ROMANTIC SOCIABILITY

Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain 1770–1840

EDITED BY

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To Benjamin Penny
and Susan Conley

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Sociability and the international republican conversation

Margaret C. Jacob

The new sociability of the eighteenth century offered political awakening and personal awareness that often goes under-reported in our various histories of Enlightened practices. The fashion of sociable gatherings opened a new space, one that facilitated the discussion of public events; in some social venues, learning the arts of governance itself took centre-stage. In *Living the Enlightenment* (1991) I examined masonic practices in various European countries from the 1720s to the 1780s and drew out the political implications of lodges having become in effect 'schools' in the art of governing.[1] Of the many forms of sociability the lodges were by far the most formal and the most overtly interested in governance, in constitutions, voting, taxes, rules of decorum, etc. By contrast the scientific societies, salons, reading clubs and literary and philosophical societies seldom concerned themselves directly with rituals, systems of governance, or with policing moral behaviour. They practised self-improvement without casting it as an ethical enterprise to be directed by group pressure. Yet, however informal, being sociable offered the opportunity for group discussion that could ignite new thoughts; possibly, as I will argue at the end of this chapter, new affections and actions.

Most important, local conversations could turn remarkably international. By the 1770s, and oftentimes inspired by upheaval in the American colonies, British and Continental clubs, societies and lodges display a heightened awareness of issues defined as corruption, or as tyranny and oppression. That awareness only deepened as events in Paris unfolded in the summer of 1789. The ensuing establishment of corresponding societies in the 1790s and the radicalization of existing clubs and organizations on both sides of the Channel – even on both sides of the Atlantic – provide continuity with the developments from the 1770s onward. By the 1790s the political stakes had risen considerably, and for a time French events became the universal idiom for analysis.

There is as much continuity – as there is rupture – between Enlightened social practices and the heated fraternizing of the 1790s, between the Enlightenment as lived earlier in the clubs and salons and the political socializing of radicals and Romantics. In the last decades of the century one theme seemed to dominate the international conversation in sociable circles: the meaning and nature of democratic republics, and after 1789, the kind of personal transformation needed to create the democratic subject. Whether experienced in the privacy of the study, or amid the distraction of the lodge or the salon, all reformers participated in what I would describe as an international republican conversation. It took place in printed periodicals and private letters as well as in drawing-rooms, largely written or spoken in English or French (the former was also used by Dutch and German correspondents). For a brief time early in the 1790s the conversation transcended national identities just as it provided some consolation to the like-minded. Helen Maria Williams, the British ex-patriot and revolutionary loyalist, told her friends back home how much she missed them in these terms:

> The société des amis de la Constitution at Rouen sent me a very flattering letter of thanks for my french journal, and ordered three Thousand copies of an answer I sent them, to be printed – these honors I find 'play round the head but come not to the heart,' nor do I feel any pleasure from the Democrats which at all compensates to my heart for this cruel separation from my friends at home.[2]

Decades earlier, Enlightened authors had proclaimed an international republic of letters, an imaginary place where tolerance and freedom of expression reigned supreme. As the century waned, republicanism reclaimed its overtly political associations. In places as diverse as Brussels and Buenos Aires, the call to establish a republic, with democratic associations, became the only practical direction available to the critics of both oligarchy and monarchy.[3] In Britain, foreign revolutions experienced vicariously, hence inwardly, also called forth the necessity for personal transformation as much as they demanded an alteration of corrupt electoral practices. By the 1790s radicals were asking themselves: if the democratic republic had become the ideal, how would men and women conduct themselves in such an imagined place? But before that question could be posed on either side of the Channel, disillusionment with the existing regimes had to occur.

In the second half of the century many factors – some of them ostensibly contradictory – played into the shift towards practical reform with a republican tinge. In some places in Europe the policies of Enlightened

absolutists sowed unintended seeds. In the southern Netherlands during the 1750s and 1760s, the Austrian regime fostered reform wherever possible. Cobenzl's strategy was intended to break the authority of the old ruling elites, the landed nobility and the ultramontane clergy. Inevitably the Austrians wound up enlisting the assistance of minor *philosophes*, men like Pierre Rousseau and Rousset de Missy. Their religious and political views were far to the left of anything the monarchy and its ministers had in mind, but they had the requisite journalistic skills.[4] As the career of Rousset de Missy illustrates, agents enlisted to do the work of kings can sometimes turn against their paymasters. By 1747 to 1748, Rousset had evolved from being a client of the House of Orange and its British–Austrian allies – what has been called a 'Dutch Whig' – into a fomenter of revolution, a zealot in the cause of reforming a corrupt republic. By 1750 he had been sent into exile.[5] Decades after his death, in 1793 the Amsterdam masonic lodge he had founded, with its gaze cast towards Paris, celebrated the demise of 'the tyrant Tarquin and his damnable wife Tullia'. In 1795 the brothers rejoiced in the French Revolution and feasted with its invading army, addressing them as 'liberators'.[6] Most European lodges throughout the eighteenth century were loyalist, or at least conforming. But official corruption occasionally pushed them into a posture of opposition that could continue for decades.

British political life also offers other examples of official authority acting with unintended consequences and providing the impetus for radical socializing. In the 1760s the heavy-handed repression of John Wilkes by ministers of party and crown fuelled discontent that arguably would have remained more dormant had Wilkes been allowed to take his seat and rail as he pleased. The fact that the high-living Wilkes proved open to bribery in return for staying exiled in France suggests that his understanding of politics had an opportunistic side that would be harder to find a mere decade later.[7] Throughout the 1760s there were prim Real Whigs like Catharine Macaulay who found him to be 'a man guilty of so many excesses & inconsistencies'. Richard Price said that Wilkes was 'an immoral patriot'.[8] In part the heavy hand of government created this creature; the populace and the clubs that rallied round him – including masonic lodges in the Midlands – did the rest.

In arguing for a new era of radicalism that takes root in the second half of the eighteenth century I do not want to imply that during the previous decades the discontent were simply asleep at the helm. But the radicalism of the later decades has a different and more moralistic tone from the aggressive freethinking found among republicans of the generation

associated with the names of Trenchard and Gordon, or Toland and Collins. Many forces contributed to this mid- to late-century shift in the political consciousness of the educated: print culture, growing urban literacy and most important, in northern and western Europe and the American colonies, the triumph of a liberal, socially focussed, more emotive version of Protestantism. By mid-century its benign face can be seen among the middling classes in Birmingham, or Philadelphia, or Geneva. In the 1770s moral pronouncements of Protestant origins about virtue and the vitality of republics flourished. Also in that decade, as James Bradley has shown, Dissenters and liberal Anglicans made common electoral causes in districts from Bristol to Manchester.[9] The clergy were vital to these electoral efforts. Even deists like Benjamin Franklin could give assistance to fellow radicals in search of a universal and socially anchored religiosity. With Franklin's aid, the cleric David Williams wrote *A liturgy on the universal principles of religion and morality* (1776). The message was zealous for the cause of reform, in language that recalled the Protestant enthusiasts of an earlier age. Not surprisingly in 1792 Williams made his way to France along with Thomas Paine.[10] Paine's pen in turn could preach in the homiletic style made famous in the colonies by clerics like Ezra Stiles and Jonathan Mayhew.[11]

The distinctively Protestant cast to the international republican conversation, however secular in its orientation, meant that the language of morality and the language of political reform became inextricably united. In addition co-religionists networked across the Atlantic. The Congregational minister in Rhode Island, Ezra Stiles, had contact with over forty like-minded radicals in England. On 30 January 1749, when Massachusetts citizens were called upon to observe and mourn the hundredth anniversary of the execution of Charles I, Mayhew rose in his pulpit to celebrate the Puritans who proclaimed that 'Britons will not be slaves'. Among the worshippers was the young Paul Revere, soon to become an ardent republican and freemason.[12] Within the setting provided by liberal Protestantism, piety, social morality and political principles fused, or as Raymond Williams puts it, 'a conclusion about personal feeling became a conclusion about society'.[13] There is a continuity provided by liberal Protestantism between the politics of Joseph Priestley in the 1770s and the democratic Unitarianism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the 1790s.[14]

The American colonists deserve a great deal of credit for putting the republican vocabulary forward as the passionate and international idiom of the age. But then so too do the English radicals to whom the

colonists were so deeply indebted. The Club of Honest Whigs in London welcomed rebels like Franklin and Josiah Quincy, while as Pauline Maier and Bernard Bailyn have argued, English radicals from Harrington to Trenchard and Gordon and Mrs Macaulay provided the colonists with their reading matter. In the 1770s men like Arthur and William Lee of Virginia acted also as go-betweens, and in this hot-house of conversation of the like-minded it became possible for the Americans to imagine that insurrection in the mother country might also be possible.

Once again, as with the clandestine literature of the early century, the raising of the rhetorical and political temperature could not be imagined without the services of publishers like Edward and Charles Dilly, James Ridgway and Daniel Isaac Eaton.[15] To discuss the motives of such publishers is beside the point. What is important is the appearance in Western publishing, as early as the seventeenth century, of publishers with a subversive 'voice': the so-called 'Pierre Marteau of Cologne' published after 1660 from The Netherlands, but in French, and produced a string of books against absolutism. Edmund Curll in London during the reign of Anne specialized in the scandalous and irreverent while a full half century later, Marc Michel Rey in Amsterdam published Rousseau and d'Holbach. In Britain the Dillys, *et al.* issued dozens of texts in support of the American revolution or constitutional reform. The political implications of print culture acquire a clearer meaning when we can see certain presses used systematically for specific types of largely unacceptable literature. Would there have been a High Enlightenment in Paris if Rey had not been plying his trade in Amsterdam? He gave the world Rousseau along with a host of anonymous books, previously clandestine, once in manuscript only.

Thus in the 1760s and 1770s, thanks to Rey, there was Rousseau. The sources of his appeal were multiple and varied. Emphasis needs to be placed upon the moralizing quality of his political idealism and its compatibility with the liberal Protestantism I have just described. In 1762, at its publication, the *Social Contract* joined an already inaugurated, international and largely abstract conversation, much of it quite heated, about the nature of the best form of government, about republics, or the possibilities for reform as promoted by Enlightened 'despots'. Rousseau's debt to classical republican thought was obvious; indeed he saw Geneva as a once pure republic that had been corrupted by its elite.

What is most important about Rousseau's vision, I would suggest, is the fact that unlike the earlier freethinkers, or for that matter Wilkes, Rousseau entertained no ribald hostility to religion *per se*. Indeed his

youth had been saturated in a newer and far more liberal brand of Calvinism current in Geneva at the time. As a result both Catholics and Protestants all over Europe could read him in preference to many of the other, far more irreligious philosophes.[16] In Italy Cosimo Amidei and Carlantonio Pilati, inspired by Rousseau, came to see that the work of reform had to be Europe-wide; it was not simply an Italian problem. Rousseau's universalist emphasis on purity and virtue, on the goodness of man, resonated especially well with the liberal Protestantism. Then too it appealed to freemasons, who had long used republican and moralizing language to describe the constitutionally imposed discipline and the equalitarian ideals of a lodge. As an Amsterdam masonic orator put it in 1766, 'The main reason why freemasonry was so well received among the enlightened: the Natural state of humanity is therein restored perfectly, no disguise will be tolerated.'[17] The transparency of affect that enabled the Enlightened to see through the disguise created by effete luxury and politeness lay at the heart of Rousseau's message. He made republicans seem to be naturally, if vaguely religious. Piety turned outwards, towards the social or towards nature, became remarkably fashionable. Rousseau deserves considerable credit for the intense moralizing about republics commonplace by the 1770s, and he popularized the prudish republicanism so beloved by Anglo-American men and women of Dissenting background.

Rousseau also generated ferocious critics. The *Parlement* of Paris, the main French judicial body, condemned the *Social Contract* in 1762, and even some of Rousseau's closest friends backed away from him. Yet, arguably, his novels were far more subversive than his technical treatise on the theory of political liberty. Written for a general audience, *La nouvelle Héloise* and *Emile* gloried in the fictional search for transparency between men and women, for the absence of duplicity and formal coldness. Each advocated self-discipline within the framework of sentiment and a longing to return to nature. Despite the obvious piety of Richardson, novels had always been suspect among the conservative. By the 1790s they came to blame Rousseau for fomenting the French Revolution. Edmund Burke saw novels as part of the rot that had undermined authority. He declared that they were 'part of a systematic scheme by Rousseau to destroy all social and family relationships, thus enabling the French revolutionaries to take power'.[18] Burke was nothing if not succinct. By 1789 the very name, Rousseau, had come to symbolize subversion.

By the 1770s the political stakes for European reformers seemed to rise by the year. In France the courts or *parlements* thwarted the crown and

prevented fiscal reform. They revealed the impotence of the monarchy to effect meaningful reform. In Sweden royal authority was reasserted against the claims of the English-style parliament. In the same decade the Polish Commonwealth was dismantled by its imperialist neighbours, and in 1776 no one could say how the tumultuous events in the American colonies would progress. In the German-speaking lands the secret Illuminati rose to prominence, and the authorities responded with fury. Throughout the West everything political took on a new urgency. Letters and people traversed the Atlantic and the Channel with reports of new defeats or victories.

None of this radicalism, or simply the new political awareness, can be explained without a nod towards sociability and print culture. In the German-speaking lands absolutist princes ruled in every principality with the exception of a few free cities. Yet in both Germany and Austria by the last quarter of the eighteenth century the new public sphere was plainly visible. Journals, books and newspapers – although censured – flourished. At the same time, probably close to 300 masonic lodges had sprung up, found in almost every medium-sized town.[19] Although they often enjoyed the sponsorship of kings like Frederick the Great of Prussia, the lodges were nonetheless controversial, especially in Catholic areas. In general the German lodges were deeply hierarchical, far more so than their counterparts further to the west. The association of German freemasonry with the absolutist monarchy of Frederick did not, however, make the lodges off-bounds for Enlightened intellectuals like the young poet Goethe, the renegade Lutheran Lessing, and the secular, but devout Jew, Moses Mendelssohn.

Many others in Germany found the goals of freemasonry to be inspirational. By the 1780s German freemasonry had spawned a radical offshoot, the famous (or infamous) Illuminati. Founded by Adam Weishaupt (born 1748), a twenty-eight-year-old professor, the League of the Illuminati was strongest in Munich. Its leaders wanted to use it as a vehicle for the reform of freemasonry and then to extend its influence throughout Germany. At the height of its fame the League had no more than 600 members, of whom the majority were court and administrative officials, clergymen and military officers. They swore an oath to such vagaries as: 'The order of the day is to put an end to the machinations of the purveyors of injustice.'[20] They too had been deeply impressed by the American Revolution.

The Illuminati of the 1780s provided an excuse. The danger they supposedly posed enabled the authorities in every Continental European country to conjure up the fear of subversion and to crack down on the supporters of Enlightenment. In the Austrian kingdom the supposedly Enlightened, but worried, Joseph II closed down all but one masonic lodge in every town, and the surviving one had to be approved by the Grand Lodge in Vienna or Brussels. In Germany men were arrested as Illuminati just on the suspicion of membership. In response ordinary freemasons defended themselves by noting that their only offence had been that they welcomed men of all religions, and even then they claimed to be (on the whole) devout Christians.[21] From this distance we might ask, had the Continental Enlightenment devolved into a collection of men playing at a private game of secrecy where posturing passed for political engagement? If a reformer were to answer 'yes' to that question, the antidote for the ailment might be imagined to lie across the Channel, in the model of parliamentary government, however corrupt and oligarchic.

Decades before the conservative reaction of the 1790s in Britain the creation of a reform parliament preoccupied sections of the urban middle class. In the throes of Anglophilia a young Frenchman, Jean Paul Marat, decided to see for himself how 'liberty' fared in the land of its birth. Informed by Voltairean idealism, Marat witnessed political agitation at first hand in England during the 1760s and early 1770s – during the so-called 'Wilkes and Liberty' movement. Wilkes and his followers had demanded reforms in the system of elections. Marat saw Wilkes imprisoned on charges that his supporters found to have been invented for the occasion. Like so many others, Marat too turned to reading Rousseau to find out why liberty, even in Britain, possessed so many enemies. He had graduated from Voltaire and advanced to republicanism and Rousseau. Then Marat took up his own pen and produced a devastating attack on the power of princes, on oppression and slavery, *Chains of Slavery* (1774).[22] We may only wonder if he discussed its contents with his masonic brethren when he turned up in Amsterdam and signed the visitors' book of Rousset de Missy's original lodge.

Marat, and later Paine, fittingly captured the mood among British liberals and radicals. By the 1780s they had made reform, in particular the abolition of the African slave trade, a live subject for debate. In the movement against slavery, secular ideas associated with the Enlightenment were complemented, indeed augmented, by religious fervour of a Quaker and Methodist variety.[23] And there was no shortage of stories in print about the conditions of the slave trade and the brutality of the plantation system. Some were written by men who had been slaves. The

international republican conversation could focus on concrete domestic issues like the nature of parliamentary representation, but it could also think globally, and attack the human misery inflicted by European imperial expansion.

In the land of its birth, the Enlightenment returned to England with renewed vigour, largely under the impact of the American Revolution. The cause of heterodoxy and reform was taken up in the 1770s and 1780s by the Dissenting Unitarian minister, Joseph Priestley. To a man and woman – the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft came out of the same liberal Protestant circles – Dissenters (non-Anglican Protestants) tended to support the American Revolution, just as they had supported the parliamentary rebel John Wilkes. Once again, the link was forged between political and intellectual radicalism. Just when the Church of England thought it had put the twin genies of radicalism and heresy back in the bottle, 'the infidel spirit of the times' – as the Dean of Canterbury put it – wafted out again.[24] From his grave, Hume (died 1776) even got into the fray as his executors saw to it that his deistic religious views finally made their way into print.

In France reading and travel had convinced Denis Diderot of the injustice and corruption of the society in which he was born and had to live. He deplored European colonialism, and in a silent collaboration with the Abbé Raynal, a bestseller was born: *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes (Philosophical and Political History of the European Establishments and Trade in the Two Indies)*, 1770, enlarged in 1774, with many subsequent editions. Along with works by Marat and others, the book addressed the moral issue raised by European hegemony as it never had been raised before. Inexorably, Diderot was moving in the direction of believing in democracy – for all the peoples of the world. Although their friendship had died in bitterness many decades previously, Diderot and Rousseau had begun to walk the same path in their political theory. Rousseau held the torch.

By the 1780s the new American republic, no longer a colony, rejoined the international conversation at the heart of the Enlightenment. One northern American state after the other – with New Jersey the last in 1804 – abolished slavery within its domain. Southern plantation owners had to take care when they ventured north with their human chattel in tow. This was the first time a legislative body anywhere in the world had turned its back on centuries of Western (and non-Western) practice. The effect on European liberals was inspirational. In Belfast the republican

newspaper of the 1790s, *The Northern Star*, denounced the attack on the Unitarian and supporter of the French Revolution, Joseph Priestley. A pro-king, pro-church mob in Birmingham had burned down his home and laboratory. In the mind of the Irish radicals Negro slavery stood as yet another example of the British imperial oppression that Priestley had experienced.[25] For a brief moment, from Philadelphia to Berlin, it seemed as if a consensus had formed about a set of universal principles, of inalienable human rights upon which all Enlightened people could agree. As late as 1815 the British supporter of the French Revolution, Helen Maria Williams, could fantasize about going to America where she would 'pass my days in composing [visions?] in praise of liberty'.[26]

By no means were all the voices associated with Enlightened opinion articulate on the subject of slavery. Hume, as we know, had been plainly racist in his assumptions about non-Western peoples. When British and French *émigré* radicals of the 1790s went to the new American republic quite a few succumbed to the lure of slave-owning once it became possible for them legally to own other men and women. In the French Caribbean, writers of mixed racial ancestry like Moreau de Saint-Méry, who came to hold high office in the colonies, knew enough about the Enlightenment that they could identify with its scientific spirit and detail the abuses of the mercantilist and slave system. But they never pulled away from the entire institution and its injustices. In the end they offered more criticisms of Versailles than they did of the planters.[27] A Spanish Jesuit, Francisco Javier Clavigero attempted to write the history of Mexico from an Enlightened perspective. His *Historia Antigua de México* (1781–2) rejected diabolical intervention and addressed Mexican civilization by reference to its own assumptions. Yet in the end Clavigero could not embrace the secular and moral vision of the Enlightenment. He argued that the Mexicans must accept their conquest and virtual enslavement as a punishment for their sins.[28]

Decisively, slavery came on to the international agenda by the 1780s. There were good reasons for this late-century disaffection. The same century that produced the Enlightenment witnessed a hardening of slave laws and institutions, particularly in the British and French colonies. Plantation life had become socially respectable for the often-absent owners who reaped its benefits. In the British West Indies killing a slave was punishable only with a fine. In the French colonies the repressive *Code Noir* had been promulgated by Louis XIV in 1685, the same year that he began the persecution of French Protestants. In the course of the eighteenth century the situation of the slaves in the French colonies had actually

worsened, as more and more plantations were established and the black population came to vastly outnumber their white overseers, who ruled with increasing harshness. And slavery, as well as racial stereotyping, had plenty of apologists.[29] Yet remarkably, given the bias against Africans found in much of the travel literature, around 1780 an emotional sea-change occurred in literate European circles.

No entirely adequate account has been offered for the emotional shift against slavery, but one piece in the puzzle must be the writings and testimonies given by blacks themselves. Men like Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano, both freed slaves who made their way to England, raised their voices to oppose the slave system. Many abolitionists entertained stereotypes about blacks, about the lethargy imagined as the inevitable result of the African heat. Yet they also hated slavery, and inspired first by the American revolution – then by the French – they launched a moral crusade that slowly led to victory. At the same time a disillusionment with the amateurish and stereotypical quality of travel literature caused reformers to demand a more exacting and scientific account of the world's peoples.[30] Some of the new accounts would harden racial categories, others would seek to write from the inside, from the values and assumptions of distant and foreign peoples.

By 1789 political events within Europe, and globally, were to make slavery a burning issue. More than any other event in Western history the French Revolution galvanized international opinion against slavery and around the issue of universal human rights.[31] Helen Maria Williams effortlessly saw the linkage, 'respecting the rights of man in Europe we shall always agree in wishing that a portion of those same rights were extended to Africa'.[32] By 1791 even the translator of a vast collection of Moslem law was shocked by how much legal energy had been spent in Moslem countries defining slavery and the rights of owners.[33] Street-corner lecturers harangued London and provincial audiences about the evils of the slave trade, and Quakers and Methodists prayed in their chapels for the victims of enslavement.

Historians have long debated the exact relationship between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In the minds of contemporaries, supporters as well as opponents of the Revolution, the Enlightenment had laid the groundwork for its most important ideas and agendas. Within two years of its outbreak in 1789, the Revolution had galvanized a radical movement in the British Isles, in Haiti, and finally in Ireland and Egypt. The Haitian revolution of slaves against their French masters forced the French revolutionaries back in Paris to confront the

meaning of the principles they had decreed for themselves. In 1794 the National Assembly abolished slavery and the slave trade in the French colonies. Napoleon would reinstitute it, and the issue remained fraught until finally in 1833 Britain abolished slavery in its colonies. In 1848 a new revolution in France reinstated the principles of the French Revolution with regard to slavery. Around the issue of human rights in general, and slavery in particular, the links between the Enlightenment and the highest ideals articulated during the French Revolution seem incontrovertible.[34]

A British radical who had gone to Paris in 1792, James Watt, Jr – the son of the famous perfecter of the steam engine – wrote to his perplexed father in Birmingham and tied the warp of the Enlightenment to the woof of revolution:

> My hatred is not against individual kings, but against the system of Royalty, for I think kings in general far less blameable than the people that submit to them. The abolition of that source of all our evils in this country is a more deadly blow to the prejudices of mankind, than would be the destruction of all the monarchs of Europe ... The principles upon which their thrones were founded are now disavowed by an Enlightened age and mankind awakened from their lethargy are everywhere shaking off a system founded upon force and Priestcraft.

The young James had cast his lot with the Jacobins, and in his letters he took to lecturing his long-suffering father on the evils of monarchy, and on his own hatred for the 'crimes of tyrants'.[35] When he arrived in Paris in March 1792 James Jr brought greetings from the Manchester Constitutional Society to the Mayor of Paris, and Robespierre presented him and his travelling companion, Thomas Cooper, to the Jacobin society. With Watt and Cooper went a letter from Thomas Walker that 'hinted at the imminent collapse of the British monarchy and aristocratic society'.[36] Enthused by the writings of Thomas Paine, and by the heady exaltation of a revolution in full throttle, Cooper would remember those months as the happiest of his life.[37] Fraternizing had become so intense – in Paris but also in Manchester – that lives came to be shaped by it.

Watt's youthful reading had been heavily laden with works by the *philosophes* and with the latest scientific writing. His politics and his books complemented one another, and we would be hard pressed to say which had come first. In addition, Watt, like so many followers of Enlightened ideas in England, had joined one of the many 'corresponding societies' that had sprung up after 1789. They sought to offer moral support to the revolutionaries in Paris, and to import their reformist spirit. Decades earlier, Watt's father had been a pivotal figure in the Lunar Society of

Birmingham, one of the most famous and liberal literary-philosophical societies of the 1770s. During the 1790s the corresponding societies in England and the Jacobin clubs in France built upon the foundations of civic and social life created in the course of the eighteenth century. In every major American and European city, civil society expanded along with literacy, and even more books were published. If one single thread united most of these new disparate, unconnected, even informal groups, it was their interest in utility, in the practical, in progress and in intense self-improvement.

Perhaps most typical were the societies of 'usefulness', *Het Nut*, as each was called in town after town in the Dutch Republic. They channelled discontent, inspired charitable efforts, built libraries, sponsored lectures, published weekly journals and in general cast a cold eye on a situation about which there was considerable general agreement: the Dutch Republic had gone into decline and was in need of reform. A participant in the international republican conversation, the Baron Van der Capellen, emerged as a leader among the Dutch critics of the *stadholderate*. In the early 1780s a misguided war with Britain over commercial rights exposed the sad condition of the Republic's army and navy. Van der Capellen seized on these failings and the need for truly representative institutions in the Republic. The Estates General that met in The Hague represented each province, not the general population, and it was dominated by old families drawn from local elites, the so-called regents. Van der Capellen privately wrote to Benjamin Franklin about his personal 'right to vote' in the assembly of the various Dutch states. In an address *To the Netherlands People* (1781) – soon translated into French, German, and English – Van der Capellen proclaimed himself the prophet who would lead his people out of bondage and 'make them free'.[38] Predictably the new societies to promote usefulness took up Van der Capellen's call. So too did the leading masonic lodge of Amsterdam where Rousset and then Marat had fraternized.

The temperature of politics in the 1790s everywhere in Western Europe made usefulness the least of all the evils now imagined by the authorities in church and state. Spying became the order of the day as did sexual innuendo aimed particularly at the radical clubs. Fraternizing elicited paranoia about the homoerotic, and while sociability had been suspect before, in the 1790s conservatives unleashed an unprecedented torrent of abuse. Yet no side entirely cornered the market on sexual taunts. In Sheffield in 1793 the corresponding society wrote to its counterpart in Edinburgh and claimed that 'male prostitutes' and

'venal hirelings', the sycophants of courts, 'would fell their country and its liberties for a mess of potage' and they have 'gone so far as to sap and destroy every prop and pillar' supporting the constitution.[39] But in the genre of print, as opposed to private conversation, the Tories and the opponents of the French Revolution deserve the prize for viciousness and sexual innuendo, much of it anonymous. Take the following poem aimed at the free-living Charles James Fox and the Whigs:

> Thus *Satan* leads, as artfully, his Clan,
> As F [o]x, not *Guy Faux*, but as *dark* a man,
> Leads his *thin'd pack*, whipp'd in by Sh [e]r[ida]n –
> A Clan, so *naked*, that 'twas apt enough,
> E'en then to've stiled the corps – not Blue – but Buff;
> For tho' the *Diaboliads* cou'd make Speeches,
> They, doubtless, had of old – not any *Breeches*.
> How soon our MODERN DIABOLIADS' *STATE*
> May lit'rally be *in buff*, is known to Fate;
> Tho'thus much speak already their sad faces,
> From their *long fasting*, from a *want of Places*,
> Eyes sunk, with haggard looks, and shrivell'd skin,
> While keen vexation gnaws their hearts within[40]

The intimation of sexual deviance, nasty though it is, may not have been entirely without foundation. By this I mean it is possible to see in the circles of radicals and Romantics that emerge in the 1790s new forms of personal experimentation, the attempt to create new genres of affect and freedom. Clubs of male reformers took up the feminist cause and embraced Wollstonecraft as well as the women revolutionaries in France.[41] Irish republicans like Mary Ann McCracken thought that 'the present Era will produce some women of sufficient talents to inspire the rest with genuine love of Liberty . . . I think the reign of prejudice is nearly at an end.'[42] At the same moment William Blake sang of free love between the sexes.[43] Even animals had their moment of liberation with the British radical, John Oswald, raising the issue of humane treatment.[44] And as if this sort of theorizing were not enough, the pied piper of the radical and Romantic left, William Godwin, gave the world a reasoned argument against marriage and monogamy and in favour of complete freedom in matters sexual.[45]

In Whig lives as lived, the meaning of this revolt against authority could become visible and concrete. By 1800 the King of Clubs in London constituted the fashionable club for Whig reformers, and into the circle moved Tom Wedgwood, Gregory Watt (the son of James), James

Mackintosh (after 1803 Sir James), the Smith brothers and the Scottish poet, Thomas Campbell. Southey, Coleridge, Humphry Davy, James and John Tobin – overlapping with Gregory Watt – made yet another related circle.[46] Among the members of these loose clubs or associations, many like Mackintosh became celebrated Whigs while the Reverend Sydney Smith sealed his credentials by being one of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review* and a major contributor to it. He too had been deeply influenced by the principles of the French Revolution about which he had learned, he said, in 1798.[47] Smith's life exemplified the intense personal meaning of revolutions lived vicariously, and the importance of being able to consort with like-minded associates.

Smith believed that in both fiction and non-fiction philosophers like Godwin had been 'impelled and directed' by the progress of the Revolution: 'The fearful convulsion ... agitated the world of politics and of morals ... burst open the secret springs of imagination and of thought ... roused [Godwin] not into action but into thought.' Smith said that the effect upon readers like himself was transformative: 'passions which have not usually been thought worthy to agitate the soul, now first seem to have their most ardent beatings, and their tumultuous joys'.[48] If Smith knew joy and likened it to the effects of the French Revolution, he came to happiness by a most circuitous route. In contrast to the liberty he found in Godwin, Smith experienced what he called 'the tyranny, trouble and folly' of his own father.[49] They had poisonous relations complicated by tension about money and ideology, with the freethinking Smith even defending the right to commit suicide. Eventually his father told him in 1797 to go away and never darken his door.[50]

Father and son sputtered on for years in this vein. Significantly, when Smith and his wife finally established a family of their own they raised their children in an atmosphere of such freedom that one governess after the other fled in despair. He 'purposely indulged' his own children in 'the liberty [which will] accustom a young man gradually to be his own master'. They saw their marriage as companionate and sought to set a very different emotional tone in the household from that which Smith had known as a child.[51] In the 1790s, even the devout Anglican Anna Maria Larpent thought that what ailed the French and their revolution could be analyzed in terms of men and women there being too distant one from the other.[52] Radicals like the Smiths, Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge, dreamed of eliminating personal distance, of finding emotional transparency.

Same-sex experimentation, as well as intense friendships between the sexes, characterized these circles of radicals and Romantics. The Wordsworth–Dorothy Wordsworth–Coleridge triangle, for example, has long defied any sort of simple characterization. To say that each in his or her way was in love with the other, while leaving open the nature of that love, is probably the best that anyone at this distance can do.[53] Southey was also smitten by his male friends, particularly Coleridge. Long after they had abandoned their plan to migrate to Pennsylvania and join Priestley – there to set up a utopian community on the egalitarian principles of pantisocracy – Southey longed for Coleridge's company: 'the man, to whom, in all the ups and downs of six years, my heart has clung with most affection, despite even its own efforts'.[54]

At the root of the utopian and (*avant la lettre*) socialist scheme stood the passionate figure of George Dyer. More than the other utopians who wanted to find personal and gender equality in Pennsylvania, Dyer possessed a deep concern for the poor and disadvantaged. For a time the circle of Dyer, Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge became intensely involved one with the other. Dyer knew poverty first-hand, having seen his father committed to the poorhouse.[55] He wrote and spoke about social conditions for much of his life. Yet Dyer also shared in the experimentally erotic milieu of the Romantics. In 1800 he suppressed a book of poetry that contains these lines addressed to Robert Anderson: 'But, no, my friend: I read thy candid page, / ... / Oh! May I view again with ravish's sight, / As when with thee, Anderson, I stray'd, / And all the wonder-varying scene survey'd.'[56] Dyer also knew his Anacreon well, and the ancient poet had long been associated with same-sex intimacy.[57] A barely suppressed eroticism infused Dyer's memories of his youthful Cambridge days. In his *Ode To the Cam* the picture evokes 'nature's living power' and the 'new-born joys' of 'bard, the lover, and the jocund swain'. Yet it also makes clear that 'All must be left, tho' friendly to the Muse; / And man, poor man, lie down in cheerless gloom.'

The vision shared by Dyer and his circle of radical Romantics held them together for a time in London and the Lake District, all bound by a labile affection. The circle endorsed the philosophic and revolutionary traditions of the seventeenth century. Dyer entered 'in converse sweet with Locke, immortal sage; / So too by Cam with him, whose bosom glow'd / With thy pure raptures, and the Muse's rage' [i.e. Milton]. Algernon Sidney was also invoked by them as they cursed 'those murd'rers of the world', the Austrians and the Prussians. Whether

in alliance with the French revolutionaries, or with the Poles led by Kosciusko, Dyer and his friends wooed 'Thee, Liberty'.[58]

Other seekers were drawn to the Romantic flame, and Tom Wedgwood, the son of the famous potter, became Coleridge's bosom companion. They both shared an addiction to opium, and aided by Coleridge, the young Wedgwood and possibly his brother also tried a form of hemp leaves known as 'bang'.[59] Tom had early on developed a disdain for 'the pleasures of the family & having a great disgust to large mixed company'.[60] After a series of male companions, many of them also associated with the King of Clubs,[61] the young Wedgwood succumbed to his addictions. Telling his brother in 1804 that his 'present sufferings [are] too intolerable & they are beyond all alleviation . . . my pains & extreme feebleness & depression are now unceasing', Tom was dead by the summer of 1805.[62] His youthful dalliance with Godwin and radicalism, and with science, did not save him from the depression that stalked the Wedgwood family. It is little wonder that they also sought liberty in their personal lives, emboldened again by their shared intimacies with poets and philosophers. By 1800 the politics found amid the sociability of republicans and radicals had become intensely personal. Decades of sociability, politics observed or lived, had loosened old restraints and thrown up new cautions. In the midst of the Terror, Helen Maria Williams said that 'the scenes which have lately been acting at Paris . . . have . . . been such that scarcely can my conviction that this temporary evil will produce permanent good at all reconcile my mind to that profusion of blood, that dismal waste of life of which I have been witness'.[63] Living on the edge of a more democratic era could bring exhilaration as well as fear and foreboding.

NOTES

For full citations see Bibliography.

1 Jacob, *Living.*
2 Bloom and Bloom (eds.), *Piozzi Letters*, vol. I, p. 371.
3 On the Spanish colonies and rebellion in the late eighteenth century see McFarlane, 'Identity'.
4 De Boom, *Les Ministres.*
5 See Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment.*
6 The Library of the Grand Lodge of The Netherlands, The Hague, MS 41:10 for 1795 and discussed in Jacob, 'Radicalism', pp. 233, 234.
7 Thomas, *Wilkes*, p. 63.
8 Hill, *Republican Virago*, pp. 56, 57.

9 Bradley, *Religion.*
10 Hans, *New Trends*, pp. 164–5.
11 Fruchtman, *Paine*, p. 10.
12 Triber, *True Republican*, p. 20.
13 Williams, *Culture*, p. 30.
14 Cf. Ryan, *Romantic Reformation.*
15 Davis, '"That Odious"'.
16 See Van Kley, *Religious Origins*, pp. 296–7.
17 The Library of the Grand Lodge, The Hague, MS 41:8, fo. 26.
18 *The Anti-Jacobin*, quoted in Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p. 260.
19 See Dülmen, *Society.*
20 See Abbott (ed.), *Fictions*, and Neugebauer-Wölk, *Esoterische Bünde.*
21 [Anon] *Freymaureren.*
22 See Conner, *Marat*, pp. 23–4.
23 Turner, 'Limits'.
24 Aston, 'Horne'.
25 *Northern Star*, Belfast, 25 April 1792, 'The Negroe's Complaint'.
26 Huntington Library, MS BN 454, 16 June 1815, Helen M. Williams to her friend in America, Ruth Baldwin Barlow.
27 Lewis, *Main Currents*, pp. 131–3.
28 See Cervantes, *Devil*, pp. 153–4.
29 Goveia, *West Indian*, pp. 20–1, pp. 44–5.
30 Marshall and Williams, *Great Map*, pp. 300–1.
31 See Hunt (ed.), *French Revolution.* Cf. Durey, *Transatlantic*, pp. 282–5.
32 John Rylands Library, Manchester, MS 570, 26 February 1792, to Mrs Piozzi.
33 Ali Ibn Abi Bakr, Burhan al-Din, al-Marghinani, *The Hedàya*, pp. xlii–xliii.
34 Hunt (ed.), *French Revolution.*
35 Birmingham City Library, MS letter written from Nantes, 17 October 1792, James Watt Jr to his father, JWP, w/6.
36 I quote Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*, p. 34, who is paraphrasing Godwin. The groundbreaking work on James Watt, Jr was done by Robinson, 'English Jacobin'. Cf. Erdman, *Commerce*, pp. 50–5.
37 Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*, p. 33.
38 Capellen, *Brieven*, pp. 387–8.
39 *The First and Second Report*, p. 166.
40 [Anon], *Secession.*
41 See *The Cabinet.*
42 McNeill, *McCracken*, p. 127, quoting a letter of 16 March 1797.
43 Blake, *Sexes.*
44 Oswald, *Cry.*
45 Godwin, *An Enquiry*, vol. II, pp. 844–51.
46 Paris, *Davy*, p. 62. William Clayfield was also in this circle.
47 Smith, *Works*, preface. On the club see Litchfield, *Wedgwood*, p. 97. On conversations in this circle see Smith (ed.), *Letters*, vol. I, p. 63; letter of June 1801.
48 Smith, *Works*, vol. III, p. 16, from the *New Monthly Magazine.*

49 Smith (ed.), *Letters*, vol. I, p. 103, letter of April 1805 to Francis Jeffrey.
50 Huntington Library, Sydney Smith MSS, HM 30430, 26 June 1796 to his father, Robert Smith, wanting money, and it is clear there has been an estrangement: 'I hope my dr father you will do me the favor of writing to me – as it will be a proof that you begin to feel a returning regard for me.' See also HM 30431, 9 July 1796; HM 30433, 5 November 1797, Smith to his brother Bobus, saying that his father has told him to go away and stay away; 25 November 1797 to his father: 'I hope the conversation upon suicide which pass'd between us, has produced no other unpleasant sensation in your mind than the want of respect to you, of which I am sorry to say, you have a right to accuse me.' He says that they have quarrelled about metaphysical 'nonsense'. HM 30449, from Edinburgh, 25 December 1801.
51 Smith (ed.), *Letters*, vol. I, p. 69, letter to Mrs Beach, wife of his patron, March 1802.
52 Huntington Library, HM 31201, Anna Maria Larpent's diary, entry for 2 December 1796, in which she claims that French men and women are too separate and sees Montaigne as the culprit.
53 Certainly contemporaries were made uneasy by the attachment between Wordsworth and Coleridge; British Library MSS ADD 35345, Josiah Wedgwood, Jr to Tom Poole, 1799 February 1, hoping that Wordsworth and Coleridge will remain separated; Coleridge will benefit from 'mixed society'.
54 Huntington Library, HM 4829, 27 July 1800, Southey to William Taylor.
55 New York Public Library, uncatalogued Dyer letter, no. 101, 5 February, n.d.
56 Dyer, *Poems*, Preface, vol. I, p. xxxvii, 'the principles of freedom are too sacred, to be surrendered to trifles'; 'Ode addressed to Dr Robert Anderson', vol. II, p. 91. The Huntington Library's copy belonged to Southey.
57 Dyer, *Poems*, vol. I, p. 17. My thanks to Bernie Frischer on matters classical and Anacreon.
58 *Ibid.*, pp. 44–5, *Ode on Liberty: Written on a Public Anniversary*, and at the time of the Polish uprising.
59 Keele University, Wedgwood MSS, W/M 1112, fo. 159 Coleridge to Wedgwood (possibly Josiah), 17 February 1803; on Tom's addictions see same call number, 24 June 1804, Tom to Josiah, Jr; on the family's reserve see Sarah to Tom, 3 July 1804, her letter to him attributed 'to the inveterate bad habit of not expressing our feelings which so many of our family have & I amongst the rest . . . my taciturnity has really been owing partly to the family infirmity'.
60 Keele University, Wedgwood MS W/M21, 27 April 1790, Tom to his brother, Josiah Jr, on his going off to live with John Leslie.
61 Keele University, Wedgwood MS W/M21, same to same, 18 November 1800 and 1 April 1802, 'I am just going to the King of Clubs.'
62 *Ibid.*, letter of 12 November 1804, same to same, on his suffering; letter of condolence, 16 July 1805, Thomas Campbell to Josiah, Jr.
63 John Rylands Library, Manchester, MS 570, 4 September 1794 to Mrs Piozzi.