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978-0-521-86113-7 - Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832

Kevin Gilmartin

Excerpt

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*Introduction: Reconsidering counterrevolutionary  
expression*

This is a study of the literary forms and rhetorical strategies involved in British counterrevolutionary and anti-radical print expression from the first reaction to the French Revolution through the Napoleonic era to the Reform Act of 1832. The specific provisions of the 1832 bill for reform – a rationalization and limited extension of the franchise, and redistribution of parliamentary seats away from pocket boroughs in favor of populous towns and counties – by no means answered radical expectations. But taken together with a significant erosion of the constitutional position of the Church of England in the late 1820s, through the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and Catholic relief, electoral reform and the middle-class political ascendancy it facilitated served to shift the ideological and social terms in which a defense of the establishment was conducted over the course of the rest of the nineteenth century. While my own rationale for historical coverage has to do with developments in political expression, the years marked out for this study coincide with the notional boundaries of the British romantic period, less often insisted upon in recent literary scholarship perhaps, but still evident in a field now constituted by a critically productive tension between the old romantic canon and an influx of competing aesthetic movements and recovered writers and texts. The argument of this book is not intended to reground romanticism in conservative terms. But in drawing on recent historical scholarship that insists upon the productive role of conservative movements in the political culture of the period, it will challenge the tendency for a leading strand of romantic studies to identify literary expression and the life of the imagination, whether by way of positive affiliation or more ambiguous dislocation and displacement, with some primary sympathy for the French Revolution, and to privilege the progressive affiliations of literature and of print culture more broadly.<sup>1</sup>

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And yet any account of a counterrevolutionary culture that was itself obsessed with the print sources of subversion must grant some measure of the romanticist tendency to associate literary expression with radical social change, particularly where revolution was itself understood in mediated terms. It is certainly striking how often in British literature of the romantic period disruptive political energies seem to arrive through the written or printed word. This was partly a matter of experience, as revolution became for British culture and society what Ronald Paulson has suggestively termed “a secondary French reality – history at second hand in written reports.”<sup>2</sup> But there is also evidence here of a kind of ideological defense mechanism, and literary expression offers a particularly acute register of the way the threat of subversion was consistently displaced from England to republican France, to North America, and to Ireland, with the trauma of political change getting relayed and reported as news, rumor, and correspondence. In her important study of British fictional reworkings of the sentimental plot of Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Nicola J. Watson has shown how, as “the Revolution was read and reread, written and rewritten” in these years, the sentimental device of intercepted correspondence came to figure transgressive energies,<sup>3</sup> and similar relays for revolution can be found throughout the literature of the period. In the conservative imagination, patterns of discursive transmission were complicated by a symptomatic ambiguity about the geography of subversion. Complaints about foreign contagion were common enough, but so too were opportunistic reprisal campaigns against at least a century of indigenous liberal and Enlightenment tendencies, blamed for sapping the moral and spiritual foundations of political stability. And alarmist responses to dissident forces at home were concerned to justify repressive measures by drawing a short line from the London radical press to diffuse manifestations of popular discontent. “What think you of a club of Atheists meeting twice a week at an ale-house in Keswick, and the landlady of their way of thinking” (*SLC* 4: 210), Robert Southey wrote from his remote rural home to a London correspondent in 1816, and discoveries of this kind only served to reinvigorate his furious *Quarterly Review* campaign against William Cobbett and the London radical press.

To identify Robert Southey and other hostile commentators on the transmission of radical unrest as *counterrevolutionaries* itself merits some reflection. One paradoxical assumption of this book is that a programmatic defense of the unreformed constitution and the established

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Church in this period can be considered “counterrevolutionary,” and that there are reasons to prefer this term to a defensively construed conservatism, even though the British state did not experience a political transformation that could be said to enlist a “counter-revolution” in the strict sense of “a revolution opposed to a previous revolution.”<sup>4</sup> The anti-radical arguments and print forms of expression treated in this book were often not simply retrospective nor committed to preserving “things as they are,” but were instead involved in a more enterprising and potentially compromised literary-political project that itself contributed to the transformation of the established order, in part by systematically engaging a subversive enemy on its own compromised literary and public terrain. They were counterrevolutionary in the sense that they were unapologetically committed to a project of social renovation, and to intervening in present conditions even to the point of adjusting inherited arrangements, in order to block revolutionary designs. To raise this issue about the term “counterrevolution” is not to overlook a historical record of political violence and conspiracy that extends in this period from the naval mutinies of 1797, the Irish rising of 1798, and the Despard plot of 1802 through the Luddite disturbances of 1811 and 1812, the Pentridge rising of 1817, and the Cato Street conspiracy of 1820.<sup>5</sup> But it is to recognize that the scale of events in England did not approach that of revolutionary France, so that the tendency to figure catastrophic political change in mediated terms – and particularly through the production, circulation, and reception of print – was to some extent a matter of experience. At the same time, geographical displacements of revolutionary energy can be more critically evaluated, as a determined result of loyalist efforts to discredit dissent of any kind as essentially alien, disloyal, and extreme, present in Britain only as the phantasmal consequence of overheated speculation and unreliable print transmission. There is reason, then, to be alert to the risk that we sustain a conservative polemic when we recapitulate displaced conceptions of revolution in our own interpretive discourse. From at least the founding of *The Anti-Jacobin; or, Weekly Examiner* in 1797, the term “anti-Jacobin” was itself a politically calculated self-identification, meant to gather a host of dissident political, social, and cultural forces under the ominous sign of a Jacobinism whose real sympathies lay abroad.

Within British romantic studies, revolution as a matter of literary and print intervention is a familiar pattern, though it manifests itself in the first instance as an Enlightenment inheritance, and what David

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Simpson has identified as the belief among “radicals of the 1790s, like Godwin, Paine and Thelwall, and some of their French precursors, . . . that print would be the agent of world revolution.”<sup>6</sup> It was arguably in its *negative* form that this belief in the disruptive power of the printed word acquired its more distinctive romantic inflection, above all in Edmund Burke’s “mastery of the semiotics of revolution” in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), a text shot through with anxieties about the subversive work of newspapers, pamphlets, reprinted sermons, paper currency, and a shadowy conspiracy of the political men of letters at home and abroad.<sup>7</sup> Advanced, examined, and contested through the early phases of the revolution controversy and the campaign against domestic radicalism, the connection between revolution and the printed word found emblematic as well as casual expression throughout canonical romanticism. In *The Excursion* (1814), William Wordsworth identifies one source of the Solitary’s postrevolutionary disaffection in a copy of Voltaire’s *Candide*, although any sense of a compelling political threat is mitigated by the cavalier dismissal of Voltaire’s text – “dull product of a scoffer’s pen” – and by its discovery among the ornaments of a child’s playhouse.<sup>8</sup> A similar pattern of print transmission is more ambiguously underscored in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) through the telling error by which Eleanor Tilney mistakes Catherine Morland’s anticipation of a “very shocking” gothic novel due out in London for news of a “dreadful riot.”<sup>9</sup> And again towards the end of the period, with a dialectical precision born of his own uneasily sustained radical commitments, William Hazlitt brought the legacies of Paine and Burke together in his *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (1828, 1830) when he wrote that “the French Revolution might be described as the remote but inevitable result of the invention of the art of printing,”<sup>10</sup> a claim made more provocative by Hazlitt’s insistence on tracing the critical and democratizing effects of print back through a native revolutionary inheritance to the impact of the English Reformation.

The anxious intersection of print and subversion has long made romantic studies fertile ground for interpretive theories of a revolution in language, aesthetics, or consciousness, and in recent decades, for the more materially and institutionally grounded theories of social transformation that have entered literary studies through Jürgen Habermas’ account of the structural development of a political public sphere.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, the talismanic year 1789 has proven a fluid and even unpredictable literary-historical marker. It persists as a point of departure for British romanticism less from any strictly causal claim about the

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relation between politics and the arts, between France and Britain, but rather as a potent (if often unexamined) figure for the way writers responded to, identified with, or repudiated a whole range of social, psychological, and aesthetic transformations conjured by events in France. To be sure, the perception that British literature and culture were undergoing changes not directly related to revolutionary events in Paris was available to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century commentators on the right and on the left, particularly where a longer view of the Enlightenment was possible, and where liberating (or corrupting) changes in taste, morality, and manners were found to be at work. And while this book is certainly interested in the way that subversion in all its forms was felt to circulate through literature and society, it will generally take the view that programmatic conservative anxieties about the threat of revolution were dictated by political concerns for monarchy, constitutional government, Church establishment, and social hierarchy.

This is not to deny that over the course of the 1790s a revolution controversy tended to spill over from political and constitutional principle to manners, mind, and morality, so that any strict distinction between politics and literature become increasingly hard to sustain, nor is it to dismiss such celebrated episodes in the literary politics of the period as the assault of the *Anti-Jacobin* on Robert Southey's early radical verse or the strictures of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* on the Cockney School of poetry. Instead, it is to keep in mind that the campaign against subversion was chiefly conducted on other fronts, with the *Anti-Jacobin* establishing a sense of proper authority by constituting itself within the periodical framework of a single parliamentary session, and *Blackwood's* developing its sense of festive embattlement primarily with respect to the Whig opposition and plebeian unrest rather than Cockney versification. Extreme fears continued to circulate around extreme outcomes: insurrection, regicide, the leveling of property rights and class privilege, and a sectarian dissolution of the Anglican establishment. Jane West certainly betrayed a common counterrevolutionary sentiment when she claimed, in her 1799 novel *A Tale of the Times*, that "the annihilation of thrones and altars" was the work not of arms but of "those principles which, by dissolving domestic confidence and undermining private worth, paved the way for universal confusion" (*TT* 2: 275). But the force of this argument lay precisely in its warning that any compromises in matters of domesticity, manners, and taste would precipitate the fall of governments and "universal confusion." A crucial exception can be found

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among Evangelical moral reformers, for whom the crisis of the 1790s was, as David Eastwood has written, a crisis “in the realm of public morality rather than in the world of politics.”<sup>12</sup> Even here, however, the urgent new political threat was seized upon by Evangelical activists as an opportunity to extend the base of support for a moral reform campaign had once seemed suspiciously revisionist, and contaminated with its own Puritan revolutionary associations.

Within the framework of a counterrevolutionary imagination that traced the alarming movement of subversive energies back and forth from nation to nation, and from politics and religion to manners, taste, and judgment, the printed word was subject to heightened scrutiny because it was understood to mediate the threat of revolution, anticipating in its own disruptive historical development a traumatic break with inherited forms, and conditioning the reception of cataclysmic events through the “rapid communication of intelligence” that Wordsworth famously entered in his catalogue of debilitating modern developments.<sup>13</sup> For radicals and liberals, the alignment of print with social change was readily understood in progressive terms. Thus Hazlitt extended his discussion of the revolutionary consequences of print through a series of conventional Enlightenment distinctions between “the diffusion of knowledge and inquiry” on the one hand and the stubborn remnants of “barbarous superstition” and “the feudal system” on the other.<sup>14</sup> For those inclined to defend the established Church and the unreformed constitution, the situation was altogether more difficult, not least because such defenses were characteristically expressed in print. Nor was it easy to renounce altogether the progressive assumptions bound up in an identification of print culture with radical change. The British constitution had long been celebrated, by contrast with Continental absolutism and Eastern despotism, for its capacity to accommodate new social and political energies, of the kind manifestly evinced in the career of a politician and writer such as Edmund Burke. And the commitment to social and economic advancement was a widely shared inheritance among eighteenth-century British elites. One of the challenges facing counterrevolutionary movements was to sustain a qualified commitment to progress while distinguishing the reformist designs of present-day radicals from earlier constitutional revisions by which the English state had legitimately accommodated the Reformation and the rise of commercial society.

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With the ambiguities of an enterprising and resourceful conservatism in mind, it is important to acknowledge that the shock of 1789 did often yield a straightforward logic of reaction: in blunt defenses of monarchy, social hierarchy, and economic inequality as a providential dispensation; in unyielding and often contorted accounts of the benefits of an unreformed electorate; in a repudiation of the skeptical, speculative, and cosmopolitan tendencies of the eighteenth century; and in a commitment to social forms that were conceived (however notionally) in local, rural, and oral terms. For literary and cultural studies, this nostalgic structure of feeling has long served as the dominant framework for romantic-period conservatism, against which to measure the political inclinations of particular writers, texts, and movements. And while this deep conservatism – often identified as “Burkean,” though Edmund Burke is at best an imperfect type – was certainly crucial to the defense of Church and state in the period, it does not tell the whole story. The *Reflections* routinely betrays competing counterrevolutionary energies, for example, in the way Burke sets out from an implicit contrast between his own reluctantly published private correspondence and Richard Price’s promiscuously reprinted sermon in support of the French, even as he then proceeds to hunt down an ominous “predecessor” for Price in the figure of Hugh Peter, the Puritan era divine notorious for having preached at the execution of Charles I. Mixture is of course a favorite Burkean figure, and his own mixed rendering of Price’s offensive communication – is it characteristically printed or spoken? a betrayal of foreign or indigenous sympathies? an alarming present departure or an echo of past transgressions? – suggests how a counterrevolutionary discourse could remain alert to the transmission of stabilizing and destabilizing tendencies back and forth between print and speech. While the *Reflections* did partly encode its political suspicions as a matter of literary form, with Burke’s own unsystematic private correspondence pitted against calculated conspiracies in print, it became increasingly clear to counterrevolutionary activists over the course of the 1790s that an effective challenge to the threat of revolution would have to engage directly with those modes of public organization and print communication that were associated with radical protest.

As an account of the challenges involved in this kind of mixed conservative print campaign *against* the rise of radicalism in print and in public opinion, the present study can be said to draw its concerns from the nervously imperfect rhetorical organization of the *Reflections*,

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rather than from the more usual romanticist identification of Burke with conservative principles of organic development, generational inheritance, and immediate local attachment as the precondition for national feeling. Given the prominence Burke has long enjoyed within British romantic studies, a field that has not easily accommodated topical prose, his diminished presence in the chapters that follow deserves some explanation.<sup>15</sup> The fact that literary scholarship has paid far less attention to other leading social and political writers of the period (Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, Robert Owen, and even Thomas Paine) can certainly be traced to the impressive rhetorical force of the *Reflections*, to the way Burke's anxieties about the politics of sentiment, theater, sublimity, and domesticity get played out elsewhere in the literature of the period, and to his influence on such leading poets and essayists as William Wordsworth and William Hazlitt.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, there is no reason to challenge the canonical status of the *Reflections*, and my decision not to devote a chapter of this book to Burke is a recognition of the range and quality of existing scholarship.<sup>17</sup> What is more problematic, however, is the tendency for literary scholarship to make the ideological disposition of the *Reflections* a simple index of conservatism, in the way Paine's *Rights of Man* or "English Jacobinism" once stood for a radical culture that we now correctly understand to have been more complex and internally differentiated, extending through a range of native, cosmopolitan, constitutionalist, Dissenting, infidel, feminist, and economic idioms of protest.<sup>18</sup> And in many respects Burke was a far less representative man of the right than Paine was of the left. In a perceptive account of how the *Reflections* came to achieve its status "as a conservative classic," J.G.A. Pocock reminds us that Burke remained through much of his late career "a lonely and distrusted figure," by no means a prime mover of conservative thought and action in a decade that has since been identified with his impact: "The counterrevolutionary associations which were formed in and after 1793 seem to have relied less on Burke for their polemics than on William Paley, Hannah More, and other authoritarian elements lying deep in Whig and Tory tradition."<sup>19</sup> The appearance after the *Reflections* of such contrarian polemics as *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791) and *A Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796) serves to underscore the development of his counterrevolutionary writing amidst the disintegration of the Whig corporate identities he had once sustained, as well as his unwillingness or inability to bring his animosity towards

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the French Revolution to bear upon secure collective affiliations. In an astute survey of the pamphlet literature of the 1790s, Gregory Claeys has further complicated Burke's situation by challenging the very framework of a "Burke-Paine debate" as a way of understanding the British controversy over the French Revolution, on the grounds that conflict "was waged in terms not immediately given in the two major combatants' main texts," particularly once loyalism became fixated with a misleading charge of social and economic leveling advanced against *Rights of Man*.<sup>20</sup>

Successive scholarly formulations of a "Burke problem" suggest that, in accounts of his own work, the tendency has been to acknowledge a complex and distinctive achievement.<sup>21</sup> Yet an ambivalence about matters of party, property, national identity, and literary professionalism tends to get overlooked where Burke comes to stand for a reflex counterrevolutionary traditionalism. While there is no arguing against the need for interpretive shorthand in literary and ideological analysis, the effect here has been both to misrepresent Burke and to flatten out the range and complexity of conservative positions in an age of revolution. The growing body of work in romanticism that identifies radical expression with a range of dissident traditions has not been accompanied by a similar appreciation of the diversity and resourcefulness of conservative movements.<sup>22</sup> While historians and political theorists such as H. T. Dickinson, Ian R. Christie, Frank O'Gorman, Mark Philp, Gregory Claeys, David Eastwood, James J. Sack, Don Herzog, and Emma Vincent have undertaken a substantial critical reassessment of conservatism in this period,<sup>23</sup> their work has yet to be felt in the political framework for romantic studies. Again, the effect is doubly distorting, making some of Burke's distinctive idioms and concerns a measure of British conservatism, while reserving a formally and stylistically engaging response to the French Revolution for the magnificent prose of the *Reflections*. In drawing upon recent historical scholarship, my aim is to recover for literary studies the range and complexity of counterrevolutionary expression, and to demonstrate the enterprising and productive (rather than merely negative or reactive) presence of counterrevolutionary voices in the culture of the romantic period.

It is worth being clear at the outset about the limits of this study. My interest lies with an articulate, self-conscious, and interventionist conservatism in print, rather than with sporadic outbreaks of "Church and King" violence, or with those more implicit and deeply embedded habits of deference and national feeling that undoubtedly contributed

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to the prevention of revolution in Britain.<sup>24</sup> Nor do the chapters that follow substantially engage visual and theatrical forms that were increasingly brought to bear upon political controversy in this period.<sup>25</sup> In adhering to deliberate counterrevolutionary verbal expression in print, my aim is to bring into focus some of the constitutive tensions that make this a distinct body of writing: tensions between revision and tradition; between a desire to confront radicalism on its own terms, and a deep-seated skepticism about the political legitimacy of print culture and public opinion; between an unyielding confidence in the viability of the old regime, and a realization that new social forces and cultural forms must be enlisted in its defense. And of course conditioning every dimension of the response to radical protest there is a framing tension between counterrevolutionary public expression and coercive state action. No account of an enterprising conservatism in this period can afford to ignore the repressive network of spies, gagging acts, and criminal prosecutions that went into “Pitt’s terror” and subsequent government campaigns against popular unrest. Yet here too it is important not merely to construe such repression as a distinct outer limit upon free expression, an approach that tends to reinforce straightforward identifications of print culture with liberating social change. Loyalist civic associations and government sponsored periodical forms were designed to align counterrevolutionary public expression with state repression and legal restriction, and conservatives strenuously denied that there was anything inappropriate or inconsistent about this kind of collaboration. Contrary to the liberal assumptions that often guide our histories of the institutions of criticism, this book suggests that aggressive critical practices developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on both sides of a sustained debate over the legitimacy of the old regime in Britain.

I have already suggested that “conservative” can be a misleading term for counterrevolutionary expression if it is construed in a narrowly retrospective or defensive sense. Semantic difficulties do not end here, as James J. Sack has suggested in his study of the ideological development of “reaction and orthodoxy” in Britain from the 1760s to 1832. Where the term “Jacobite” was clearly passing out of relevant usage in these decades, the alternative “Tory” was factionally contested and inconsistently applied; “Pittite” entered the field in the 1790s in honor of the Prime Minister William Pitt’s decisive leadership against the French and against domestic radical protest, but the term then became embroiled after his death in 1806 in rival