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A National Response: Widening Conceptions of Conservatism in Great Britain during the 1790s

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### I. A History of Reaction

When a revolution, recognized by contemporaries as a seminal event in world history, is already three months underway, a sense of urgency in the documents from the period is unsurprising. By October 1789, the absolute monarchy of yesterday's France was a vestige of the past. The National Assembly had been formed, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* declared, the Ancien Régime dismantled, and Louis XVI forcibly moved from the Sun King's palace at Versailles to the Tuileries Palace in Paris. For Europeans inside and outside "la grande nation," the series of sudden, radical changes was the only thing worth discussing. Nowhere was this more true outside of France than in its historic rival and neighbor, Great Britain. By the end of the 1790s, the British had defined themselves against the radicalism exhibited by their neighbor despite a flurry of initial support for French reforms. The story of

Britain's pivot towards a national conservative culture was not merely the latest iteration Anglo-French antipathies; it played a central role in the beginnings of a nationalistic view of the Britons.

The period will be approached chronologically, in two parts. For each part, "types" of sources will be analyzed by category with reference to other types whenever possible. First, British responses to early 1793, responses from the Terror to the ascent of Napoleon being addressed thereafter. The "types" are diplomatic messages and memoranda to and from the Foreign Office, parliamentary speeches and the political and philosophical pamphlets proceeding therefrom, literary responses, press coverage, and records of the responses of "ordinary" citizens, mostly gathered from diaries and letters. In each category, any figure who has conventionally been treated as a benchmark will be a reference point rather than a focus. For the period lasting from 1789 to 1793, the categories will broadly be treated in the order given above, whereas in the subsequent period they will broadly be treated in the reverse. The pigeonholing of sources into categories, not to mention the implied hierarchy of the order they will be presented in, is a major challenge. By not enforcing a top-down approach for the entire extent of the study, and by deviating from the category-structure to make connections where appropriate, it is hoped that such a reading will be discouraged. One should not approach the subject of how public opinion is formed with an opinion already in mind. On the other hand, no regard for source type would distort the very real distinctions in class and profession that existed at the time and which would have qualified how an opinion was heard. Handled with the proper regard for social distinction, the sources reveal that the major events of the 1790s—the Terror, the Revolutionary Wars, censorship laws—did have the greatest influence on how British minds changed. If Britain was in a total war with France, it made sense to identify itself as the anti-France. While a connection

is not proven, it should be observed that by the end of the decade, even writing unconnected to the Revolution, such as Robert Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, had renounced confidence in humanity's ability to overcome obstacles through its intellect, an idea upon which revolution was based.<sup>1</sup> The network through which such systemic change took effect, however, was not simply a machine of the government's to turn on and off. In a society that in the early 1790s was populated with anarchists and millenarian Dissenters, politics, literature, and pamphlets, as well as Burke's quill, played a role in quelling a revolution at home.

## II. Romantic Case Studies

The speed with which the Revolution had torn down the aristocratic system disconcerted more than a few Britons, but in 1789, this response was by no means representative of the consensus. In Parliament, the Revolution was received as good news on balance. With a solid Tory majority led by William Pitt the Younger, many MPs were delighted to learn the most powerful nation on continental Europe was seemingly in free fall.<sup>2</sup> An absolute monarchy which had weathered military defeat and mounting domestic criticism had been undone within a few short weeks. Even for some members of the Whig opposition, France's move from absolute to constitutional monarchy was taken as a sign that Britain's system of government, assumed to be the best in the world, was being recognized as such by the West. Sections of the recently ratified American constitution emulated the British system, and now France was becoming more like it

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* [From Chapter 1], in *European Romanticism: A Reader*, edited by Simon Haines, Stephen Prickett (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2010, 2014), 972.

<sup>2</sup> William Pitt served as Prime Minister throughout much of the Revolutionary Period, from 1783 to 1801 and again from 1804 to his death in 1806.

as well.<sup>3</sup> A tepid enthusiasm, characteristic of reigning political goals and opinions, was the initial response of Parliament's center.

For the more radically inclined, the cause for celebration was different. The Revolution did not represent the collapse of a rival power, nor did it signify the inherent strength of constitutional monarchy. Rather, it was the beginning of a new era of liberty and should be emulated through radical reforms in Britain. Whether or not this opinion captured the true sentiments of the general populace, thanks to the support of intellectual and artistic elites, the radical cause was a highly vocal position, especially in the early years of the Revolution.

Despite the prominent place it assumed in public discourse, "radicalism" in the 1790s had no single definition. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791) called for a republican system of governance, whereas William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) was more concerned with the individual and the efficacy of anarchy.<sup>4</sup> Uniting most radicals, however, was the fleeting nature of their prominence within late eighteenth century Britain. The few who remained committed to their causes would soon be consigned to domestic obscurity and continental exile.<sup>5</sup>

What may have seemed a promising moment for the Godwins, Paines, and Wollstonecrafts of London in 1789 was in fact the high tide of their hopes. In the short term, English radicalism would appear to have decisively misread the pulse of the Great Britain and France. Ten years after the Fall of the Bastille, the world had changed in ways neither aristocrats

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Claeys, "Introduction," In *Political Writings of the 1790s, Volume I*, edited by Gregory Claeys (London: William Pickering, 1995), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Claeys, "Introduction," xix.

<sup>5</sup> See Warren Breckman, "Introduction: A Revolution in Culture," in *European Romanticism: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Warren Breckman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008, 2015), 25-6, and Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2014, 2016), 385-6.

nor republicans could have foreseen. In 1799, Napoleon became First Consul of France, the two countries were at war once again, and the attitude of the average MP was that the Revolution was a monstrosity. It is unsurprising that in wartime that a government should speak poorly of its enemy. What is less obvious is the retreat of sympathy for the French among non-government personnel. Public opinion had turned against revolution, a generalization that held true in the cultural as well as political sphere. At the outset of the Revolution, radical groups in support of the more extreme wings of the National Assembly had a place in public discourse. By the turn of the century, moderate positions towards France were suspect and outright support for the republic resulted in ostracization. Fear of state suppression and hatred for the enemy cannot account for the change alone, though such factors played a part. As more information about revolutionary France arrived, initial excitement over the Revolution, whatever its reason, was being reconsidered by the British.<sup>6</sup> As is often the case, the thinking of the literate and famous is well-documented. The opinion of the Revolution held by an unknown, nineteen-year-old William Wordsworth, bears little resemblance to that of his famous, twenty-nine-year-old self, fast becoming the most celebrated poet in the country. His experience of the Revolution is worth reviewing.

As Warren Breckman has observed, for several Romantics, the Revolution arrived at the end of their adolescence.<sup>7</sup> At a time when they were undergoing a major transition in their lives, so it seemed was the world. For individuals like Wordsworth, “to be young was very heaven” in 1789.<sup>8</sup> The next year, Wordsworth set out for Europe to experience the “sublimity of the Alps,”

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<sup>6</sup> Kevin Gilmartin. *Writing Against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Breckman. “Introduction.” 14.

<sup>8</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 440.

and if possible, experience a bit of that revolutionary excitement present on the continent.<sup>9</sup> By happy coincidence, he passed through Paris during the celebration of the Revolution's first anniversary. Wordsworth returned to Britain in 1790, "infected by the virulent contagion of radicalism."<sup>10</sup>

Through 1791, he frequented the politically radical circles. Though influential, most radical causes were still the projects of elites or minorities, who formed societies in London for the express purpose of putting radicals in contact with each other. One of these groups was the Society of Constitutional Information, and Wordsworth had access to it through Samuel Nicholson, a Unitarian Dissenter. Members of the Society included such prominent radicals as Joseph Priestley, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft, and would have exposed Wordsworth to the Dissenter schools that had already shaped William Blake's thinking. Not yet renowned for his poetry, the young Wordsworth's literary efforts would receive early assistance in publication from Godwin, who approved of his work. In the meantime, Wordsworth was a voracious reader of pamphlets, especially those of Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke, the great articulator of the conservative rejoinder to radicalism. Wordsworth even attended parliamentary debates, though it is not certain which particular exchanges he saw. What is known is that in the early 1790s, politics was not an abstract issue Wordsworth awoke to through conversations on the college green; it was the seminal issue contested by real people, of different persuasions and backgrounds, Wordsworth encountered in person. The political and civic exclusion dissenting Christians endured was long known to Wordsworth, but in his political period, it was given a "human face" in the form of Unitarian Dissenters. These victims of the Test and Corporation

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 2020), 47, and Stephen Gill, "Introduction," in William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, 2008), xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Gill, *William Wordsworth*, 40.

Acts belied the ignorant caricature conjured up by Burke and the Tories.<sup>11</sup> Hearing their stories caused Wordsworth to reevaluate his opinion of the Church of England, and removed him ever further from the conventional careers laid before Englishmen of his station.<sup>12</sup> He considered becoming a polemicist, and as late as 1795 Wordsworth was working on poetry with a political motive. He rewrote “Salisbury Plain” to incorporate a more explicit commentary on the tyranny of states, and sought out Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey for their political as well as poetic activities.<sup>13</sup> Such was the zenith of his political life, for from mid-decade on, as his career as a poet flourished, his enthusiasm for the Revolution dissipated. When Wordsworth released his autobiographical *The Prelude*, in 1805, investment in the Revolution is ended even early, in 1794 with the execution of Robespierre, that early paragon of revolutionary ideals.<sup>14</sup>

Opposed to the violence of the Terror and loyal to his country in time of war, Wordsworth grew steadily less enamored with the Revolution. When *Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1798, Wordsworth had already lost faith in politics and turned to a focus on Nature and the individual experience as a more meaningful mode of being.<sup>15</sup> As he stated in an advertisement for the collection, part of Wordsworth’s purpose for working on the *Ballads* was a desire to make the language of non-aristocrats poetic.<sup>16</sup> Bringing everyday language into a high art could not have helped solidify Britain’s ruling class, but beyond this brief admission of purpose, Wordsworth shied away from overtly political statements. His innovations would be

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<sup>11</sup> The Test and Corporation Acts were passed in 1673 and precluded Roman Catholics and nonconformist Protestants from serving in public offices. For Dissenters in the 1790s, the severity of these acts varied depending on the individual. For some offices it was no longer applied, and it was possible for Dissenters to maneuver around through “occasional conformity. Roman Catholics would remain totally excluded until 1828.

<sup>12</sup> Gill, *William Wordsworth*, 54-5.

<sup>13</sup> Gill, “Introduction,” xv-xvi.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, “Introduction,” in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth (London: Penguin Books, 1995). xxxv.

<sup>15</sup> Breckman, “Introduction,” 16.

<sup>16</sup> William Wordsworth, “Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in *European Romanticism: A Reader*, edited by Simon Haines, Stephen Prickett (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2010, 2014), 73.

found in the expression he gave to individual emotions. Whether those feelings would lead his readers to overthrow the monarchy does not seem to concern him. An “overbalance of pleasure” on the reader’s part is what chiefly interests him.<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth had become much more interested in a person’s inner revolution, one in which revelation originated with feeling and then influenced how events were experienced, not the other way around. What mattered was not real events, but the events of the artist’s imagination, which could be more true than anything constrained by the actual world could be.<sup>18</sup> For the reader, this insight may have been revolutionary, but a revolutionary would have little use for it.

In their article on British Romanticism, Simon Haines and Christopher A. Strathman likened the older Wordsworth to Edmund Burke in their shared view of the Revolution as an inhumane, subversion of the natural order.<sup>19</sup> In focusing on the private rather than the public revolution, Wordsworth was in effect consenting to leave outward norms revolutions like France’s were meant to change intact. While Wordsworth had not become a reactionary, he had moved from staunch support for the Revolution to a political quietism which, if pushed, leaned decidedly toward God and country. In an appraisal of Wordsworth written during the poet’s old age, the essayist William Hazlitt would lament a talent that did not reach its full potential, “remote from the passions and events of the great world,” as it was.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the elder Wordsworth extensively revised his most famous poems from the 1790s and 1800s in order to

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<sup>17</sup> William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in *European Romanticism: A Reader*, edited by Simon Haines, Stephen Prickett (London & New York: Bloomsbury), 75.

<sup>18</sup> William Wordsworth. “Preface to ‘Lyrical Ballads,’” in *European Romanticism: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Warren Breckman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008, 2015), 66-7.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Haines, Christopher A. Strathman, “British Romanticism,” in *European Romanticism: A Reader.*, edited by Simon Haines, Stephen Prickett (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2010, 2014), 27.

<sup>20</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of Controversy and Other Essays*, edited by James Grande and Jon Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 291.



substitute a more conventional Christianity for a more Romantic pantheism in which he had once believed.<sup>21</sup>

Wordsworth was not a singular figure in this regard. His colleague Coleridge underwent an even starker transformation. By 1789, he had already declared himself a theological skeptic. When news of July 14 reached England, Coleridge composed his first serious poetic work, “The Fall of the Bastille,” in which he imagines the spirit of liberty reaching from Paris to English field-hands.<sup>22</sup> In early 1790s, Coleridge had been even more political than his partner, going so far as to make plans for an egalitarian society to be founded in the New World.<sup>23</sup> A twenty-year-old Hazlitt idolized Coleridge for his radicalism, and as late as 1798 was convinced that the future of liberal poetry lay with him. In the end, Coleridge would be another hero to disappoint Hazlitt.<sup>24</sup> He turned away from revolutionary projects and his outlook became more conservative. In his later years he stated that the purpose of art was pleasure instead of truth, returned to organized religion, and had abandoned the daring tone of his early poetry to become a literary critic and political commentator.<sup>25</sup> As with Wordsworth, the pantheistic spirituality of his younger years was disconcerting to the elder Coleridge, and he had no qualms about criticizing his youthful radicalism.<sup>26</sup> In fact, according to Breckman the eventual repudiation of the Revolution by most major, first generation Romantics led to a sense of betrayal among the

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<sup>21</sup> Breckman, “Introduction,” 22.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772-1804*, (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1989, 1999), 30, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Gill, “Introduction,” xvi.

<sup>24</sup> James Grande, Jon Mee, “Introduction,” in William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of Controversy and Other Essays*, edited by James Grande and Jon Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), xv.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Excerpt from *Biographia Literaria*,” in *European Romanticism: A Reader*, edited by Simon Haines, Stephen Prickett (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2010, 2014), 79.

<sup>26</sup> Breckman, “Introduction,” 22.

subsequent generation, who felt that the spirit of their predecessors' art was not in line with their apolitical or conservative nature.<sup>27</sup>

The rejection of the first generation by the second is all the more understandable when the long-lasting effects of British culture's swing to the right took. Jane Austen became a household name in the 1810s, yet when compared to eighteenth century writers of similar stature, such as Jonathan Swift or Henry Fielding, her novels are not about characters rebelling against social norms but submitting to them.<sup>28</sup> That Austen's novels espoused moderate to conservative views and achieved cultural authority in the nineteenth century was not an obvious continuation of a British literary tradition. Even compared to Wordsworth and Coleridge, her realist prose style is far more restrained.

In figures like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Austen historians have the best documented and studied individuals of the time and place. The reasons Wordsworth changed his mind about the Revolution will never be known exactly—an aversion to revolutionary violence and the patriotism stirred by war as plausible, major factors. Doubtless, the chasm between the ideals the young Wordsworth believed in and the results of their application disturbed the more mature man. The process by which Wordsworth received information is not as well known, however, and for a great many members of British society who have remained “uncanonized” in the Western tradition, the question of how minds were changed is all the less satisfactorily answered. How did information about the French Revolution reach Great Britain? Through whom did it travel, and how was information reinterpreted before it was passed on? Was a certain type of individual or group more likely to influence public opinion? Did a coherent conservative mindset

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<sup>27</sup> Breckman, “Introduction,” 25.

<sup>28</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.

emerge from discourse, or was a reactionary worldview a coerced response to the specter of French invasion? In an effort to understand how the British were thinking from 1789 to 1799, is it useful to study major figures like Wordsworth or Burke, or did these figures only affect elite circles? Did elite circles direct public opinion, or were they directed by it? A single one of these questions would require a hefty monograph to answer comprehensively, but by placing a variety of sources in conversation with each other, the process by which events in France became news and then British opinion may be better understood.

### III. 1789-1793

If his majesty's government was rattled by the first months of the Revolution, his officials were exceedingly skilled at hiding it. In an October 30 memorandum to King George III, the Foreign Office recounted a recent conversation between the Duke of Leeds, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and the Duke of Orleans, a high-ranking French noble and a supporter of the Revolution. Orleans had begun by relaying Louis XVI's hope that France and Britain would remain at peace and build a new alliance system to ensure the stability of Europe—a stability in which both kings were interested. Leeds dismissed the notion and advised Orleans that, before it could lead a new European order, his country had better restore “Tranquility at Home, without which France...could not expect any favourable estimation on the Part of other Nations.”<sup>29</sup> Clearly Leeds was referring to the revolutionary situation, yet the document on the whole does not convey a sense of urgency. France's domestic troubles were a serious development, not as an existential break from the past. The message conveyed the Foreign Secretary's aversion to the instability the Revolution had exhibited since July, but beyond a

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<sup>29</sup> Oscar Browning, ed. “Whitehall to the King, October 30, 1789,” in *The Political Memoranda of Francis Fifth Duke of Leeds* (London: Nichols and Sons, 1884), 145-6.

backhanded insult typical of Anglo-French enmity, the document's tone was ambivalent. Where Leeds or the Foreign Office stood on the content of the revolution remained unclear. Perhaps this was standard practice for a meeting at which neither party expected results, yet it was also an appropriate response for a Britain unsure of its position vis-à-vis France.

The manner in which the Duke of Leeds first learned of the Revolution was not impartial. A recounting of the events of June and July 1789 was relayed to him through the foreign office in Dorset from a British diplomat eyewitness to events in Paris. Early on, the author adopted a tone sympathetic to the nobility, whom he saw as horribly disgraced by events. On June 4, he described the abuse borne by the noble order as a foregone conclusion in the current political climate and accused the Third Estate as deliberately spinning the worst possible narrative one could about them. Louis XVI was written of as a victim of an impossible situation. By capitulating to the demands of the Third Estate, he would welcome Revolution, while to ignore their pleas would invite civil war. The diplomatic reception of events was not entirely negative. Some approval for a limited revolution can be detected. So long as the monarchy was respected, the diplomat regarded reforms of the French system as a remarkable good. The constant criterion for appropriate revolution, however, was that it have excessive "regularity and good order." The swift collapse of the Ancien Regime did not cause the writer to betray his feelings, but when he could walk the streets with safety and see the Bastille fall with "the loss of very few lives," he could not help but complement the "good order" of events. That France was now "a free Country; the King a very limited Monarch, and the Nobility as reduced to a level with the rest of Nation," was recognized, but did not as easily draw out the author's relief or anxiety. No commentary was expended on the source of the sudden desire for representative institutions, or on why the general public now had such great expectations for their rulers to live

up to.<sup>30</sup> Instead, he posed questions such as “who can trust to the moderation of an offended multitude?” and bemoaned the humiliation of seeing Louis XVI paraded about his former subjects.<sup>31</sup> In this regard the author was not far from Rousseau’s claim that the state’s most important concern “is that of its own conservation.”<sup>32</sup>

While the Duke of Leeds received accurate updates on events in Paris, the reports arrived with a set of opinions that Leeds either shared and had reinforced, or which he had nevertheless to take note of: the Revolution was dangerous for nobility, unfairly demonized the ruling class, and threatened to destabilize existing social structures. Francis Osborne had himself only taken up the title Duke of Leeds in March 1789 upon the death of his father, and the office he led was still in its infancy. Until the early 1780s, the office of the Principal Secretary of State performed both the function of the modern Home and Foreign offices. Realizing that this pairing made little sense, King George III ordered them separated, part of a larger process by which Whitehall, the modern British bureaucracy, was coming into being. Following the split on March 27, 1782, the Foreign Office quickly became a system unto itself, albeit one with very few members. In the mid-nineteenth century, its numbers had grown only to thirty. Within Whitehall, it became “the stronghold of the aristocracy,” wherein merit was prized second to parentage.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, the information prized by both diplomat and Foreign Secretary are aristocratic in character. Revolution as a reforming force was well and good, but order, namely the maintenance of the preexisting order, was prioritized above all other concerns. For the diplomat,

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<sup>30</sup> William Doyle, *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 1999), 92.

<sup>31</sup> Oscar Browning, ed., *Despatches from Paris, 1784-1790, Volume 2 (1788-1790)*, (London: Royal Historical Society, 1910), 207, 223, 226, 240-1, 243, 245-7.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, translated by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2019), 23.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Hennessy, *Whitehall* (London: Fontana Press, 1989, 1990), 27-9.

seeing the king humiliated was a painful sight, yet the overall orderliness of what he witnessed disposed him toward admiring the revolution, if there had to be one. Aristocratic disgrace was unfortunate, but it could be borne if that was the price of keeping the old order largely intact. By the time the Duke of Leeds met with Orleans in October, the Revolution had already made a return to Ancien Regime norms impossible barring a direct move on the part of Louis XVI against his people. It is to be expected then that so little of substance was discussed between Leeds and Orleans. From Leeds perspective, the Revolution had already overstepped the bounds of permissibility and a government that represented it was dangerous to endorse. Until Louis XVI set his house in order, there was nothing to be said.

If orderliness was one quality of the aristocratic establishment, pragmatism was another. On November 30, Leeds met with Prime Minister Pitt, Home Secretary Grenville, and other senior government officials to discuss the Austrian Netherlands.<sup>34</sup> A rebellion had recently arisen there in response to military reforms imposed by Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, and the government wanted to ensure that the insurgents would be well disposed toward Britain no matter the outcome of their present efforts. "If the circumstances afford an opening for our Interference," the British ought to let the insurgents know they would act. If the rebellion was successful, Britain would have another ally and greater influence in the Low Countries. If it failed, then in the interim Britain would still enjoy an increase of power in the region and in any event the continued rule of Joseph II on the other side of the Channel was a tolerable situation. What made the matter a priority, however, was less an attachment to the rebellion and more a desire to preserve stability in the region should Joseph II fail to stamp it out. "In the event of the

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<sup>34</sup> Britain was allied with the Kingdoms of Holland and Prussia through the Triple Alliance established in 1788. The Austrian Netherlands covered much of present day Belgium.

Emperor's being unsuccessful," a new regime in the Austrian Netherlands would be in danger of catching its neighbor's revolutionary bug. British assistance was a safeguard against "Democratical Principles" pervading the movement, a development which would surely make them allies of France.<sup>35</sup> Whitehall saw the spirit of democracy as a dangerous and infectious ideology from the very start. In the coming years, radical intellectuals in Britain would enjoy much support in elite and urban circles, but while they may have claimed more brilliant minds in the first years of the Revolution, there was no question that the reins of power belonged to their opponents. Conversely, Whitehall placed democracy not within a broader ideological debate, but within diplomatic interests in Europe that predated the Fall of Bastille. On the one hand, the meaning of the Revolution for France and the rest of Europe was not yet clear. On the other, Whitehall was out ahead of the general public in its commitment to oppose the Revolution, but because of the age-old Anglo-Frankish rivalry as well as opposition to the Revolution's spread.

Leeds was an aristocrat like the vast majority of his colleagues, but his unwillingness to engage with the French did not signal a general aversion to debate amongst the landed gentry. The prospect of a true overthrow of Britain's system of government would eventually prove unpalatable to a majority of British politicians, but not all thought there was reason to believe that the threat to order was as yet that great. Especially in the two years following the Fall of the Bastille, a "gentlemanly debate" was conducted over the merits of France's limited Revolution. Debate would later give way to intimidation and suppression on the part of His Majesty's government, but before the Revolution became preoccupied with abstract ideals and posed an existential threat to the old order wherever it was accepted, arguing for its good was not only

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<sup>35</sup> Oscar Browning, ed., "Whitehall to the King, November 30, 1789," in *The Political Memoranda of Francis Fifth Duke of Leeds* (London: Nichols and Sons, 1884), 147.

allowed, it was a common response.<sup>36</sup> In this early phase, when both opponents to and supporters of revolutionary France could interpret the Revolution as being a welcome thing, it is rather more surprising that, quite apart from these two groups, a conservative condemnation of the Revolution should emerge well before the Reign of Terror. That the debate shifted from one over why the Revolution was an opportunity to Britain to one between a conservative, Tory majority opposed and a liberal contingent of the Whig opposition, was to the credit of Whig MP and famed defender of the colonies, Edmund Burke.

To liberals, the content of Burke's 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France* were as hurtful as they were baffling. A perception of two Burkes, Burke the eloquent defender of the American cause during the 1770s and 1780s, and Burke the reactionary bigot with regard to the French one in the 1790s. This view was summarized in Hazlitt's retrospective. Burke the liberal defended "the rights of the people as inherent, inalienable." Burke the conservative rushed to the defence of "a foreign Sovereign, whom we had always been in the habit of treating as an arbitrary tyrant." Beyond his passionate prose style that Hazlitt conceded was effective, the two Burkes could not be reconciled, were in fact "deadly enemies." The former Burke argued based on reason, the latter, on the "picturesque and fanciful." In *Reflections*, his emotional attachments led him to justify tyranny, and the concerning part for Hazlitt was that his eloquence could make any position he pleased sound plausible.<sup>37</sup> Such was the assessment of his political opponents, but what of his work itself, not to mention the opinion of those who came around to his way of thinking?

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<sup>36</sup> Claeys, "Introduction," xviii.

<sup>37</sup> Hazlitt, *The Spirit of Controversy*, 72-5.



What makes Burke's work so striking today, indeed, what marked it as an authoritative text by the nineteenth century, was that it did not read as a text released in 1790. Its critique of the Revolution's destructive tendencies would be expected, and no less correct, were the book released in 1793 or 1794, after the beheading of Louis XVI, the commencement of the Terror, or the beginning of open war between France and its neighbors. Instead, the *Reflections* states with confidence that such developments were built into the very nature of a revolution irrespective of all preexisting structures, before any of these developments occurred. It is for this reason that *Reflections* was vehemently denounced by Burke's allies upon release, not met with much embrace from his opponents, but would within a few years lend a larger conservative reaction so much legitimacy.<sup>38</sup> Pitt and company seemed to have a prophet.

In 1790, the French Revolution was at its least alarming. The months from July to October 1789 had been ones of rapid change. After Louis XVI's move to Paris, however, the pace of change slowed. As a constitution was debated and a new government put in place, it seemed as if France might be headed toward that system of constitutional monarchy Britain was constantly congratulating itself for having. This change was not only tolerable, it was welcome, and the period when it seemed likely was to last until Louis XVI's botched Flight to Varennes in the summer of 1791. Despite these encouraging signs, Burke felt compelled to criticize what he saw as dangerous and central tendencies of the Revolution. An Irishman, the prospect of home being turned by revolutionary rhetoric was a much more distinct possibility than it was for his colleagues.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Introduction," in Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968, 2004), 21-2.

<sup>39</sup> O'Brien, "Introduction," 33.

At the heart of his issue with the Revolution was its hostility to a natural continuity with the past. Burke was a sentimental person, who was more inclined to value what he found in the world rather than criticize it, and he saw any movement premised on a wholesale rejection of a society's inheritance as inherently destructive. He was particularly concerned by the willingness of men of property to support a program of reform that could only end in their dispossession. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* had already stated that social distinction could be based only on social utility.<sup>40</sup> Because they had renounced ancient institutions—institutions, Burke contended, that had self-evident value and stability by virtue of their longevity—they had robbed France of a societal cohesion that could not be reinvented within a few short years. It was only a matter of time before the status of pre-revolutionary property holders in such a country would no longer be respected. The next year, the Constitution of 1791 abolished the nobility.<sup>41</sup>

To Burke, his disavowal of the Revolution was consistent with his stance on the American colonies. In that conflict, the British government had undermined the values upon which colonial confidence in British authority was based. To rebel against a specific government for the sake of maintaining the essence of that system's values was a cause worth defending against a Crown that had lost its way.<sup>42</sup> For the French, their inability to realize their utopian visions, paired with commitment to abstract values divorced from specific circumstances, would compel revolutionaries to act in inhumane and, eventually, tyrannical ways. Reform of Britain's

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<sup>40</sup> "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen," in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, edited by Keith Michael Baker, Volume 7 of *The University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 238.

<sup>41</sup> "The Constitution of 1791," in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, edited by Keith Michael Baker, Volume 7 of *The University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 249-50.

<sup>42</sup> David Womersley, "Introduction," in Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, edited by David Womersley (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1998, 2004), xxi.

government, church, and society might be advisable, depending on the reform proposed, but the pace of change should be cautious and revolution avoided.<sup>43</sup>

Burke's high profile among the radically-inclined ensured that *Reflections* was met with public furor. Immediate counter pamphlets were released by Wollstonecraft, Separatist Joseph Priestley, historian Catherine Macaulay, and most famously by Thomas Paine. The historian Robert Tombs has described their disagreement over how government ought to be formed as a disagreement between pragmatists and idealists? The radicals, being more or less in line with the members of the National Assembly, opted for ideological justifications.<sup>44</sup> Burke valued pragmatism, as he had in his writings dating back to the American Revolutionary period.<sup>45</sup> In Parliament, his position made an immediate political enemy out of his longtime friend and Whig leader Charles James Fox, while Prime Minister Pitt thought Burke's description of the Revolution's danger exaggerated.

Among major political figures, Burke's *Reflections* did not enjoy immediate, widespread support. From 1790 to 1791, the pamphlet war saw skeptics and supporters of the Revolution on their most even playing field. Even in this brief, early period of debate—debate which would be cut short rather than evolve throughout the decade—the imprint of Burkean arguments made on conservative writers could already be seen. In 1791, Thomas Green published a short pamphlet, “Political Speculations, Occasioned by the Progress of a Democratic Party in England.” Who was Green? A poet from Ipswich, by no means a heavyweight in parliament. His high degree of literacy aside, his pamphlet is nothing more than the views of an educated Englishman,

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<sup>43</sup> For a summary of Burke's major points, see O'Brien, “Introduction,” 23-53.

<sup>44</sup> Tombs, *The English and Their History*, 385-6.

<sup>45</sup> Womersley, “Introduction,” xvii.

compelled to express his views on the current political debate. What can his opinion tell us about a more typical conservative response to the Revolution and the radicalism it inspired?

The primary reference point for Green was Burke. He identified his views as the provocation for the torrent of radical writing that had poured forth over the months since *Reflections* was published. Like Burke, Green was eager to distinguish himself from a reactionary position, deriding absolute, unreflective obedience to preexisting authority. Britons ought to question why they were ruled in the way they were and seek to improve their system of government, but radical calls for greater suffrage and in extreme cases republicanism went too far. Where radicals strayed, Green argued, was in their dual belief that human beings could be perfected and that a state should be organized to bring about and maintain an ideal society. Any element of the previous order that did not conform to the new goal of liberty was to be abolished, without regard for its historic importance or validity by other metrics. In Green's dystopian vision of radical Britain, liberty would be misunderstood as human happiness itself, rather than as a common means to it. Though correct in what an ideal world would look like, radical proposals were inhumane and unworkable precisely because of their failure to recognize humanity as it actually was. Attachment to property would be the strongest, though not the only, barrier to a true overthrow of pre-revolutionary attachments, and the new radical rulers would merely replace the tyranny they had sought to overthrow. Not that this would be a challenge in the new order, for their being elected would be deemed sufficient evidence of their greater righteousness.

Among private associations, some greater force binding society could be acknowledged. For Green, this force was the Christian God, but he recognized that to base English law upon this belief would exclude the irreligious. The best laws were therefore those that defined limited

rights and were applicable only to mediate specific conflicts. These laws arose not as the precepts of a single ideology, but as the most successful forms of diplomacy between peoples that had been tested throughout the centuries. “Natural Rights” purported to be self-evident, but were in fact invented and delaminated by a group that was not representative of the people for whom they claimed to be speaking. Imbued with religious authority, belief in natural rights would make any restraint of their expansion, no matter how ill-advised in a particular case, a categorical affront to the entire edifice of the regime. “Are we equal?” would be a more essential question than “Is the law conducive to making people happy?” In Green’s mind, if a law was good, it mattered not how many supported it. Having critiqued radical alternatives to governance, he then turned to an assessment of the present system of British governance. Parroting Burke, he concluded that it was a grand inheritance, the evidence of which could be seen in a rich culture and economic prosperity. The system ought to be constantly improved upon—taxes were too high, Green thought—but did that mean that “with the petulant perverseness of children, reject the good we have, because it is no better?”<sup>46</sup> Burke’s cautious, incremental improvements were the route Britons ought to take, while extreme reforms like universal suffrage were to be guarded against, lest the fortunate link to a repository of historical wisdom be severed through unnaturally excessive change. In his conclusion, Green revealed one of two possibilities. Either his reading of *Reflections* had defined his view of English radicalism and the ethos behind the Revolution, or Burke had tapped into a previously unarticulated regard British institutions and history among the moderate to conservatively-minded. For a poet to whom the inherent virtue of

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<sup>46</sup> For the quote and content of the past three paragraphs, see Thomas Green, “Political Speculations, Occasioned by the Progress of a Democratic Party in England,” in *Political Writings of the 1790s, Volume VII*, edited by Gregory Claeys (London: William Pickering, 1995), 28, 30-8, 40.

the Revolution was unintelligible, Burke's defense of was an argument onto which his mind had latched.

The period of debate in which Burke and figures like Green wrote was short-lived. Within two years of the publication of *Reflections*, the events that that work predicted came to pass. In June 1791, Louis XVI and his family attempted to flee the country. A slow carriage and some perceptive peasants ensured they were caught in the French town of Varennes. The Flight to Varennes changed the entire course of Revolution. In the words of revolutionary Jean-Marie Roland, "We are living through ten years in twenty-four hours." There was no doubt among the French that their king had intended to raise an army abroad, amongst friendly foreign governments and aristocratic emigres, with which to reclaim his old rule of France. The Count of Mirabeau, a revolutionary who had died that April, had believed that the Revolution would strengthen the monarchy by making it more legitimate.<sup>47</sup> Before the summer was out, few believed constitutional monarchy would work. If there was still doubt that Louis XVI was more than a prisoner, whose rule and life depended on remaining in the good-graces of revolutionary Parisians, they were now dissipated. Over the next year, France became increasingly belligerent in its foreign policy and radical in its domestic structure. In April 1792, France went to war with Austria and Prussia and in September, officially deposed Louis XVI and established universal manhood suffrage. Simultaneously, the greater emphasis on liberty was accompanied by an ever-increasing level of authoritarianism.

In Britain, these events were watched with alarm, to the benefit of Burke and his cause, and to the detriment of real debate. To the government, radicalism was no longer the annoying

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<sup>47</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution* (New York City: Routledge, 2006, 2016), 44.

opinions of one section of the Whig opposition, it was a virulent ideology that, in the form of France, posed an existential threat to the state. By mid-decade, it was Paine who found himself fleeing England for the unpopularity of his opinions among the establishment. Fox would be consigned to a smaller and smaller minority, whose reforms became unpassable due to their perceived connection to the French cause.<sup>48</sup> On May 6, 1791, his strained partnership with Burke was officially ended. Having heard Fox declare the previous month that the Revolution was the most magnificent moment in history, Burke crossed the aisle, declaring their friendship concluded. On the other hand, chastising the Revolution in the harshest terms possible soon became a favorite occupation of Pitt's, and Burke grew into something of a celebrity.<sup>49</sup> Depending on which side of the political aisle one cast oneself, the 1790s could be a decade of political elevation or impotence.

A royal proclamation issued on May 21, 1792 illustrates the new position of radicalism in the eyes of the Crown. "Sheriffs, Justices of the Peace, chief Magistrates in our Cities, Boroughs and Corporations, and all other our Officers and Magistrates throughout our Kingdom of Great Britain," were ordered to identify "Authors and Printers...wicked and seditious writings [i.e. any cause opposed to loyalism]" and "suppress and prevent all Riots, Tumults, and other disorders" stoked by subversive persons that would be "dangerous to the most important interests of this Kingdom."<sup>50</sup> The timing of this proclamation was no small matter. France had gone to war with Austria and Prussia only a month prior, thus resuming its time-honored position as Britain's continental rival. As Foreign Office documents have shown, for Whitehall bureaucrats

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<sup>48</sup> Gill, *William Wordsworth*, 54-5.

<sup>49</sup> Womersley, "Introduction," xxxi.

<sup>50</sup> George R, "By the King. A Proclamation," in *Political Writings of the 1790s, Volume VII*, edited by Gregory Claeys. London: William Pickering, 1995).

the Revolution was never primarily about ideas. It was the latest development in the realm of great power politics, and here what mattered was Britain's position in an international order conducive to its stability or the enlargement of its power. Added to the traditional threat posed by France was its ever-radicalizing Revolution, which, ideals aside, was exceedingly disorderly by the measure of men such as the now former Foreign Secretary Leeds. The specter of war was beginning to render radical causes distractions at best, treason at worst. As the proclamation indicates, the Crown imagined radical writers to have a great deal of influence over the common reader, and felt reason to fear the presence of revolutionary conspiracies. Was the threat real or not? Was the pretense of a threat being used to stoke fear and justify suppression before a great power conflict unconcerned with the niceties of reform? The pragmatism regarding the Austrian Netherlands certainly proved the government capable of such an action. Whatever the true beliefs or motives behind the proclamation, however, tolerating debate on principle in a time of emergency had struck the Crown as foolhardy. The ideological component of political debate did not disappear, yet it was quickly being overtaken by priorities further and further removed from the heady philosophical points that so perturbed Burke and Paine. Pamphlet wars and actual wars were, after all, different beasts.

By the winter of early 1793, France, now a republic, was on the verge of war with Britain. Far from weakening its enemy, the Revolution had inculcated a degree of nationalism never before seen in Europe. Contrary to expectations, France had proven a worthy adversary against Austria and Prussia. What was more, the moderate revolution that seemed possible from 1789 to 1791 was no more. With his botched Flight, Louis XVI had lost the trust of his people, and the deputies of the National Assembly had lost faith in the feasibility of monarchy. In January 1793, Louis XVI was beheaded, and war with Britain now seemed only a matter of time.



The Revolution not only stood against the aristocratic order of which the Foreign Office and Burke was so fond, it now threatened to spread beyond France's borders. On February 1, 1793, unbeknownst to Prime Minister Pitt, France declared war on Great Britain. He was that day delivering an address to Parliament on the occasion of George III requesting an enlarged budget for the military and navy. Despite the assumption of peace, Britain was already on a war-footing. If Pitt thought Burke's critique of the Revolution too harsh in 1790, he restrained himself not a whit upon receiving the King's request. As a response to His Majesty, Pitt made a lengthy address to Parliament in which he laid bare how the government viewed its adversary.

Pitt addressed the matter of augmenting Britain's military budget only briefly. It was of secondary importance to the context for the request. It is in a politician's interest to describe history in a manner that suits present needs before impartial accuracy, but Pitt did not attempt to cast the entire Revolution in shadow. The dire situation was caused by a single, "calamitous event": Louis XVI's beheading. Such an act was framed as a common breaking point for the politically and religiously minded alike. Indeed, it was an insult to all humanity.<sup>51</sup> Monarchy could not be replaced; it was unfathomable and unacceptable. For too many Britons, the monarchy was just the way things were. To approve of its being done away with, even in France, went contrary to the very underpinnings of the British system of government most MPs had stood by. As all agreements between Britain and France had been made with a Bourbon government that no longer held sway, France could not be trusted on the basis of its past relationship. Despite Tory misgivings, the French king had remained a guarantor of the Revolution's legitimacy. By killing the king, the French had rendered their revolution

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<sup>51</sup> William Pitt, "February 1, 1793: 'His Majesty's message respecting an augmentation of the naval and military forces,'" in *The Speeches of the Right Honourable William Pitt in the House of Commons, Volume I*, edited by W.S. Hathaway (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1805, 1817), 398.

illegitimate. For all the hopeful talk of British republicans, they appear to have overestimated the British establishment's readiness to stomach a break from the past of that magnitude.

The present barbarity in France was, Pitt contended, a consequence of their disregard for traditional institutions and their vain attempt to create a new one. France was in disarray, but Britain stood firm, and it was vital it be kept that way. For the application of logical ideologies had revealed themselves to be extremely susceptible to passion. Better, Pitt said, maintain the "mixture of monarchical government Britain" had been so blessed to inherit.<sup>52</sup> Burke certainly would have approved. As for the ideological argument in favor of a republic, greater suffrage, and the abolishment of other tyrannical social structures, Pitt side-stepped the issue to focus on what the results of French practices, not French words, were. Not the slaughter of its own people, but its behavior in conquered territories was what, in the Prime Minister's mind, made the French a grave threat. Imbued with revolutionary belief in the Republic's mission, the French sought to subvert "every ancient, every established usage, however long they may have existed, and however much they may have been revered." The conservative rebuttal was no longer that existing orders must not be disrupted, it was that the Republic was an inhumane agent of destruction. For all its talk of freedom, and the commencement of Terror surely did not aid the attractiveness of republicanism within its borders, its France's adventures abroad, in name the exercise of the people's will, were merely for "the power of the French."<sup>53</sup>

Before summarizing Parliament's readiness to support His Majesty in the defense of the country, Pitt lobbed a final accusation at the French. They had attempted to foment domestic strife within Great Britain by encouraging any "society in England, however...desperate in their

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<sup>52</sup> Pitt, "February 1, 1793," 401.

<sup>53</sup> Pitt, "February 1, 1793," 406-7.

principles...who possessed treason and disloyalty.”<sup>54</sup> It was an obvious attack on radical circles calling for reforms. Pitt could not have known that his speech was made on the first day of war, but he had, in effect, made his first wartime address. France was now an actual, not potential enemy, and association with its cause and ideology would not be a matter simply of opinion. The war would be fought at home and abroad.

#### IV. 1793-1799

Pitt gave his formal address on war with France on February 12. He expressed sentiments similar to those he shared nearly a fortnight prior, reiterating that the execution of Louis XVI was in fact “aimed against all sovereignty, and shewed their determination...of exterminating all monarchy.” Pitt was correct in his assessment of the National Convention’s vision, if not their capabilities vis-à-vis Britain. Much less straightforward was his remark that the Republic was launching “a war against opinions.”<sup>55</sup> Surely such a statement was tinged with irony considering the liberating intention of the Revolution, but it was also telling of the that Pitt’s words could be applied to Britain as well, with his government the main aggressor.

As Pitt acknowledged, “a war against opinions” was how the radical minority already described the British situation. That he would be prosecuting one himself while condemning an admittedly more violent French attempt to do the same did not seem to bother Pitt. On May 7, Whig MP Charles Grey made a motion to reform parliament such that the electoral process was based on universal manhood suffrage. In his response, the Prime Minister’s made clear how reform of any sort was to be treated henceforth. As yet, those “whose object indeed was nothing

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<sup>54</sup> Pitt, “February 1, 1793,” 411.

<sup>55</sup> William Pitt, “February 12, 1793: ‘Ditto, Announcing war with France,’” in *The Speeches of the Right Honourable William Pitt in the House of Commons, Volume I*, edited by W.S. Hathaway (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1805, 1817), 432, 434.

less than to introduce here...French principles” were not a “contemptible party,” though their cause should be now “regarded with horror.” To proceed with reforms imported from France at a time when France was being fought as a result of those reforms was akin to being in a besieged citadel discussing “points of difference” rather than attending “the means of defence.” War did not represent a temporary suspension of radical-conservative debate either, rather it signaled a new period in British politics when the Prime Minister “would rather forego for ever the advantages of reform, than risk for a moment the existence of the British constitution.”<sup>56</sup> Because its consequences had been so grave, the French Revolution had blackened the name of all reforms leading to greater democratization.

Mr. Grey’s call for reform was clearly mistimed, but it had provoked a response as grandiose in language as it was fierce in tone. What, after all, was that threatening about one opposition MP whose proposal could so easily be dismissed? As with Buckingham’s royal proclamation, Pitt’s speech reveals how the political establishment viewed the domestic threat, and raises questions about the speaker’s belief in the frightening picture he painted. The Revolution had provoked a “general disaffection” among sections of the British public. Only a happy combination of Parliament and the Crown’s interference, “the loyalty, vigour, and unanimity of the people,” and the fortuitous advantage French aggression had lent the conservative cause, had prevented radical discontent from developing into an effective political force. The present security should not be mistaken for victory, though, for while the Terror and the onset of war had silenced radicalism for a moment, its supporters were watching “for an opportunity favourable to the accomplishment of their designs. For that purpose, they had looked

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<sup>56</sup> William Pitt, “May 7, 1793: ‘Motion by Mr. Grey respecting a reform in parliament,’” in *The Speeches of the Right Honourable William Pitt in the House of Commons, Volume I*, edited by W.S. Hathaway (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1805, 1817), 438, 444.

peculiarly to the question of parliamentary reform.”<sup>57</sup> Grey’s request for reform was no trifle, but a symbol of a grand conspiracy against His Majesty’s government.

Was the threat that dire? True, there had been three productions of “Taking the Bastille” in London from 1790 to 1791, but there were also around 2,000 loyalist societies in London, far outnumbering the number of radical organizations, whose activities included burning Paine in effigy.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps Pitt was paranoid. He would not have strayed far from Burke here, who as Kevin Gilmartin observed, was suspicious of the subversive effects of “newspapers, pamphlets, reprinted sermons, paper currency” and conspiracies.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps Pitt was erring on the side of caution—better to overestimate the degree of destabilizing dissent and tamp it down utterly than underestimate the threat and let it grow. Yet these genuine motives are belied by the fact that, in the same address, Pitt dismissed the call for reform on the grounds of its being unrepresentative of a broadly-held opinion. The petitions for universal suffrage were “fabricated in appearance, similar in substance and expression, it did not require much time to determine... that they were the work of a few individuals.”<sup>60</sup> The conspiracy, then, was quite small and easily dealt with. Pitt recognized that radical dissent was in fact not widespread while simultaneously stoking fears of an imminent plot against the Crown being launched.

In the coming years, Pitt’s government would attach serious import to the activities of these “few individuals,” using the existence of supposed treasonous groups as a pretext for vigorous suppression of the free-flowing debates of the early 1790s. On May 16, 1794, Pitt gave a similar address on the findings of a secret committee established to investigate seditious

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<sup>57</sup> Pitt, “May 7, 1793,” 440.

<sup>58</sup> See Claeys, “Introduction,” xx, and Tombs, *The English and Their History*, 338.

<sup>59</sup> Gilmartin, “Writing against Revolution,” 3.

<sup>60</sup> Pitt, “May 7, 1793,” 440.

societies. Without naming individuals, the Prime Minister detailed a plot to organize a British equivalent of the National Convention. Thankfully, they had been discovered, but as Pitt described it, the plot was a near thing. More condemning, the plotters had kept up a correspondence with Jacobins that dated back to the moderate years of Revolution. These were “wretches...outcasts of society, tending to enrich themselves, by depriving of property, and of life, all those who were distinguished either for personal worth, or for opulence.”<sup>61</sup> Without committing himself to exposing the specifics of what the committee found, Pitt had once more held up the prospect of a radical rebellion as proof that republican dissent could not be tolerated.

A conservative defense of Britain’s government soon evolved into something broader: a rebuke, from non-political sectors of society, of radical political causes and new values associated with cosmopolitanism and the Enlightenment. Pitt’s government practiced suppression of radical speech, but the emergence of a conservative culture does not appear to have been directed from Parliament. It seems, rather, to have been a voluntary rejection of republicanism and skepticism more broadly, on the part of Britons who now felt the need to defend and define their country against the revolutionary spirit of the continent.

During the 1790s, well-regarded Romantics became increasingly wary of the Revolution and the perceived enlightened emphasis on logic that led to it. Wordsworth and Coleridge were not alone in their turn from the Enlightenment and revolution. In her poem “On Being Cautioned,” Charlotte Smith described a raving lunatic with envy. Free from logic, he could

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<sup>61</sup> William Pitt, “May 16, 1794: ‘Report of the secret committee respecting seditious societies,’” in *The Speeches of the Right Honourable William Pitt in the House of Commons, Volume II* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1808, 1903), 31.

follow the far more sensible ravings of his heart.<sup>62</sup> During the height of radical influence in the early 1790s, William Blake was convinced by the standard attacks on hereditary government and aristocratic society, and even began to question his relationship with the Christian God.<sup>63</sup> The disillusionment which flowed from his exposure to Godwin and Paine colored the latter half of his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Blake never accepted the conservative worldview that Wordsworth or Coleridge embraced. He remained throughout his life a religious radical, far outside the bounds of even Dissenter denominations. By 1795, however, he had regained faith in God, and rejected the French Revolution and the materialistic, irreligious values on which it was based.<sup>64</sup>

Despite a growing political ambivalence among major Romantic figures, for all their visibility today, they are not the best indicator of public sentiments. Blake remained devout but could not be described as a religious conformist, and although Wordsworth and Coleridge would later become political, social, and religious conservatives, by the turn of the century they were more withdrawn from debate than they were actively opposed to radical reforms—they had other artistic projects to prioritize. Yet if the Romantic elite are placed to the side, a more conservative tenor characterized much British fiction during the decade. Popular fiction had long been held suspect by conservative individuals and suppressive governments, full as they were with individualism, sexual innuendo, and social mobility.<sup>65</sup> In the early 1780s, the Count of Vergennes, chief minister of Louis XVI, had expended much ink on requests for London to

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<sup>62</sup> Charlotte Smith, “On Being Cautioned against Walking on a Headland Overlooking the Sea, because It was Frequented by a Lunatic,” in *European Romanticism: A Reader*, edited by Simon Haines, Stephen Prickett (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2010, 2014).

<sup>63</sup> Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Shrimpton, “Introduction,” in William Blake, *Selected Poems*, edited by Nicholas Shrimpton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xxix.

<sup>65</sup> Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution*, 16.

suppress a pornographic press run by French émigré.<sup>66</sup> He saw such literature not as peripheral, but as a threat to Bourbon rule. In the 1790s, radical English fiction made the political and social reputation of popular fiction all the more odious, with Godwin's *Caleb Williams* being a favorite of British radicals.

It was from this harmful public perception that British writers now strove to save literature. Much of a new, conservative literature originated from a religious perspective. France had long been viewed as a religiously forsaken country due to its Catholicism, but the Republic's antagonistic stance towards the Church only worsened matters.<sup>67</sup> In the eyes of committed Anglicans, the Republic was moving from a corrupted form of Christianity to outright heathenism. In 1793, France abandoned the pursuit of a new church for the Republic, choosing instead to dechristianize itself and even replace the Christian calendar with a revolutionary one. Coupled with worsening reports of the Terror, the Revolution had lost all moral authority in the eyes of religious Britons. If Burke's defense of inherited systems had seemed alarmist before, it now seemed a task of utmost rather than hypothetical importance.

One early form fictional apologetics for British ways took was the dialogue. These were thinly veiled political arguments on the part of the author, much akin to Green's pamphlet, but disguised as a scene from a play, in which two characters discuss political matters of the day. "Village Politics," by Hannah More, a religious writer, was first published in 1792. By the end of the following year, it had gone through eight editions. Before a word is uttered in her dialogue,

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<sup>66</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 195.

<sup>67</sup> When Louis XVI's absolute authority was stripped away, so was the system that upheld the king as God's (Roman Catholic) representative in France. In November 1789, the National Assembly nationalized all Church property to resolve its debt crisis. By the winter of 1790-1, priests were forced to publicly support or repudiate the Revolution, prompting Pope Pius VI to issue an encyclical condemning all proposed reforms to the French church.



her work already relays concerns similar to those of the Prime Minister. “Village Politics” is addressed to “mechanics, journeymen, and day labourers,” whom she fears are too susceptible to radical thought.<sup>68</sup> To More, the most pressing setting in which to repudiate the Revolution was not in the House of Commons, but in the streets. As Pitt admitted, the numbers of true radicals may never have been significant, yet he and More were clearly alarmed by debates going on among common folk in which one point of view flirted with republicanism. More was hardly representative of the average day labourer, her writing was likely far more articulate than the typical conversation, and she wrote with an overt political agenda. Her dialogue was heavily slanted heavily in favor of the loyalism—it is easy for the writer to win an argument when she decides what her opponent says—but as the actual conversations went largely unrecorded, recreations such as More’s may be the closest historians can approach what the true day laborers were saying to each other. They at least represent what the author’s imagined of their working class countrymen.

More’s interlocutors are Jack Anvil, a blacksmith, and Tom Hod, a mason. Jack finds Tom despondent. He has read Paine’s *Rights of Man* and wants a new system of government. Right away, More indicates that radical grievances are fabricated, for Tom clarifies “that I should never have known [I was unhappy], if I had not had the good luck to meet with this book.”<sup>69</sup> Throughout “Village Politics,” More emphasizes the alien relationship radical agendas had to everyday life. When Tom tells Jack he wants liberty, Jack initially thinks he means there is a warrant out for his arrest. As far as Jack can see, Tom could scarcely be more free than he is now. To Tom’s assertion that in France all are equal, Jack responds that under British law, all

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<sup>68</sup> Hannah More, “Village Politics,” in *Political Writings of the 1790s, Volume VIII*, edited by Gregory Claeys. London: William Pickering, 1995), 2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

citizens are, at least in theory, equal as well. That in practice they often are not Jack admits is a problem, but he defends the system on three fronts.

Before tearing down society in the name of liberty, Tom is directed to look at how such an action has played out in France. Jack reminds him that the French system was much more tyrannical than the British one to begin with. Often preferring to tie his arguments back to religious examples, Jack tells Tom that French church prevented its members from encountering the word of the God themselves.<sup>70</sup> Even so, for all the faults of the French system, by dismantling it overnight in the name of abstract virtues, the French had made themselves infinitely worse off. In the dialogue's concluding paragraphs, when Tom is on the verge of renouncing his commitment to revolution, Jack lays bare what French principles have wrought. Their liberty has caused them to "murder more men in one night, than ever their poor king did in his whole life."<sup>71</sup> With each reprinting, this line from "Village Politics" would have become all the more convincing as news of the Terror's magnitude kept trickling into London. Revolution as the French defined it was bound to fail, for its commitment to principles blinded its proponents to humanity and customs as they were. Where people deviated from the principle, they were condemned as odious, with no consideration given to values that might arise from practices contrary to liberty and equality.

Jack takes particular issue with the radical call for equality. How can anyone think people are equal in a revolutionary sense, Jack wonders. He admits that in their essence, every human being is of equal value. Where radicals err, is in assuming that equality applies to every aspect of how individuals compare to each other. The trick to good living—sustained by a

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<sup>70</sup> A reference to the use of Latin in the Roman Catholic Church. See More, "Village Politics." 8.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

religious outlook—is in seeing that even though some are smarter, stronger, and better equipped to rule than others, all are children of God. An aristocrat travelling in a carriage has no right to run the pedestrian over; to say that he has no right to ride simply because another man walks is a gross overreach. A government that attempted to implement such a policy would usurp providence, impoverish men of quality and means, and destroy social customs, culture, and religion in the name of a new truth. With the use “of my limbs, of my liberty, of the laws, and of my Bible,” the first two being natural rights, the latter two civil rights, Jack thinks he is well-equipped to live a good life.<sup>72</sup> More brings Jack to what was fast becoming a Burkean cliché: ending his argument with a profession of love for the British past, and a pledge to uphold that precious inheritance in the present. More differed from Green in her greater emphasis on the Church of England’s central role in this project, but otherwise can be accounted a member of an emerging body of rank-and-file conservative writers.

One marker of the new literature was a growing optimism. Conservative writers did not believe that disenchantment and a scientific outlook would lead to human progress, but unlike Malthus, they did not foresee a bleak future emerging from that very same outlook. There’s was one characterized by faith in religious and cultural systems. Flawed as the British system is, More’s Jack is certain that, if its foundations are left in place, it will “mend” itself through gradual reform.<sup>73</sup> As with Burke and Pitt, alarm that the world as it had been known was under existential threat was countered by a strengthening assertion that the traditional order was well-equipped to dispatch with the new one. As the Tory government’s wartime measures to suppress radicalism demonstrate, the conservative response was sustained by the state’s criminalization of

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<sup>72</sup> More, “Village Politics,” 7.

<sup>73</sup> More, “Village Politics,” 4-5.

dissent in service of age-old fears of a European rival. The debate was not so much won by religious traditionalists as it was halted by the moderator with their side declared victorious. Nevertheless, to describe the conservative victory merely as a propagandistic effort of an oppressive state would be an overstatement.

Given Britain's war-footing post 1793, its anti-radical diatribes can occasionally read less as literature and more as state-endorsed reminders of what one's thoughts ought to be. In an anonymous dialogue published in 1793, Monsieur Francois attempts to convince John English that his country should adopt the Republic's ways. English explains that any such attempt would be disastrous and calls attention to the different situations presiding in the two countries in 1789. England was a constitutional monarchy, in which the king's rights had been restrained gradually over the centuries. At present, a balance existed that allowed him to preserve order without becoming a tyrant. In essence, Britain was a land in which all were constrained by laws. Ancien Regime France, on the other hand, was ruled by a despot. Common folk paid the greatest share of taxes and bribes and the bureaucracy ran on bribes. The author's argument at this point illustrated a distinction between radical and conservative writing. Radicals spoke of matters in general, universal terms, to which conservative apologetics responded by examining the specifics of matters as they stood in different places. The pre-Revolutionary French situation was fundamentally worse than Britain's, and even so, the monsieur's description of republican life makes it clear the change was not for the better. So committed were France's people to the principle of equality that they had scarcely hesitated to jail or execute leaders of the Revolution for being superior to their countrymen. The brief dialogue ends on an ominous note when monsieur speaks of how his people wish their system to be spread to their neighbors. John

English balks at the prospect, and the tone in which he does so rouses one to take up arms as “an Englishman.”<sup>74</sup>

The ending of Francois and English’s dialogue reads as a patriotic call to arms. Its disinterest in character—the allegory behind the names is hardly opaque—and rote recitation of anti-French sentiment make it neither literary nor groundbreaking. In the words of English himself, “all the natural enemies of Great Britain” wish it to be like them.<sup>75</sup> To the protagonist, the form of the conflict, if not its essence, signal continuity with the past rather than a break. All that dialogues such as the author’s need do is review the facts so its readers will be assured that once again, defense of the British Isles was a righteous cause. If dialogues such of this one were the only type of conservative writing after 1793, it could be described as propaganda, albeit one that, given the volume of work and variety of authors, was expressive of public sentiments. In his study of revolutionary-era British literature, however, M.O. Grenby identified fifty novels published between 1791 and 1805 as conservative, and he did not describe these longer works as state propaganda. With a few exceptions, they appeared to be expressing the author’s opinions, which happened to have absorbed and accepted conservative principles.<sup>76</sup> Henry James Pye, Britain’s poet laureate from 1790 to his death in 1813, Elizabeth Hamilton, a Scottish essayist and novelist, and the English novelists George Walker, and Jane West, were a few of the many writers who published moderate to conservative works during the mid to late 1790s.<sup>77</sup> Their novels tended to depict the outside world was depicted as unstable and immoral. The home, by contrast, was a source of comfort and continuity. Anti-Jacobin literature, as it became known,

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<sup>74</sup> “A New Dialogue between Monsieur Francois and John English on the French Revolution,” in *Political Writings of the 1790s, Volume VIII*, edited by Gregory Claeys (London: William Pickering, 1995), 15.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> M.O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-5.

<sup>77</sup> Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution*, 16.

was not just about escape from politics. It could be more personal than radical literature, but it was also interested in engaging radical causes directly.

Pye was reviled as a poet and was assumed to have won the job through his friendship with William Pitt. A measure of redemption was only afforded through his conservative novel *The Democrat* (1795), which proved him a decent prose writer. *The Democrat* is the story of Jean le Noir, a French agent who is sent abroad to spread revolutionary ideology. Le Noir is a comic figure, whose foolhardy attempts to make the world more democratic make him an object of mockery. Pye made his opinion of the protagonist clear in his introduction. Employing his poetic profession, he inserts under the cover the lines, “Let grumbling Sans-culottes our Laws decry; let Fox harangue, and baffled Priestly fly: let snuffling Stanhope hie to Gallia’s shore, and hug his canting comrade, Jean Le Noir.”<sup>78</sup> Although le Noir was a Frenchman, Pye directed his attack not, principally, against Frenchmen who would not read his work, but against fellow Britons who had supported the Revolution in its early days. To Pye, the legacy of their enthusiasm was the ideology to be resisted in the culture.

In Walker’s *The Vagabond* (1799), the hero joins a radical riot only to discover that it is no different from a mob.<sup>79</sup> Further misadventures allow Walker opportunity to ridicule several radical thinkers and beliefs. The most direct attack is reserved for William Godwin. He is represented by Stupeo, a mentor figure for the protagonist who journeys to the New World to establish a utopian community. He does not make much progress before he is captured and burned alive by Native Americans. No friends of subtlety, Pye and Walker attacked radicalism

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<sup>78</sup> Henry James Pye, *The Democrat* (New York: James Rivington, 1995), iii. Sans-culotte referred to the most radical wing of French revolutionaries. They claimed to represent French commoners and played a major part in the prosecution of the Terror. Charles Stanhope was an English radical and former Whig member of Parliament.

<sup>79</sup> See George Walker, *The Vagabond* (London: G. Walker, 1799).

directly, using the pretense of fiction as the thinnest of veils. In this regard, they were more akin to the dialogues than to the socially conservative novels of Jane Austen. Conservative literature was not only a device through which writers lambasted the dissenters among their countrymen. Other turn of the century writers explored the passive and active ways characters in their novels affirmed different sets of values in everyday life. By tracking the effects radical and conservative lifestyles had on their characters, authors focused on broader concerns. As the French example had shown, revolution meant more than changes to systems of government; it indicated a wholesale change in what people believed, what they valued, and how they acted.

Hamilton and West were more partial to reform than Pye and Walker, but the two were otherwise accepting of traditional Christian and social values. Their works are less concerned with the strictly political implications of radical thought than they were with broader social and cultural changes that a radical mentalité brought about. In West's *The Infidel Father* (1802), she attacks atheism.<sup>80</sup> Not only had non-conforming strains of Christian thought and behavior become associated with radicalism, but the dechristianization of France and the secularism characteristic of much of the Enlightenment had opened up a dangerous space for outright non-belief. To any Anglican of lukewarm belief, radicalism could not but evoke a larger threat to religion itself.

Hamilton was more concerned with the debate surrounding women. Were they equal to men in interests or capabilities, as Wollstonecraft asserted in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), or was there a natural difference between the sexes that ought not to be upset? Hamilton found her position lay between these two poles. In her 1800 novel *Memoirs of Modern*

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<sup>80</sup> See Jane West, *The Infidel Father* (London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees, 1802).

*Philosophers*, Hamilton indicated that women should be better educated, but they should also retain their traditional social role. As was often the style in contemporary prose literature, Hamilton prefaced *Memoirs* with an address from a fake author to lend her work a greater sense of realism. Through Geoffrey Jarvis, a man who purports to have discovered the novel in manuscript form, Hamilton recreated a London scene that would strike the reader as plausible. Jarvis happened upon a shop that was the former lodging house of a mysterious writer who died suddenly. Uninterested in his possessions, the shopkeeper sold his writings to Jarvis. Upon inspection, he discovered that it was a cautionary tale.<sup>81</sup> *Memoirs* depicts the lives of Bridgetina, Julia, and Harriet. Notably, all three women read voraciously, however, only Harriet avoids falling under the influence of prominent radical writing. Because of the works of figures like Godwin, Bridgetina and Julia embrace an individualistic and hedonistic lifestyle and are led astray for much of novel. Only when traditional values and one's domestic place are accepted, can a woman find satisfaction. All of this, Hamilton expected her reader to believe was the work of an ordinary, unknown individual, whose work Jarvis happened upon in a shop. Hamilton's London was a city of writers, many of them well-read in recent political pamphlets and eager to make their contribution to the debate.

At pains to stress that her novel was not meant to be a reactionary broadside, Hamilton had Jarvis add that the manuscript's worth lay in not attacking individuals, implying that this may have been a common practice, but in illustrating the shortcomings of radical thought, especially Godwin's. All the author (Hamilton) has done is "expose the dangerous tendency of those parts of his theory which might, by a bad man, be converted into an engine of mischief."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1800), vii-xvi.

<sup>82</sup> Hamilton, *Memoirs*, xiv.



The Terror only a few years passed and the Revolutionary Wars ongoing, Hamilton's reader would have understood that "mischief" was an understatement.

These were the kinds of books people would have read, for despite Wordsworth's intent to make poetic language more accessible to commoners, most of the reading public would not have understood his work. Blake's prophetic writings were certainly religious, but they would still have seemed dangerously radical to many religious Britons. More telling was the conventional Anglicanism on display in lesser but more numerous books. While radical causes made inroads with educated urbanites in the early 1790s, twice as many conservative books were published during the decade. It was these novels that became a living part of most people's daily lives and they played a role in reducing the average Briton's understanding of the First Republic to a demonic, world-ending entity. A conservative bent was soon a requirement for a book's success and less politically engaged prose would dominate British fiction for the remainder of the Revolutionary period and in the post-revolutionary years which followed.<sup>83</sup>

Grenby's emphasis on publication rates rather than library collections recognizes a disjuncture between the titles studied from a historical period and what the typical reader would have been perusing. Robert Darnton noticed a similar discrepancy in his book on the Ancien Régime's readership. The books often assumed to be widely read in the years preceding the French Revolution did not appear, in fact, to be that widely owned. Rousseau's *The Social Contract* was only in a small number of private libraries. At the same time, Darnton recognized that such libraries were by their nature out-of-date, and one copy of an exciting new release might be circulated among friends.<sup>84</sup> By basing his argument off publication rates rather than

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<sup>83</sup> Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 7, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, 167, 177.

number of copies owned, Grenby set a fairly reliable baseline for readership. Given that pure propaganda was rare in these books, the high number of reactionary novels published must have reflected real demand.

As a conservative literature emerged, the French republic was not at a standstill. Revolutionary war had been proceeding apace. After a volatile start, the French offensive had steadily strengthened from 1795. The next year, Napoleon rose to prominence through his successful campaigns in Italy. In 1798, France promulgated a policy of creating a ring of satellite states and spreading revolutionary politics and ideologies. That August, British troops engaged French forces in Ireland. If during the first four years of the Revolution, Britons nervously watched and debated events across the Channel, they were now players in a continental struggle. Pitt continued to deplore the French Republic, but his need to muzzle political opponents was put to rest soon after the commencement of war. In 1794, the Duke of Portland, a Whig MP, led a large defection from his party to the government. What was left of Pitt's opposition was too emaciated to pose a serious challenge to his secured leadership.<sup>85</sup> Better equipped to prosecute radicalism at home, the Prime Minister had little need to. Public articulation of opposition to radical agendas was becoming widespread. If Burke's *Reflections* was controversial upon publication for its singularity, the logic of Burkean thought was old hat by the end of the decade. Not only political pamphleteers, but poets, novelists, and religious writers of greater and lesser renown were becoming disillusioned with the Revolution, and the myriad ideologies that lay behind it. The greatest diversity of source types also reflected a broader understanding of what

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<sup>85</sup> Claeys, "Introduction," xix.

was at stake in the last decade of the century: a way of life. A brief pamphlet from 1798 demonstrates how changed the conversation had become.

“Loyalty Necessary to Self-Preservation” is an anonymous source. At its outset, it appears to be similar in tone and argument to previous conservative pamphlets, only updated to reflect the greater urgency brought on by the war’s scope and the enemy’s objectives. Its author compares a tranquil Britain to a depraved and disorderly France. As tyrannical as the French situation was before 1789, it had made itself infinitely worse by embracing the principles of liberty, equality, and democracy. Of course, at present Britain was a far superior country, but this was in part because of its rich national inheritance of a constitutional monarchy, moderate representation that had emerged from centuries of trial and error, a good church, and a social order. The author paid little attention to the need for reform. Instead, he emphasized that Britain and other European countries were having their national identities threatened by a French ideology that they had seen was destructive. Now was not the time even for discussion of “mending,” for the French had already “appeared in Bantry Bay [in Ireland].” Despite his writing a pamphlet to encourage support of God and country, the author was curiously comforted by the Irish engagement. The French had been soundly defeated, in part due to the near unanimous “Bravery of the People” shown in opposing them.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the author was quite cool in his confidence that Britons would rise to defend their heritage. Rather than focus on the finer points of radical and conservative logic, as earlier dialogue writers had, he focused the majority of his pamphlet on the national character the British people were so fortunate to possess. It assured that, no matter how frightening the French threat was, a united domestic front would emerge.

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<sup>86</sup> “Loyalism Necessary to Self-Preservation,” in *Political Writings of the 1790s, Volume VIII*, edited by Gregory Claeys (London: William Pickering, 1995), 283.

The pamphlet flipped back and forth between idealism and pragmatism. By 1798, a pamphlet exclusively focused on the political would have seemed beside the point. Events within and without France had proved beyond argument that, at least in its current expression, republicanism was out of the question. In focusing on the character of the British people, the author instead took a more comprehensive view of the conflict. He divided them into three groups. The largest were the loyalists. It was this contingent that convinced the author the British were superior to their radical enemies. The political loyalty of this group was “inseparably interwoven with their religious Tenets,” that any “Fear of Dereliction” was nonexistent. Conservatism was not a narrow political stance regarding the situation in France but was now descriptive of people in their totality. From how they were ruled, to what they read, to where they went to Church, attributes of conservatism were inseparable as each contributed to a certain everyday life that was the true treasure of the polity. The second group consisted of democrats, of “most rancorous Spirit,” about whom the author has little to write.<sup>87</sup>

Separate from these two opposing forces was no small number of individuals who were not attached to any political or moral system, and would instead support whichever regime best served their self-interest. Here, the stable order of the British government would ensure that they too would support their homeland as it was. If one mark of conservatism was a fondness for older ways, another marker was continued reliance on the preexisting simply because it had long proven reliable. In his uncertain times the author was convinced that the self-interested would cling to present institutions. Compared to the risks that came with even major republican reforms, let alone revolution, the constitutional monarchy and conservative social manners that had presided over a relatively peaceful domestic scene would be preferable. While this group

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<sup>87</sup> “Loyalism Necessary,” 289.

lacked “that Purity of Principle,” it would support the same ends as that “first class of Patriots,” to quell the threat of radicalism at home.<sup>88</sup> While not ideal, an alliance between the merely pragmatic and the wholesome, truly British general public would be enough to ensure wartime solidarity.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the destabilizing threat posed by radicalism was safely excised from the public square. British Romanticism had become, for the time being, an apolitical, personal art more attached to religious feeling than revolutionary zeal. The Anglican Church retained its place as the state and cultural religion. Lesser-known but more widely read books reiterated political and social counterarguments to radical writing. Pitt’s government would go on hiatus following the Acts of Union, but the British state remained firm in its opposition to the spread of revolutionary ideology.<sup>89</sup> With only brief interruptions, war against revolutionary and Napoleonic France would continue until 1815.

Nineteenth century Britain would see radicalism return in the form of various successful reform movements. Crucially, however, Britain had not seen a revolution of its own at a time when European nations experienced political upheaval. Instead, Britain articulated what it was in opposition to revolution. What began as a political and philosophical debate between MPs, bureaucrats, and religious radicals quickly evolved into a more general debate among the literate and laboring population. The number of citizens fully engaged in some aspect of this discourse is impossible to ascertain, as is the numbers fervently committed to a counterrevolutionary view.

The outcome, however, cannot be disputed. It seems the pragmatism of our most recent

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> The Acts of Union united the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland in 1800. Henceforth, the two kingdoms would have one parliament in Westminster and be known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

pamphleteer proved valuable, if not in the manner he envisioned, for the conservative, i.e. prerevolutionary, view of proper religion, cultural expression, and social practices were strengthened by the threat of revolution. Whereas these values had not been questioned with the vehemence they were in the 1790s, now their status was defended and enshrined as a mark of identity. In war time, it was one's duty as a Briton to uphold the nation's superior character.

## V. Implications

Burke died in 1797, and for all his perceptiveness, he could not have foreseen his posthumous importance. His pamphlet began a new political debate in Parliament that would redefine the political spectrum of Britain along a right-left spectrum more familiar to the twenty-first century reader.<sup>90</sup> Even before his expiration, a general idea of what was written in the *Reflections*, and more importantly of the intellectual legitimacy Burke had lent the Tory cause, was taken for granted as the truth that had been vindicated by the French themselves. With a Burkean argument for their inherent sanctity, British institutions now possessed an authority that was not characteristic of the past Burke so revered.<sup>91</sup>

A growing conservatism defined by its attachment to traditional political ideologies, religious convictions, social manners, and cultural forms were in the ascendant. Alongside these trends was a complementary form of conservatism wedded to order. This was the value that most par-for-the-course diplomats prized above all else. As we have seen, preexisting political concerns came to dominate revolutionary debate. Facing uncertain principles and values, a war with France gave revolutionary debate a comforting, familiar urgency. War with France had arrived once more, and Britain had to take up arms against it and what it stood for. Because of

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<sup>90</sup> Claeys, "Introduction," xix.

<sup>91</sup> Tombs, *The English and Their History*, 385-6.

the scope and nature of the Revolution, however, an essential part of this project required Britons to articulate what they were, even as they rejected the French Revolution. In doing so, they began to speak of themselves in comprehensive, patriotic terms. Britain was not alone in experiencing a growing nationalism, but it did so with counterrevolutionaries in power. Because of preexisting political priorities and cultural norms, a love of all things not new was nurtured, but this in the self-consciousness of its expression, affection for the old proved a significant novelty.

In radical and conservative debates of the 1790s, the role played by the onset of war cannot be underestimated. It provided the government a blank check to attack radicals at home. For the less politically engaged, Burke's and Fox's fights may or may not have mattered, whereas war was a tangible threat. A conservative turn can also only be said to occur because of the variety of instances in which it is evinced. Yes, the force of the government played a crucial role, but the mark of its success in implementing the contents of its conservatism was in the voluntary acquiescence of a number of its citizens. Although suppressive measures mean that increasing silence among radicals in Britain cannot be taken to mean they were changing their minds, an outpouring of writing opposed to radicalism cannot be denied. As more information about the Terror and the Wars of Revolution arrived, diplomats, MPs, and conservative religious figures were joined in their disapproval by lesser-known writers and novelists. Although laboring Britons did not record their own opinions with nearly as much frequency, their involvement in the debate was great enough for their activities to play a central role in the writings of the literate. Unknown pamphleteers and authors may not have enjoyed as large a readership as Burke, but in their existence and numbers, they created a climate of increasing, popular conservatism that Burke never could brought about himself.

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