

MILTON'S HEIRS: ENGLISH ROMANTICISM AND ITS POLITICAL CULTURE

Key Words and Related Topics:

- The Whig view of history
- The legacy of the Reformation and the political controversies of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries
- The legacy of the Dissenters, their political and cultural tradition
- The Age of Revolution: the Enlightenment and the impact of the French Revolution
- John Milton as a cultural, literary, and political icon
- The poetics and politics of Romanticism
- William Blake, Thomas Paine, Joseph Johnson and the radicalism of the late eighteenth century in England
- Milton's Satan and the stereotype of the Romantic rebel
- Radicalism, science and literature in English romanticism: P.B. Shelley

Temario de la Guía Docente: 5. Aspects of English National Identity: The Monarchy, the Protestant Reformation, and Liberalism. 9. From the Political Reforms of the 19th Century to the Welfare State

Introduction:

The Whig view of history is part of a political and ideological discourse that looked upon the events, institutions and document of the English medieval political and legal traditions (such as *Magna Carta*, *habeas corpus*, ordue process), the Reformation, and the controversies around the English Civil War and the Commonwealth, as steps on the path towards an ever increasing degree of individual freedom, justice, improvement in the standards of living, and perfection in the functioning of the political systems within which these improvements were implemented. This was a teleological vision which we have seen at work, for instance, in unit 7 with texts like John Adams' *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1765).

If the Reformation, and the seventeenth century in general, were contemplated as templates or models for the political discourse that was used by rulers and historians in the United States and in England, and for the political reforms that took place in England in the nineteenth century, for the Romantic revolutionary poets that lived in England towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries there were also important cultural icons in this age. One of them was the seventeenth-century poet John Milton, who acted as Secretary for Foreign Tongues under Oliver Cromwell during the Puritan Commonwealth. In the eyes of Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Milton became not just a poetic role model, but also a republican hero in an age when English radicals admired and supported the sort of political developments that had been adumbrated first by the American Revolution in 1776, and later on by the French Revolution in 1789.

The English radicals discussed in this unit (e.g. Blake, and Shelley, which we shall use as examples of many others) were the heirs of the political tradition of the English seventeenth century, but they were also the result of the influence of the new values of the Enlightenment in science, religion, as well as politics. The political reforms they proposed around the end of the 18th century were inspired by the American Revolution first, and above all by the French Revolution. Some of these reforms would be gradually

and slowly implemented during the nineteenth century. As we will see in unit 9, historians saw the gradual reformist policies of the Victorian era as a triumph of English moderation and commonsense. They represented the triumph of the pragmatic and commonsensical phlegm of the English character, in sharp contrast with the violent revolutions that swept through France first in 1789 and then in a succession of revolutionary waves in Europe as a whole during the course of the nineteenth century.

THE LEGACY OF THE REFORMATION, THE COMMONWEALTH, AND THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR. THE WHIG VIEW OF HISTORY

TASK: Read text number one and answer the following questions:

1. Compare what the text describes as the Whig view of history with the account that John Adams provides of the transplantation, or translation, of ideas from England to America in his *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (unit 7)
2. What sort of concepts and ideas did the Whig view of history promote in the United States?
3. How does this Whig view of history agree with the narrative of English national identity that we have studied so far?
4. How did nineteenth-century English politicians and historians appropriate this Whig view of history for their own purposes?
5. What do the Marxist and the Whig views of history have in common?
6. What sort of conclusions does the text offer in its last paragraph? In which way are they relevant for our syllabus?

[1]

“To understand approaches to seventeenth-century England we need to begin with the Whig view of history (...). In the narrower sense, the Whig view of history was a necessary polemical response to the 1688 Revolution: the Whigs who forcefully removed James II to bring in William of Orange needed to make that violent fracture into a natural succession of government. They needed to marginalize the Jacobites and appropriate from them the languages of scripture, law and history through which all authority in seventeenth-century England was validated. Unlike their republican predecessors of the 1650s, the Whigs triumphed politically because they secured a cultural dominance. By recruiting the most skilful pens and brushes, the Whigs assured a peaceful succession for William. And through a programme of editions, memoirs and histories, they created a pantheon of Whig heroes and a Whig interpretation of the past: an interpretation which emphasized parliaments and property, liberties and Protestantism in England from pre-Saxon times to 1688.



Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800 – 1859),
historian and Whig politician

(...)

In the larger and more familiar sense, of course, the Whig interpretation of history is a synonym for a teleological approach to the past: in general a quest to explain the present, in particular, in the wake of the Great Reform Bill, a self-congratulatory desire to trace the origins of reformed parliamentary government, the apogee, as the radicals saw it, of political development. The figure who connects this larger vision to Whig politics is Thomas Babington Macaulay. Macaulay became a committed Whig and discerned even before 1830 that the course of parliamentary reform paved the way to a restoration of the Whigs to government. In parliament he was a leading spokesman for the Reform Bill, the passing of which owed not a little to the power of his rhetoric. In an early letter

on the subject of reform, Macaulay invoked the name of Oliver Cromwell. His vision of politics was, as he believed any vision of politics should be, informed by history. In his youth, Macaulay had penned essays on William III and Milton which, like his invocation of Cromwell, reveal how a reading of the seventeenth century shaped his approach to Whig politics in the nineteenth. Indeed for Macaulay both those centuries, and history and politics generally, were inseparable. When the Whigs had enjoyed political dominance under William it was because a Whig view of history was also the prevailing orthodoxy. Accordingly, the political resurgence of the Whigs in the 1830s required a history that would ... attribute the very material progress of England to the political principles espoused by the Whig cause and party. It was that history which Macaulay, after holding office in Lord Melbourne's government, turned to write: a history, as he described it, of 'all the transactions which took place between the 1688 Revolution which brought the crown into harmony with parliament and the 1832 Revolution which brought parliament into harmony with the nation.

(...)

Though a history for its time, and as its author acknowledged, an insular history, the influence of Macaulay's history extended beyond the England of his lifetime. In the United States of America, sales of Macaulay's *History* were surpassed only by the Bible, as his message of progress and Whig politics struck a chord across the Atlantic. It was Macaulay's nephew, George Otto Trevelyan, whose *History of the American Revolution* 'supplied, in some sense, the originally intended conclusion to Macaulay's work' and conjoined a view of seventeenth-century English history with the myth of Manifest Destiny of the American people to extend benefits of freedom and progress across their continent—and beyond. A vision of seventeenth-century English history was (and remained) important to America because, in the words of the great American scholar of Stuart England, Wallace Notestein, it is 'the story of how human beings have learned to govern themselves... [the story of] the slow accumulation of parliamentary rights and privileges', hence a vital early chapter in what my own school textbook of American history called *The History of a Free People*. Not least because such a national ideology retains power to this day, American historiography—especially on seventeenth-century England—has remained essentially Whig.

Moreover in Europe, the Whig view of the past drew impetus from another philosophical, historical and political movement—Marxism. At one level, Marxism may appear as distant from Whig historiography as Marx himself from Macaulay. Yet Marx's vision of history was, like the Whigs, teleological and, as for Macaulay, for Marx politics was a historical process just as history was 'that noble science of politics'. More particularly, in both Whig and Marxist visions was a connection between material progress and the course of history, and a sense that in England's case the seventeenth century was pivotal. Where for the Whig the Civil War witnessed the triumph of liberty and parliaments over despotism, to the Marxist the English revolution marks the overthrow of feudal monarchy and aristocracy by the rising gentry and merchant classes represented in parliament. Though their political ends were quite distinct, even antagonistic, Marx and Macaulay could find common ground in an interpretation of seventeenth-century England—an alliance that helped sustain as the dominant historical interpretation what had been polemically constructed to defeat the threats of Jacobinism.

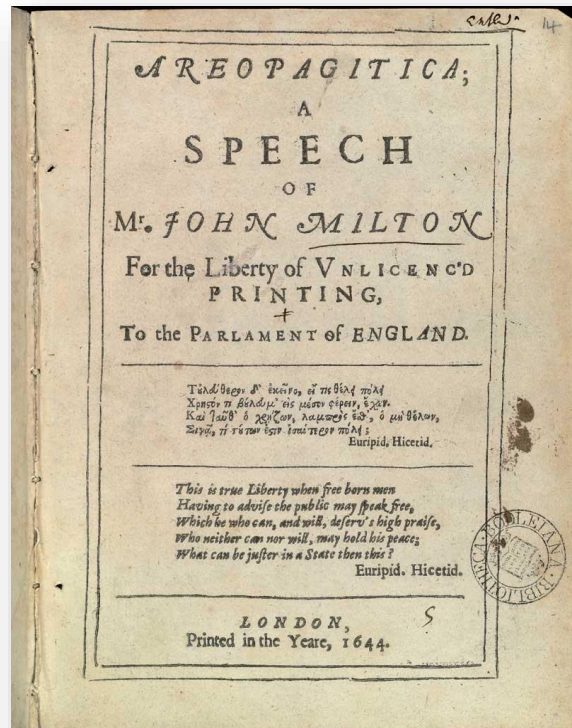
(...)

Though then the product of a moment, or moments, the Whig view of English history has sustained a dominance which calls for explanation. And the explanation is both ideological and historical. Perhaps from the eighteenth century onwards, Whig history has been an important component of English and American nationalism and national identity, of the moral foundations of colonial expansion and imperial power... Secondly, and related, Whig history is also Protestant history and in both England and America it underpinned an Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite as the natural class of government."

(Kevin Sharpe. *Remapping Early Modern England. The Culture of Seventeenth-Century Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 4-9)

THE ROMANTIC READING OF MILTON

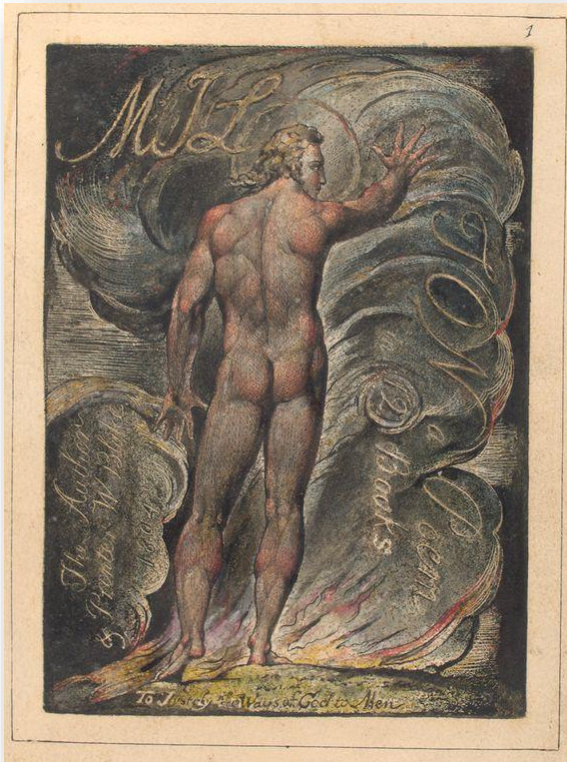
John Milton (1608-74) was a poet and scholar, a supporter of the Puritan republic established in England under Cromwell, after the Civil War in the middle of the seventeenth century. He is one of the most important poets in the English tradition. His most famous work is *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem inspired on the one hand by the Biblical history of Creation, and the Fall of Adam and Eve, and on the other the great classical Roman poet Virgil and his epic poem the *Aeneid*. Although the cause of Puritan republicanism was defeated, Milton—like many other seventeenth century republicans—became part of the pantheon for English radicals during the 18th and the 19th centuries. For the English Romantics Milton became a cultural and political icon, and a republican hero who had defended the cause of freedom against the tyranny and absolute monarchy of Charles I. Besides important and influential poems, like *Paradise Lost*, he also wrote political essays, one of which, *Areopagitica* (1644) defended freedom of speech. In another one, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) he displayed the influence of Protestant humanists like George Buchanan (see unit 4.1). Buchanan was also an important influence in his *Defence of the English People* (first edition 1652), which justified the execution of King Charles I.



As mentioned above Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is a long epic poem that recounts the Fall of Adam and Eve through the temptation of Satan, the angel that rebelled against the authority of God. Although Milton was a sincere and devout Christian, in this poem Satan can be interpreted as a revolutionary rebel that refuses to obey a tyrant God that resembles an absolute monarch. This reading of Satan as a heroic figure that tried to shake off the chains that bound him to an absolute ruler, and was punished for it, became very attractive for Romanticism, which hence turned Satan into a cultural icon.



Satan presiding over Hell.
From an illustration to
Milton's *Paradise Lost*



Title page of 'Milton, a Poem', by William Blake. Blake composed and illustrated this epic poem, inspired by the poetry of the seventeenth century poet John Milton. The image below shows an idealised portrait of Blake as he was seized by the spirit of Milton

Others sympathetic to the French Revolution invoked Milton's name as the paradigmatic revolutionary poet-prophet. Joseph Johnson was particularly involved in publishing Milton, reflecting the political interests of his circle across the spectrum of reformist and radical opinion. Johnson was one of the original sponsors of Henry Fuseli's plan for an extended series of paintings on Miltonic subjects.

(...)

The period after 1795 witnessed a remarkable increase in visual representations of Milton's poetry, often influenced, as in Fuseli's case, by the increasing demand for illustrated books... Fuseli's friend William Blake ... returned obsessively to Miltonic subjects throughout his career. The promise in *Areopagitica* that England could become a nation of prophets remained an inspiring force behind the millenarianism of Blake's poetry, culminating in the direct but critical treatment of his hero in the epic *Milton*. Blake was also a regular illustrator of the poems.

(...)

Writing in August and September 1802,

TASK: Read text number two and summarize the sort of opinion that romantic poets, politicians and artists had about Milton—name them and describe how they reinterpreted Milton within their own age.

[2]

By the end of our period [i.e. Romancism], Milton was firmly enshrined as the hero of English liberty in the Whig tradition, with texts such as *Areopagitica* admired across the political spectrum for its defence of freedom of the press. Thomas Macaulay's laudatory review in the *Edinburgh Review* (1825) of a translation of the recently discovered statement of Milton's religious beliefs, *De Doctrina Christiana*, may be taken as the culmination of this tradition, but respect for the poet did not necessarily presuppose political sympathy. By the middle of the eighteenth century, *Paradise Lost* had become the prime example of the sublime in English letters, and it was in this mode that Milton was also frequently evoked. Indeed as an epic poet he made a more appropriate guiding deity for English letters than Shakespeare.



Wordsworth produced a series of 'Sonnets dedicated to Liberty' which invoked the figure of Milton as the patriot poet, though whether this Milton is a republican hero is a matter of debate. Wordsworth's own epic, *The Prelude*, is in many ways an attempt to rewrite *Paradise Lost* for a modern age. Percy Shelley's representative of the wave of young intellectuals for whom Milton remained a political and poetical hero, reminding readers in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821) that 'the sacred Milton was ... a republican and a bold inquirer into morals and religion', but by this time the iconic status of the great poet-prophet was already firmly established. The 'glory of English literature', as Macaulay called him, was regarded by the majority of his readers in the nineteenth century as a patriot in a newer sense which privileged national pride over any particular political principles.

An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age. Iain McCalman. Oxford University Press 2009 *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Universidad de Granada. 4 March 2010 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t285.e449>>

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827) – TOM PAINE (1737-1809) – JOSEPH JOHNSON (1738-1809) LITERATURE, CULTURE, POLITICAL RADICALISM AND THE REVOLUTION CONTROVERSY

William Blake was an extremely original and influential pre-Romantic poet and artist. The following texts describe his connections with a circle of radical artists, philosophers, and political thinkers. They all gathered around Joseph Johnson, who was an influential bookseller and publisher. Blake had met Johnson early in his career, in 1779, when Blake was just out of his apprenticeship. In his London house, Johnson regularly brought together some of the most important artists, intellectuals and political radicals of the late eighteenth century. They included the philosopher William



William Blake, by Thomas Phillips, 1807

Godwin—who would marry Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft was—like the painter Henry Fuseli—part of Joseph Johnson's circle. Godwin and Wollstonecraft had a daughter—Mary Shelley, the author of the famous novel *Frankenstein*. Most of these artists and intellectuals came—like Johnson himself—from a dissenting background, and they all shared the sort of education that set a high value upon reason, individual freedom, and a critical spirit that questioned pre-established truths. These were, in short, the general values of the Enlightenment. In this respect, and in varying degrees (they were not, of course, all alike) Johnson's circle illustrates very well this coming together of the radical Protestant tradition (the Dissenters, see unit 5), the scientific and educational values of the Enlightenment (see unit 6), and the political radicalism that usually went with them. Most of the members in this group were also admirers of the

French Revolution. In 1789 the French Revolution—like the execution of Charles I in the English seventeenth century—caused a shock all around Europe: for traditionalists and established governments, it was a cause of great alarm, and it moved them to implement harsh repression to avoid similar outbreaks in their own countries (as was the case in England, see unit 9). For radicals, it meant the fulfillment of their ideals, and the beginning of a new age of fraternity and universal equality—the end of tyranny and the liberation for all human beings from oppression.

The following texts describe this group, and also the tremendous impact that the French Revolution had during the period, as well as the sort of political debate it stirred and the upheaval it caused in England.

TASK: Read texts [3], [4] and [5], and answer the following questions:

1. What sort of poem was Blake about to publish with Joseph Johnson? Why was its publication eventually aborted?
2. Which was Blake's opinion about Tom Paine? What do his opinions say about the circle of radicals where both belonged?
3. What do you think that text [3] means by claiming that Blake's struggles 'were all in the mind'?
4. Summarize the contradictory legacy of the French revolution, according to text [4]
5. Which were the main political ideals and reforms proposed by the English radicals, according to text [5]

[3]

“Joseph Johnson (1738-1809), twenty years older than Blake, was born into a Baptist family but moved towards Unitarianism, and he had a Dissenter's sympathies with liberal social and political causes. He was a methodical, determined man, gentle and generous, and by the time Blake met him he was solidly established in his profession, though his greatest accomplishments were yet in the future. He became the chief publisher of the quiet poems of William Cowper, the scientific speculations of Dr Joseph Priestley, the radical political and philological works of John Horne Tooke, the botanical poetry of Erasmus Darwin, and the miscellaneous writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, who lived in his house for a time. He was imprisoned in 1799 by a vindictive government for selling a radical pamphlet by Gilbert Wakefield

(...)

Johnson's most promising and generous actions towards Blake were, however, abortive. He agreed to publish Blake's *The French Revolution*, and even had the first book set up in type. However, only page-proofs survive for the first book; the other six have disappeared entirely. The poem is a psychomachia, a war of spirits, of the spirits of freedom and privilege ... We do not know why the publication of *The French Revolution* was aborted; perhaps Blake never finished the poem; perhaps Johnson decided that the growing government hysteria about the untamed forces across the channel meant that it would be injudicious to print a work so sympathetic to the revolutionaries...

Johnson gathered round him a circle of witty, liberal friends, including many of the authors whose works he published, and he gave 'plain but hospitable weekly dinners [*on Wednesdays*] at his house, no. 72, St. Paul's Churchyard, in a little quaintly-shaped up-stairs room, with walls not at right angles', which was decorated with the original of Fuseli's famous painting of 'The Nightmare'. The guests included Henry Fuseli, Dr Richard Price, Dr Joseph Priestley, Thomas Christie (the editor of Johnson's *Analytical Review*), Horne Tooke, Thomas Holcroft, William Godwin, Tom Paine, and Mary Wollstonecraft.



Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) was an Anglo-Swiss painter, who was a member of the Johnson circle. This painting (*The Nightmare*, 1781) was in Johnson's house, and presided over the meetings the publisher had with his circle of revolutionary friends and acquaintances. Like Blake, he was also inspired by Milton's work (some of whose poems he illustrated too: see below his *The Creation of Eve*, one of the episodes in *Paradise Lost*)

It seems somewhat unlikely that the artisan William Blake was a member of this genteel gathering of earnest liberals, though he was often in political sympathy with them. Gilchrist was told that

Down to his latest days Blake always avowed himself a 'Liberty Boy', a faithful 'Son of Liberty'... He courageously donned... the *bonnet rouge*—in open day, and philosophically walked the streets with the same on his head. He is said to have been the only one of the set who had the courage to make that public profession of faith... when the painter heard of [*The Massacres in Paris of September 1792*], he tore off his white cockade, and assuredly never wore the red cap again.

[...]

Of course, Blake would have heard of the notorious Mary Wollstonecraft from her friends in Johnson's circle, and he may well have met her, though there is no biographical evidence that he did so... "He also knew other members of the Johnson circle, including Horne Tooke, William Godwin, and Tom Paine..."

He celebrated Paine as a staunch defender of political liberty in his *America* (1793), and he defended him vigorously in his marginalia to Bishop Watson's *Apology for the Bible* (1798). The government had become so exercised about the influence of Paine's *Rights of Man* (1790) that they attempted to demonize him... For Paine the defender of liberty and the enemy of hypocrisy, Blake had the profoundest admiration. 'Is it a greater miracle to feed five thousand men with five loaves [*as Christ did*] than to overthrow all the armies of Europe with a small pamphlet', as Paine did with *Common Sense* (1776)?"

(Adapted from G.E. Bentley, Jr. *The Stranger from Paradise. A Biography of William Blake*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 108-112)

"Blake sympathized with Tom Paine and George Cumberland and the young William Wordsworth and all those who deplored the Church and King politics of Pitt's Tory administration. However, he abominated

Pitt's politics not merely because they were politically wrong but because they were political. At the high tide of British radicalism, before it was stemmed and diverted by the notorious Two Acts of 1795, Blake may have been surrounded by political activists and government informers, but his own struggles were all in the mind. He was never a joiner or a builder of street barricades. His most active campaigning was against the entire race of politicians and governors, and he waged his campaigns chiefly in the margins of the books he was reading.

Blake's judgment of the vindictiveness of the government was, alas! but too accurate. His friend and patron Joseph Johnson, who had showed his political discretion by declining to publish Blake's *French Revolution* (1791) and Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791), was arrested and imprisoned in 1799 for selling an outspoken political pamphlet, and Benjamin Flower was imprisoned for six months in 1799 for publishing reflections upon the Bishop of Llandaff. In 1798, to defend conscience and the Voice of God against the tricksters of State Religion was likely to cost a man his liberty if not his life."

(Bentley, 2001, pp. 196-7)

[4]

"The French Revolution is incontrovertibly the defining act of modern politics. From it flowed the European upheavals of 1848, the Russian Revolution, and a goodly share of those urgent demands for democracy, liberty and equality, whose often contradictory fusion remains the unresolved problematic of our times. Yet the meaning of the Revolution has remained, from its inception, heavily contested. Some have hailed the events commencing on July 14th as the inexorable progress of Enlightenment towards the eradication of aristocratic, monarchical, and clerical tyranny, the downfall of superstition and exploitation, and an end to the enslavement of non-whites. Others, however, date the origins of the colossal bloodbath of twentieth-century totalitarian tyranny in the degeneration of the Revolution into mob rule, the Terror of 1793-4, and the later Napoleonic dictatorship. In the latter view, Robespierre begat Stalin, and the Enlightenment should be symbolised less by the incandescence of Reason than the ghastly illumination cast by the *lanterne* upon corpses suspended from it."

(Gregory Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain. The Origins of Modern Politics*. London: Palgrave, 2007, 2007, pp. 1-2)

[5]

"By the second half of the eighteenth century [the radical opposition] was generating a powerful rhetoric, heady enough to sustain the American Revolution, vague enough to manifest itself ubiquitously in the arts; for, in the poetry and painting of 1770-1800, salient themes include a sense of personal liberty and autonomy, a belief in civic virtue, and a hatred of corruption—all of which can be seen as symptomatic of a 'republican' tradition in Western European thought at least as old as Machiavelli. When he applies himself more specifically to the Constitution, the late-eighteenth-century radical seeks to extend the democratic element in the system, which is notionally held to be a balance between monarch, aristocracy, and commons. Typically, then, the radical criticises the monarch, or the aristocracy, or both, and represents these institutions as encroaching upon the populace or upon its preserve, the House of Commons. He sees existing government as not truly tripartite, but aristocratic. He therefore argues for economical reform, because he believes that an oligarchic government maintains its influence through its control of patronage, or that it manipulates the economy in favour of its own small class, the 'landed interest'. The radical opposes war because, again, he thinks wars tend to profit certain wealthy interests (like the aristocratic owners of West Indian plantations), while they entail loss to ordinary commerce, and hardship to the population at large.

(...)



Henri Fuseli, *The Creation of Eve* (1793), inspired in Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*

It was in 1780, during the American War, that English radicals adopted a platform of demands which would remain unsatisfied until the middle of the next century, like universal adult male suffrage and the redistribution of parliamentary seats according to population; perhaps, indeed, liberal sentiments were more widely found among the educated classes in 1780 than a decade later.

(...)

The English radicals of the 1790s (Paine, Wollstonecraft, Godwin) and their innovative, utopian proposals: Welfare state, no centralised government, radical egalitarianism (including feminism)

(...)

Fired by enthusiasm at events in France, and by the too-ready sympathy of a likeminded, pre-selected circle of readers, the leading London radicals produce between 1791 and early 1793 a series of innovative and utopian proposals. Paine, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft envisage, for example, the establishment of a humane welfare state; or the ultimate withering away of the centralised state; or a new egalitarianism in inter-personal relations which would do away with the employee's subservience to the employer or the woman's to a man."

(Adapted from Marilyn Butler, ed. and introd. *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*. Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 3-5)

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH – 'SONNETS DEDICATED TO LIBERTY'

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of the founders (together with Coleridge)



William Wordsworth, the young poet and radical supporter of the French Revolution, in 1798, when he was 28

of English romantic poetry towards the end of the eighteenth century. In his youth he was also a political republican radical—he visited France in 1791, and therefore had a chance to experience the revolutionary spirit in person. Like many other romantics, he moved away from the Revolution first when it degenerated into radical violence and harsh repression under Robespierre's reign of terror, and afterwards when France got in conflict with England. As he grew older, he also became increasingly more conservative.

The following poem ('London 1802') is one in a series of sonnets dedicated to liberty, and it was written in England, in the middle of the revolution controversy, when the English government was implementing harsh repressive measures to stop the spread of the sort of revolutionary radicalism that came from France. The

poem illustrates very well the ideas that radical romantics were defending at the time, and it also shows the political value that Milton had acquired for them.

P.B. Shelley belongs in the second generation of romantic poets—other important, and very interesting poets in this group were John Keats, and Lord Byron. Shelley illustrates the continuation of the political and poetic radicalism of the romantics: his essays, and his poetry exemplify the radical drift of the Enlightenment, and in particular his poem *Prometheus Unbound* represents a new version of the myth of the romantic rebel—of which Milton's Satan was a predecessor.

TASK. Read the poem, under light of the preceding texts provided in this unit, and comment on its contents and its ideas.

[6]

LONDON, 1802.

Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart:
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In chearful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on itself did lay.



Wordsworth in 1842, soon before he became poet laureate in 1843

TASK: Read text number seven and answer the following questions:

1. What sort of interests did the young Shelley have, both before he went to Oxford, and once he was there?
2. How do his interests, and his own character, appear in Shelley's publications?
3. Shelley wrote a poem titled *Prometheus Unbound*. Do some research on who was *Prometheus*: what does this character have in common with Milton's Satan? What do you think both Prometheus and Satan signified for romantic radicals like Shelley?
4. The text refers to 'the Shelleys': who did Shelly marry? Which famous novel did his wife write? How does this novel resonate with Shelley's personal interests, and also with romantic conventions and the tradition of rational enlightenment?
5. What was the Peterloo Massacre? Which was Shelley's reaction to it?

[7]

Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1792-1822)

He was the eldest son of Elizabeth Shelley and Sir Timothy Shelley, a country gentleman and Whig Member of Parliament. Shelley was educated as was appropriate for an heir to a baronetcy, and was first taught at home by a private tutor, in the company of his younger sisters and his mother. In 1802 he was sent to Syon House Academy in Isleworth (London), and in 1804 to Eton. Finally, he went to University College, Oxford, the same college his father had attended. **Shelley was brought up to be a politician, and a conservative one at that, and his later development into a radical, republican and atheist poet was in severe contrast both to his education and his family's wishes.**

The recollections and anecdotes of Shelley's family and friends reveal that **in his childhood he was an avid scientist**, regularly making chemical preparations; after his formal studies of chemistry had begun at Syon House, Shelley at one stage attempted to treat his sisters' chilblains with electric shocks. The lectures Adam Walker gave at Shelley's school encouraged his interest, and introduced Shelley to new scientific pursuits. At Eton Shelley was taught by Walker again and by Dr James Lind. These two men initially directed **his reading**, which **included writers which the young Victor Frankenstein would read in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the ancient alchemists Theophrastus Paracelsus and Albert Magnus**. His friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg described Shelley's Oxford rooms as filled with scientific equipment, 'an electrical machine, an air-pump, the galvanic trough, a solar microscope, and large glass jars and receivers'.

(...)

His rebellious nature revealed itself early on, as did his refusal to conform to societal expectations. He did well at his studies and left Eton with a good grasp of both Greek and Latin.

Shelley was by now a self-confessed 'votary of romance'. His favourite books were Gothic novels. He published his own attempt in this genre when he was only seventeen years old, *Zastrozzi*. With his sister Elizabeth, he wrote and published a collection of poems entitled *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*, which also appeared in **1810**. It seems that Timothy Shelley encouraged his son's publishing attempts and instructed publishers at Oxford to humour his son. At Oxford **Shelley and Hogg** published *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*, a collection purporting to be written by a woman who had tried to stab George III with a pair of scissors. The money raised by this volume went to help Peter Finnerty, an Irish journalist imprisoned because he had criticised the government. Shelley published another Gothic novel, *St Irvyne*, in December of the same year.

Trouble really began when Shelley and Hogg published their pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*. Determined that their pamphlet should not go ignored, they sent it to such people as were bound to be offended. *The Necessity of Atheism* was the culmination of much thought, reading and debate. Over the Christmas holidays, the exchange of letters between Shelley and Hogg had dwelt on the possibility of a creative first cause for life and the universe. ***Necessity* was a dogmatic materialist doctrine, based on the idea that that 'no testimony can be admitted which is contrary to reason'.**

When Shelley and Hogg refused to admit authorship of *The Necessity of Atheism* in March 1811, they were expelled from Oxford. Any possible reconciliation between Shelley and his family after this was thwarted by Shelley's elopement with Harriet Westbrook, whom he had met in January. They left London in the summer accompanied by her sister Eliza, and, despite Shelley's deeply held opposition to marriage, married on 29 August in Edinburgh.

(...)



Shelley, by Alfred Clint, 1819

His first major poem, *Queen Mab*, contained his political ideas to date. It is a materialist poem with long scientific and political notes. The poem came to haunt Shelley in later life, and was used to prove his atheism in the case for custody of his children by Harriet, which he lost. It continued to be published throughout (and beyond) his lifetime; the working classes came to see it as a call for reform and George Bernard Shaw referred to it many years after its publication as 'the Chartists' Bible'. The breadth of Shelley's reading is demonstrated by his extensive notes, which make reference to contemporary and ancient science, politics, philosophy and literature.

In September[of 1818] the Shelleys moved to Venice and Shelley began to write Act One of his great lyrical drama, *Prometheus Unbound*. Though this poetical drama refers to the lost final part of Aeschylus's dramatic trilogy about Prometheus, Shelley appropriated the myth to show an enlightened Prometheus forgive the tyrannical ruler Jupiter. Prometheus refuses to condemn such acts as the crucifixion of Christ and the violence of the French Revolution; instead he pities the tyrant who tortures him. Eventually in Act Four, written by December of the following year, humanity itself is redeemed through the release of Demogorgon; while Demogorgon is both

Jupiter's son and therefore in a sense his successor, the cycle of violence and tragedy has been broken and humans are free. The poetic drama demonstrates Shelley's facility as poet, with an extraordinary array of verse forms used. *Prometheus*, which includes a love duet between the sun and the moon in Act Four, is as grand in its scope as in its scientific detail, and as politically contemporary as it is utopian.



The Funeral of Shelley, by L.E. Fournier, 1889

During 1819 Shelley's and Mary's son William died, and their relationship worsened. When Shelley heard about the **Peterloo Massacre**, during which a number of unarmed people had been killed or seriously injured by charging yeomanry sent in to end a peaceful call for reform, he immediately wrote **his great polemical poem, *Mask of Anarchy***. Shelley wanted to write 'popular songs' that, as he wrote in letters, would 'awaken & direct the imagination of the reformers'. These poems are a testament to his firm belief that England would witness a revolution before long. Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*, with its rousing call to 'Rise like lions', was not published by Hunt when Shelley sent it to him. Afraid of the consequences, Hunt, who had already been imprisoned for libelling the Prince Regent, held on to the poem and did not publish it until 1832. Shelley's poem 'England in 1819' demonstrates the force with which Shelley objected to the oppressive government of England at this time, with its 'old mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king' and his corrupt and hypocritical ministers, 'Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know'. The suppression of Shelley's political poems continued through the Victorian period, privileging an image of Shelley as, in Matthew Arnold's words, an 'ineffectual angel'.

(...)

In his *Defence of Poetry* written in 1821 but unpublished until 1840, Shelley famously expressed his belief in the poet's moral function, that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World'. Shelley also wrote *Hellas* in 1821, celebrating the Greek War of Independence. His repeated attempts to persuade his friends to join him finally materialised: Byron moved to Pisa and the Hunt family arrived in Italy in 1822. Byron, Hunt and Shelley had decided to form a political and literary journal, *The Liberal*. Shelley's prolific poetic career was cut short on 8 July 1822 when his boat the *Don Juan* sank in a storm, returning from a welcoming visit to the Hunts, and Shelley was drowned. He had been writing a play, *Charles the First*, and was in the middle of his visionary poem 'The Triumph of Life'.

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