Introduction: the spell of democracy

J'avoue que dans l'Amérique j'ai vu plus que l'Amérique.
(Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, 14)

DEMOCRACY, REVOLUTION, AND MONARCHISM

"There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy," wrote Thomas Paine in 1776:

> it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgement is required. The state of a king shuts him from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly; wherefore the different parts, unnaturally opposing and destroying each other, prove the whole character to be absurd and useless. (*Common Sense*, 69)

These sentiments can be found in one of the most powerful and effective expressions of anti-monarchism in the western political tradition. As such, they also helped to achieve the creation of the west's first post-monarchical political state. The American Revolution begins with a rejection of monarchism and with it a rejection of the kind of decadent absurdity that would shut a man from the world even as he is asked to exercise his decisive political judgment. To recognize this madness and call it by its name is, according to the American Revolution, to come out from under the spell of monarchy.

In June of 1995, *The New York Times* carried a brief guest editorial on the recent elections in Haiti written by J. Brian Atwood, Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development. The piece included this account of an incident that took place while he was observing a polling station:

> The problem was that symbols intended to identify candidates for illiterate voters had been left off the ballots – inadvertently, it seemed – and the polling officials

were attempting to help voters read the ballots. The poll watchers thought they were influencing the voters' choices. International observers like myself sought to explain to the poll watchers what the election officials were doing and calm their fears.

A few minutes later an elderly man poked his head out from behind the cardboard wall that was guarding his secret ballot. "Someone has to tell me who to vote for," he said. Whereupon the election officials and poll watchers alike almost screamed in unison, "You have to decide for yourself!" (A27)

There is nothing particularly exotic about this scene: for all the inevitable condescension that might enter into Euro-American accounts of "fledgling" democracies around the world, this is not a scene that is foreign to democracy.[1] Indeed, there is something exemplary about the drama of enforced isolation that this story records. The "elderly" man's frank imperative activates a scream that is more or less silently at work in every scene of democratic election. Watching over the man are a succession of "polling officials," "poll watchers" (watching the officials), and "international observers" (watching the watchers). The man, exercising his sovereign democratic will, would seem to be at the center of the law here: the law – via its representatives – surrounds him. And yet the officials do not want to see him; they do not want to hear from him or speak to him. They are almost hysterical about this. They are mad about his freedom. The man is all alone, in an outside–inside that defies simple description. This enigmatic and necessary space can only be located within or under what we could call the spell of democracy.

The study that follows will repeatedly suggest that the "fabulous" and "chimerical" features of monarchism, as it was condemned in America from as early as 1750 (when Jonathan Mayhew employed the words I have just quoted) to the post-revolutionary era, persist in displaced forms in the democratic state.[2] To claim as much, and to make reference to the *spell* of democracy, is, of course, to fly in the face of the revolution's explicit assertion that it had come to put an end to the magic and mystery of monarchism. "Titles," wrote Thomas Paine, referring to royal nomenclature, "are like circles drawn by the magician's wand, to contract the sphere of man's felicity" (*Rights of Man*, 227); "May [The Declaration of Independence]," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "be to the world . . . the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves."[3] The American Revolution, so we have been told, brought things down to earth, brought things into the light of day, grounded itself in the common, the natural, and the ordinary. The thirteen governments of the newly united states,

explained John Adams in 1787, were founded "on the natural authority of the people alone, without a pretense of miracle or mystery" ("Defense," *Political Writings*, 118).

By resisting the story of demystification that the American Revolution tells about itself, this book will approach monarchic and democratic political orders as two forms of political organization not just as the terms of an absolute opposition between which we have to make a political (or ethical) choice. To reject democracy's inheritance from monarchism, I argue, is to participate in the discourse of the revolution, not to analyze it, and it is to participate in what I will call, in chapter one, monarchophobia. In the pages of this introduction and in the chapters that follow, I will pursue some of the ways in which the political order and the political subject produced by the American Revolution can be thought of as being, in Jonathan Mayhew's words, "as fabulous and chimerical, as transubstantiation; or any of those most absurd reveries of ancient or modern visionaries" ("Discourse," 407).[4] I want to consider the consequences for the democratic citizen of the founding rupture between the political subjectivity that had initiated the revolution (colonial and rebellious) and that which emerged in the wake of its success (republican and constitutional); I want to draw attention to the figural excess generated by the concept of representation in the late eighteenth century; and I want to think about the strange temporality of democratic citizenship (how is it possible that one can retroactively become a subject of the revolution's liberation and empowerment?). I will repeatedly return to the relationship between political power and the rhetoric of immortality, and, finally, to the opportunity and anxiety generated by the particular forms of the citizen's realization under democracy. All these questions are raised and implicitly addressed by an ongoing reflection on an overdetermined reference to democracy's "spell." The American Revolution only brings its subjects out from under the spell of monarchy, this study suggests, insofar as it binds them to the spell of democracy.

To re-mystify the language we use to describe democracy is, for some, to participate in a discourse that has been far more at home in English departments than in history departments over the last thirty or so years. The language of structuralist, post-structuralist, and post-Marxist literary, political, and philosophical analysis threatens at times to provoke a replaying of the revolutionary moment in which an ethic of plain speech and common sense, of the ordinary and the natural, is pitted against the "monkish" gibberish of the high priests of theory. I will return to the question of how a certain post-modern discourse might be said to displace

the charisma of monarchic mystique, but for now I want to admit that for many readers the study that follows will appear to be merely one more example of the kind of theoretical obfuscation that is incapable of reading the revolution's own language about itself. To that end, this book has an unapologetic founding question: "How might literary theory contribute to our understanding of the American Revolution?" This question does not ask after the representation of revolutionary events in literary texts, nor does it interrogate the political leanings of particular authors. I am not particularly interested in the aesthetic or formal elegance of the era's political writings, nor am I going to suggest that an ear for poetry makes one a better reader of the Declaration of Independence (although this may be true). Instead, this book finds in literary theory a productive series of reflections on the rhetorical dimension of all attempts – literary, historical, or political – to establish empirical distinctions and identities. Literary theory insists on a rhetorical supplement at work in any founding moment and in any founding structure. This book's literary approach, in other words, introduces into a field dominated by political science and American history an infuriating insistence on the extent to which every text, every claim, every category of revolutionary experience is at odds with itself and hence with the revolutionary project of which it is a part. To bring literary theory to bear on our understanding of the American Revolution, means, among other things, to attempt to demonstrate (and suggest the implications of) an irreducible tension between the rhetorical and the logical in every moment of what we call the founding. Those founding categories that would seem to give stability and certainty to the revolutionary effort (the monarch as absolute enemy; the "people" as sovereign source of democratic legitimacy; nature's God and God's nature; individual inalienable rights etc.) must be examined with attention to the performative disruption of their cognitive force. Literary theory refuses to take the revolution's version of its world at face value, not because it is committed to the revolution's failure or because it wants to accuse the revolution of deceit. The literary theory that I am bringing to bear on the American Revolution will be as useful for expanding the effects of the revolution as for contracting its claims to authority. Furthermore, I will suggest that the American Revolution distinguishes itself as an era in which a peculiar sensitivity to the rhetorical production of meaning emerges out of a radically politicized experience of the historical production of the social order, of justice, and of political subjecthood. Literary theory and the American Revolution share an engagement with history as the paradoxical experience of a meaningful break with precedent and convention.

The American Revolution's defining gesture, the gesture that gave it the profile of a revolution as opposed to merely an intra-state dispute, was its rejection of the English crown and with it the rejection of absolute monarchy in general. "[We must] besiege the throne of heaven," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "to extirpate from creation this class of human lions, tigers, and mammoths called kings, from whom let him perish who does not say 'good Lord deliver us.'"[5] The antagonism between monarchism and democracy was, I will contend, the most far-reaching of the revolution's political oppositions and thus it is the deconstruction of this opposition that will continually inform the readings that follow. This deconstruction follows a literary, or rhetorical, insistence on the textual instability of any set of grounding antitheses (such as that between monarchism and democracy), but it also participates in a post-modern analysis of the constitutive role played by an antagonist or enemy in the construction of any political identity. The American Revolution's crucial opposition between monarchism and democracy cannot be disentangled, I will show, from the revolution's immediate reincorporation, by way of translation and displacement, of the structures and aporias of monarchism. Understanding the post-revolutionary United States means, among other things, understanding the ways in which the discourse of democracy persistently reinscribes its defining antagonism towards monarchism *and* the ways in which it inherits, in altered form, some of the features of the monarchic political order. Thus we have to take note of a founding complication. To reassert the centrality of anti-monarchism to the revolution's political transformation is to insist on an absolute distinction: the pre- and post-revolutionary American states are divided by the wall of a political event that knows no compromise ("I do not see any tolerable middle ground," wrote Rousseau in 1767, "between the most austere democracy and the most perfect Hobbesian regime"[6]). But this wall is undermined by the suggestion that monarchism and republicanism not be seen as the poles of an opposition but as different but related attempts to manage the same political problems and as different but related attempts to assert their transcendence of politics as such. This latter claim finds in Rousseau's comment the invocation of a peculiar intimacy: there is no middle ground between monarchism and republicanism because nothing comes between them.

Thus, *Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism* suggests that displaced or translated elements of monarchic political culture can be found at work in key revolutionary ideas and constructs. The citizen, the State, and the founding documents of American democracy emerge from this analysis

augmented by reinscribed versions of the same paradoxes, inconsistencies, and aporias that structure the monarchic political order. At the same time, this study is not simply interested in revealing (cynically or pejoratively) these political inheritances. Instead, I will suggest that a recognition of the complex and irreducible relationship between democracy and monarchism is essential for understanding how democracy works and how it can be put to work in new and potentially more effective ways. One of the results of this approach is to disturb simple reductions of political affiliation in the literature of this period. Hence, a character who laments the American break with England emerges as the author of a nuanced allegory of revolution; a post-revolutionary outlaw's philosophy finds an echo behind the closed doors of the constitutional convention; Benjamin Franklin's exemplary civic personality performs one of its most crucial interventions in the name of a secret sacrifice; and the subject of revolutionary freedom finds itself enclosed by the walls of the voting booth. The subject of the American founding, I repeatedly show, inherits the monarch's political authority by simultaneously inheriting the monarch's arbitrariness, extravagance, and obscurity. This monarchic inheritance (announced in the exemplary form of Philip Freneau's excessive denial: "Without a king, we till the smiling plain; / Without a king, we trace the unbounded sea, / . . . Without a king, to see the end of time"[7]) enriches the subject of American democracy and of American literary study.

Deconstructing the opposition between monarchism and democracy also allows us to develop new insights into some of the major political and cultural preoccupations of the early United States. In the course of this book I will consider, among other things, political loyalism, the adoption of the secret ballot, the revolutionary appropriation of the Native American, the debate over the franchise, and the critical debate over print-based or oratorical models of revolutionary persuasion. The discussion will involve a series of fictional letters, two late-eighteenth century autobiographies, and the novels and stories of Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper; but as the study of a period in which political writing and political events presented Americans with their most compelling occasions for speculation and innovation, we will also pay close attention to the words of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, as well as to the language generated in and around the Declaration of Independence, the Constitutional Convention, and the various post-revolutionary attempts to secure or contain the radicalism of the revolution's transformations. *Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism* subjects these texts and events to readings

that repeatedly ask after the traces or reconfigurations of monarchical political structures within the practices and discourses of democracy. We will persistently return to a distinction between the othering of monarchism that is necessary for the transition to democracy and the post-revolutionary recognition of democracy's political relationship to monarchism, a recognition that allows for a political philosophy that is not spell-bound by a simple revolutionary antagonism. Democracy resists its relationship to monarchism, and this resistance produces a range of fascinating figures, voices, and narratives in the polemics and plots of the new nation's novels, memoirs, and pamphlets. In the pages that follow, I want to track the fortunes of terms that link an antipathy towards monarchism to anxieties about political power *per se* and about the subject transformed by the accession to political power. Does democracy succeed by giving each and every citizen a share in the power *and* the madness of the monarch? Is sovereignty something to be desired or feared? Will the revolution have brought "ordinary people" to power, as one distinguished observer has recently put it, only to have rendered them incurably and unrecognizably extraordinary?[8] I want to begin to answer these questions by considering in more detail what it means to suggest that in bringing them out from under the spell of monarchism, democracy introduces its subjects to a new set of mysteries. What exactly falls under the spell of democracy?

REVOLUTIONARY EXORCISM

Spell *sb.*1 **3. a.** A set of words, a formula or verse, supposed to possess occult or magical powers; a charm or incantation; a means of accomplishing enchantment or exorcism.[9]

Political revolution always finds itself repudiating a particular form of political organization (monarchism, for example, or totalitarian communism), but it simultaneously repudiates politics in general in the name of a revolutionary transcendence of politics. Overcoming the political failings of one regime becomes indistinguishable, in revolutionary rhetoric, from overcoming the constitutive aporias of the political (everything that, under the name of politics, resists the passage between the constative theory of the state and its performative history). This collapse of two distinct gestures would seem to be an inevitable feature of the modern revolution. In order to constitute a revolution, its discourse has to reject absolutely the principle of authority in one political regime and replace

it with its own authority, the authority of the revolutionary voice. This act of usurpation can only justify itself as a legitimate, original, and self-justifying event insofar as it replaces a political force that had *itself* claimed a meta-historical transcendence of politics. The democratic revolution's new beginning, that is to say, depends upon, and repeats, monarchism's blasphemous appropriation of divine, which is to say extra-legal, authority. (This structure is wonderfully reproduced in one of the climactic scenes of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* [1798] in which the "biloquist," Carwin, produces the illusion of a divine voice in order to tell the psychotic Theodore Wieland that the voice of God that he thought he had heard commanding him to murder his family was a delusion.[10]) That the American Revolution engages in this divine appropriation at the very moment of revolution is evident from a close scrutiny of the Declaration of Independence. The text in which the independent people of the United States produce themselves as such – and thereby *become* what they claim already to be – succeeds insofar as it earns itself the right to command this impossibility. The effect, in other words, is rhetorical, and it produces the revolutionary people as the god-like figures who stand outside of, and are not subject to, mortal and historical patterns of temporality and causality.[11] The Declaration of Independence cannot but perform a monarchic gesture precisely insofar as it claims an authority that is not preceded by (but is said to coincide with) the "approbation and consent" of the people in whose name it denounces and rejects monarchism.[12]

Similarly, we ought to consider the complexity of the revolutionary claim that the subject of post-monarchism is the subject of birth (the subject of what the nineteenth-century African American abolitionist James Forten called " the birth-right of the human race" [quoted in Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 78][13]). This idea, Hannah Arendt writes, was absolutely original to the American Revolution: "inalienable political rights of all men by virtue of birth would have appeared to all ages prior to our own as they appeared to Burke – a contradiction in terms" (*On Revolution*, 45).[14] This is certainly not a subject that democracy (our democracy) wants to give up ("Civil rights," wrote Malcolm X, "means you're asking Uncle Sam to treat you right. Human rights are something you were born with. Human rights are your God-given rights. Human rights are the rights that are recognized by all nations of this earth," "The Ballot," 2549). The idealism and the antagonism of this element of anti-monarchism are part of the inheritance of democracy. But *post*-revolutionary political philosophy reminds us that this very antagonism registers a contamination:

the subject of universal, inalienable rights is also always the subject of an othered – and thus displaced – monarchism; monarchic subjectivity (that of the monarch himself, but also, as we shall see in chapter one, that of the obedient people) is an integral part of the structure of democratic subjectivity. This contamination can be glimpsed in the various revolutionary condemnations of the absolute monarch's privileged relationship to the rights of birth: "The following," writes Thomas Paine, "is the system of logic upon which are founded the claims of Royalty: 'I,' says the hereditary prince, owe my authority to my birth; I owe my birth to God; therefore, I owe nothing to men'" ("An Essay," 389–90). "Just consider;" Paine continues, "a person cannot be a mere workman without some sort of ability; to be a king all that a man requires is to be born" (391). If today it is becoming possible to challenge the unexamined efficacy of an appeal to the rights of man (the rights of birth), it is because we may finally be able to resist the revolutionary injunction against thinking through the relations of inheritance and displacement that connect monarchism and democracy.[15] Democratic subjectivity, as we shall see, is in perpetual negotiation with the structures of monarchism.

Now the revolutionary subject of the rights of birth and of the Declaration's monarchic "coup of force" is also the subject of one of the most enduring legacies of revolutionary anti-monarchism: the Bill of Rights, that original supplement to the juridical founding of the federally united states. The Bill's principle gesture opposes an inalienable extra-legal freedom to the encroachments of any form of political power; it is, as Thomas Jefferson put it, "what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, and what no just government should refuse or rest on inference."[16] "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech," asserts the most famous element of the Bill. Lawmaking forces, the forces of political power, must be restrained from encroaching upon an originally free speech. The subject of the Bill of Rights is the subject of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, the subject endowed at birth with "certain inalienable rights" including the right "to alter or to abolish" any government that fails to secure these rights.

But the subject of American democracy is also, of course, the subject of the Constitution – the subject of that text which the Bill of Rights amends. Who is *that* subject if he or she is *not* the subject of an original and inalienable freedom? That subject, it seems clear, is the subject of politico-juridical structure, the subject of (constitutional) convention.[17] If the subject of the Bill of Rights finds its figural space outside, or before,

the law (the people "out of doors" as Paine among others liked to say), the subject of the Constitution might be expected to show up *inside* the law, framed by its articles and sections, defined by its delineation of acceptable representatives and eligible voters. (In chapters three and four I will suggest at more length how the subject of the Constitution can be thought of not just as the subject of convention but as the subject of *the* Convention, the subject of that insistently secretive and rhetorically quite extravagant founding process that took place in Annapolis and Philadelphia in 1786 and 1787.) That this subject is as crucial to the identity of the democratic citizen as the open-air subject of the Bill of Rights is brought home to us, I will argue, by the centrality for democracy of the secret ballot. The democratic subject-citizen, in other words, is simultaneously and irreducibly the subject outside and before the law (the subject of an originary freedom) and the subject isolated and secreted within the frame of the ballot box or the voting booth.[18] One could even say that the history of political antagonism within democracy can be rewritten as an ongoing confrontation between the discourse of the subject outside and before the law, the subject of the Bill of Rights, and the subject of the law's structures and concealments (and this confrontation has recently been replayed for us in the academic study of late-eighteenth century America in the form of an "opposition" between an oratorical understanding of revolutionary rhetoric and a print-privileging analysis: the subject of print's concealments versus the subject of the spoken voice's revelations). But without dismissing the importance of this "confrontation," we should consider the possibility that it maintains a false opposition. For as the *New York Times* piece with which I began suggests, the constitutional subject of the ballot box, in his or her secrecy and isolation, is as much the subject of a disorienting "outside" as the Bill of Rights' subject "out of doors." Hidden behind a cardboard wall that "guards his ballot" (Atwood, "Fragile," A27), but which also, as with Paine's "ridiculous" monarch, leaves him "shut off from the world" (Paine, *Common Sense*, 69), the Haitian voter experiences the deconstruction of a simple opposition between the law and its outside, between democracy and monarchism as a kind of border crisis that for all its danger and for all the anxiety it generates, nevertheless belongs to democracy (the guest editorial was entitled "Fragile – But Democratic").

But something, it is important to remember, could be said to interrupt the isolation of the voting booth. The democratic voter shares his or her secret space with writing, that writing with which the voter *must* engage at the moment of decision. For the Haitian voter, this writing may well