rebel”, “rebellion” and “rebellious” all the way to “revolt”, “revolutionary” and “revolutive”.

there is no turning back. Reversals and revivals are neither deemed possible nor, for the most part, desirable. This applies to sudden, clean breaks with the past as well as to protracted developments like the Industrial Revolution, the Agrarian Revolution, the financial revolution of the turn of the eighteenth century (which saw the creation of the Bank of England and the London stock exchange), the “godly” revolution associated with William III, the urban revolution that spans so many generations it is hard to bracket chronologically, and the sexual revolution that is ongoing since the 1960s. By co-opting the ancient term “revolution”, common usage is signalling a feeling of self-assurance in humanity’s achievements on which sceptics and conservatives will not fail to pass judgment.¹⁰

4.

To observe the nuances of “revolution” and related terms in texts from the Early Modern Period makes for an illuminating exercise. With the help of Alexander Schmidt’s *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary*,

¹⁰ My argument on the history of the term runs largely parallel to that in Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016 [1963]), pp. 28-40. Arendt’s emphasis on the American and the French Revolutions make her study otherwise little useful for my purposes.

it is easy to go back to the Bard.¹¹ Whereas the noun “revolt” refers to rebellion, desertion, or a “gross departure from duty”, and the verb “to revolt” carries similar implications of faithlessness, “to revolve” means to consider deeply, to meditate, and is therefore tagged positively. The word “revolution” itself is glossed ambiguously as referring to the possibility of change occurring over time, i.e. gradually, or being only apparent, i.e. no real change at all, as in Sonnet 59:

If there be nothing new, but that which is
Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,
Which, labouring for invention, bear amiss
The second burden of a former child!
O that record could with a backward look
Even of five hundred courses of the sun
Show me your image in some antique book,
Since mind at first in character was done,
That I might see what the old world could say
To this composèd wonder of your frame;
Whether we are mended, or whe’er better they,
Or whether revolution be the same.¹²

¹¹ See Alexander Schmidt, *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary: A Complete Dictionary of all the English Words, Phrases and Constructions in the Works of the Poet*, 3rd ed., revised and enlarged by Gregor Sarrazin (New York: Dover, 1971 [1902]), Vol. II, p. 975.

¹² William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, ed. John Kerrigan (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 106.

Shakespeare is drawing on the Book of Ecclesiastes (1:9) to explore the conceit that there may be no new thing under the sun, and therefore that it is likely to be mere vanity to presume that human history “labours” (also in the sense of conceiving and giving birth) to produce novelty.¹³ History is recurrence, not “invention”.

In keeping with the logic of correspondences mentioned above, it is apt to add that Shakespeare’s conceit involves an analogy with the cosmic order that assumes no essential change ever occurs because human events are determined by the regular movement of superior bodies, and that there is thus a coherent pattern that translates the will and wisdom of the Creator. This is the worldview underlying *Macbeth*. It is the worldview underpinning that other great story of ambition and insubordination, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Having been shown the apparatus of the cosmos by the archangel Raphael, Adam contemplates the movements and the magnitude of the stars and planets, and wonders how Nature could create “many nobler bodies”

¹³ Organic metaphors of generation and regeneration recur in the examples below, while the potential revolutionary character of the gap between generations will be especially obvious in the work of Nancy Mitford.

... and on thir orbs impose
Such restless revolution day by day
Repeated, while the sedentary earth,
That better might with far less compass move,
Served by more noble than her self, attains
Her end without least motion, and receives,
As tribute, such a sumless journey brought
Of incorporeal speed, her warmth and light;¹⁴

Similarly to Shakespeare's usage, Milton's preferred terms for Satan's insurrection, hence the antonyms of the notion of balance and permanence expressed by the "restless revolution day by day" of the heavenly bodies, are "rebellion" and "revolt". These are also the terms used for Adam and Eve's subsequent disobedience.¹⁵ As we have seen, this usage is consistent with Shakespeare's in *Macbeth*.¹⁶

¹⁴ Book VIII, lines 28, 30-37, in John Milton, *Poetical Works*, ed. Douglas Bush (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1966]).

¹⁵ See Book I, line 33; Book IX, lines 5-13. The word "rebellion" is also applied, significantly, to the stories of Nimrod and the tower of Babel in Book XII, lines 13-62.

¹⁶ The only time Thomas Hobbes uses the word "revolution" in *Leviathan* is in the concluding paragraph, which reads: "And thus I have brought to an end my Discourse of Civill and Ecclesiasticall Government, occasioned by the disorders of the present time, without partiality, without application, and without other designe, than to set before mens eyes the mutuall Relation [between] Protection and Obedience; of which the condition of Humane Nature, and the Laws divine, (both Naturall and Positive) require an inviolable observation. And though in the revolution of States, there can

As is well known, Milton was actively committed to a chain of events that are often recollected as “the English revolution” par excellence (notably by historians like Christopher Hill, the author of *God’s Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*, and other studies along the same lines).¹⁷ The epithet asserts the importance of that chain of events, its singularity even, but it is not always intended to be flattering. Although an imposing statue of Oliver Cromwell stands before the Houses of Parliament – on a par with Winston Churchill, as it were – national collective memory has often pronounced anathema on the violence, the intolerance, and the religious “enthusiasm” that were notorious in the period. Cromwell’s role in history entailed a civil war, the trial and execution of a monarch, and the establishment of a political regime that could hardly claim to remain true to the liberties of the people it was supposed to be founded on.

be no very good Constellation for Truths of this nature to be born under, (as having an angry aspect from the dissolvers of an old Government, and seeing but the backs of them that erect a new;) yet I cannot think it will be condemned at this time, either by the Publique Judge of Doctrine, or by any that desires the continuance of Publique Peace” (*Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1968], pp. 728-729). The meaning of “revolution” here matches the examples noted above.

¹⁷ Christopher Hill, *God’s Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1970]); *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (n.p.: Penguin, 2019 [1972]).

Having said that, it is interesting to consider the vocabulary used by Cromwell to refer to the events he was so deeply concerned in. In a speech before Parliament in 1657, having been asked to take up the title of King, Cromwell says: “I have, the best I can, revolved the whole Business in my thoughts” – and he refuses the offer (speech 18).¹⁸ The verb “to revolve” obviously means to reflect deeply by turning things over in your mind; we have seen this in Shakespeare. More to my point, in a speech to Parliament made in the same year the Lord Protector quotes others as arguing that if he becomes King “there is not anything de novo done, but merely things are revolved into their old current” (speech 15). In the field of politics, then, to revolve is to go back to the way things were before.

The most relevant instances of Cromwell’s understanding of the concept of revolution are, however, to be located in a speech delivered a few years earlier, in 1654, in which his decision to dissolve the First Protectorate Parliament is explained (speech 2). It is a speech filled with warnings directed at those who do not believe “that this Cause and this Business” to which they have committed themselves

¹⁸ All references from “Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell”, *The Cromwell Association*, <https://www.olivercromwell.org/letters_and_speeches.htm>, accessed 11 April 2024.

is “of God”, or who fail to act accordingly; a speech based on the conviction that God manifests himself in history, which is made up of “the Births of Providence”. The tone can turn ominous: “take heed again, I say, how you judge of His Revolutions as the product of men’s inventions!” As in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 59, the “labour” of “invention” arises from a misapprehension; for Cromwell, it verges dangerously on impiety as well. Parliament must be chastised for its irreverence. Above all, the speech stresses the fact that God rules the Earth, and that it is God’s revolutions, or alternatively “the Revolutions of Christ himself”, not man’s actions per se, that are the true stamp of history:

And I say this, not only to this Assembly, but to the world, That the man liveth not who can come to me and charge me with having, in these great Revolutions, “made Necessities.” I challenge even all that fear God. And as God hath said, “My glory I will not give unto another,” let men take heed and be twice advised how they call His Revolutions, the things of God, and His working of things from one period to another, – how, I say, they call them Necessities of men’s creation! For by so doing, they do vilify and lessen the works of God, and rob Him of His glory; which He hath said He will not give unto another, nor suffer to be taken from Him!

We know what God did to Herod, when he was applauded and did not acknowledge God. And God knoweth what He will do with men, when they call His Revolutions human designs, and so detract from His glory.

That Cromwell speaks of “revolutions”, plural, is a strong indication that the time-honoured meaning of the word, involving the repetition of a pattern, is involved. The foundering of the Protectorate in 1660 would make way for the *Restoration* – a backward-looking concept once again.

The next historical watershed is the Glorious Revolution – also celebrated as the Bloodless Revolution, as mentioned above. The events of 1688-89 comprehended a parliamentary delegation being sent to William of Orange asking him to depose King James II, an invasion of England that met no opposition to speak of (with William’s army landing at Torbay on 5 November 1688, the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot), James fleeing to exile in France, and William ascending the throne together with his wife, Mary, James II’s eldest daughter. The so-called Revolution Settlement was formally inscribed in the Bill of Rights, passed in Parliament by “the lords spiritual and temporal, and commons, assembled at Westminster, lawfully, fully, and freely representing all the estates of the people of

this realm”.¹⁹ Having thus claimed its legitimacy in the preamble (by paying lip-service to the old concept of the legislature as *the King in Parliament* while effectively establishing the primacy of Parliament over the Crown), the document proceeds to lay down the terms of the new and future reigns by stressing that the people do not want continuity with James’s policies. Rather, they want to ensure continuity with a legal and institutional covenant from which that monarch had unduly deviated. The Bill of Rights is, first, a bill of remonstrance that itemizes the charge that “the late King James the Second, by the assistance of divers evil counsellors, judges, and ministers employed by him, did endeavour to subvert and extirpate the protestant religion, and the laws and liberties of this kingdom” (p. 108). To this notion that James was unworthy to rule, the act adds that he in effect abdicated the throne. Having made these points, the Bill of Rights entrusts William III and Mary II, as well as their successors, with the Crown, on the condition that they abide by the will of the governed and the law of the land; the trust may be otherwise revoked.

The text of the Bill of Rights conspicuously lacks the word “revolution”. We may nevertheless speculate

¹⁹ J. J. Bagley and P. B. Rowley, *A Documentary History of England. Vol. 1 (1066-1540)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 107-108.

that, if the word *were* there, it would either refer to the conduct of James II – in which case the modern sense of the term would be involved, for the gist of the argument is that James abused the royal prerogative and disrupted the legal and institutional framework of the realm – or it would be applied to the Glorious Revolution itself – in which case the old sense of the term would be brought to bear, since the Bill of Rights purports to re-assert “the true, ancient, and indubitable rights and liberties of the people of this kingdom” (p. 112). The Glorious Revolution is not supposed to be a revolution in the sense of a substantial break with the past. It announces itself as a sort of new restoration.²⁰

It is interesting to juxtapose the Bill of Rights with the political writings of John Locke, who contributed a theoretical basis for the notion that the social compact rested on the consent of the governed and that power must be exercised for the benefit of the people. In Locke’s bulky *Two Treatises of Government*, published in 1689-90, hence arising from the same political and intellectual context as the Bill of Rights, the word “revolution” appears only twice, in the chapter discussing the dissolution of government.

²⁰ Incidentally, the *OED* is unhelpful in establishing the emergence of “the” (as opposed to “this”) “Glorious Revolution”, just as it fails to date the appearance of “the Bloodless Revolution”.

Locke is making a point here that is institutional but also social and even psychological. To those who object that no government can depend for its stability on the will of the people, “the People being ignorant, and always discontented”, Locke answers that the people is conservative by nature:

People are not so easily got out of their old Forms, as some are apt to suggest. They are hardly to be prevailed with to amend the acknowledg'd Faults, in the Frame they have been accustom'd to. And if there be any Original defects, or adventitious ones introduced by time, or corruption; 'tis not an easy thing to get them changed, even when all the World sees there is an opportunity for it. This slowness and aversion in the People to quit their old Constitutions, has, in the many revolutions which have been seen in this Kingdom, in this and former Ages, still kept us to, or, after some interval of fruitless attempts, still brought us back again to our old legislative of King, Lords and Commons: And whatever provocations have made the Crown be taken from some of our Princes Heads, they never carried the People so far, as to place it in another Line.²¹

²¹ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1967]), p. 414.

To recognize that sovereignty lies with the people, Locke submits, is not a “*Hypothesis* [that] lays a *ferment* for frequent *Rebellion*” (*ibidem*). On the contrary, history shows that the people will as a rule engage in “revolutions” that reinstate “their old Constitutions”. The English do not appreciate lawlessness and social anarchy. In the passage above, then, it is the old meaning of “revolution” as repetition or restitution that obtains. In the second relevant passage Locke operates a semantic shift, but the political point remains. The conservative temper of the people makes it resistant to the prospect of revolution – in this case, in the modern sense of the term; it is only when faced with abuses of government so grievous that they can no longer be endured that the people undertake violent political action:

such *Revolutions* *happen* not upon every little mismanagement in publick affairs. *Great mistakes* in the ruling part, many wrong and inconvenient Laws, and all the *slips* of humane frailty will be *born by the People*, without mutiny or murmur. But if a long train of Abuses, Prevarications, and Artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the People, and they cannot but feel, what they lie under, and see, whither they are going; ’tis not to be wonder’d, that they should then rouse themselves, and endeavour to put the

rule into such hands, which may secure to them the ends for which Government was at first erected; and without which, ancient Names, and specious Forms, are so far from being better, that they are much worse, than the state of Nature, or pure Anarchy; the inconveniencies being all as great and as near, but the remedy farther off and more difficult. (p. 415)

Considering the timorous or disingenuous manner in which the Bill of Rights conceptualizes the groundbreaking events of 1688-89, and taking into account Locke's rendition of the prudent character of the (English) people, it seems appropriate for a historian like W. A. Speck to name a study of "Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688" *Reluctant Revolutionaries*.²²

5.

Did this attitude of reluctance set an example to later generations? It may well have, considering how much mythologizing of the Glorious Revolution as a milestone of liberty historians and propagandists alike have indulged in. But be that as it may, to remain alien

²² W. A. Speck, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1988]).

to the spirit of rebellion has tended to be understood as an aspect of individual and public virtue by the mainstream political culture of Britain, as exemplified in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* of 1790. Burke's pamphlet is important not only for its resounding rejection of the French Revolution in the name of a particular set of preconceptions; it matters also for its wider apology for prejudice itself. And in this we may perhaps hear an echo of Shakespeare's concern with "brains" that are "beguiled ... labouring for invention" in Sonnet 59, as well as of Adam Smith's stance, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, against the "man of system" who "is apt to be very wise in his own conceit", as opposed to the "man whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence", and who will rather "moderat[e]", "accommodate", "remedy" and "ameliorate".²³

With blatant irony, Burke addresses the zealots of the Revolution across the Channel, and certain societies of supporters in London foremost, in order to expose them as being essentially misguided. "You see, Sir", he writes, "that in this enlightened age" (and his allusion to the Enlightenment is distinctly sarcastic)

²³ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), pp. 233-234.

I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved.²⁴

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1993]), p. 87.

The passage hinges on an opposition between *us* (the British, traditionalist, judicious adversaries of the Revolution), on the one hand, and, on the other, *you* together with *they* (the radical partisans of the Revolution abroad and the French revolutionaries themselves). It deplors that the events in France have unwisely discarded the moral legacy of previous ages. It argues that the faith in reason does not condone the presumption that each man, or any man, can disregard what others have thought and found. On the contrary, the patrimony of reason is collaborative and intergenerational, and prejudice equips men with valuable mental shortcuts: “Prejudice renders a man’s virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature” (*ibidem*). Novelty is pernicious folly. Prejudice bestows coherence, expediency, and morality to the life of individuals and societies. As a repository of habits of mind, it factors in caution, humility, and experience.

Burke cultivates a feeling of nostalgia for a time that he idealizes to such an extent that he fails to concede the inequalities and oppression of the Ancien Régime. France used to be “a nation of gallant men, ... a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers”.

But the age of chivalry is gone. – That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprize is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness. (p. 76)

While placing the misfortunes of Marie Antoinette centre stage, Burke's appeal to the pathetic serves his argument that Europe received its character from the spirit of chivalry (hence, pre-revolutionary France ceases to be Britain's great nemesis, as it was usually perceived to be) "which made power gentle, and obedience liberal" (p. 77) by blending the affections, manners, and the law. This blending is the proper foundation for patriotism: "There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely" (p. 78).

Burke does not naturalize the concepts of rule, privilege, national identity, the state, or society. He holds that society is a contract. But it is a fundamental contract that is not liable to be “dissolved at pleasure”, just as “the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee”. It is an all-encompassing contract, and one that binds generation to generation, and mankind to other and grander spheres of existence:

It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primaeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. (pp. 96-97)

Those who would tear apart this connectedness without absolute necessity to do so are gravely at fault. By their actions

the law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow. (p. 97)

The revolutionaries are, one might say, like Macbeth.

Metaphysical intimations aside (and they are not, in any case, the main drift of Burke's argument), emphasis is placed throughout on a line of political conduct that is equated with "the prevalent opinion in Paris, that an unfeeling heart, and an undoubting confidence, are the sole qualifications for a perfect legislator" (p. 169). Such politicians do not respect "the institutions of their forefathers" and destroy "at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their society". The prospect is dire:

By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and

continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer. (p. 95)

Undoubtedly, the moral value of intergenerational responsibility is a mainstay of political conservatism. It is striking that the same idea can be found a century and a half later in one of George Orwell's most provocative pieces, the long essay *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, penned in 1941 at a time of national crisis – when, as stated in the opening sentence, German airplanes were dropping bombs on the British civilian population. There is much that is unfair and disreputable about Britain, Orwell maintains, and there is much that is worse still about its Empire. Orwell veers between recognizing “the overwhelming strength of patriotism, national loyalty”, and disputing that there are “really such things as nations”.²⁵ Because, as he sees it, all individuals are different, and the disparities of income are so extreme that the country is “notoriously” made up of “two nations, the rich and the poor”. Likewise,

²⁵ George Orwell, *Essays*, selected and introduced by John Carey (New York: Everyman's Library / Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), pp. 291 and 292.

the so-called races of Britain feel themselves to be very different from one another. A Scotsman, for instance, does not thank you if you call him an Englishman. You can see the hesitation we feel on this point by the fact that we call our islands by no less than six different names, England, Britain, Great Britain, the British Isles, the United Kingdom and, in very exalted moments, Albion. (p. 299)

Yet distinctions dwindle somewhat when Britons are seen from the outside (that Orwell slips freely from “Britain” to “England” and back again need not concern us here too much):

Yes, there *is* something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person. (p. 292)

This trope of organic continuity allows the author to offer a progressive definition of patriotism relying on a paradox that proves to be only apparent: “Patriotism has nothing to do with Conservatism. It is actually the opposite of Conservatism, since it is a devotion to something that is always changing and yet is felt to be mystically the same. It is the bridge between the future and the past” (p. 342).

According to Orwell, an arresting characteristic of “English civilization” is “all-important”: “the respect for constitutionalism and legality, the belief in ‘the law’ as something above the State and above the individual, something which is cruel and stupid, of course, but at any rate *incorruptible*” (p. 298).

Cruel and stupid the law may be, then, but there is an integrity about it, and there is an Englishness, that make it indispensable. Still, Orwell, the anti-imperialist, and a socialist of a very individual ideological imprint, is intent on reconciling the irreconcilable. He advocates for a revolution. His programme includes the nationalization of resources like land, railways, banks, and major industries; the limitation of incomes; the granting of dominion status for India, with the possibility of independence after the war; an alliance with the countries that are victims of the Fascist powers, and other proposals (cf. pp. 334-339). Part III, under

the title “The English Revolution”, with a measure of wishful thinking, is as bold as to claim:

The English revolution started several years ago, and it began to gather momentum when the troops came back from Dunkirk. Like all else in England, it happens in a sleepy unwilling way, but it is happening. The war has speeded it up, but it has also increased, and desperately, the necessity for speed. (p. 328)

It is typical of Orwell that he sees a military defeat, however glorified, as a catalyst for a sorely-needed revision of the national self-consciousness; and that in the present collective emergency he presents himself as a spokesperson for conducting the war effort in an entirely new way – since, he warns: “Either we turn this war into a revolutionary war . . . or we lose it, and much more besides” (p. 342).

However, Orwell was unwilling to give carte blanche to any and all revolutions. His work from the post-World War II period is highly critical of political systems that he denounces as founded on violence and ideological delusions. *Animal Farm* condemns the Russian Revolution and Stalinism for their betrayal of the promises of justice and liberation. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers a dystopian depiction of a totalitarian

state bent on controlling its citizens' everyday life and most intimate thoughts, while it remains committed to a condition of permanent revolution (an idea that stemmed from the Marxist tradition). After the defeat of the most aggressive right-wing dictatorships during the war, Orwell's lasting preoccupation with communism squares with his self-definition, in the 1946 essay "Why I Write", as a political author who always stood, "directly or indirectly", as he puts it, "*against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism" (p. 1083). In substance, this may amount to several different things. We have seen that one possible meaning of this statement is that Orwell repudiated one kind of revolution while embracing another – one that pursues a political programme of his own devising.

6.

In *The Lion and the Unicorn* Orwell insists that the character of one people differs from that of another. History is not predetermined, but the range of historical possibility is limited: "certain alternatives are possible and others not. A seed may grow or not grow, but at any rate a turnip seed never grows into a parsnip" (p. 293), he observes. Some developments are impossible because

they are unnatural and incompatible: “Things that could happen in one country could not happen in another. Hitler’s June Purge, for instance, could not have happened in England” (p. 291). Perhaps unwittingly, Orwell is sounding a Burkean note.

But not everybody agreed. Oswald Mosley, the British avatar of Italy’s Duce and Germany’s Führer, leader of the British Union of Fascists, surely did not. BUF rallies and parades, their Roman-style salutes and uniforms (the infamous black shirts), and Mosley’s flair for inflammatory speeches did little to disguise their affinities with the rising dictatorships of interbellum Europe.

Needless to say, there were a number of bad things about Mosley. One of them was bad timing. After the Second World War broke out, he was arrested as a security risk in 1940, and remained interned until late 1943. But in the thirties he had proved what he was capable of. He had determination and a magnetic personality; like other firebrands and would-be dictators, he wasn’t short on showmanship; and he managed to distil his ideas into propaganda that was not ineffective. His was, on close analysis, an uneasy compound of proposed reforms. Many of these are explained in an artfully contrived condensation as *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered*,

published in 1936. Mosley proposes to erase barriers of class by establishing “the principle of no reward without service, and the consequent elimination of the parasite”. Meanwhile, he is careful to distance himself from socialism:

We believe everywhere in the Leadership principle and the functional differentiation which allocates definite responsibility to the individual. This principle rests on an obvious fact of human nature which Socialism ignores. Men and women are born with varying gifts and capacities.²⁶

Concurrently, Mosley intends to abolish parties in order to replace “the present Dictatorship of Vested Interests” with a dictatorship of the people: “Fascism restores to power the people”. In these terms,

The Fascist Movement represents Leadership, not Tyranny. It offers to the people a Leadership in national revival which they will accept of their own free will. The Dictatorship is a Dictatorship of the will of the people expressed through a Leadership and Government of their own choice.

²⁶ Oswald Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered* (London: B. U. F. Publications, 1936), unpaginated, nr 8.

The idiom of revival and restoration is symptomatic. Change is to take place on behalf of restitution and efficiency rather than of novelty: “Fascism offers that Leadership through which the will of the people can be effective” (nr 15). This is consistent with the notion that some things need to change in order to become truer to their original conception. “What will be the position of the House of Lords?”, it is asked. The answer is: “The House of Lords will be replaced by a Second Chamber representing the industry, culture and ability of the Nation”. This chamber, which will be a pillar of the coming corporate state, reflects “every aspect of the people’s spiritual life”. Mosley proceeds with a historical justification:

The present House of Lords is an anachronism. It was originally intended that the House of Lords should broadly represent industry and culture. In early days the Peers owned the land, which was the only industry, and enjoyed exceptional opportunities of education. To-day, Agriculture is not the only industry and many Peers are not even connected with land or industry. Further, none would claim they enjoy a monopoly of culture. Therefore, by abolishing the present House of Lords in favour of an Assembly genuinely representing

the industry and culture of the Nation, we restore the original conception of the British Constitution. (nr 25)

In the meantime, violent methods are not endorsed. Power is to be gained by electoral means (cf. nr 16). Once a parliamentary majority has been achieved, reforms will be brought into effect. These will not only have internal but also international impact. In Mosley's opinion, the League of Nations has become "an unholy alliance of decaying democratic systems, with the bloodstained Soviet against the renaissance Fascist countries". A new balance of power will repose on "the union of the Great Powers of Europe in Universal Fascism". He therefore envisions Britain and France "go[ing] Fascist" and joining "a real League of National States" with Italy and Germany, ensuring "a real collective security" against the "only enemy of Western civilisation", the Soviet Union (nr 92). Awkwardly, Mosley is at the same time an isolationist, who believes that the principal cause of war is "cut-throat" commercial competition between nations. Logically,

[b]y building a self-contained or autarchic system we withdraw from the struggle for markets and so withdraw from the risks of war. This is the answer to the fantastic assertion that Peace and Empire are incompatible. When other nations follow our example there will be nothing left to fight about. (nr 87)

Isolation, then, is propounded as a policy for the major powers – with their respective empires therein comprised.

This patchwork of ideas entails revolution of a particular sort. Mosley's programme espouses the role of scientists, professionals, technicians, experts, but it also extols the pursuit of a policy of "owner-occupier Farmers" which harks back to the medieval status of the franklin. "We believe that the private tenure of land should be as widely diffused as possible in many different hands", he says (nr 59). From such echoes of olden times Mosley's judgment that F. D. Roosevelt's New Deal has failed receives an added supply of ambiguity, as he postulates that "before a new civilisation can be born, the mind and soul of the Nation must first be awakened" (nr 77).

The composite of the old and the new, the conservative and the progressive, re-emerges in a short pamphlet published the following year, titled *Ten Points of Fascism*, where Mosley remarks:

FASCISM is a creed of patriotism and revolution. For the first time a strong movement emerges, which on the one hand is loyal to King and Country, and on the other hand stands for far-reaching and revolutionary changes in government, in economics, and in life itself. Hitherto, patriotism has been associated with those who wish to keep things as they are; revolution has been associated with a flabby internationalism which sets the interests of foreign countries before those of Britain. The watchword of Fascism is "Britain First". We love our country, but we are determined to build a country worthy of that love. Things cannot remain as they are: we must have great changes to adapt modern Britain to modern fact. True patriotism finds expression for the first time in the revolution of Fascism.²⁷

Mosley's argument is disconcerting. On the surface at least, his rejection of internationalism would seem to resonate in Orwell's dictum in *The Lion and the*

²⁷ Oswald Mosley, *Ten Points of Fascism* (London: B. U. F. Publications, 1937), p. 1.

Unicorn that “[n]o real revolutionary has ever been an internationalist” (which in turn reads like a gibe at the *Communist Manifesto*).²⁸ As for the resolve to build a country worthy of one’s love, it appears to agree with Burke’s political-aesthetic contention that the British way of life should be preserved, for “[t]o make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely” (quoted above, section 5). Some travelling companions are more unexpected than others.

7.

Are revolutionaries dangerous, or are they puerile? Should they be feared, or should they be laughed down? The former attitude prevails among those for whom the word “revolution” is shorthand for political evil, but a posture of derision confronting the inanity of the most egregious ideas may also apply. Nancy Mitford’s 1935 novel, *Wigs on the Green*, denounces right-wing extremism as a farce. It presents the character of an energetic young woman, Eugenia Malmains, still in her teens, who is a staunch supporter of, and local organizer for, the Union Jackshirts (their head is one

²⁸ Orwell, *Essays*, p. 342.

Captain Jack, transparently based on Oswald Mosley, just as Eugenia herself is based on the author's sisters, Unity Mitford and Diana Mosley – whose marriage to the leader of the BUF was attended by members of the inner circle of the Nazi party).

The novel is a comedy of manners with a plot that is pushed forward by two fortune hunters who leave London for the village of Chalford in search of heiresses. Eugenia, the grandchild of old-fashioned Lord and Lady Chalford, is, of course, an attractive target. But, for all their cynicism, the fortune hunters are in for a surprise. Eugenia cares much less for being courted than she does for politics. Her first appearance in the novel – after being introduced as “batty” – presents her as an inflated political agitator:

“Britons, awake! Arise! oh, British lion!” cried Eugenia Malmain in thrilling tones. She stood on an overturned wash-tub on Chalford village green and harangued about a dozen aged yokels. Her straight hair, cut in a fringe, large, pale-blue eyes, dark skin, well-proportioned limbs and classical features, combined with a certain fanaticism of gesture to give her the aspect of a modern Joan of Arc.

She was dressed in an ill-fitting grey woollen skirt, no stockings, a pair of threadbare plimsolls, and a jumper made apparently out of a Union Jack. Round her waist was a leather belt to which there was attached a large bright dagger.²⁹

This cannot help but read like a grim parody. There is something baffling and graceless about a scene which eerily amalgamates Speakers' Corner with a dagger vaguely reminiscent of the paraphernalia of Hitler's SS while throwing intimations of a providential mission into the bargain.

Eugenia is propagandizing for the Union Jack Movement, also known as the Social Unionist Movement and the Social Unionists. It is supposed to be "a youth movement":

we are tired of the old. We see things through their eyes no longer. We see nothing admirable in that debating society of aged and corrupt men called Parliament which muddles our great Empire into wars or treaties, dropping one by one the jewels from its crown, casting away its glorious colonies, its hitherto undenied supremacy at sea, its prestige abroad, its prosperity at home, and all

²⁹ Nancy Mitford, *The Complete Novels* (n.p.: Penguin, 2015), p. 228.

according to each vacillating whim of some octogenarian statesman's mistress – (p. 229)

And on she rants, resenting the interruptions of her nanny, who plucks at her skirt in order to put at end to the rather embarrassing situation.

Eugenia's fervour remains unabated. She is determined to set up a garden party and a pageant enacting "the March on Rome, the Death of Horst Wessel, the Burning of the Reichstag, the Presidential Election of Roosevelt" (p. 251). A local lady suggests King Charles I and his wife instead, who actually visited Chalford. Eugenia vetoes the proposal: "You can't have Charles and Henrietta Maria at a Social Unionist rally ... Cromwell and Mrs Cromwell, if you like – the first Englishman to have the right political outlook" (p. 252). In the end, since pageants are supposed to be historical, it is decided that George III and Queen Charlotte will figure, alongside Lord Nelson, Frances Burney, and the Duchess of Devonshire. The choices are perceived to be incongruous. The King and Social Unionism have nothing in common: "The ordinary person simply remembers George III by the fact that he went mad and lost America. That's all he's ever supposed to have done for England, poor old boy", the writer of the pageant complains. This difficulty is

promptly solved by Eugenia, who concocts a speech to be given by George III relating a dream which warns against England's sinking "into the slush and slime of a decaying democracy" and offers a vision of Westminster being taken "by young and victorious Comrades": "In those days, the streets will ring with the cry of youths who will march, each carrying his little banner, towards the fulfilment of a Glorious Britain" (p. 276). Perhaps not all depressing elements, however, have been expunged: General Wolfe being killed by a stray bullet while reciting Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* to his troops is a touch more melancholy than would presumably be appropriate (cf. p. 313).

In due course, a rally, garden party, pageant, and "Olde Englyshe Fayre" (p. 304) take place. A large crowd gathers, and, although some mishaps occur, the pageant is on the whole "an enormous success".

Social Unionists and the public alike shouted themselves to a frenzy when, a messenger arriving to tell George III that Louis of France had been razored up by Marxist non-Aryans, the English monarch observed sadly, "Alas! my poor brother!" (p. 315)

The Social Unionists triumphantly sing their hymn – a nationalistic, xenophobic, militaristic piece of hack work. Then all of a sudden, as they are cheering, they are “attacked from the rear by quantities of horrible-looking men dressed as the *sansculottes* of Revolutionary France and wearing yellow caps on their heads” (p. 316). These are the local Pacifists. A pitched battle ensues, all the more outlandish as it is fought by women and men donning wigs, masks, feathers, and full-bottomed coats.

The Unionists appear at first to be utterly overcome, but the tables are turned by Eugenia’s valour. “We are your only safeguard against Pacifism in its most brutal form”, she gloats (p. 318). But her excitement is comically deflated by her grandmother not realizing what has in fact been happening: “How wonderfully realistic that was”, Lady Chalford observes in appreciation; “One might almost believe that some of those poor fellows were actually hurt”. To which the Duke of Driburgh replies: “I presume that what we have just witnessed is the Battle of Waterloo, with your dear little Eugenia in the part of Boadicea, such a clever notion” (p. 317). Neither of the old aristocrats has a clue about what is going on, but, significantly, “dear little Eugenia” is as much exalted as she is cut down to size by their remarks.

As the “victims of Pacifist atrocities”, some of these unspeakable, stagger back to get their wounds dressed, and are met with Eugenia’s confidence that their names will go down in history as having had the privilege “to fight beneath the Union Jack in the Battle of Chalford Park”, things become frantic and start to fall apart:

The Olde Englyshe Fayre from now on became more like an Olde Englyshe Orgy. An enormous bonfire was made, on which Karl Marx and Captain Chadlington (the local Conservative Member of Parliament) were burnt together in effigy amid fearful howls and cat-calls from the Comrades. “Down with the Pacifists! Down with the Communists! Down with non-Aryans! Down with the Junket-fronted National Government! We defend the Union Jack, we will whack and we will smack and we will otherwise attack all traitors to the Union Jack –” (p. 318)

Bonfires, Aryanism, anti-communism, swastikas, daggers, rallies, uniforms, hymns, salutes – it goes without saying, these are all redolent of National Socialism, and they can hardly be supposed to sit comfortably with the defence of the Union Jack.

But still Eugenia has her way: “the now epic Battle of Chalford Park” is inscribed in Social Unionist lore, and Eugenia is granted an interview with the Captain, who “warmly thanked her for all the work she had done on behalf of the Movement and had finally, as a token of gratitude, plucked, like the pelican, his own little emblem from his own bosom and pinned it, still warm, upon hers” (p. 319). It is the warmest of personal glories, ominous of the worst of times; a moment of light before the season of darkness; a spring of hope ushering in the winter of despair.

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. London: Faber and Faber, 2016 [1963].

Bagley, J. J., and P. B. Rowley. *A Documentary History of England. Vol. 1 (1066-1540)*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.

Brooke, Nicholas. "Introduction". William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Ed. Nicholas Brooke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1990]. 1-81.

Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Ed. L. G. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1993].

Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*. Notes and intr. by Michael K. Goldberg. Text established by Michael K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin and Mark Engel. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Conestaggio, Gerolamo Franchi di. *The historie of the vniting of the kingdom of Portugall to the crowne of Castill containing the last warres of the Portugals against the Moores of Africke, the end of the house of Portugall, and change of that government*.

The description of Portugall, their principall townes, castles, places ... Of the East Indies, the isles of Terceres, and other dependences ... Imprinted at London: By Arn. Hatfield for Edward Blount, 1600. *Early English Books Online – Text Creation Partnership, University of Michigan Library*, <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A19211.0001.001?view=toc>>, accessed 21 April 2024.

Cressy, David. “Four Hundred Years of Festivities”. Brenda Buchanan *et al.* *Gunpowder Plots: A Celebration of 400 Years of Bonfire Night*. London: Allen Lane, 2005. 49-79.

Cromwell, Oliver. “Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell”. *The Cromwell Association*, <https://www.olivercromwell.org/letters_and_speeches.htm>, accessed 11 April 2024.

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Ed. Andrew Sanders. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1988].

Godwin, William. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. Ed. Mark Philp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Hill, Christopher. *God’s Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1970].

Hill, Christopher. *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*. N.p.: Penguin, 2019 [1972].

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ed. C. B. Macpherson. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1968].

Hunter, G. K. "Introduction". William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Ed. G. K. Hunter. London: Penguin, 1995. 7-45.

Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Ed. Peter Laslett. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1967].

MacArthur, Brian, ed. *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches*. 2nd, rev. ed. London: Penguin, 1999.

Milton, John. *Poetical Works*. Ed. Douglas Bush. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1966].

Mitford, Nancy. *The Complete Novels*. N.p.: Penguin, 2015.

Mosley, Oswald. *Ten Points of Fascism*. London: B. U. F. Publications, 1937.

Mosley, Oswald. *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered*. London: B. U. F. Publications, 1936.

Muir, Kenneth. "Introduction". William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Ed. Kenneth Muir. London: The Arden Shakespeare / Methuen, 2005 [1951]. xiii-lxv.

Orwell, George. *Essays*. Selected and introduced by John Carey. New York: Everyman's Library / Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

The Oxford English Dictionary. Prep. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998 [1991]. 20 vols.

Schmidt, Alexander. *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary: A Complete Dictionary of all the English Words, Phrases and Constructions in the Works of the Poet*. 3rd ed., revised and enlarged by Gregor Sarrazin. New York: Dover, 1971 [1902]. 2 vols.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Nicholas Brooke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1990].

Shakespeare, William. *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*. Ed. John Kerrigan. London: Penguin, 1986.

Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982.

Speck, W. A. *Reluctant Revolutionaries: Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1988].

Tillyard, E. M. W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Chatto & Windus, 1963 [1943].

This study focuses on historical developments, ideological debates, and literary depictions of real or envisaged revolutions in order to show that the idea of a sudden, clean break with the past has gained comparatively little purchase in British culture over the centuries. Instead, an incremental spirit has predominated. The point is not that revolutions were never planned or attempted. It is, rather, that the prevalent approach to the idea of revolution has been one that either denies the revolutionary character of the most profound changes or, if it recognizes it, one that derides revolutions as evils and mistakes. Authors covered range from William Shakespeare and John Milton in the Early Modern Period to the socialist George Orwell and the fascist Oswald Mosley in the twentieth century.

