

THE MYTH OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION REVISITED

Alastair MacLachlan

For contemporaries, probably the most striking feature of 1789 was its suddenness and completeness. In a matter of a few months, the most powerful monarchy in the European world, the wealthiest aristocracy, the most complex institutional apparatus, the most sophisticated hierarchy, crumbled, disappeared - and all without significant loss of blood. If it hadn't been 1789, and if they hadn't been brought up to use different linguistic protocols, the writers and talkers of the time might have called it all a miracle, a clear instance of the particular workings of Providence; Mirabeau or Lafayette or even Louis XVI himself might have been dubbed 'the Great Deliverer', the 'man of God's right hand', the instrument of God's benign purpose, as had William of Orange on a similarly bloodless and seemingly miraculous occasion (frequently compared to the events of 1789) a century earlier.¹ But, it was 1789. And the form of explanation was fundamentally different.

Revolutions are, of course, literary events also, and the crumbling of the French state was saturated by words, in print, in conversations and in political meetings. The linguistic explosion was almost as striking as the revolutionary circumstances the writers and speakers grappled with, the new order they tried to explain. Groups hitherto politically inarticulate were suddenly invited to list their grievances so that the good king could put them right. The result was a collection of complaints and aspirations so complicated and voluminous that it still defies the computer. Newspapers and periodicals, few in number, subject to the vagaries of *ancien regime* censorship, devoted in the main (as Mornet² demonstrated) to *belles lettres* and science, made way for a deluge of politics; political clubs proliferated at every level; electoral, communal, sectional assemblies seemed to meet almost continuously; the various National Assemblies - the 'Constituant', the 'Legislative', and the 'Convention' - leant their enormous prestige to the rhetoric of Revolution. Some words quickly became taboo, others sacred: reading simple place names became 'a silent course in ethics'; and uttering terms like '*patrie*', '*nation*', 'regeneration', 'virtue', 'terror', a sort of revolutionary catechism. It is not too much to claim that the most striking and perhaps the most lasting legacy of the Revolution is indeed its new language of politics: 'its linguisticity', writes Lynn Hunt, 'is its most revealing aspect; its linguistic functions, its linguistic structure and its linguistic status are its most disclosive attributes'.³

Until recently, Revolutionary discourse has not received its proper attention: language has usually been treated as a screen rather than a sign. Terms like virtue, for example, have made most historians uncomfortable: 'virtue', they have argued, must stand for something else. The opponents of the Revolution from Burke onwards had always argued that such language was invariably a hypocritical cloak, the tool of scoundrels or less frequently the self-delusion of fools. Marx devoted some of his most celebrated pages to what he called the masquerades or camouflages of Revolutionary language; and writers like Soboul or Poulantzas - more reductionist than their master - have written off the moral idioms or the rhetorical tropes of the Revolutionaries as mere ideology or false consciousness. Albert Soboul, for instance, sees in the 'virtue' invoked by Robespierre and St Just an instance of their pre-bourgeois intellectual limitations: 'incapable of analyzing the economic and social conditions of their time ... they believed in appeals to virtue'. Similarly, for Poulantzas, the terrorist idiom of the '*Pere Duchesne*' was little more than 'a plebian manner to put an end to the enemies of the bourgeoisie'.⁴ For their part, revisionists like Cobban or Cobb, yet more materialist than the materialism they denounce, more caught in the polarization of the illusory and the real, simply don't bother

with what they regard as mere rhetoric, consciously or unconsciously designed to disguise special pleading or personal point-scoring.⁵ Even Francois Furet who takes the language of the Revolution seriously, argues that it was a sort of unstable stopgap tailored to fit the collapse of institutional forms and the consequent struggle for the appropriation of public opinion. Language was a particular instance of what Furet calls 'the illusion of the political': 'the semiotic circuit is the absolute master of politics'.⁶ The veil holds the secret of the revolutionary process, but it is nonetheless, says Furet, a veil. And Lynn Hunt who more than any other writer has rescued the language and symbols of the Revolution from epiphenomenal limbo, would stop short of wishing to establish them as the Revolution's most lasting legacy, as 'an enduring shift in political culture'.⁷

Inevitably, perhaps, the new rhetoric of politics was not entirely new. It was borrowed rather from the literary models of the Enlightenment. Let us take a typical trope - in this case from that old philosophic war horse, the *Encyclopaedia* itself. In the famous preliminary discourse, d'Alembert provides the philosophic movement with a pedigree and a legitimization. We are probably, all of us, familiar with its language and symbols: the darkness of ignorance and superstition, the gradual dawn of a new light, its application, thanks to a few great men, throughout the sciences and the arts and its eventual and inevitable diffusion into every field of political and social behaviour - a stirring story full of violent and heroic metaphors: the breaking of chains, the rending of veils, the clashing of doctrines, the storming of citadels.

Descartes dared to show intelligent minds how to throw off the yoke of scholasticism, of opinion, of authority - in a word of prejudice and barbarism He can be thought of as a leader who, before anyone else, had the courage to rise up against a despotic and arbitrary power and who in preparing a resounding revolution, laid the foundations of a more just and happier government which he himself was not able to see established.⁸

The European Enlightenment had identified traditionality in its various guises - intolerance, absurdity, superstition and ignorance - as the major obstacle, the ubiquitous enemy, in its battle for a more rational and more just social and political order. Under the soubriquet of the '*ancien regime*' were subsumed practices and beliefs which had been unreflectingly accepted for generations, legitimated by nothing more than habit or inertia, and for that reason alone a scandal to those who thought it necessary for every institution to be placed under the scrutiny of reason. But in addition, and inevitably, the 'sleep of reason' brought forth more substantive monsters: powerful and intolerant churches, supposedly sacred and patriarchal rulers, an arrogant wealthy and unproductive nobility, a steep and disjunctive hierarchy of deference, an irrational and unjust legal system, a 'feudal regime' all of which had to be 'abolished for ever'.⁹ But when traditionality yielded to rationality and scientific knowledge, all the vices it sustained would vanish - like, in a favourite metaphor of '*les lumieres*', the mists of night at sunrise. Light would be diffused through the method of rational and critical analysis, through reducing words to things, separating wholes into their constituent parts, through eschewing prejudice and habit, through 'de-mystification', through what J. S. Mill was to call the language and syntax of subversion.¹⁰ Over and again during the late eighteenth century the sign systems of Enlightenment had been borrowed by *parlementaires* in their parochial struggles against 'despotic ministers' or by those same reforming ministers in their efforts to galvanize a society riddled with 'gothic prejudices'. Little cause for wonder then that this should spill over into 1789 and beyond.

But this paper is not just about the language but also about the myth of the Revolution. And perhaps I had better characterize my use of this much used word. Quite simply, like Donald Horne in *"The Public Culture"*, I take 'myth' to refer to 'a belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning'. Myths go to the heart of things, describe things 'as they really are', events 'as they really happened', but in a way which is sharper and more dramatic than a description of the circumference or surface of things and events can ever convey. Myths have a magic or a talismanic ability to heighten and transform the prosaic or the mundane, infusing ordinary existence with dramatic meaning and significance. Myths, as I shall use them in this paper, are particularly effective as explanations and legitimations of political action. More precisely, they provide their users with an accepted 'Charter of Foundation' with which they may align their behaviour or offer them an 'imagined identity' which claims their allegiance and which conveys special collective meaning and purpose for their activities. Myths and their attendant rituals and icons, are complex and high voltage shorthands of political language and behaviour. Their constant and consistent use gains them widespread social acceptance and places them in Eco's category of the 'overcoded': 'given a code assigning meaning to certain minimal expressions, overcoding (assigns) additional meanings to more macroscopic strings of these expressions'.¹¹

The European Enlightenment stands before us decked out in the language of rationality and de-mythologizing. But I would like to suggest - and Foucault has argued the point at length¹² - that it presents a particularly sharp example of myth making. The central myth of the Enlightenment is, of course, to be found in Sarastro's Temple,¹³ in what one might call the solar myth of light triumphing over darkness, reason and wisdom rolling back the clouds of superstition and ignorance, justice overruling arbitrary caprice. Sarastro's Temple simply dramatizes and presents as narrative the metaphors and the rhetoric tropes we have already mentioned:

Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid from sight,
God said let Newton be and all was Light

Science had torn down the veils of ignorance and superstition in one area of human thought, held a mirror to nature and showed things 'as they really were'; scientific politics or economics, moral Newtonism would accomplish it throughout the whole of life.¹⁴

The myth is adopted wholesale in the iconography and rhetoric of the Revolution. Think of all those geometrical mausoleums, the cylinders, cubes, cones and spheres of Boullée and Ledoux, many of them dedicated to the great Newton; think of the accent on clear lines, open space ('Revolutionary intensity', said Ballaud-Varenne, one of the Committee of Public Safety, 'can only be exercised in a free space, which is why the Legislator clears the road of everything that is an obstacle'¹⁵). Or consider the following of Sièyes and Robespierre (and, believe me, they are characteristic):

In the dark ages of barbarism and feudalism it was possible to destroy true relations among men, to sow disorder in every nation, and to corrupt all justice; but now that daylight is rising, all gothic absurdities must flee, all remnants of ancient ferocity must crumble and die. That much is certain.

Everything has changed in the physical order (thanks to the conquests of science); everything must change in the moral and political order.

Half the world's revolution is already complete; the other half must be accomplished.¹⁶

And yet, particularly in Robespierre and the men of the Convention, there is a difference of tone and message. The tone is urgent, imperative. The language and mythology of Enlightenment is both dramatized and qualified. Briefly, (and I have no time to go into this) I would suggest that this is the result of a particular type of self-identification associated, in the first instance, with their penchant for antique and especially Roman models which enabled them to see themselves as actors in pre-existing roles. Their schooling in the rhetorical skills of Cicero and Quintilian was almost too faithfully reflected in their speeches; and their intensive and passionate reading of Cicero, Sallust and Plutarch turned many of them, on their own self-assessment, into ardent Republicans 'without their ever dreaming of becoming one'.¹⁷ The Romanism of the Revolution is usually treated as a rather comic instance of amateur dramatics. But politics is theatre and what matters in theatre - as every student of Stanislavsky knows - is not whether the role is real or unreal, but whether one believes in it, makes it one's own. This is what was different about 1789 and 1848. The men of '48 were play acting; those of '79 and '92 were swallowed up in their roles. Marx (whose famous pages from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* deserve more careful reading than they are usually accorded), is apposite here:

The raising of the dead ... served to glorify new struggles, not to parody the old; it fostered in imagination an aggrandizement of the set task, not flight from its actual solution, a rediscovery of the spirit of revolution rather than a summoning up of its ghost.¹⁸

Enlightenment, moreover, is not a natural and benign process, a radiance which spreads of its own accord; it involves also, an act of will, a struggle increasingly uncertain, increasingly imperilled. Enlightenment, said Kant, was 'daring to know' (*sapere aude*), learning how to grow up, how to escape the leading strings of infancy. Enlightenment traced a human projectory from nonage to maturity. But the will to knowledge came from within. Tamino, you may remember, had to undergo rites of initiation, of purification, had to will his liberation. Here Rousseau is crucial: not his political programme which - if it ever existed - few of the Revolutionaries knew and which never had the qualities or effects attributed to it by writers like Talmon or Crocker,¹⁹ but his concern with the authentic moral persona and its creation - the Rousseau of *The Confessions* and the *Nouvelle Héloïse*". Enlightenment comes from within not without, not from the radiance diffused by scientists and philosophers, but from the inner light, from the simplicity and innocence of the human heart. It is the emanation of one's integral self, the expression of one's total identity, an identity, unconstrained, uncontaminated, and, yes, virtuous.

Living in a society he saw as hopelessly superficial and meaningless, Rousseau was overcome with a sense of loss. All of his writing was in a sense concerned with bridging the gap between the unitary self and his fragmented environment, with the restitution of 'transparency'. Traditional society imposed 'ascribed' conditions on people, refused to recognize them as moral or social agents, treated them as inferiors, children, objects of pity or of patronage. Avant-garde life in great cities offered intellectuals like himself freedom from such social bonds or psychic chains only to enslave them to fashion; allowed them to be themselves, only to dislocate them, force them apart, drive them into insincerity, into assuming the 'masks' of conventional social discourse. A misfit, so he believed, through historical circumstance not through disposition, through distortions imposed on him from outside, not from the virtue and purity which came from within,

Rousseau longed to achieve that ecstasy of 'unmediated, unobstructed communication with others which he achieved in communion with himself and nature', he yearned for the recovery in the moral community of that meaningful order which reposed in natural man.²⁰

The cult of Rousseau dramatized, individualized and democratized the myth of Enlightenment, turned it from an external process into an inner spiritual drama. In this sense - and only in this sense - the Revolution may be termed 'Rousseauist'. The Revolution actualizes the unity/identity which Jean-Jacques craved, transposes Rousseau's purely personal and abstract fabrications into collective and concrete and hence mythic forms: through a series of linguistic devices - the Nation, the *patrie*, citizenship, the will of the people - it creates an 'imagined' moral community. The Terror becomes on a political level homologous with what unfolds on the psychic level in the writings of Rousseau.²¹ To safeguard its virtue, its purity, its innocence it must attribute evil to the plots formed by its enemies.

Rousseau depicted in strokes of flame the charms of virtue ... The purity of his doctrine, imbibed from nature and from a profound hatred of vice as well as his invincible contempt for the scheming intriguers who usurped the name of philosophers called forth the hatred and persecution of his rivals and false friends. Ah! Had he been the witness of this Revolution of which he was the precursor, who can doubt that his generous soul would have embraced the cause of justice and equality with transports of joy. But what did his cowardly adversaries do? They fought against the Revolution.²²

- thus Robespierre in his final appraisal of the work of the *philosophes*, delivered to the Jacobin Club some two months before his death.

The central myths of the Revolution, in other words, combine the instrumentalism of the Enlightenment with the expressivism of Romanticism: the belief in a Temple of Sarastro, in an objective rational order which provides all the answers, with the conviction that it must be built with pure hands and unsullied hearts, formed by an act of will of those who through virtue and innocence, through rites of initiation and purification, will inhabit it. They revolve around the interplay of what I call 'Foundation myths' which have to be re-defined and 'myths of identity' which have to be re-enacted.

To begin with, of course, one had to cast out the old: by 1789, in fact, this was not so difficult. For the past century, France had been beset by what has been referred to in another context as a struggle over the criterion of authority. Crown and noble apologists had battled with each other for decades over the origins of the French race and their consequent over-riding absolutist claims or sacrosanct immemorial privileges. And by a nice irony, not unfamiliar in the history of ideas, the largely discredited scholarship of 'the noble thesis' came to be orthodox political and social rationalization on the eve of the Revolution. Authoritative absolutism had already died. But privilege was vulnerable also. Often, conflict within a ruling class over the differing historical credentials of rival factions can bring to life radical myths hostile to both; for with the fragmentation of a single authoritative past, the radical can appeal to a tradition which is anterior to the tradition of his or her rulers: 'When Adam delv'd and Eve span, who was then the gentleman'; or in the version of 1789:

The Third Estate has nothing to fear from going back to the past. It will refer back to the year preceding the conquest Why should it

not send back to the forests of Franconia, all those families who cling to the mad claim that they are descended from the race of conquerors and have inherited their rights? Thus purified, the nation will easily console itself, I believe for no longer imagining itself composed only of descendants of Gauls and Romans'.²³

'When a people rebels against its divinities, its first act is to break their images'.²⁴ Iconoclasm was central to the rhetoric of the Enlightenment; and no event symbolized the overthrow of 'Gothic' barbarity and royal despotism more completely than the capture of the Bastille. The image of the prison - the tomb of holy liberty, the cage of the intellect, the place of vengeance, of silence, of incarceration - was especially strong in the eighteenth century: think of Piranese, of Beccaria, or the hundreds of works from Linguet's *Mémoires* onwards in the 1780s and '90s devoted to the Bastille, to the man in the iron mask, or to the cages especially designed, it was said, by the Spider King, Louis XI.²⁵ And always the same images: the evil monster, the devouring Minotaur, the uneasy giant, the forgotten prisoner.²⁶

Serene and blessed Liberty for the first time' (wrote the "Revolutions de Paris") has at last been introduced into this abode of horrors, this frightful refuge of monstrous despotism and its crimes.²⁷

Michelet was doing no more than paraphrasing contemporary myth-making when he wrote of the events of July 14th in the language of legend:

Correctly speaking the Bastille was not taken; it surrendered. Troubled by a bad conscience, it went mad and lost all presence of mind.²⁸

And all of this, of course, to describe the tragi-comedy of the crowd searching for arms and gunpowder, alarming and confusing a jumpy and incompetent Governor and his semi-retired guard, storming the citadel and freeing its 7 prisoners (4 counterfeiters, 2 madmen and 1 sadist)! Yet, of course, Michelet was right: the Bastille was a symbol of despotism and its destruction an event acclaimed throughout the civilized world. The storming of the Bastille was the key Foundation myth of the Revolution, the crucial source of its legitimacy, the first of its popular rituals of insurrection. Revolutions, one does not have to be reminded, are 'the carnival of the oppressed'. And one can't have a carnival without fireworks.²⁹

The destruction of 'the feudal regime' had much of the same quality of contemporary fabrication. Feudalism, a term coined by the *philosophes* to describe a confused welter of residues: a bewildering and bastardized social reality focussing around seigneurial dues, subsistence peasant farming characterized by a form of sharecropping known as '*metayage*', a form of government otherwise called 'Gothic', featuring the breakdown of central authority and its replacement by countless local jurisdictions, a racial theory of nobility formulated by Boulainvilliers, reformulated by Montesquieu in the language of political sociology as the cornerstone of anti-despotism, and despite its rickety history, well established in the repertoire of 'parlementary' rhetoric by 1789, and a more generalized regime of privilege standing for the system of estates, compartments, grades, distinctions: some or all of this was 'for ever abolished' in the famous aristocratic *auto da fé* of August 4th. However, the very uncertainty about what 'it' was; the fine print which restored much of the fiscal substance without the ideological impedimenta; the readiness of some to renounce the privileges of others; the fact that it was a tactical manoeuvre which got out of control, a belated response to widespread peasant revolts, has led

modern historians to question its importance and pour scorn on the heroic descriptions of contemporaries. But once again, contemporary myth had its reasons: it did seem like a bonfire of vanities, an electric whirlwind, 'an immortal night in which justice cast out of the Temple all the sellers in order to listen freely to the poor, the innocent and the oppressed', an anvil on which fraternity had forged a new order which would transform social relationships and begin the world anew. It, too, was the first of many ritual surrenders: the trunkloads of coin, the religious objects, crosses, statues, sacred ampules heaped onto the floor of the Convention in 1793 and 1794.³⁰

Foundation myths require symbolic rituals, initiation rites, and in the case of the French Revolution, the Tennis Court Oath and its subsequent re-enactments in Feasts of Federation (which became a sort of mass exercise in oath taking), became an inaugurating communion of the new nation, which was at the same time an act of mutual self-identification. 'We live in a (political) world we ourselves create'.³¹ Political identity thus created cannot be delegated, cannot be exercised by another. As Rousseau always insisted, representation is corruption. Putting it for a moment in the terminology used by Derrida in his analysis of the metaphysics of presence: 'the legitimizing instance is the representer present in person, sovereignty is presence and the delight in presence'; corruption the alienation of presence, the general will changed into the transmitted power, 'the catastrophe of the signifier-representer'.³² Here, it is almost as important to notice what the oath was not: it was not, of course, a contract made with a pre-existing government; it was not a renewal of a mythic pre-Capetian community, of ancient liberties or 'birthrights'; it was not a Covenant made with God, the fulfilment of a destiny or the culmination of process of nation-building.³³ It was central to the 'new order' ushered in by the Revolution. The mythology of the Revolution was unremittingly secular and - if one may use the expression - presentist. It inhabited what Lynn Hunt has aptly called 'the mythic present', the instant of creation of the new community, the sacred moment of consensus. 'We have reached', said one ardent spirit in 1789, 'the heart of time'. 'The mythic present was inherently undatable' (and hence was always changing: Bastille Day, the Immortal Night, the overthrow of the monarchy, the execution of the king - all of them requiring new festivals, new rituals, new linguistic codes), 'and as a consequence the revolution's own history was always in flux', was also inherently revolutionary.³⁴

The Foundation myths and myths of identity, institutionalized in the festivals and popular displays directed by David and Gregoire between 1790 and 1794, became something of an ideological refuge in which conflicts between the Revolutionaries could be sublimated, where the divisions besetting bourgeois and *sans culotte*, Parisian and provincial, could be dissolved in the new moral community, forged by the new language of politics.³⁵ They became a means of distinguishing the Revolution from what was now dubbed an '*ancien regime*', an old order that preceded the Revolution and which environed it still. The 'mythic present' was always engaged in struggle against the past:

How glorious', declared Joseph Priestley, 'is the prospect, the reverse of all that is past which is now opening upon us and upon the world.'³⁶

But the demarcation required constant vigilance. For the Revolution lived in a world where the relics of the past abounded, as the unreformed members of French society, its external enemies, its internal traitors; where the new beginning was constantly threatened by the never-ending: hence the coupling of regeneration and conspiracy in the rhetoric and iconography of the Revolution. Sarastro's Temple, you may remember, harboured

Monastatos: light was always threatened by the shadow, transparency by the veil, free space by obstacles, virtue by corruption.

Let us focus this distaff side of the mythology of the Revolution, for a moment, on the unlikely head of Louis XVI. The Revolutionary oath was, of course, a symbolic contrast to the anointing of a king: kings traditionally received the 'supernatural insignia of power from a transcendent God during the ceremony of consecration'.³⁷ Kings were made to shine; they became the vehicles through which the light and virtue which came from God and which they enjoyed through their elevated blood and status were diffused to their subjects. Listen to Louis XIV ('the sun king') for a moment

The great interval which virtue puts between other men and the king exposes him in the most beautiful light and with utmost glitter in the eyes of the whole world. All eyes are attached to him alone ... everything else crawls, everything else is impotent and sterile.³⁸

It is as if until the Revolution, every King preened himself before the same magic mirror and saw the same gratifying images: himself as God's deputy, head and soul of the body politic, sole knower of the mysteries of state, father of his subjects, husband of the realm, healer, peacemaker, sovereign lord.³⁹ The version of Enlightenment mythology which equates light with the nation and which locates it in the heart of the citizen cannot of course for a moment tolerate any of this:⁴⁰ 'the consecrated despotism of hereditary monarchy', the invisible 'unseen thunderbolt' of royal power as one speaker called it at Louis' trial, what Burke praised as natural radiance and Paine denigrated as borrowed plumage.⁴¹ 'The Revolution begins', said St Just, 'where the tyrant ends'. And adapting the Enlightenment's favourite metaphor to the spectre of conspiracy and backsliding, he asked:

What do you call a Revolution? The fall of a throne, a few blows levelled at a few abuses? The moral order is like the physical; abuses disappear for an instant as the dew dries in the morning, and as it falls again with the night, so the abuses will reappear.⁴²

The Revolution had always leant heavily on the Manichean element of Enlightenment mythology⁴³ and I hope I don't need to labour the polarities: without the Queen of the Night there could be no Sarastro. What it does is to couple this with the principle of exclusion: the aristocrat is the outsider, the alien, the person who can never identify with or create within himself the new moral and political order. This is already the theme of Sièyes' "*What is the Third Estate*". Now, in the hands of St Just and Robespierre, it is given fresh impetus by the infusion of Rousseauist pathos and its moral categories. Whereas Charles Stuart was called to account for his actions against 'the ancient and fundamental laws and liberties' of his kingdom, was the victim of antiquarian fundamentalism, Louis was the emblem of the past at war with the present, someone outside 'the sacred moment of consensus', 'the stranger', said St Just, 'in our midst'. He was not a citizen, not part of the general will, but rather Monsieur Veto, a rebel against the absolute sovereignty of the people. 'Kingship itself is crime', a blasphemy against the new philosophy; 'no one can reign innocently', and 'to avenge the murder of the people', to atone for a thousand years of tyranny the king must die.⁴⁴ As with Louis, so too with other aliens, strangers, aristocrats, *Feuillants*, *Fédérés* - the list was endless.

'Words', the Chinese philosophers used to point out, 'are rigid in their form and yet endlessly debatable in their meaning'.⁴⁵ The language of the Revolution - and the mythical constructions formed by that language - could never be given objective or even

widely accepted social content, and could never, for that reason, be successfully appropriated by the revolutionary leadership. The course of the Revolution, and particularly the Terror, can indeed be seen as an attempt to overcome these ambiguities and anomalies, by regulating what could and could not be said, worn, written, thought by every citizen. By this stage, myth had dwindled into ideology in the sense that Marx gave to the term: a set of ideas that related to reality, not in order to shed light on it or to change it, but in order to veil it or to permit its manipulators to say one thing and do another. And this was all the more certain since the mythology in question was an unstable compound of Enlightenment and expressivist ideas: ideas which in other hands could be harnessed to very different purposes. Sarastro's Temple was never meant for the *sans culotte*, and simple hearts were not the malleable complement of philosopher-revolutionaries.

For all that, and for all the consequent inadequacy of an account of the Revolution which focusses exclusively on its language, symbols and myths, they came to be central to the historiography of the Revolution also. The struggle between grace and justice, as Michelet called it, between the traditional mandate to rule and the novel categorical imperatives of reason and identity, which found their most provocative illustration in the episodes I have mentioned and which marked such a decisive severing from the myths of the *ancien régime*, came to constitute its meaning for contemporary observers and for subsequent historians.

The rhetoric of the revolutionaries duly found its response in the most explicit and eloquent defence of those myths in the work of Edmund Burke.. Take the following:

All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd and antiquated fashion.⁴⁶

One could not hope to find a more complete answer to Sarastro's Temple and Rousseau's transparence. In many respects, indeed, and not just because of its polemic, his work is rather the swansong of traditionalism than the fountainhead of modern right-wing ideology. Burke always claimed that his work was descriptive not just prescriptive, was an account of the ways in which social thought and practice actually operated, rather than an ideological reaction to French principles, that his traditionalism was itself traditional.⁴⁷

English history, he maintained, constituted a tradition of behaviour encapsulated in the accumulated precedent of English law and the transmission of English landed property - in an elaborate body of myths, which taken together formed the cult of the 'ancient constitution', and in a set of historic arrangements based on inheritance. Government, he argued, was transmitted 'in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property', 'locked fast as in a sort of family settlement; grasped as in a type of mortmain for ever'. State and society are not so much a biological unity as 'an undying *persona ficta* which secures our liberties by vesting the possession of them in an immortal continuity'. Society was a contract but a contract of a peculiar kind, 'a contract in the

great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact which holds all physical and moral natures, each in their appointed place'. It was an earthly expression of transcendent values. It was 'a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born'.⁴⁸

Burke's *Weltanschauung* has no place for the discontinuities of the Revolution. Modern France, according to its own cultural representations, was born in 1789. The Revolution, in other words, was a myth of origin. But it was an identity myth also. 'Any account of the Revolution was a discourse on civic identity, any political action an elaboration of a history that began in 1789'.⁴⁹ And at the level of historical discourse, also, the myth of the Revolution preceded and figured its historical placement or depiction, first in the linguistic protocols of the Revolutionaries themselves or in the distaff form enshrined in Burke's analogical rhetoric. In a way, the analysis of Burke and his contemporary, Paine was pivotal: as outsiders who were also insiders, polemicists who claimed also to be historians, they set much of the subsequent historical agenda. For Burke, the Revolution stood for the destruction of a finely structured polity, the pulverization of a complex corporate society, a conspiracy of impious intellectuals and envious petty bourgeois; for Tom Paine, it saw the substitution of the Rights of the Citizen for the wrongs of the subject. Michelet simply presented Paine's version more definitively and dramatically in the famous symbolic substitution of Justice for Grace, the yielding up of 'Doubting Castle' Bastille and Giant Privilege. Alternatively, in the complex version manufactured for 19th century Liberals for whom 1789 was splendid, 1792 a pity and 1794 anathema, the Revolution was yet another skirmish in an age-old struggle between the aristocracy and the middle class, a blow for liberty which turned to revenge against the oppressor, or as a bright day dawning, which was perverted by the monstrous inheritance of class hatred, centralization and moral inertia.⁵⁰

Over and again during the nineteenth century, the Revolution was tailored to suit the needs of a notoriously capricious political climate. Even after 1871 with the gradual stabilization of politics, when the Revolution was institutionalized⁵¹ (and given a special Professorship in the Sorbonne), it appeared first in a Republican frockcoat (a polite constitutional descent conducted at the level of parliamentary debates - which, 'under force of circumstances', went a bit off the rails), but sporting also a populist patriotism crystallized around the cult figure of Danton, disculpated from the September massacres and cleared of corruption: a Clemenceau before his time.⁵² Thence, it progressed through a more and more radical laying on of hands, (via a Jacobin-Leninist stage in which a political discourse on the Russian Revolution was superimposed upon the events of 1789 and 1792) with the 'Incorruptible' but also dandified and verbally inscrutable figure of Robespierre as an uncomfortable Socialist saint.⁵³ And finally it achieved its '*Sorbonniste*' apogee in a more and more anonymously delineated *sans-culotte* or *bras-nus* movement⁵⁴ (collectivities which sometimes seem to have strayed out of a Museum of Communist Realist Art or a rigidly choreographed party ballet for the chosen instruments of historical change), their intervention charted in a number of 'Great Leaps Forward' known as '*Journées*'.⁵⁵ And so to the present day: even so famous, highly regarded and still widely used a work as Lefebvre's '*Quatre-Vingt-Neuf*', written for the 150th anniversary and celebrating the first year of the Revolution as a co-operative labour of every section of French society and especially of the alliance between middle class and artisan, a sort of 1939 Popular Front before its time, demonstrably belongs to the tradition of Republican mythology and Professorial apostolic succession that started with Aulard and ended only with the death of Albert Soboul in 1983.⁵⁶ The view from the Right, topographically speaking, further up the Left Bank, from the Faubourg St Germain and the Académie rather than the Quartier Latin, is even more clearly mythical

and far more insubstantial: a rudely interrupted eighteenth century *Fête Champêtre* and a gallery of beautiful Queens, long suffering Kings and martyred aristocrats, differing only from Burke's rodomontade in its rhetorical hollowness and slick but seedy aroma of proto-Fascism and *Action Française*.

All these myths are discredited according to the 'revisions' of the last twenty or thirty years. We can dispense with the idea that there was a Revolution at all, says Alfred Cobban; rather there were many Revolutions, few of them progressive, many abortive: a revolt of office holders against the administrative structure of the Ancien Régime, of peasant proprietors and urban consumers against agrarian reform, of town against country and country against town. These contradictory and often overlapping movements produced no significant social transformation, no discernible 'modernization', not even lasting political change: after all the huffing and puffing, the landscape of French politics and society was much the same in 1815 as it had been in 1789.⁵⁷ Or, according to the few *Annaliens* who have set their plough to so alien a furrow, it is yet another '*crise éco-demographique*', a dramatic episode in the Early Modern interplay of consumption and resources, a sharper than normal pair of Malthusian 'scissors'. Or, in Richard Cobb's evocative entertainments, it is the backcloth to an endless variety of droll tales, '*contes immoraux*', fascinating tit-bits of literary or human value.⁵⁸

Much of the smashing of historical idols - of the great Bourgeois Revolution or the Foundation of the French State - has been exhilarating; some of it has been long overdue. It is repeating a pattern which has occurred in many less traditional historical bastions thirty, forty, fifty years ago: 'the English Revolution',⁵⁹ 'Feudalism', 'the Renaissance', 'the Industrial Revolution'. Like most iconoclasm it has been characterized by some tilting at windmills, some knocking down of straw men - myths have been crudified, invented even, the better to be laughed out of academe. And of course, the destruction has invariably been advertised as the preliminary to the new work of synthesis: once all the regional studies have been completed, another 500 or 5000 theses written, we shall be able to put Humpty together again. After all, the worst polemical disagreements are a thing of the past: we have moved beyond Michelet and Taine, Mathiez and Gaxotte, and 'there is good reason to suggest that historical truths eventually will gain general acceptance and that judgements about the Revolution will in the long run approach agreement'.⁶⁰

It may be so, but I must confess to an unease, to a considerable scepticism. In the late 50s and early 60s, Cobban's debunking of naive class analysis, of reductionist Marxism and homogenized 'modernization' theory, seemed so right; in the early 70s, Richard Cobb's burlesques of departed orthodoxies, his sharpness of perception and total absence of cant, his effervescent wit and a-politicism, seemed wonderfully exhilarating. But, as the years went by and the volumes poured out, I gradually lost my enthusiasm. What did it add up to, this '*officier's coup*', this pre-emptive '*Poujadiste*' strike by the peasantry and lumpen-bourgeoisie, this nostalgic tourism, this 'Promenade', this 'laboratory for purely existential preference'?⁶¹ The critical history of the last twenty years may well have substituted for a process that was intelligible and open to criticism, no process at all or one that is a mystery, a pursuit of intimations which others cannot follow, a personal dialogue between the researcher and the archive.

When all is said and done, the myth of origin and identity has a place in our understanding of the Revolution. To begin with it still retains its position as a semantic marker in modern historiography, as a signpost in any large scale narrative of the modern world or any comparative analysis of modern thought: as the imagined 'foundation stone' of the Modern France, or of bourgeois society. But beyond that, beyond the resonances

of the Revolution in nineteenth century Liberalism or Conservatism, beyond even its pivotal role in the formation of Marxist ideology, 'myth' has another, perhaps a more conventionally historical role. In many ways it remains vital to any attempt to restore the contingency of the Revolution, and to rescue its participants not just from theoretical models of class or from subservience to the imperatives of the state - from the roles assigned them in the traditional historiography of the Revolution - but from something which may be worse: from the redundancy and the trivialization imposed on their language, their emotions, their experiences, their politics, by a modern critical history which operates solely under the rubric of de-mystification.⁶² Perhaps Hegel had a point: 'behind the curtain of appearances there is nothing to be seen, unless we ourselves go there, as much in order that we may thereby see as that there may be something there that can be seen'.⁶³ We need the myth of the Revolution in order to see.

¹ See Richard Price's sermon 'On the love of our country', 1789, pp 6-7-; William Coxe, 'A letter to the Rev Richard Price', 1790 pp. 19-21.

² D. Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française, 1715-1787* (5th ed. Paris, 1954).

³ Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984) p. 22.

⁴ A.Soboul, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la Jacobinisme' quoted in C. Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca, 1986) p 15; A.Soboul, *The Parisian sans-culottes and the French Revolution*, trans. G. Lewis (Oxford, 1964), pp. 227-30, Chaps 3 & 4, passim; N.Poulantzas, *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales* (Paris,1971) quoted in L.Hunt, op. cit. p. 20.

⁵ One of the reasons, I would suggest, why Cobban's revisionism provoked so many Marxist or 'Marxisant' historians, was that he drew quite different conclusions from a shared body of assumptions. Cobb, of course, was - and is - less easily stereotyped (it is notable, for example, that the most recent work, George C.Conmel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* [London, 1987] fails to even index this the most prolific and disturbing revisionist of them all). Nevertheless, it might be argued that Cobb's overwhelming interest in individual motivation often lapses into sceptical, schematic and reductionist formulae. At all events, he isn't very impressed by what people say.

⁶ F.Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1985) pp. 50-61, 164-204.

⁷ L.Hunt, op. cit. pp. 48-51.

⁸ Diderot & d'Alembert, 'Discourse préliminaire', quoted in C.Frankel, *The Faith of Reason* (New York, 1969) pp. 15-16; R. Darnon, *The Great Cat Massacre and other episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 1985) p. 201.

⁹ E.Shils, *Tradition* (London, 1981) p.6.

¹⁰ *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge* ed. F.R.Leavis (London, 1967) pp. 44-45.

¹¹ D.Horne, *The Public Culture* (London, 1986) pp. 57-58; U.Eco, *Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1979) Ch.2, Section 14.3.

¹² See especially, *The Order of Things* (London, 1970), Chaps. 5 - 9.

¹³ 'The Magic Flute' ("Die Zauberflöte") (Vienna, 1791).

¹⁴ Still the most illuminating (no pun intended!) treatment of solar imagery is K. Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl* (London, 1958) pp. 11-57; also J. Starobinski, *The invention of Liberty* (Geneva, 1964).

¹⁵ Quoted in J. Starobinski op cit. p. 101. See also, N. Hampson, *The First European Revolution* (London, 1969); J. Starobinski '1789: les emblèmes de la Raison' (Paris, 1979) pp. 49-61.

¹⁶ Quoted in F.Furet op. cit. p. 44; L.Hunt op. cit. pp. 37-38.

¹⁷ M de Roland, 'Mémoires' ii p.22, quoted in H.T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries* (Chicago, 1937) p. 39.

¹⁸ K.Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon' in *Surveys from exile* ed. D. Fernbach (London, 1973) p. 148.

¹⁹ J.R. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1952); L.G.Crocker, *An Age of Crisis: Man and World in eighteenth century thought* (Baltimore, 1959).

- 20 K. Weintrub, *The Value of the Individual* (Chicago, 1979) p. 320. For this reading of Rousseau, v. M. Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity* (New York, 1980) pp. 89-144; J. Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: la transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris, 1958) pp. 118 ff.
- 21 C. Blum, op.cit. pp.153-168; L. Hunt, Review Essay on F. Furet, 'Penser la Révolution Française': *History and Theory*, 20, 1981. pp. 318-9.
- 22 C. Blum, op. cit. p. 236; R. Bienvenu, *The Ninth of Thermidor: The Fall of Robespierre* (New York, 1968) pp. 170-1; see also N. Hampson, *Will and Circumstance: Montesquieu, Rousseau and the French Revolution* (London, 1983) p. 240, 242; C. Blum, op. cit. pp. 260-81: 'The Death of the Republic of Virtue'.
- 23 E. Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate* ed. S.E. Finer (London, 1963) pp. 59-60.
- 24 Petrus Borel, quoted in V. Bromberg, *The Romantic Prison* (Princeton, 1978) p. 30.
- 25 *Ibid.* pp. 30-39: 'The image of the Bastille'.
- 26 The prisoner, henceforth, would not be forgotten. Think of Bentham's *Panopticon*; or think of the all-seeing 'eye' of Revolutionary iconography. Foucault's 'speculative' trajectory from ritual punishment to social discipline and control could well be paralleled in the emblems of the Revolution also. v. M. Foucault *'Discipline and Punish'* (London, 1977).
- 27 'Les Révolutions de Paris' No 1, July 12-18, 1789, extract in J. Gilchrist & W.J. Murray, *The Press in the French Revolution* (London, 1971) p. 55.
- 28 J. Michelet, *The History of the French Revolution*, ed. G. Wright (Chicago, 1967) pp. 164-5; R. Barthes, *'Michelet'*, trans. R. Howard (New York, 1987) p. 80 ff.
- 29 E. Gellner, 'From the Revolution to Liberalization' in *'Government and Opposition'* 11 (3), 1976. p. 258. c.f. Lenin: "Revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. At no other time are the mass of the people in a position to come forward so actively as the creators of a new social order, as at the time of revolution".
- 30 J.Q.C. Mackrell, *The attack on Feudalism in 18th century France* (London, 1973) p. 163 ff; A. Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1965) pp. 36-53.
- 31 J.G. Herder, *'Sämmtliche Werke'* viii p. 252, quoted by I. Berlin, *'Vico and Herder'* (London, 1976) p. 143.
- 32 J. Derrida, *'Of Grammatology'* trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore, 1976) pp 296-7, 302. L. Hunt, *History and Theory*, 20, 1981 pp. 318-9.
- 33 For the absence of Covenant or Exodus 'mythic infiguration', which was so much a feature of 'The English Revolution/Great Rebellion' and of the 'American Revolution/War of Independence', v. M. Walzer, *'Exodus and Revolution'* (New York, 1985). Equally there is little to parallel the theory of 'the Norman Yoke' or the 'Freeborn Englishman'.
- 34 L. Hunt, *'Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution'*, pp. 27-28; J. Starobinski, '1789' pp. 62, 66-7; M. Ozouf, *'La Fête révolutionnaire'*, 1789-99 (Paris, 1976) pp. 203-7.
- 35 M. Ozouf, op. cit. p. 201.
- 36 J. Priestley, 'An Essay on the First Principles of Government' (London, 1771) p. 4-5, quoted in J. Passmore, *The Perfectability of Man* (London, 1970) pp. 190-1. See also C. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the 18th Century Philosophers* (33rd ed., Yale, 1969) p. 151 ff: 'The uses of posterity'.
- 37 Hunt op. cit. p. 21. c.f. *ibid.* pp. 52 ff.
- 38 Quoted in C. Blum, op. cit. p. 23. c.f. Louis XIV, *'Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin'* trans. & ed. P. Sonnino (London, 1970) pp. 102-3, a passage in which Louis explains his use of solar imagery in court masques: 'chosen as the symbol was the sun, which, according to the rules of this art, is the noblest of all, and which, by virtue of its uniqueness, by the brilliance that surrounds it, by the light that it imparts to the other heavenly bodies that seem to pay it court, by its equal and just distribution of this same light to all the various parts of the world, by the good that it does everywhere, constantly producing life, joy and activity everywhere, by its perpetual yet always imperceptible movement, by

never departing or deviating from its steady and invariable course, assuredly makes a most vivid and a most beautiful image for a great monarch'. For sun iconography at Versailles, v. J.-M. Apostolidès, *'Le roi-machine: spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV'* (Paris, 1981) pp. 86-7, 137-40; E. Guillou, *'Le palais du soleil'* (Paris, 1963) p. 56 ff; N. Elias *'The Court Society'*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford, 1983) p. 117 ff.

³⁹ M. Walzer, *'Revolution and Regicide: Speeches at the trial of Louis XVI'* (Cambridge, 1974) p. 9.

⁴⁰ For a curious attempt to combine 'roi-soleil' and 'nation-soleil', see 'The astronomical system of the French Revolution' attributed to one "Moullin, Engineer, Geographer", printed in J. Bernard Cohen, *'Revolution in Science'* (Harvard, 1985) frontispiece.

⁴¹ Maihle, 7 November 1792, as quoted in M. Walzer, *'Revolution and Regicide'* p. 96; E. Burke, *'Reflections on the Revolution in France'*, ed. C.C. O'Brien (London, 1968) pp. 164-70 (see, for example, his description of Marie Antoinette: 'surely lighted on this orb... a more delightful vision... decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in - glittering like the morning star, full of life and splendour and joy'); T. Paine, *'Rights of Man'* ed. H. Collins (London, 1969) pp. 69-73 ('he pities the plumage but forgets the dying bird').

⁴² Quoted in M. Walzer, *'Revolution and Regicide'* p. 176; see also C. Blum, op cit. pp. 169-81.

⁴³ For the 'dualism' of the Enlightenment, or, as he puts it, the struggle of Hebrew and Hellene, see above all, P. Gay, *'The Enlightenment: an interpretation'*, vol 1: *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (London, 1966).

⁴⁴ For the 'dualism' of the Enlightenment, or, as he puts it, the struggle of Hebrew and Hellene, see above all, P. Gay, *'The Enlightenment: an interpretation'*, vol 1: *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (London, 1966).

⁴⁵ Quoted in J.G.A. Pocock, *'Politics, Language and Time'* (New York, 1971) p. 58.

⁴⁶ Burke, *'Reflections'* p. 171.

⁴⁷ For this reading of Burke, see especially J.G.A. Pocock, 'Burke and the Ancient Constitution' in *Politics, Language and Time* (New York, 1971) pp 203 - 221.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 212-13; Burke, *'Reflections'* pp. 194-5; C.B. MacPherson, *'Burke'* (Oxford, 1980) pp. 45-6.

⁴⁹ K. Baker, 'Enlightenment and Revolution in France: old problems, renewed approaches', *Journal of Modern History* 53, June 1981 p. 282.

⁵⁰ For 19th century readings of the Revolution v. S. Mellon, *'The Political Uses of History'* (Stanford, 1958); G. Farmer, *'France reviews its revolutionary past'* (New York, 1948); A. Gérard, *'La Révolution Française: Mythes et Interprétations 1789-1970'* (Paris, 1971) p. 61 ff; P. Geyl, *'Encounters in History'* (London, 1958).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; M. Agulhon, *'Marianne into Battle: Republican imagery and symbolism in France, 1789-1880'* trans J.Lloyd (Cambridge, 1981) passim; E. Hobsbawm, *'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914'*, in E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger eds., *'The Invention of Tradition'* (London, 1983) pp. 270-3.

⁵² Particularly in the works of A. Aulard.

⁵³ See especially the writings of A. Mathiez.

⁵⁴ See especially A. Soboul, op.cit; D. Guerin, *'Class struggle in the First French Republic: bourgeois and bras-nus, 1793-95'*, trans. I. Patterson (London, 1973);

C. Mazauric, *'Sur la Révolution française. Contributions à l'histoire de la révolution bourgeoise'* (Paris, 1970).

⁵⁵ R. Cobb, *'The Police and the People: French Popular Protest 1789-1820'* (Oxford, 1970) pp. 120-1; R. Darnton *New York Review of Books*, 5th April 1973.

⁵⁶ R. Cobb, 'A second identity: Essays on France and French History' (Oxford, 1969) pp. 84-100.

⁵⁷ A. Cobban, op.cit; also, 'The myth of the French Revolution' in *'Aspects of French History'* (London, 1968).

⁵⁸ R. Cobb, *'Reactions to the French Revolution'* (Oxford, 1972); *'Paris and its provinces'* (Oxford, 1975); *'Tour de France'* (London, 1976); *'Beyond the Terror: Essays in French regional and social history'* (Cambridge, 1980).

⁵⁹ The parallel with the doctrinal clash of Tawney, Stone, Hill, Trevor-Roper, Hexter *et al.* over the social origins of the English Revolution in the 1940s and 50s, is, of course, particularly obvious.

Cobban's debt to Trevor-Roper, though unacknowledged, is especially striking.

⁶⁰ Farmer, *op. cit.* pp. 7-8.

⁶¹ R. Darnton, *New York Review of Books*, 5th April 1973.

⁶² The importance of 'contingency' and 'agency' in the reading of the Revolution was forcefully put during discussion of the paper by R. Guha. I have sharpened the conclusion of my paper accordingly.

⁶³ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* trans. J.B. Bailly (London, 1967)

p. 118; P. Singer, *Hegel* (Oxford, 1983) pp. 48-50.