# From Ritual Practice to Cultural Text

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*Resumen:* Este artículo se ocupa de la distinción entre prácticas textuales y sociales (esto es, acciones que abarcan el mundo social). De la misma forma que los diferentes géneros literarios, son sujeto, por sí mismos, de diferentes operaciones interpretativas, la práctica ritual y la lectura de textos no es algo estrictamente análogo. Aquí, la famosa interpretación de la llamada "analogía textual" de Clifford Geertz en las ciencias sociales, puede ser engañosa. Si creemos que es importante recuperar los significados históricos expresados de una manera ritual, entonces debemos ser cuidadosos al diferenciar entre cómo trabajan las prácticas sociales y cómo trabajan los textos. Este artículo tiene en cuenta las prácticas rituales en el marco de la política radical británica durante la época de la Revolución Francesa -incluyendo estas de sociabilidad-, tanto como la hostilidad racionalista a la representación ritual y al privilegio del texto impreso sobre el ritual y el espectáculo.

*Palabras clave:* Ritual, prácticas sociales, prácticas textuales, política radical, Gran Bretaña, siglos XVIII-XIX.

*Abstract:* This article takes up the distinction between the textual and social practices (that is, actions taken in the social world). In the same way that different literary genres are themselves subject to different interpretative operations, ritual practice and the reading of texts are not strictly analogous. Here Clifford Geertz's famous rendering of the so-called "text analogy" in the social sciences can be misleading. If we believe that it is important to recover historical meanings expressed in ritual form, then we must be careful to differentiate between how social practices work from how texts work. This article considers ritual practices, including those of sociability, in British radical politics in the age of the French revolution, as well as considering rationalist hostility to ritual performance and the privileging of the printed text over ritual and spectacle.

*Key words:* Ritual, social practices, textual practices, radical politics, Britain, XVIIIth-XIXth centuries.

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In his well-known essay, 'Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought' (first published in 1980), Clifford Geertz, reported that 'Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think'. And that something included a turn to interpretation and meaning, to viewing the social world as symbolically ordered, to a blurring of disciplinary genres, and most radically to what he termed 'the text analogy'. By this last term, Geertz explained that we had come to see 'social institutions, social customs, social changes as in some sense "readable"' and that this move had changed our entire sense of 'what [such] interpretation is'[1]. Geertz's short article was on target, both as a report from the field and a prediction that itself set the agenda for historical studies and the social sciences. Of course, a fully proper genealogy of 'the text' as a concept and object of study would require an appreciation of those who pioneered the poststructuralist study of the literary text. Most notably, Roland Barthes distinguished what was at stake in the movement from 'work' to 'text', in the shift from viewing a literary object as a closed entity composed of determinate meanings to that of viewing it as endless play, an 'infinite postponement' of signification. As he wrote, 'the text is *radically* symbolic'[2]. It was, however, no coincidence that during the 1980's Geertz was the prophet and his works the rock on which historians such as Lynn Hunt, Robert Darnton, and William Sewell built the new cultural history[3]. Among the defining interpretative strategies associated with the so-called cultural turn and the subsequent turn to language and discourse is the notion that social actions are readable in a manner analogous to the reading of texts.

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[1] Reprinted in Clifford GEERTZ, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology*, New York, Basic Books, 1983, pp. 19-35.

[2] Roland BARTHES, *The Rustle of Language*, translated Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 58-59.

[3] See Lynn HUNT (ed.), *The New Cultural History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1989, particularly Hunt's 'Introduction: History, Culture, and Text'; Victoria E. BONNELL and Lynn HUNT (eds.), *Beyond the Culture Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999. Also Ronald G. WALTERS, 'Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and the Historians', *Social Research*, 27, 1980, pp. 537-56.

The new cultural historians and practitioners of the 'linguistic turn' have produced much of the most exciting historical scholarship of the last two decades. And even before the recent turn to culture and language, E. P. Thompson and Natalie Z. Davis had embraced anthropological methods in order to 'decode behavior' and 'disclose invisible rules of action'.[4] The meanings associated with the 'moral economy' of the eighteenth-century English crowd or the 'rites of violence' of sixteenth-century French religious rioters were identified as normatively and socially constituted systems of action because they were in some sense readable[5]. That said, Thompson and Davis resisted the full turn into the cultural 'text' itself, although that which separated cultural meanings — symbolically and ritually ordered — from social or economic structures that were somehow 'not-culture' was left ambiguous. The question remains, as Lynn Hunt asks, 'can a history of culture work if it is shorn of all theoretical assumptions about culture's relationship to the social world — if indeed, its agenda is conceived as the undermining of all assumptions about the relationship between culture and the social world'?[6].

Roger Chartier, himself among the most prominent of the new cultural historians, has questioned the transposition of the Geertzian approach to culture to historical practice, arguing that such interpretations assume an overly coherent system or lexicon of shared meanings and values[7]. Most recently, he has placed the 'text analogy' in serious

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[4] E. P. THOMPSON, 'Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?', *SocialHistory*, 3, 1978, pp. 155-56.

[5] E. P. THOMPSON, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', reprinted in his *Customs in Common*, New York, The New Press, 1991; Natalie Zemon DAVIS, 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Rite in Sixteenth-Century France', reprinted in her *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1975. Also see E. P. THOMPSON, 'Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context', *Midland History*, 1, 1972, pp. 41-55; Idem, 'Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History', *The Indian Historical Review*, 3, 1978, pp. 247-66; Natalie Zemon DAVIS, 'Anthropology and History in the 1980s: The Possibilities of the Past', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 11, 1981, pp. 267-75.

[6] HUNT, 'Introduction', *New Cultural History*, p. 10.

[7] Roger CHARTIER, 'Text, Symbols, and Frenchness', *Journal of Modern History*, 57, 1985, pp. 682-95, and Robert DARNTON's reply, *Ibid*, 58, 1986, pp. 218-34. *Cf* THOMPSON, *Customs in Common*, p. 6. Also see the dis-

doubt; he maintains, 'it is not legitimate to reduce the practices that constitute the social world to the principles that command discourse'. Chartier warns historians against 'unconstrained use of the term "text" — a term too often inappropriately applied to practices (ordinary and ritualized) whose tactics and procedures bear no resemblance to discursive strategies'.[8] Chartier's intervention has obvious implications for historians working on ritual practices and the production of cultural meaning. My essay accepts as a point of departure the view that important differences do indeed exist between how written or printed texts work and how meanings are produced through ritual actions.

This is not, however, to deny, that social actions are 'readable'. Moreover, I am also concerned here about the interplay between social practices and textual meaning and about how such interplay is negotiated. I am not merely alluding to the obvious fact that the only access that we have to social actions in the past is through texts, but that meanings are often produced through negotiations between ritual practice and textual inscription. Indeed, the fact of social practices being recorded in printed texts itself speaks to broader communicative conditions. I should be clear: by 'texts' I am referring exclusively to how meanings are expressed in written or printed works. Yet we can not maintain a sharp distinction between print culture and social practice, since the production and reception of texts are themselves socially situated actions; reading is a creative practice[9]. It is precisely the inability to maintain this separation that is of interest here. The relationship between ritual and text needs to be explored. Finally, we should note, while the field of cultural meaning should not be reduced to social conditions seen as independent of or external to culture, neither is the cultural field autonomous. Textual and ritual meanings are produced within fields to which individuals and groups have unequal

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cussion involving Chartier, Darnton and Pierre Bourdieu, 'Dialogue à propos de l'historie culturelle', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 59, 1985, pp. 87-93.

[8] Roger CHARTIER, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, translated Lydia G. Cochrane, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 19-21.

[9] See Roger CHARTIER, 'Texts, Printing, Readings', in *New Cultural History*, pp. 154-75.

access based on prior conditions of power and authority[10]. From this it follows that 'shared' meanings — rituals, symbols, texts, ideologies that have dominant force within particular societies at particular historical moments — often constitute the symbolic capital over which the most intense struggles occur.

The remainder of this article examines how these more theoretical issues pertain to English political culture and ritual practices in the age of the French revolution. In turn, it suggests that examining a particular historical moment, when questions about how meanings should be represented were most critically posed, can help us to reflect on the relationship between ritual and textual meaning, bringing historical perspective and specificity to bear on this question. The first part of my essay briefly addresses contemporaries' own views on the differences between the printed word and ritual practice as crucial to their understanding of how social and political allegiances were ordered, thus providing a certain historicity to our own understanding of negotiations between ritual practice and print culture. I am concerned, moreover, not only to stress the importance of distinctions that contemporaries drew between print culture and ritual practice, and a series of related distinctions — such as those between the rational and non-rational, the theatrical and anti-theatrical — but also to underscore the difficulties they faced in actually maintaining such distinctions and the ways in which they exploited the slippage between various communicative modes. The second part of the essay moves from print and ritual display to the rationalist faith in enlightenment notions of conversation and sociability, setting this faith against the actual conditions governing sociability and political speech within public spaces. The essay concludes by considering the negotiations between printed texts and various practices — social, legal and ritual — in the case of Daniel Isaac Eaton, republican bookseller and publisher extraordinaire.

[10] On language and authority, see Bruce LINCOLN, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, ch. 1.

## I

The term 'ritual' is itself not easily defined. I find David Kertzer's definition of ritual as 'symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive' to be helpful[11]. But for my purpose practices that take ritual form, or assume counter or even mock ritual form, rather than being strictly 'standardized' or 'repetitive', will be considered. As will be seen, the play and counter-play, including the play between texts and ritual practice, are my concern. As for rituals of sociability, I will stray further afield than the term 'sociability' might strictly infer. However, to the extent that rituals of sociability serve to bind and constitute, to define and redefine, collective social experience they suggest the complex interpenetrations between social text and community.

During the eighteenth century, the realm of symbol and ritual was central to British popular politics and culture: Jacobites toasted the king over the water; opponents of oligarchy kept radical meanings associated with the 'glorious revolution' alive through ritual commemorations; celebrations of naval heroes such as Admiral Edward Vernon encoded notions of English patriotism and liberty.[12] The life of most towns revolved around a series of social performances: the pageantry of the assize and quarter sessions, local and parliamentary elections with their bonfires and ribbons, the entries and exits at Sunday church services, the 'show' of public executions, military parades,

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[11] David I. KERTZER, *Rituals, Politics, and Power*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1988, ch. 1.

[12] Kathleen WILSON, 'Inventing Revolution: 1688 and Eighteenth-Century Popular Politics', *Journal of British Studies*, 28, 1989, pp. 347-86; Idem, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; Gerald JORDON and Nicholas ROGERS, 'Admirals as Heroes: Patriotism and Liberty in Hanoverian England', *Journal of British Studies*, 28, 1989, 201-24; Nicholas ROGERS, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998; Frank O'GORMAN, 'Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England, 1760-1860', *Past and Present*, 135, 1992, pp. 79-115.

local fairs and festivals. Theatricality — the politics of display, performance, and spectatorship — was apparent everywhere. Responding to the theatrics of authority, plebeian crowds fashioned their own rituals of resistance that occasionally broke through the hegemony of elite culture.[13] Popular radicalism's repertoire of ritual and symbolic display was often ordered as counter-theatre, replying, mocking, and commenting on the ritual performances of the crown, aristocracy, and established church. Royal anniversaries, coronations, political feast or fast days, sermons and religious services — the date of Charles I's martyrdom (30 January), the restoration of the royal family, 'Oak Apple Day' (29 May), Accession Day (25 October), Gunpowder Day (5 November) — contributed to a calender of loyal observance against which popular politics might frame counter-rituals of remembrance[14].

Or consider how the solemnities of the criminal court, where the judge donned a black cap before pronouncing the sentence of death or slipped on white gloves to signal a maiden' assize session at which there had been no capital sentences, were refracted in the ritualized spectacle of the gallows. Making a good show — appearing 'flash', often dressed in white as if going to one's own wedding — was important, as those facing death sought to retain a measure of autonomy and dignity. Moreover, rather than functioning unproblematically as a terrifying moment of community censure and shame, unruly crowds often transformed the eighteenth-century 'hanging match' into a public attraction at which disorder — abortive rescues, brawls, and occasional riots — loomed large[15]. As Michel Foucault has forcefully demonstrated, a regime of punishment fixed on publically inscribing the king's authority on the body of the condemned ran its own risks; carnival was never far from the gallows with its huge crowds,

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[13] THOMPSON, *Customs in Common*, particularly ch. 2; also see Gillian RUSSELL, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society, 1793-1815*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[14] Robert HOLE, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760-1832*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 12-19.

[15] Douglas HAY, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', in Douglas HAY *et al.* (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Free: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, New York, Pantheon, 1975, particularly pp. 26-31; Peter LINEBAUGH, 'The Tyburn Riot Against the Surgeons', in *ibidem*, pp. 65-117.

'shabby' ceremony, and air of license. The question was posed, whose show was it?[16].

The coming of the French revolution brought a crisis in representation. The crossroads between two regimes of truth — two conceptions of how social and political truths should be represented — had been reached. Many British intellectuals sympathetic to the French and American revolutions rejected a traditional medium of truth based on spectatorship and ritualized performance in favor of an enlightenment faith in rational transparency and in language that was capable of eradicating the gap between the sign and its intended meaning. It was this faith that informed Thomas Spence's phonetic alphabet, Thomas Paine's views on currency, and various schemes for political representation: in each case representation was to be rendered as pure, as unmediated as possible. How were the people to be represented and how were political truths to be represented to the people as citizens rather than subjects? These were burning questions. For the followers of Paine and William Godwin, rational communication stood against aristocratic and royal spectacle. Royal pomp, splendour and ornamental display were calculated 'to bring over to its party our eyes and our ears'. Godwin maintained that kings set out with 'every artifice' to 'dazzle our senses, and mislead our judgement'.[17] Rather than being truly readable, the performance of royal authority thrived— indeed, could only thrive — on disguise and dissimulation, on its own illegibility or rather its susceptibility to misreading. Aristocratic government, like aristocratic writing and ceremony, depended on elaborate

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[16] Michel FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish: The Brith of the Prison*, translated Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage, 1979, ch. 2; Randall MCGOWEN, 'The Body and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of Modern History*, 59, 1987, pp. 651-79; V. A. C. GATRELL, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 90-105. As Gatrell reminds us, ultimate control rested not with the crowd but with authority. *Cf.* T. W. LAQUEUR, 'Crowds, carnivals and the English state in English executions, 1604-1868', in A. L. BEIER *et al.* (eds.), *The First Modern Society: Essays in Honour of Lawrence Stone*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 305-99.

[17] William GODWIN, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, 3rd edition, first published 1798, p. 441.

conventions of deception, craft, and artifice; amid the show of monarchy, truth was kept safely from view and government was rendered mysterious. Thus metaphors of concealment run throughout Paine's *Rights of Man*. Monarchy is 'the master-fraud, which shelters all others'. And Paine charges Edmund Burke with assuming a 'contemptible opinion of mankind ... as a herd of beings that must be governed by fraud, effigy, and show'. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution* is a work 'very well calculated for theatrical representation, where facts are manufactured for show'; 'poetical liberties' are taken 'to produce a stage effect'[18]. The role of the revolutionary writer was to pulled back the curtains behind which monarchy's true character was hidden, to unmask aristocratic falsehood and corruption. Reason is not counter- but anti-theatrical.

No doubt republican distrust of the theatrical can be traced back to Reformation iconoclasm and Puritan privileging of the word over the visual or ritualistic. But if republicans attempted the impossible, the intensity of their efforts to tame a volatile field of meaning underscores an important truth: forms of expression matter. The medium is the message, or a large part of it. The play of the text is not the same as ritual play. Of course, radicals also strove to counter the play of the printed text itself. Writers like Paine and Godwin rejected classical models of rhetoric, employing instead a 'plain style' associated with modern scientific discourse. The model of the text was that of mathematical demonstration in which axioms were laid down and meaning was controlled by definitions and empirical reasoning[19]. Not surprisingly William Sherwin, Paine's first radical biographer, traced the precision and clarity of Paine's political and theological writings to his early grounding in science, particularly mathematics, enabling him 'to reduce abstruseness to simplicity, to understand difficult subjects

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[18] Thomas PAINE, *Rights of Man*, London, Penguin, 1984, first published 1791-92, pp. 49, 59-60, 77, 174, 204.

[19] David A. WILSON, *Paine and Cobbett: the Transatlantic Connection*, Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston and Montreal, 1988, ch. 1; Olivia SMITH, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984, ch. 2; Charles TAYLOR, 'Language and Human Nature', in his *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 226. The debt to Locke's views on language in such formulations is clear.

himself, and to render them intelligible to others'.[20] Tremendous faith was placed in the printed word and in readers' innate rational capacity. It was enough merely for rational truth to be clearly stated for reason to triumph over fiction[21].

Despite popular radicals' own extensive use of ritual and symbol expression — the planting of liberty trees, demands to illuminate, displaying of caps of liberty, revolutionary dining, songs and toasts — republicans worried that such gestures pandered to popular irrationality, appealing to the senses rather than the mind. Similarly, public oratory, particularly rabble-rousing, was suspect since it did not allow for deliberation[22]. Radicals often contrasted the decorum of their own proceedings to the saturnalia of loyalist mobs burning Paine in effigy or to the disorder of heavy-drinking and liberally bribed election crowds. Most radically, Godwin rejected all representational forms whether political, musical, or theatrical, that depended merely on repetition or precedent. 'All formal repetition of other men's ideas', wrote Godwin, 'seems to be a scheme for imprisoning for so long a time the operations of our own mind'[23]. Ritual performance stood thoroughly condemned by such strictures. Yet both republicans and loyalists recognized the need to find popular forms to communicate their principles. Thus a correspondent of John Reeves, founder of the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, urged loyalists to awaken 'patriotic spirit' through the medium of 'vulgar ballads', noting the success of *Ça ira* and commenting that 'the lower class of People... are incapable of reading

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[20] W. T. SHERWIN, *Memoirs of the Life of Thomas Paine*, London, 1819, p. 12.

[21] See James EPSTEIN, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 112, and ch. 4 more generally.

[22] ROGERS, *Crowds, Culture and Politics*, p. 211. Thus at the outdoor meeting at Copenhagen Fields in 1795 several rostra were set up, so that there could be deliberations. See *Account of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the London Corresponding Society, held in a field near Copenhagen House*, London, 1795.

[23] Quoted in Mark PHILP, *Godwin's Political Justice*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 1.

or understanding any good or serious address to set them right'[24]. While not concurring with this correspondent's low opinion of the intellectual capacities of the laboring poor, Spence worked as a multimedia propagandist in the republican cause, devising a wide range of popular forms of expression. Alive to the culture of the street and plebeian tavern, he stretched representational conventions, using proverbs, aphorisms, songs, and striking his own radical token coinage[25]. Republicanism was to be inserted within everyday plebeian life and culture, to be given new form including that of ritual, allegory, and symbol.

Across the channel, the problem of representing revolutionary principles in new forms assumed a life-and-death urgency. Following Rousseau's lead, revolutionaries struggled to re-create the theatre of politics so as to offer nontheatrical, republican ceremonies[26]. As Greg Dening reminds us, anti-theatrical and anti-ritual prejudices were not opposed to pure representation but rather to playfulness, to the threat of uncertain meanings[27]. The utopian desire to bring forms of revolutionary expression into line with the abstraction of a pure and transparent general will floundered on its own inherent contradictions. As it turned out, the Jacobins were themselves masters of political theatricality; the didactic spectacle of the guillotine was every bit as unstable as was monarchy's scaffold theatre[28]. As leaders raced desperately to transform former subjects into citizens, they invented festivals of reason, revolutionary catechisms, and a lexicon of symbols designed to

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[24] 'Fidelia' to Reeves, British Library, Add. MSS 16920, fo. 99, cited in Mark PHILP, 'Vulgar Conservatism, 1792-3', *English Historical Review*, 110, 1995, p. 51.

[25] See Marcus WOOD, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790-1822*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, ch. 2.

[26] See Sara MAZA, *Private Life and Public Affairs*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, pp. 61-3, on Rousseau and Diderot's views of theatre.

[27] Greg DENING, *Performances*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 113-14.

[28] Paul Andrew FRIEDLAND, 'Representations and Revolution: The Theatricality of Politics and the Politics of Theater in France, 1789-1794', Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1995, pp. 406-08, and conclusion and ch. 2 more generally.

instruct citizens in the transparencies of republican virtue[29]. Signs of virtue were to be worn on the body of the citizen, inscribed in one's personal comportment and bearing, evidenced in modes of address and dress. British radicals followed suit. Gestures of ordinary life took on extraordinary significance. Friends of liberty imitated French fashion, wearing their hair loose or cropped, greeting each other as 'citizen', dating personal correspondence and public addresses 'year 1 of Liberty'. Lord Edward Fitzgerald, the Irish revolutionary, insisted on walking the streets instead of riding in his carriage, telling friends that he felt more pride 'in being on a level with his fellow citizens'[30]. In the theatre itself, the popular playwright Thomas Holcroft, who was Godwin's closet friend, devised a science of acting. To this end, he wrote highly detailed instructions for actor's bodily gestures that were intended to produce specific emotional responses in theatre audiences — an attempt to stabilize the inherently unstable.[31] Paine, for his part, sought to develop anti-superstitious forms of theophilanthropist worship[32].

## II

Moreover, if British republicans embraced a culture of the word, privileging the printed text over ritual performance, they also shared an enlightenment faith in the civilizing force of sociability and conversation[33]. As Mark Philp comments, 'sociability was the basic fabric of late eighteenth-century intellectual life'. Britain's radical intellectuals 'lived in a round of debate and discussion, in clubs, associations,

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[29] Lynn HUNT, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984, part 1; Mona OZOUF, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, translated Alan Sheridan, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1988.

[30] Stella TILLYARD, *Citizen Lord: Edward Fitzgerald, 1763-1798*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1997, pp. 140-41, 158.

[31] David KARR, 'The Space of the Theater and the Production of Meaning in 1790's London: the Case of Thomas Holcroft', forthcoming.

[32] Thomas PAINE, *Manual of the Theophilanthropes, or Adorers of God and Friends of Man*, London, 1797.

[33] See, for example, David HUME, *Essays; Moral, Political and Literary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1966, first published 1741-42.

debating societies, saloons, taverns, coffee houses, bookshops, publishing houses and in the street'[34]. This was the social and intellectual milieu that nurtured radical ideas extolling the value of conversation and sociability, the power of reason and opinion. Thus John Horne Tooke's house at Wimbledon was a center of continuous dining, drinking, conversation, and conviviality. Leading figures of London's radical intelligentsia, generally drawn from the middling social ranks, gathered at Tooke's table — including Paine, Godwin, Holcroft, the orator and poet John Thelwall, the radical publisher Joseph Johnson, the engraver William Sharp, Robert Merry, the sculptor Thomas Banks, Archibald Hamilton Rowan of the United Irishmen, the radical lawyers John Frost and Felix Vaughan, the republican Thomas Cooper, among others. Many of the same advanced thinkers and artists could be found at Johnson's weekly dinner parties which also included Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Barbauld, William Blake, Joel Barlow, and the Swiss painter Henry Fuseli[35]. At these gregarious sessions politics were mixed with wide ranging discussion and the forging of networks of friends and dining companions. These dinner parties were themselves extensions of the public sphere and broader notions of the civilizing effects of sociability.

Ideas about sociability and conversation were inseparable from communicative conditions associated with the emergence of the 'bourgeois' public sphere. At taverns, coffeehouses, booksellers, debating and supper clubs, the norms of polite sociability were formed. These were sites for the reading of newspapers, gathering of intelligence, conversing among friends and other informed citizens, spaces of conviviality where ideas circulated freely among supposed equals.

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[34] PHILP, *Godwin's Political Justice*, pp. 127-8. Also see Marilyn BUTLER, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactions: English Literature and its Background, 1760-1830*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 25-6; Nicholas ROE, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* , Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 9-10, 169, 243.

[35] Christina and David BEWLEY, *Gentleman Radical: A Life of John Horne Tooke, 1736-1812*, London, Tauris 1998, p. 85; Gerald P. TYSON, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1979, pp. 118-122; David ERDMAN, *Blake, Prophet against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of his Time*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969, pp. 155-56.

As Terry Eagleton argues, the hallmark of such discursive space was its consensual character, embodying common standards of taste and conduct that were first and most famously articulated by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in their *Tatler* and *Spectator* essays. The suspension of social status at such sites of sociability was predicated on shared standards of the sayable, on norms of politeness, good behaviour, restrained conversation, and good writing. The blending of 'grace and gravitas, urbanity and morality, correction and consolidation' was, as Eagleton writes, directly linked to the production of a 'polite' reading public and to the growing legitimacy of essay writing, to the republic of belles lettres[36]. The coffee-house was a self-regulating republic of urban civility[37]. However, this civility was always subject to a series of tensions: between the permissive pleasures of heavy drinking and good order, between accessibility to customers of varying social backgrounds and distinction based on the appearance of good taste and manners, between free conversation and the hazardous subjects of politics and religion.

In Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, the section on the 'utility of social communication' provides the model of the 'ideal speech situation' — what Godwin calls 'candid and unreserved conversation'. 'Let us suppose', writes Godwin, unimpaired conversation between two sensitive truth seekers, 'desirous extensively to communicate the truths with which they are acquainted' and distinguished by 'mildness of their temper, and a spirit of benevolence'. Unlike the 'cold' encounter with the printed page, vigorous private conversation provides a variety of views, stimulating 'freedom and elasticity to our

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[36] Terry EAGLETON, *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism*, London, Verso, 1984, pp. 9-30. Also see Roy PORTER, "The Enlightenment in England", in Roy PORTER and Mikuláš TEICH (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 8-18; and *Cf.* Jon P. KLANCHER, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), chap. 1, for an important revision to thinking on the 'public sphere'.

[37] J. G. A. PEACOCK, 'Virtues, rights, and manners: A model for historians of political thought', in his *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 37-50; David S. SHIELD, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America*, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 1997, chs. 2 & 3.

dispositions'[38]. Godwin was wary of popular political associations, preferring informal conversation to formal organizations, enforced programs, political rivalries, and what he regarded as associations' tendency to tumult and violence. Moreover, Godwin and his friends tried to put such principles into practice. Thus Godwin and Holcroft were members of a small society devoted to the goal of free, rational enquiry, The Philomathean Society. According to John Binns, who was a leading member of the London Corresponding Society and also a Philomathean, the number of members was limited to twenty-one. The society met fortnightly to discuss a prearranged topic; no member was allowed to speak for more than fifteen minutes, a rule necessitated by Godwin and Holcroft's prolixity[39].

While no doubt Godwin and his friends were attempting to put theory into practice, such moves defined a limit that could not be realized outside of a small, semi-private circle. Arguably, the difficulty of imagining or sustaining ideal conditions for rational discourse within public space encouraged such experiments in free communication. By the late the late eighteenth century, the ideals of civility associated with the culture of the public sphere had become at best tenuous. While taverns and coffee houses had from the late seventeenth century been contentious political sites, in the wake of the American and French revolutions consensual norms of 'bourgeois' conduct, of politeness and sociability, could not withstand the disruptions of revolutionary politics. Taverns, coffee houses, debating clubs were hardly safe havens for those committed to the principles of the French revolution. If, as Jürgen Habermas proposes, the rationality of the public sphere was in the first instance the product of private subjectivity originating within the conjugal family (and later extended into the market), by 1792 the capacity for private individuals to exchange views with a measure of security was in jeopardy. The watchfulness of government spies and perhaps more significantly that of private individuals responding to the royal proclamation of May 1792 against sedition now policed the space of the tavern and coffee house, their rooms, boxes and tables. Taverns and alehouses, it should be remembered, were subject to the control of licensing by local magis-

[38] GODWIN, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, pp. 288-90.

[39] John BINNS, *Recollections of the Life of John Binns*, Philadelphia, 1854, p. 45.

trates; many proprietors were, in fact, pressured to ban supporters of Thomas Paine from their premises[40]. Moreover, the publicness of the coffee house and tavern was not of apiece, as 'private' speech was also subject to policing. John Binns, who had himself faced trial for his revolutionary activities, recalled that the 'Jacobin' orator John Thelwall never felt comfortable even in private conversation. 'If he went into an oyster house, or an *a-la-mode* beef-shop, he would conceit that one-half of the boxes in the room had government spies in them, whose especial business was to watch and report, as far as possible, all he said and all he did'[41].

In light of his own trial for high treason, Thelwall's paranoia was understandable, and as the case of Charles Pigott and William Hodgson illustrates, it was not entirely misplaced. Both men were leading members of the London Corresponding Society. Pigott was a prominent radical author of gentry background who specialised in scurrilous exposés of the sexual morals of the aristocracy; Hodgson was a hatter[42]. The two men had dined 'convivially together' at a London coffee house; they called for newspapers which they read and discussed. Hodgson spoke freely of the Duke of York's 'bad private character', commenting that he 'respected no man however exalted by rank, unless dignified by virtue'. Less decorously, he called the Elector of Hanover (i.e. George III) and Landgrave of Hesse Cassell 'German Hog Butchers'. While in private conversation — conversing

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[40] Jürgen HABERMAS, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1989, first published 1962, particularly pp. 51-67; ROGERS, *Crowds, Culture and Politics*, pp. 192-210, *passim*. For provincial loyalist coercion, see Alan BOOTH, 'Popular Loyalism and Public Violence in the North-West of England, 1790-1800', *Social History*, 8, 1983, pp. 295-313. For prosecutions see Clive EMSLEY, 'Repression, 'Terror' and the Rule of Law during the Decade of the French Revolution', *English Historical Review*, 100, 1985, pp. 801-25; Idem, 'An Aspect of Pitt's "Terror": prosecutions for sedition during the 1790s', *Social History*, 6, 1981, pp. 155-84.

[41] BINNS, *Recolletions*, p. 44.

[42] See Nicholas ROGERS, 'Pigott's Private Eye: Radicalism and Sexual Scandal in Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/Revue de la societé historique canadienne*, 1993, pp. 247-63.

with an 'openness and freedom' natural to their surroundings — Pigott and Hodgson were accosted by a gentleman, a member of John Reeves' loyalist association who had been eavesdropping on their conversation. Joined by fellow loyalists who 'laid siege' to their table, the patron called for a glass of punch and demanded that the two radicals drink a loyal toast to 'the King and the Royal Family'. 'Having never in my life been accustomed to act or speak otherwise than as a free-man', Hodgson later wrote, he and Pigott refused and countered with the toast 'The French Republic, and May She Triumph Over All Her Enemies'. The coffee-house owner called for constables and on the basis of notes taken by informers, Pigott and Hodgson were arrested. Unable to meet the exorbitantly high bail set at £500 each, the two men remained for over three weeks in Newgate prison before being brought to trial[43].

When the two men were finally brought before a grand jury the legal issue turned, according to Pigott, on whether words 'passing between two friends in a public coffee-house, at a table where they were sitted [sic] by themselves' could be the subject of an indictment; did freeborn Englishmen have a right as to their own thoughts and private words? 'Till, now', declared Pigott, 'it had been supposed, that the table or box in a coffee room, was as sacred and inviolable as a private room, nay, even as our house'. There was, however, a paradox to Pigott's argument since he maintained not merely that he and Hodgson were in private conversation but that the publicness of the coffee house and the freedom and loudness with which they spoke demonstrated that they were not engaged in seditious activity. Rather than conspiring sedition — sedition being characterized by 'silence and concealment', shunning 'the light' — they appeared and spoke together openly at one of the most frequented coffee houses in the city of London. It was precisely the publicness of their private conversation that guaranteed the good intent of their actions and words; they

[43] This account is based on Charles PIGOTT, *Persecution.The Case of Charles Pigott: Contained in the Defence He had Prepared and Would Have Delivered*, London, 1793; and William HODGSON 's preface to his *The Commonwealth of Reason*, London, 1795, pp. vii-xi.

had not sought the protections of secrecy[44]. As it turned out, Pigott's indictment was discarded, while Hodgson was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and fined £200.[45] From prison Hodgson published a lengthy pamphlet entitled *The Commonwealth of Reason* (1795), a fully realized, utopian vision of a new social and political order based on perfect equality among citizens[46].

Encounters like Hodgson and Pigott's, and there were many similar cases during the 1790's, illustrate that speech is rarely pursued under 'ideal' conditions, certainly not public speech or works printed for a public and certainly not when the political stakes are high. Philomatheans might engage in rational conversation, but they could only do so by retreating from the public fray. Within public spaces of the coffee-house, tavern, debating club, street, or meeting room there was no escaping the power constraining expression, that is to say social, political, and legal conditions that are in some sense external and prior to speech, writing or ritual expression. 'Free' speech was only possible outside such public spaces; free publication was only possible for privately printed and circulated works[47]. We need always understand how practices and texts are inserted within specific social spaces and communal settings. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have argued, patterns of discourse 'are regulated through the forms of corpo-

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[44] For the protection offered by secret association, see Margaret C. JACOB, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans,* London, Allen and Unwin, 1981.

[45] Unable to pay his fine, Hodgson languished in prison beyond his sentence.

[46] Hodgson, for example, banned all wealth accumulated by any means other than 'personal industry, or equitable inheritance'. His scheme included provisions for a minimum wage, 'national manufactories' for the unemployed, abolition of the death penalty, compulsory secular education and the election of school teachers, divorce by the consent of either party.

[47] This accounts for the excitement when in the next generation radical printers pirated Shelley's *Queen Mab*, breaking an elite code of private publication or when Richard Carlile and Sherwin dared to openly publish Paine's political and theological works. Iain MCCALMAN, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 155, 160; EPSTEIN, *Radical Expression*, pp. 102-04.

rate assembly in which they are produced'. Modes of expression are never independent of such 'sites of assembly' which determine in large measure 'what may and may not be said, who may speak, how people may communicate and what importance must be given to what is said'[48]. Question of control need to be addressed. Trials are of particular interest here because they are overtly about interpretation and because the law seeks to disguise its resort to force — physical and interpretative[49]. Yet in the pronouncement of its own authority the law can not help but disclose the coercive conditions on which that authority rests. The public sphere is never independent of the law's sanction, for the law can demand that the public sphere account for itself within the law's own domain. Legal discourse is at the opposite extreme to "ideal speech", to speech among equals. As Pierre Bourdieu remarks, 'Legal discourse is a creative speech which brings into existence that which it utters. It is the limit aimed at by all performative utterance'[50].

Ritual and counter-ritual practice, including rituals of sociability, were of course subject to severe constraints, particularly to the threat of legal prosecution. Power is never absent from the conditions governing ritual performance; indeed, ritual practices are often about power, about the ordering or reordering of authority. Pigott and Hodgson's encounter involved strong ritual elements, as they toasted 'The French Republic' in response to loyalist attempts to force them to toast 'the King'. The tavern and coffee house were arenas for testing the courage of men's political convictions; male honour, as well as independence, was bound up with politics and sociability. The

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[48] Peter STALLYBRASS and Allon WHITE, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 80.

[49] The point is contested, but see Stanley FISH, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1989, particularly 'Force', pp. 503-24; *Cf.* Jacques DERRIDA, 'Force of Law: the "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', *Cardozo Law Review*, 11 (1990), pp. 921-1039; Drucilla CORNELL, 'The Violence of the Masquerade: Law Dressed Up as Justice', *ibidem.*, pp. 1047-70.

[50] Pierre BOURDIEU, *Language and Symbol Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 42. This is not to say that the law succeeds in this limit.

challenges and counter-challenges to drink particular toasts or to stand by one's words and allegiances were in certain respects analogous to the code of the duel — a ritual code that claimed extra-legal authority[51]. The code of the duel was, however, also linked to upper-class bouts of massive drinking and rowdiness, and was increasingly seen as an atavistic expression of aristocratic manliness in a commercial age[52]. As sites of sociability, commerce and conversation, coffee houses and taverns were thus subject to persuasive conditions that in practice fell short of enlightenment notions of truthful discourse or for that matter norms of 'bourgeois' propriety.

Ritual confrontations had to be carefully negotiated if one were successfully to maintain face without leading to serious altercation or prosecution. Binns, who was in Birmingham as the delegate of the London Corresponding Society in 1796, courageously paid a visit to the Church and King tavern where the Priestley riots were believed to have been planned; the panel of plate glass on the entrance door displayed in 'large polished gilt letters, the words, "NO JACOBINS ADMITTED HERE"'. Entering loyalist territory, Binns was apparently recognized as a LCS delegate and in an attempt to smoke him out, he was greeted by the toast 'Church and King', followed by 'Damn all Jacobins'. After Binns refused to drink the second toast, customers shouted for him to be thrown out of the tavern. According to Binns' account, he then defended his political principles in a con-

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[51] Steven SHAPIN, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, particularly ch. 3. According to Shapin, standing by one's word had been crucial to an earlier regime of truth based on the presumed reliability of a gentleman's utterances.

[52] See Charles MOORE, *A Full Inquiry into the Subject of Suicide. To which are added... Two Treatises on Duelling and Gaming*, 2 vols., London, 1790, vol. 2; Donna T. ANDREW, 'The Code of honour and its critics: the opposition to duelling in England, 1700-1850', *Social History*, 5, 1980, pp. 409-34; V. G. KIERNAN, *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy* , Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 2-21; and Jon ELSTER, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 203-38.

ciliatory speech; he was allowed to finish his drink and retire at his own discretion.[53] A victory of sorts.

The radical lawyer John Frost was less fortunate than Binns. Frost was prosecuted for having proclaimed as he left a Marylebone coffee house, 'I am for equality; I can see no reason why man should not be upon a footing with another; it is every man's birthright'. On being challenged by fellow customers to elaborate on his sentiments, he added that by 'equality' he meant 'no kings'. Asked specifically if he meant no king 'in this country', Frost responded, 'Yes, no king, the constitution of this country is a bad one'. The case is of particular interest in that it allows us to perceive an important set of distinctions to be made between meanings associated with speech events and those inscribed in written texts. At his trial Frost's lawyer, Thomas Erskine, argued not only had his client been 'in liquor' when he spoke, but that 'rash, hasty, or unguarded expression ... thrown out in the heat of disputation' did not meet the criminal doctrine that 'must be maintained *maliciously and advisedly*'. The distinction on which Erskine insisted was between the spoken and printed word. '[Spoken ] Words are transient and fleeting as the wind ... easily misunderstood, and often misreported'. Written words, on the other hand, 'are permanent things', and if published, 'they scatter poison far and wide. They are acts of deliberation, capable of satisfactory proof, and not ordinarily liable to misconstruction'[54]. Whether we accept Erskine's last point (surely printed words are often liable to radically different interpretations), his argument faltered on the questions of advised speech and deliberate intent.

Indeed, the directness and presence in the speech event, the exchange between interlocuters, and the opportunity to pose the question 'What do you mean'? made Frost's words more intelligible than had he merely written that he favored 'equality and no King'. Since Frost was interrogated about his intended meaning in a way that is generally impossible with regard to a written text and since he left no doubt that 'no king' referred to George III, Erskine's task was made very diffi-

[53] BINNS, *Recollections*, pp. 69-72.

[54] T .B. HOWELL and T. J. HOWELL (eds.), *A Complete Collection of State Trials,* 33 vols. London, 1809-26, vol. 22 (1792-3), 'Proceedings against John Frost for Seditious Words', cols. 471-74, 505.

cult. Frost was found guilty but that is hardly the point; a more sympathetic jury (one that was not packed) might well have brought in an acquittal. The point to be made is that the social dynamics pertaining to the speech situation —as opposed, for example, to private reading— are crucial to how meanings are produced and interpreted[55].

But what more can we say about what Frost, Binns, Pigott, and Hodgson were up to? Certainly they were not pursuing rational discussion, polite sociability or discrete conversation. Moreover, they understood the risks that they were running. By toasting and counter toasting, exchanging words and slogans, in their refusals to back down, they were testing limits, exploring expressive boundaries. Running a risk, playing on the edge, and perhaps getting away with it, these were part of the stakes. At one level, they engaged in deep play, in subversive play, in play at the edges of the permissible[56]. Their anti-hegemonic actions suggested other social worlds and other norms of permissibility — the French revolution, equality, no king. Perhaps the world of Hodgson's visionary commonwealth[57]. Official ritual, including religious and legal performance, depends on legitimate speakers, socially authorized and thus speaking with authority. In turn counter-ritual play aims at de-authorizing this legitimacy, reversing the legitimacy of official speakers and the authority on which their legitimacy rests. Of course, republicans also took risks in their printed writings, as they tested permissible boundaries and sought to undermine established authority. Moreover, texts and ritual practices are equally embedded within social and cultural contexts, including networks of authority, that in turn demand interpretation. Nonetheless,

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[55] On this point more generally, see Paul RICOEUR, 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text', *Social Research*, 38, 1971, 529-62.

[56] *Cf.* Greg DENING, *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion , Power and Theatre on the Bounty*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 79-80. The term 'deep play' is of course borrowed from Geertz.

[57] As Victor TURNER notes, most cultural performance belongs to a culture's 'subjunctive mood', conveying desires rather than actualities. Victor Turner, 'Liminality and the Performative Genres", in John J. MACALOON (ed.), *Rite, Drama, Festival, and Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, pp. 20-21.

differences remain and contemporaries were themselves alive to these differences. So, for example, communicative conditions governing private reading are not the same as those governing conversation, verbal disputation, or ritual exchange. The challenges and counter-challenges at the tavern, the toasts that one was prepared to stand to, the planting of liberty trees or burning Paine in effigy, the conflicts over 'calling the tunes' at theatre performances, these were all social actions carrying meanings that are not strictly analogous to the reading of printing texts.

## III

Finally, what about the interplay between texts and symbolic or ritual display? The case of Daniel Isaac Eaton, the most prominent Jacobin publisher of the 1790's, is instructive. Eaton was a master of escape; he survived prosecution after prosecution, including two trials for publishing Paine's work[58]. Eaton made a career from publishing works that more cautious publishers turned down. Thus when Godwin's *Cursory Strictures* (1793), which attacked the government's treason trials, was discontinued by the pamphlet's original publisher due to a menacing note from government officials, Eaton immediately put the work into circulation[59]. Moreover, Eaton's bookstore at no. 74 Newgate Street offered a meeting place for London radicals, providing a fluid site of contact between polite and plebeian radicals. His journal, *Politics for the People, or Hog's Wash* (1793-95) served a similar purpose. It was, for example, doubtful that Robert Southey's

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[58] *The Proceedings, on the Trial of Daniel Isaac Eaton, upon an Indictment, for Selling a Supposed Libel, The Second Part of the Rights of Man*, London 1793; *Trial of Daniel Isaac Eaton ... for Selling ... A Letter, Addressed to the Addressers*, London, 1793; Public Records Office, London (hereafter PRO), TS 11/978/3560, Crown Brief, King v. Eaton, May 1793. For a full discussion of Eaton's career, see Michael T. DAVIS, '*Behold the Man*: The Life, Times and Circle of Daniel Isaac Eaton, 1753-1814', PhD. diss., University of Queensland, 1995.

[59] ANON. [William Godwin], *Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, October 2, 1794*, London, 1794. Eaton's note on the title page explains that he did not believe 'that a Treasury Mandate is yet generally adopted as a law of the land'.

poem 'To the Exile Patriots' (1794) would have seen the light of day had Eaton not printed it in his journal[60]. At his bookstore and in his journal, Eaton mediated the cultural worlds of polite and popular republicanism. Much of *Politics for the People*'s cultural energy was produced by the negotiations between the low milieu of the street and boisterous tavern, the scurrilous handbill and blasphemous song, and the intellectual milieu of Tooke and Johnson's social circles; the very title of his journal comments ironically on the shifting, uncertain links between the idioms of polite and vulgar radicalism. Eaton described his journal as 'an asylum to the Public', for the publication of a rich medley of original contributions. It was a journal written as much by the Jacobin movement as for it[61]. Popular literary forms such as allegory, parody, fable, song, poetry, dramatic dialogue, skit, and visionary dream abound within the experimental space of *Politics for the People*. Subversive play was a speciality. As a collective riposte to Burke's 'swinish multitude', the journal was overrun by pigs — an animal that suggests more generally the unhinging of boundaries between high and low[62]. We find an occasion column from 'Pigabus', another signed 'A Liberty Pig' living at 'Freedom's Stye' and 'A Learned Pig', a letter addressed to 'Brother Grunter'. We also encounter some of the most advanced British Jacobin commentary of the day, including contributions from John Thelwall and James Parkinson[63].

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[60] Michael DAVIS, '"That Odious Class of Men Called Democrats": Daniel Isaac Eaton and the Romantics, 1794-95', *History*, 84, 1999, pp. 74-92.

[61] 'Address to the Public', *Politics for the People*, part 2, no. 1, 1794, p. 2; SMITH, *Politics of Language*, pp. 87-89; Gywn A. WILLIAMS, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes: Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution*, London, Edward Arnold, 1968, p. 71.

[62] For the 'social semiotics' of the pig, Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, pp. 44-59.

[63] See, for example, [Thelwall], 'Estimate of the Value of National Opulence to the Mass of the People – from the Peripatetic', *Politics for the People*, 6 (1793), pp. 73-76. Parkinson wrote under the pseudonym 'Old Hubert'. Eaton reprinted extracts from such elite writers as Addison, Dryden, Pope, Godwin, Horace Montesquieu, and Abbé Raynal, among others.

Understandably Pitt's government was intent on shutting down Eaton's operations. And they chose a particularly apt text on which to do legal battle: 'King Chaunticlere: or, The Fate of Tyranny', which Eaton published in *Politics for the People*'s eighth number (16 November 1793). 'Chaunticlere' [sic] was Eaton's version of a speech ('an anecdote') delivered by 'Citizen Thelwall' at the Chapel Court debating society (opposite the Bank)[64]. The question being discussed was 'relative to the Influence of the Love of Life, of Liberty, and of the fair Sex, on the Actions of Mankind'. While Thelwall has nothing to say of the influence of the 'fair sex', he starts by responding to an anecdote related by a previous speaker about a 'poor tortured slave in the West Indies' whose love of life was purported to be greater than his love of liberty. Thelwall shows that this story about a slave whose limbs have been cut off and who is being fried alive had been misunderstood. Rather than interpreting the mutilated slave's gesture of blocking a well-wisher's blow aimed at putting him out of his misery as testimony of his love of life over liberty, Thelwall explains this action as an involuntary reflex, a 'mere mechanical impulse' rather than a reasoned response. The charge of sedition was based, however, on Thelwall's own barnyard fable which followed the story of the slave. Farmer Thelwall, who was 'fond of birds and poultry', had a 'very fine majestic kind of animal, a game cock: a haughty, sanguinary tyrant, nursed in blood and slaughter from his infancy — fond of foreign wars and *domestic rebellions*, into which he sometimes drove his subjects'. This tyrant oppressed the 'more industrious birds', eating their food and subjecting them to 'inordinate taxation'. Brought up to revere the majestic trappings of king Chaunticleer — 'his ermine spotted breast, the fine gold trappings around his neck and shoulders, the flowing robe of plumage tucked up at his rump' and above all 'his crown, or *coxcomb'* — Thelwall admits to 'some lurking principles of aversion to barefaced despotism struggling at my heart'. Acting on these benevolent whisperings of the heart and his desire to 'rid the world of tyrants', Thelwall relates that he seized Chaunticleer, 'dragging him to the block' and with a heavy knife 'separated his neck at a blow'. Although 'if guillotines had been in fashion', he comments, that he would certainly have employed this

[64] *Politics for the People*, 1, 1793, pp. 102-07; PRO, TS 11/951/3495, 'King against Daniel Isaac Eaton, copy of the Indictment', Dec., 1793. 'Chaunticleer' is misspelt in the original title.

more rational means of execution. When the dead bird's fine trappings were stripped off, Thelwall reports that he found Chaunticleer no better than 'a common tame scratch-dunghill pullet'; in fact, he was not as good, 'for he was tough, and oily, and rank with the pollutions of his luxurious vices'.

The story itself is, of course, hilarious: a brilliantly sustained, regicidal joke. Apparently when delivered at Chapel Court it was met with 'shouts of laughter and applause'[65]. It is also interesting not merely as a republican critique of monarchical tyranny, display and spectacle, but as a commentary on rationalist understanding of bodily gestures. Thus Thelwall notes that like the slave, Chaunticleer continued 'habitual muscular motion after (by means of the loss of his head) he was no longer capable of knowing what he was about'. Indeed, Thelwall, who was a close friend of Holcroft's and a fellow Philomathean, had also delivered a highly controversial lecture at Guy's Hospital entitled 'On the Origin of Sensation', attempting to explain 'the phenomena of mind ... upon principles *purely physical*'[66].

In addition, the story and the event of its telling need to be understood within the very specific context of London debating clubs in the early 1790's. We must move outside Eaton's text. We know from Eaton's account that when Thelwall attempted to relate his tale to the exertions of the French nation in the cause of European liberty that the debating club's committee immediately adjourned the meeting[67]. By 1793 debating clubs were under intense government pressure; indeed, after the Two Acts (1795) public debating in London all but ceased[68].

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[65] Mrs. [Cecil] THELWALL, *The Life of John Thelwall by His Widow*, London, 1837, p. 110.

[66] John THELWALL, 'Prefatory Memoir', *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement*, Hereford, 1801, pp. xxii-xxiii.

[67] The managers of the society published an advertisement in the *Daily Advertiser* denouncing Thelwall's 'disrespectful' and 'licentious' deviation from the evening's topic of discussion and declaring their own support of the principles of the British constitution. Donna T. ANDREW (ed.), *London Debating Societies, 1776-1799*, London Record Society, 1994, p. 324.

[68] Mary THALE, 'London Debating Societies in the 1790's', *Historical Journal*, 32, 1989, pp. 57-86. On Thewall, see E. P. THOMPSON, 'Hunting the Jacobin Fox', *Past and Present*, 142, 1994, pp. 94-140.

In fact, Thelwall, a very popular debater, deliberately challenged what he regarded as the frivolous, non-political character of London's commercial debating clubs. As one of the managers of the Coachmaker's Hall Society for Free Debate, Thelwall successfully demanded that the society debate solely political as opposed to domestic topics (such as 'Ought the Man who submits to be governed by his Wife to receive Censure for his Weakness, or Praise for his Love of Peace?'). While this political turn proved highly attractive to artisan audiences during the 1791-92 season, the landlord of the Coachmaker's Hall, alarmed by the government's crackdown, informed Thelwall that he could not renew the society's contract unless they promised to desist from discussing all political subjects. Thelwall and republican debaters more generally lost their premises despite the popular demand for political debates[69]. The same conditions that barred republicans from the space of taverns operated to exclude them from metropolitan debating societies. It was against this background that Thelwall intervened at Chapel Court. He believed that the Chapel Court debating society had only been allowed to continue because its managers had made a compromise with the lord mayor of London. A spy reported, however, that by late October 1793 large numbers of LCS members now were attending this debating society[70]. On the night in question, Thelwall was in the audience which called for him to address what the managers no doubt regarded as a safe topic. Like the ritual toasting and counter-toasting at London taverns, Thelwall's allegory (and his silence on the 'domestic' slant to the original issue), challenged the government's suppression of free debate and the Chapel Court society's political acquiescence in the government's authority. Eaton's text of Thelwall's fable re-encodes not merely the story, but the conditions of power against which Jacobins contended.

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[69] Mrs. THELWALL, *Life of Thelwall* , pp. 93-98; THELWALL, 'Memoir', pp. xix, xxiii-xxv; Charles CESTRE, *John Thelwall: A Pioneer of Democracy and Social Reform in England during the French Revolution*, London, 1906., pp. 73-78; THALE, 'London Debating Societies', pp. 61-67.

[70] Report of the spy Lynam, 26 Oct., 1793, PRO, TS 11/958/3503, reprinted in Mary THALE (ed.), *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 89-90.

Moreover, the historicity of the genre of the fable also comes into play. As Annabel Patterson has brilliantly demonstrated, during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, partly due to fables' traditions of origin, 'the stories of the beasts, the birds, the trees, and insects quickly acquired or recovered their function as a medium of political analysis and communication, especially in the form of a communication from or on behalf of the politically powerless'[71]. The figure of the mutilated slave in Thelwall's story, while obviously drawing on abolitionist narratives, refers more obliquely to the grotesque figure of Aesop, who was a physically deformed Ethiopian who began life as a slave but became free. The fable form, so prominent in Eaton's journal, reaches back to this tradition, deeply political in its origins and implications. Eaton reprinted several late seventeenth-century, political fables[72]. Something quite basic is at stake here. Patterson argues, that Aesop's own gross body is a reminder of the body's connection to the animal world which in turn connects to the fable's metaphorical role as mediating between 'human consciousness and human survival', when 'the mind recognizes rock bottom, the irreducibly material, by rejoining the animals, one of whom is the human body'[73]. Barnyard tales take on fundamental meanings about high and low, life and death, the human condition and its materiality, liberty and slavery, speech and power. The play of words, the challenge of wit and literary ingenuity, were liberating for audiences — hearers and readers; it was also subversive in its turning of the tables on the power to authorize and control modes of public expression.

By putting Thelwall's story into print, Eaton made it available in a more permanent and general way, freeing 'the text' from the moment

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[71] Annabel PATTERSON, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1991, p. 2. This paragraph draws heavily on Patterson's work.

[72] See, for example, 'The Frog's Concern', 'The Man and his Ass' (written in 1698), 'The Disguised Shepherd', 'Logs, Storks, and Asses' (1694), 'The Land of Apes— A Fable', *Politics for the People*, 1, 1794, 25, 37, 47-8, 69, 80-4.

[73] PATTERSON, *Fables of Power*, pp. 11, 15-16 (quotation), and ch. 1 more generally.

of encounter. He may also have deepened its seditious tones[74]. The government by prosecuting Eaton again re-produces the story by means of its own power to indict and to bring publishers to trial. The story, which was never free from conditions of governmental authority, was now brought to the crowded site of Justice Hall in the Old Bailey, a subject of juridical practice. Tables were turning fast. The crown prosecutor, Fielding, standing in for the attorney-general, opened by addressing the issue of the powers of the jury, acknowledging the jury's full jurisdiction over the verdict in libel cases. The crucial question of the jury's jurisdiction over the full cause (that is, not only over the fact of publishing but whether the words written or spoken constitute seditious libel) had only been recently settled by Fox's libel act[75]. Fielding quickly moved to issues of intent and context, drawing particular attention to the journal's price of a mere two pence, its nature and audience. 'Is it not meant', asked Fielding, 'to be circulated among the people? according to the common acceptation of the term People'. Eaton was guilty of submitting politics 'to the consideration of the lowest class of society', of perverting a proper understanding of who constituted the political nation. His intentions were clearly to spread disaffection among the King's subjects — 'among the lowest of the people', 'the rude and vulgar'. The social conditions of publication were crucial to establishing meaning and guilt[76].

But the meaning of the text as text also had to be glossed. This was all the more pressing since as Fielding put it, 'there is a contrivance made use of; it is written in a species of fable; a species of simile or allegory'; 'we are to resort to that which is capable of unravelling the mystery'. And whatever the 'nature of concealment ... if a man makes use of a similitude, if he is charged with meaning the king by the character of a cock', it is for the jury to determine what the intended

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[74] Mrs. Thelwall later claimed that while Thelwall delivered the story in terms and a manner 'which made it mere jest', Eaton 'dress[ed] it up' in much stronger terms. The claim strikes me as somewhat disingenuous. Mrs. THEWALL, *Life of Thelwall*, p. 110.

[75] On Fox's Libel Act (32 Geo. 3, c. 60), see Thomas A. GREEN, *Verdict According to Conscience: Perspectives on the English Criminal Trial Jury*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 349-50.

[76] *State Trials*, 23 (1794), 'Trial of Daniel Isaac Eaton", cols. 1017-23.

meaning is; 'no screen' can protect the author or publisher of the text. As readers, the jury had to know how to read this genre of literary sedition. The problem, as Fielding recognized, was not only that by trying the text the government promulgated the very libel it meant to suppress, but that by producing the key to unraveling the text's meaning, namely 'similitude', the government would fall right into Eaton's trap. The government had to maintain that the cock represented the king without saying that George III in any way resembled the tyrannical bird, leaving the jury without a certain way to establish seditious meaning. Fielding acknowledged that by its capacity to interpret meaning ('by the legal operation of innuendo'), saying that 'the cock means the king', the jury opened itself to the charge that 'you are the libeller yourself', Fielding merely observed this tactic to be 'extremely ingenious'[77]. This reflected, of course, the condition of the fable, allowing the unsayable to be said.

It was this literary ingenuity that the defence successfully exploited, setting the law's demand for literal meaning against the allegorical mode. Thus John Gurney, Eaton's attorney, argued that the purpose of the 'curious art' of drawing up 'innuendos' was to establish 'true meaning', not to give 'unbridled and unbounded license to an imagination the most wanton and the most heated'. Why imagine that this 'haughty and sanguinary tyrant ... must necessarily mean the present mild and merciful king of Great Britain?' Upon the same principle, Gurney argued, Aesop's Fables, a book that afforded 'much pleasure and instruction', 'is the most seditious book ever published ... There is scarcely a fable that will not furnish an indictment'. The crux of the matter, as Gurney clearly stated, was that the 'only ground on which these innuendos' could be supported, 'is the ground the prosecution will not venture to state, a ground which they cannot state': namely, that the resemblance between the game cock and the king is patently obvious[78]. For the government to translate the fable, to make its meaning explicit, meant conceding that which it dare not concede. The text rendered the government silent on this key point. This literary condition also allowed the jury to acquit

[77] *Ibidem*, cols. 1024-30. *Cf.* 'What Makes A Libel? A Fable', *Politics for the People*, 1, 1794, p. 53.

[78] *State Trials*, cols. 1034-40, 1046.

Eaton on the grounds that they themselves did not wish to libel the king.

Eaton and Thelwall's need to encode their republic message as a barnyard fable spoke to unequal relations of power, but it also permitted a temporary reversal of power relations and a means to imagine a differently ordered future. Here elements of disguise and humour intensified subversive meaning. It is only through indirection that king killing could be imagined. As John Barrell comments,

> it was difficult to shift the psychological barrier which stood in the way of imagining the extinction of the quasi-mystical authority of the crown ... It was easier to speak, to go round it, and this is probably why almost all attempts to imagine the king's death or deposition in the early and mid- 1790's are expressed in the form of jokes, squibs, and pasquinades.[79].

The space of the trial was itself transformed into a theatre of ridicule; the crowded court 'was frequently convulsed with laughter'[80]. Moreover, Eaton's acquittal provided a resource for more subversive play. Charles Pigott's *Political Dictionary* gave the joke a further twist, defining 'Cock (game)' as 'a sanguinary, cruel tyrant. *Vide* where the Attorney-General compares a game-cock to our most gracious Sovereign George III'[81]. Eaton installed a new sign at his bookshop: a cock and a swine. A government spy reported that Eaton and the chairman of the jury were present together at a 'select' LCS dinner 'provided for the purpose of turning to Redicule [sic] the fast appointed to be Observed by Order of Government'. But the main subject of conversation was Eaton's acquittal 'in which they greatly exulted and the same Toasts were given and Songs Sung as has been related in former meetings — Thelwall acknowledged himself the Author of the libel of the Bantum Cock'. At another meeting, republicans drank 'a Speedy Guillotine to the King'. More formally, the

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[79] John BARRELL, 'Imagining the King's Death: The Arrest of Richard Brothers', *History Workshop Journal*, 37, 1994, pp. 21-22.

[80] Mrs. THELWALL, *Life of Thelwall*, p. 111; *Morning Chronicle*, 25 Feb. 1794, p. 3; DAVIS, *'Behold the Man'*, pp. 154-57.

[81] Charles PIGOTT, *A Political Dictionary: Explaining the True Meaning of Words*, London, 1795, p. 13.

LCS had fourteen silver medals struck and presented to the jury members and to Eaton's two attorneys[82]. Songs and toasts, fables and ridicule, medals and signs, debating societies and court rooms, dinners and fast days, subversive meaning circulated through dense, reciprocal networks of textual, social and ritual practices. Subversion deepened through the sustained interplay between text and practice.

Despite his celebrated victory, things eventually became too hot even for Eaton. After a successful government prosecution for seditious libel in July 1796, he went into hiding and early in 1797 with a new set of prosecutions hanging over him, he escaped to America[83]. But this was not the end of Eaton's story. Having returned to London in 1801, the government finally caught up with him. Now operating from his more philosophically named bookstore, the "Ratiocinatory, or Magazine for Truth and Good Sense", in 1812 Eaton was convicted of blasphemous libel for having published the so-called third part of Paine's *Age of Reason*[84]. This time Eaton pleaded his own case. In the preface to his published version of his trial, Eaton commented on the perils of self-defence at law, offering a telling reflection on the power of authorized speech. 'Plead your own cause, and you trespass on their [the lawyers'] craft ... you assault the *sanctum sanctorum* of their office — you become a rebel to the common practice, and as such you must be punished'. No doubt Eaton correctly surmised that pleading his own cause, 'gave great offense', adding 'greatly to my supposed crime'. He was sentenced to eighteen months in Newgate prison and

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[82] Reports of the spy Taylor, 28 Feb., 3, 11, 17 Mar. 1794, PRO, TS 11/955/3499, reprinted in THALE (ed.), *Papers of the London Corresponding Society*, pp. 117-23

[83] DAVIS, *'Behold the Man'*, pp. 245-48; Michael DUREY, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1997, pp. 43-44, 212.

[84] *State Trials*, 31 (1809-13), 'Proceedings in the Trial of Daniel Isaac Eaton', cols. 927-58; Michael T. DAVIS, 'Daniel Isaac Eaton's Prosecution for the Third Part of *The Age of Reason*: The Triumph of a Radical Publisher', *Thomas Paine Society Bulletin*, 2, 1994, pp. 3-6. The work's full title is *The Age of Reason. Part the Third. Being an Examination of the Passages of the New Testament, quoted from the Old and Called Prophecies Concerning Jesus Christ*, London, 1811.

to stand in the pillory 'between the hours of twelve and two' within a month of his sentencing[85].

William Cobbett, the most talented radical journalist of his generation, published an account in his *Political Register* of the aged publisher's stint in the pillory:

> in the broad part of the Old Bailey, in the presence of from twelve to twenty thousand people... The Attorney-General and Special Jury and the Judges had pronounced their opinion upon the conduct of the aged man ... and **the people** had now to pronounce **their** opinion on his conduct... The moment he appeared from the prison door, there was a general shout. Upon his being put into the pillory, the exclamation of **"brave old man!"** was followed by universal marks of applause after the manner of the Theatre; that is to say, by **clapping of hands**, and by cries of **bravo, bravo!** ----- The Pillory is erected upon a Scaffold, and is so constructed as to turn round and present the face of the person in different directions. Mr. Eaton frequently turned himself; and, at every turn, he received fresh applause. ---- Some of the people wished to convey him refreshments, which could not, I suppose, be allowed, consistently with the rules; but, one person got to him with a pocket handkerchief, to wipe the sweat from his face, the day being very hot.------ Thus he passed the hour surrounded, I should suppose, by **fifteen thousand people**, at least, from whom he received every possible mark of **compassion** and of **applause**...

At the end of his hour in the pillory, Eaton bowed to the crowd and retired to cheers. But this was not quite the end to the theatre of the pillory, or the cultural text being produced. Cobbett continues, 'To crown the whole, no sooner had he descended from the scaffold, than a GAME COCK was, by some one, put on it, typical, I suppose, of the courage he had displayed, as complimentary of the commencement of his career in politics, when, under the sign of the COCK, he published at the out-set of the Anti-Jacobin war, many things which attracted the attention of Pitt and his Attorney General'. The theatre of authority

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[85] *Trial of Mr. Daniel Isaac Eaton, for Publishing the Third and Last Part of Paine's Age of Reason*, London, 1812, pp. iii-iv, 80.

was undercut by the counter-theatre of the crowd and by the deep interplay between symbol and text[86].

For Cobbett the conclusion to be drawn was that 'the people' had at last learned to discriminate between a political hero and criminals deserving of public scorn — whose features were 'almost instantly rendered indistinguishable', pelted by mud, dead cats and dogs, and jeered mercilessly — including those guilty of 'unnatural offences'. For the governing elite the incident demonstrated the danger of exposing their authority to the uncertainties surrounding practices of ritual shame; they could no longer write the cultural script for the pillory's theatrics[87]. It was no coincidence that Eaton was the last person convicted of blasphemy to stand in the pillory, and his case was prominently discussed in the parliamentary debates that led in 1816 to legislation that restricted the use of the pillory as a means of criminal punishment[88]. For our purposes, ambitious as we are to read between the lines of the cultural text, Eaton's struggles to represent democratic truths may help us to think about how meanings are produced in the dense interchange between the printed word and cultural performance, in the creative play between text and practice, in the unequal negotiations between the weak and the powerful.

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[86] *Cobbett's Political Register*, 13 June 1812, cols. 748-49; *Morning Chronicle*, 5 June 1812, p. 3. Eaton's trial account was sold at the scene as was a handbill entitled '*Behold the Man*', a reference to Pilate's parading of Jesus, which the government seriously considered prosecuting.

[87] British Library, Place Papers, Add. MS., 27,826, fos. 172-84; Clive EMSLEY, *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900*, London and New York, Longman, second ed., 1996, p. 259; Frank MCLYNN, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England*, London and New York, Routledge, 1989, pp. 282-85.

[88] *Parliamentary Debates*, 30, 1815, cols. 354-55 (6 Apr.); 31, 1815, cols. 1122-23 (5 July); J. M. BEATTIE, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 615-16. The pillory was abolished in 1837.