Introduction

Timothy Morton and Nigel Smith

A CONNOISSEUR EXAMINING A COOPER; OR, 'A CHAOS OF THE ELEMENTS OF CHARLES THE FIRST'

Radicalism in British Literary Culture, 1650–1830 studies the transmission of radical texts, ideas and practices from the period of the English Revolution to that of the Romantic revolution. This is a new, developing field of enquiry, and we are aware that not everything in this field has been settled. In this Introduction we examine the nature of this emerging area. 'Radicalism' is explored in its diverse, plural meanings, and questions of historiography are considered. References to the individual contributions are made throughout, and at the end we examine each in turn, laying out the organisation of the whole volume.

'Radical' originally meant 'pertaining to the roots', from the Latin 'radix'. It was used in a broad set of fields of knowledge in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, from philosophy, mathematics and biology to astrology. The use of 'radical' to mean a thoroughgoing transformation of a system, a set of ideas or practices, from the 'root' upwards, dates from the late eighteenth century. *The Oxford English Dictionary* records the first usage of 'radical reformer' as 1802. One could in consequence take a nominalist view, and argue that 'radicalism' only exists in this period and afterwards. Everything else that came before was something else, and those who use the term for earlier events (e.g., the 'radical Reformation' in sixteenth-century Germany, the 'radicals' in the English Revolution, the 'radicals' in the Glorious Revolution) are guilty of anachronism.

But this would, we believe, be a disservice to historical reality. The class politics evoked in the word 'radical' – the overthrow or mitigation of the high by the low – surely did not arise spontaneously, but emerged historically. The period in English history between 1640 and 1832 was marked by some common conditions and characteristics, bestowing a consistency upon those who pursued a political or religious vision different

from that required by the state. In particular, we would point to an unchanged franchise, and, with the exception of the experiments of the 1650s, an unchanged representative. We might also add a persistent debate about the most appropriate form of Protestant worship. However different theologies and ecclesiologies were accommodated within or without the established national church, that sense of a continuity of national religious experience remained. And thus, all those who sought extreme change, or who chose to live in an alternative way, or publish an alternative vision, were responding to a broad and continuous set of circumstances, howsoever mitigated by their own position in history and their own perceptions. If they found themselves interrogated or on trial in a court of law for an offence, such as seditious activity, the law dealt with them in roughly similar ways. Hence the significance of trial accounts, either official or remembered by the accused or their followers, and their transmission as texts in the period. John Thelwall, Thomas Holcroft, Thomas Hardy and others were arrested and arraigned in 1794 under a special charge of 'Constructive Treason'. They had found inspiration in the English Revolutionary period, as demonstrated elsewhere and here in particular in the work of Michael Scrivener and Peter Kitson.

The essays gathered here analyse a number of written and usually printed texts that may be said to belong to a radical tradition as we have just defined it. Towards the end of the period, there is an undoubted sense that such a tradition existed, and that it was an animating principle for the radicals of the 1790s. Republicanism, democracy, 'English liberties' and a religious practice that did justice to the workings of the Holy Spirit within individuals, are the chief components of this tradition as it was understood in the late eighteenth century. This latter category was largely understood as 'enthusiasm', the great bugbear of reactionaries throughout the eighteenth century. Several of the chapters explore the ways in which 'enthusiasm' survived and was perceived during the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

We also have to address a substantial problem in offering a volume that spans two turbulent periods (1640–60 and *c.* 1780–1800), when radical activity was at a height. The period in between, and certainly from 1689 to 1770, was not distinguished by widespread 'radical' activity. During that time, stable government, successful campaigns in foreign wars and imperial commerce, made Great Britain a world power. The world pre-eminence that would arrive in the nineteenth century was enabled in large part by the agricultural and industrial revolutions of

this previous period. Yet, in a discernible way, and sometimes with a substantial impact, the components of seventeenth-century radicalism were carried forwards in this most stable of periods in ways that are not always obvious. Some of these pathways are the subjects of the chapters that follow.

'Radicalism' is not the word that many seventeenth- and earlier eighteenth-century people would have used to describe their projects or their writings. The body of this Introduction is sensitive to the other words that these people used, and to the particular fields of vision to which they belonged, however different they were from the viewpoints of the radicals of the early nineteenth century. Some of the complex dimensions of this historical and lexical problem are evident in the two following examples.

James Gillray's picture seems simple enough (see Figure 1), but it embodies a series of verbal puns that reveal a tale of two kingships one hundred and fifty years apart.[1] It is a Gulliverian moment: as if the King of Laputa were examining the tiny Gulliver for the first time. The King looks curious and interested, but despite the light, he strains to see the detail in the portrait. Is this a reflection on his eyesight or his intelligence or his sanity? By contrast, Oliver Cromwell looks back at the King with piercing eyes, a stern, resolute visage and apparent anger. Oliver becomes the spectre of revolution from the past, a warning about events across the Channel in 1792 and a humiliating admonition to an impotent king. The monarch to whom Cromwell was compared was William III, not George III.[2] The candlestick-holder, fashioned as a classical column, suggests a pillar of liberty, from which the light of liberty, and hence of (French) Enlightenment, extends. It also resembles the columns of justice between which both Oliver Cromwell and William III stand in famous, generically identical, pictorial representations of their rule.

Samuel Cooper (1609–72), who painted the miniature depicted in Figure 1, was the most famous and successful painter of miniatures in England during the mid-seventeenth century. His art flourished during the Commonwealth, although he had gained some fame at court during the 1630s. Like the earlier phase of Lely's career, his portraits of famous Parliamentary and Commonwealth figures helped generate a distinctive style for the non-monarchical regime.[3] In doing so, Cooper transformed a major element in late Renaissance court sensibility: miniatures were widely exchanged as private tokens and diplomatic gifts. Cromwell and his family were painted by Cooper in the 1650s. If George III were

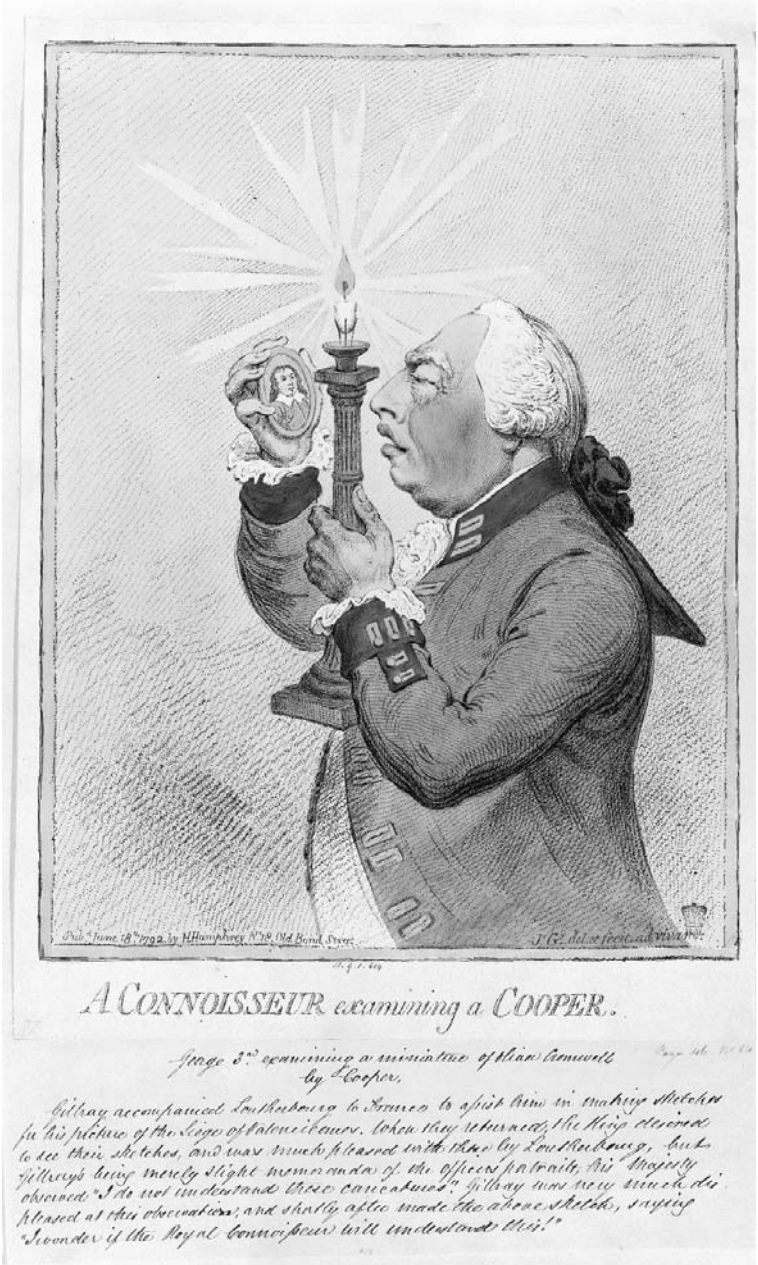

Figure 1. James Gillray, *A Connoisseur Examining a Cooper* (1792).

a real connoisseur, he would have known that miniature painting was accompanied in the 1650s by the popularity of the commemorative medal, which often combined a miniature portrait struck on one side with an image on the other of anti-monarchical action during the Civil Wars.

George III is looking back on a moment when courtliness itself was transformed. He might expect the Cooper miniature to be a gift, but it is in fact the product of a violent transformation. To that extent it is paradoxically an iconoclastic image. Just so, all of the surviving artefacts of the 1640s and 1650s become potentially powerful agents in a revival of revolutionary energy in the 1790s, or a warning against those energies.[4] There is one further insight. Art collecting during the eighteenth century was no longer a specifically aristocratic activity. The collection of republican and Whig paintings and busts by the middle classes was one way in which that political tradition was sustained and transmitted.[5] Oliver Cromwell and George III have become equal figures, both meeting in the marketplace of bourgeois art-collecting. The sublime gaze of the revolutionary hero (or rebellious usurper) meets the idiot gaze of a king.

The energies represented in Gillray's picture are also present in the literature of the period. In 1818 Percy Bysshe Shelley started work on *Charles the First*, a drama depicting the crucial moments of the English Civil War. Attempting perhaps to mollify his more reactionary friend, Thomas Medwin, Shelley wrote to him on 20 July 1820 that he meant 'to write a play, in the spirit of human nature, without prejudice or passion'.[6] Shelley later claimed to his publisher Charles Ollier that 'it is not coloured by the party spirit of the author'.[7] This is quite untrue, given the evidence we have of the play, but perhaps Shelley was trying to adumbrate the grand aesthetic form needed to imagine a broader history. On 26 January 1822 he complained to John Gisborne that he was procrastinating on the project because he could not 'seize the conception of the subject as a *whole* yet'.[8] That Shelley was *trying* and yet struggling and ultimately failing to write such a drama indicates both the need for it and the difficulty of executing it.

Shelley had requested that a box of materials on the period be sent to him. The idea of covering the English Revolutionary period had been working on both him and Mary for four years. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1816) describes how Victor Frankenstein and Henry Clerval

visit Oxford (from which Percy had been expelled in 1811 for writing an atheist pamphlet), a royalist stronghold 'after the whole nation had forsaken [the king's] cause to join the standard of parliament and liberty'. Oxford is a metonym for Victor's arrogant egotism, the entrepreneurial science that leads him to spurn his own creation. Victor comments on the Civil War, Charles I ('that unfortunate king' – *Frankenstein*'s judicously disguised republicanism here asserts that it was unfortunate that he *was ever* king), Hampden, Falkland and Goring. When visiting the tomb of Hampden, Victor, contemplating 'the divine ideas of liberty and self-sacrifice', dares for a moment to 'shake off [his] chains, and look around [him] with a free and lofty spirit'.[9] By 1818, Mary's republican father William Godwin had suggested that she work on 'a great desideratum in English history and biography, to be called "The Lives of the Commonwealth's Men" '. In reply Percy Shelley wrote: 'I am exceedingly delighted with the plan you propose of a book illustrating the character of our calumniated Republicans.'[10] The box of materials for such a project, however, was lost in a shipwreck in mid-1821. In a letter to John and Maria Gisborne, Shelley exclaimed: 'My unfortunate Box! it contained a chaos of the elements of Charles the first.'[11]

This mishap is an allegory of the reputation and fortune of the transmission, survival and continuity of radical texts and ideas from the period of the English Revolution to the British Romantic period. Shelley's fragmentary drama demonstrates the attempt by radical writers in the later period to reassess and reappropriate the radicalism of their revolutionary past. Its surviving parts reveal his focus on a radical view of the English Revolution, offering an alternative perspective to one that pointed out the military prowess of Oliver Cromwell. In fact, Shelley's play might appropriately have been entitled *Sir Henry Vane*.[12]

It is the presence of the disfigured Alexander Leighton that strikes the strongest radical chord in the opening scene of the play. His face has been branded and thus disfigured; in a sense his 'true face' has been torn off. The real Leighton (1568–1649) was fined, defrocked, pilloried and whipped (twice), had both ears and nostrils cut off, and his face branded with 'S.S.' ('sower of sedition'), for publishing *Sion's Plea* (1628); he was then imprisoned for life.[13] Thomas Medwin's life of Shelley was keen to stress the poet's dislike of the beheading of Charles I, but the presentation of Leighton complicates matters. At the very least, Medwin may have been responsible for a conservative misrepresentation of Shelley's views.[14]

Leighton portrays the violence done to him as a kind of writing that has removed his own identity:

> I *was* Leighton: what
> I *am* thou seest. And yet turn thine eyes,
> And with thy memory look upon thy friend's mind,
> Which is unchanged, and where is written deep
> The sentence of my judge.[15]

Through Shelley's characteristic rhetoric of 'silent eloquence', the presence of the disfigured person, Leighton, reclaims an identity beyond physical (dis)figuration.[16] Terror is unmasked: Archbishop Laud has dared to overwrite the law of God, inscribed on the very body of man. It is a typically strong Shelleyan image of ugliness and horror amidst aestheticised pomp. As Walter Benjamin observed, every 'cultural document' can be read as a 'record of barbarism'.[17] Shelley's *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813), his major statement of vegetarian ideas, also locates violence within civilisation, establishing a contrast between republicanism and the ideology of commercial capitalism. He writes, 'The odious and disgusting aristocracy of wealth is built upon the ruins of all that is good in chivalry or republicanism; and luxury is the forerunner of a barbarism scarce capable of cure.'[18] Capitalism may have ruined republicanism for Shelly, but radical voices could still be heard in the wreckage, even in 1818. In *Charles the First*, the presence of Leighton is radical: he *is* a document, a radical text and ghastly presence. His presence on stage testifies to the transmission of radicalism, and it appears to be retrieving a message of pacifism from that violent past.

We now consider the different kinds of radicalism: how may they be understood within the parameters of key historical determinants in the period? We discuss the significance of the party system, commerce, religion, popular politics and dominant philosophical fashions. We assess the long-term survival of heretical ideas in the eighteenth century, and the themes of social justice and crime. The section after next, 'Literature and history', explores the recent convergence of approaches between literary scholars and historians, which makes our volume possible. It discusses the republication and alteration of seventeenth-century literature associated with radicalism in the longer eighteenth century, indicating a number of genres that are crucial in this respect, such as the epic, the spiritual autobiography and the novel, in addition to forms of publication always associated with protest: the petition and the trial narrative. Most

of the contributions deal with writings that were circulated and interpreted in particular contexts. Accordingly, we elucidate the distinction between on the one hand studying the formal, rhetorical features of writing, and on the other, attending to the discursive contexts in which these rhetorics function. We also outline different considerations of time and chronology, since most of the contributions in the volume straddle conventional period boundaries in literary and social history.

WHAT IS RADICALISM?

The source of creative tension for Gillray and revolutionary vision for Shelley is a substantial difficulty for modern historians. J. G. A. Pocock states the problem succinctly at the start of his essay 'Criticism of the Whig Order in the Age between Revolutions': 'To begin our study in 1688 involves us in some problems of continuity [notably] . . . the problem of relating radical criticism . . . to the great explosion of plebeian and sectarian speech and action which had marked the years of the Civil War and Interregnum.'[19] It is indeed the age 'between' revolutions that is precisely the problem. Was the eighteenth century a buffer or block between moments of radical change? In which case, how did it block those energies? Or was it a medium, however viscous and resistant, for the transmission of these energies? By starting a conversation between the radicalism of the 1650s and that of the Romantic age, *Radicalism in British Literary Culture* is intended to open up ways in which to answer these questions. The emerging answers indicate that the eighteenth century may be understood as a medium of transmission.

Of course, there is no accounting for historical contingency. It is probably fair to say that most educated people in, say, 1740, wanted to forget about the violence of the Civil War. They saw their country progressing along a very different path. But then structural weakness in the body politic was exposed, and it was followed by a successful revolt into independence by a distant colony, and the spread of popular discontent. The late 1780s did begin to look a lot like the 1640s.[20]

There were also elements in eighteenth-century political life that may constitute a bridge between the radicalism of the mid- and later seventeenth century, and that of the late eighteenth century. While few were prepared to challenge mixed monarchy, the solidification of the Whig oligarchy, with its dependence on what were seen to be corrupt practices of patronage and placement, produced an unlikely consonance of radical Whig and Tory voices of criticism. Resistance to executive abuse

took the form of calls for more regular Parliaments, for the redistribution of seats from rotten boroughs to new, under-represented areas of population. There were attempts, either by restriction of the voting qualification, or other means, to return MPs who would resist corrupt practices, and hence better look after the liberties of their constituents. Standing armies, it was argued, should be replaced by citizen militias, each of whose number would have a direct stake in the liberties their arms would defend. The secret ballot was advocated by popular republicans in the 1650s, again by ex-Levellers in 1689 and again still by opposition 'patriots' in the 1730s and 1740s. These small groups were able to have a powerful voice, out of proportion with their actual numbers, by using the periodical press, which became progressively better established in the provinces, as well as in London. The development of political clubs, Whig and Tory, put further pressure on MPs – to 'instruct' them, as the contemporary phrase had it.[21]

The dates for the publication of these views extend evenly from 1689 to the 1760s: 1701, 1721, 1732, 1747. So, if out and out radicalism was not present, the concerns and practices that characterised the 1640s and the 1790s certainly were.

Many of the more extreme suggestions in this body of writing remained apparently undiscussed, their implications unrealised. This is so, for instance, of Locke's idea that the natural equality of all men should be the basis for political representation – an idea that could be developed into an argument for universal manhood suffrage. Yet if franchise reform was not enjoined, the perception that all men had an equal right to freedom and to scrutinise the government was a prominent part of radical Whig views. But there was no sustained and coordinated platform for such reforms. Still, in addition to a vigorous press and a political culture of associations, there were moments throughout the eighteenth century when effective protests or campaigns were fought. There were often bitterly contested general elections. The special nature of London produced effective resistance from the less wealthy middle-class merchants to the court-connected magisterial elite. 'Street demonstrations, organised petitions and addresses, judicial proceedings and tumultuous elections' made London the centre of focus for a more open kind of politics.[22] In many respects, these activities looked identical to those of the civic Levellers of the 1640s, rewritten within the terms of the eighteenth-century commercial metropolis. And London was but the most prominent example of the increasing involvement of the middling sort in politics.

It is thus not surprising that a well-formulated popular republicanism, tied closely to the distribution of printed material, and accompanied by an advanced notion of the relationship between liberty and print, should flourish in the 1650s at the hands of journalists like Marchamont Nedham and John Streater, apparently disappear after 1660, reappear sporadically in the 1690s and then re-emerge in near-identical terms in the writings and activities of John Thelwall at the end of the following century. The relationship between literacy, liberty and bearing arms is most striking in this material. The presence of Machiavellian thought is never far below its surface, a vision of classically influenced civic culture glimpsed at different moments through the eighteenth century.[23]

While elements of seventeenth-century radical literature survived, and in some instances were republished, and can be shown to have had a readership, the terms in which that radicalism could be understood were being remade by social developments. The rise of commercial society is one important factor. Another related factor is the emergence of a literary culture, organised around serial publications as well as books and meetings (notably the coffee house) in which cultural values were discussed. A society divided by confession might have survived from the seventeenth century, although it was transformed by a literary and civic culture with common interests. Furthermore, within that culture, the new philosophy that had emerged in the later seventeenth century, and in particular the views on cognition of John Locke, were broadly disseminated. On the whole, the radical ideas of the seventeenth century were not present in these circles. People read Locke, Mandeville and Berkeley, rather than Lilburne and Walwyn. Accordingly, a multifarious dissemination of ideas about sense perception, taste and ethics occurred. By the later eighteenth century, this collective knowledge had become a complex body of thought that related language usage to class, status, notions of judgement and relative degrees of civilisation. Most of the prominent radicals of the 1790s had written on language usage.[24] The terms in which the trials for sedition in the 1790s were conducted were cultural and aesthetic as much as they were political and concerned with civil liberties.[25] Late eighteenth-century radicalism reinvented seventeenth-century radical issues inside eighteenth-century discussions of psychology, language, literature and ethics.

Furthermore, there emerged and flourished reflections upon what made a successful society, from systems of education and literary cultivation to political economy. Though the late seventeenth century was marked by the emergence of political economy, such formulations were