

XV THE WAR WITH THE GREAT REPUBLICS

We cannot understand the eighteenth century so long as we suppose that rhetoric is artificial because it is artistic. We do not fall into this folly about any of the other arts. We talk of a man picking out notes arranged in ivory on a wooden piano "with much feeling," or of his pouring out his soul by scraping on cat-gut after a training as careful as an acrobat's. But we are still haunted with a prejudice that verbal form and verbal effect must somehow be hypocritical when they are the link between things so living as a man and a mob. We doubt the feeling of the old-fashioned orator, because his periods are so rounded and pointed as to convey his feeling. Now before any criticism of the eighteenth-century worthies must be put the proviso of their perfect artistic sincerity. Their oratory was unrhymed poetry, and it had the humanity of poetry. It was not even unmetrical poetry; that century is full of great phrases, often spoken on the spur of great moments, which have in them the throb and recurrence of song, as of a man thinking to a tune. Nelson's "In honour I gained them, in honour I will die with them," has more rhythm than much that is called vers libres. Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" might be a great line in Walt Whitman.

It is one of the many quaint perversities of the English to pretend to be bad speakers; but in fact the most English eighteenth-century epoch blazed with brilliant speakers. There may have been finer writing in France; there was no such fine speaking as in England. The Parliament had faults enough, but it was sincere enough to be rhetorical. The Parliament was corrupt, as it is now; though the examples of corruption were then often really made examples, in the sense of warnings, where they are now examples only in the sense of patterns. The Parliament was indifferent to the constituencies, as it is now; though perhaps the constituencies were less indifferent to the Parliament. The Parliament was snobbish, as it is now, though perhaps more respectful to mere rank and less to mere wealth. But the Parliament was a Parliament; it did fulfil its name and duty by talking, and trying to talk well. It did not merely do things because they do not bear talking about--as it does now. It was then, to the eternal glory of our country, a great "talking-shop," not a mere buying and selling shop for financial tips and official places. And as with any other artist, the care the eighteenth-century man expended on oratory is a proof of his sincerity, not a disproof of it. An enthusiastic eulogium by Burke is as rich and elaborate as a lover's sonnet; but it is because Burke is really enthusiastic, like the lover. An angry sentence by Junius is as carefully compounded as a Renaissance poison; but it is because Junius is really angry--like the poisoner. Now, nobody who has realized this psychological truth can doubt for a moment that many of the English aristocrats of the eighteenth century had a real enthusiasm for liberty; their voices lift like

trumpets upon the very word. Whatever their immediate forbears may have meant, these men meant what they said when they talked of the high memory of Hampden or the majesty of Magna Carta. Those Patriots whom Walpole called the Boys included many who really were patriots--or better still, who really were boys. If we prefer to put it so, among the Whig aristocrats were many who really were Whigs; Whigs by all the ideal definitions which identified the party with a defence of law against tyrants and courtiers. But if anybody deduces, from the fact that the Whig aristocrats were Whigs, any doubt about whether the Whig aristocrats were aristocrats, there is one practical test and reply. It might be tested in many ways: by the game laws and enclosure laws they passed, or by the strict code of the duel and the definition of honour on which they all insisted. But if it be really questioned whether I am right in calling their whole world an aristocracy, and the very reverse of it a democracy, the true historical test is this: that when republicanism really entered the world, they instantly waged two great wars with it--or (if the view be preferred) it instantly waged two great wars with them. America and France revealed the real nature of the English Parliament. Ice may sparkle, but a real spark will show it is only ice. So when the red fire of the Revolution touched the frosty splendours of the Whigs, there was instantly a hissing and a strife; a strife of the flame to melt the ice, of the water to quench the flame.

It has been noted that one of the virtues of the aristocrats was liberty, especially liberty among themselves. It might even be said that one of the virtues of the aristocrats was cynicism. They were not stuffed with our fashionable fiction, with its stiff and wooden figures of a good man named Washington and a bad man named Boney. They at least were aware that Washington's cause was not so obviously white nor Napoleon's so obviously black as most books in general circulation would indicate. They had a natural admiration for the military genius of Washington and Napoleon; they had the most unmixed contempt for the German Royal Family. But they were, as a class, not only against both Washington and Napoleon, but against them both for the same reason. And it was that they both stood for democracy.

Great injustice is done to the English aristocratic government of the time through a failure to realize this fundamental difference, especially in the case of America. There is a wrong-headed humour about the English which appears especially in this, that while they often (as in the case of Ireland) make themselves out right where they were entirely wrong, they are easily persuaded (as in the case of America) to make themselves out entirely wrong where there is at least a case for their having been more or less right. George III.'s Government laid certain taxes on the colonial community on the eastern seaboard of America. It was certainly not self-evident, in the sense of law and precedent, that the imperial government could not lay taxes on such colonists. Nor were the taxes themselves of that

practically oppressive sort which rightly raise everywhere the common casuistry of revolution. The Whig oligarchs had their faults, but utter lack of sympathy with liberty, especially local liberty, and with their adventurous kindred beyond the seas, was by no means one of their faults. Chatham, the great chief of the new and very national noblesse, was typical of them in being free from the faintest illiberality and irritation against the colonies as such. He would have made them free and even favoured colonies, if only he could have kept them as colonies. Burke, who was then the eloquent voice of Whiggism, and was destined later to show how wholly it was a voice of aristocracy, went of course even further. Even North compromised; and though George III., being a fool, might himself have refused to compromise, he had already failed to effect the Bolingbroke scheme of the restitution of the royal power. The case for the Americans, the real reason for calling them right in the quarrel, was something much deeper than the quarrel. They were at issue, not with a dead monarchy, but with a living aristocracy; they declared war on something much finer and more formidable than poor old George. Nevertheless, the popular tradition, especially in America, has pictured it primarily as a duel of George III. and George Washington; and, as we have noticed more than once, such pictures though figurative are seldom false. King George's head was not much more useful on the throne than it was on the sign-board of a tavern; nevertheless, the sign-board was really a sign, and a sign of the times. It stood for a tavern that sold not English but German beer. It stood for that side of the Whig policy which Chatham showed when he was tolerant to America alone, but intolerant of America when allied with France. That very wooden sign stood, in short, for the same thing as the juncture with Frederick the Great; it stood for that Anglo-German alliance which, at a very much later time in history, was to turn into the world-old Teutonic Race.

Roughly and frankly speaking, we may say that America forced the quarrel. She wished to be separate, which was to her but another phrase for wishing to be free. She was not thinking of her wrongs as a colony, but already of her rights as a republic. The negative effect of so small a difference could never have changed the world, without the positive effect of a great ideal, one may say of a great new religion. The real case for the colonists is that they felt they could be something, which they also felt, and justly, that England would not help them to be. England would probably have allowed the colonists all sorts of concessions and constitutional privileges; but England could not allow the colonists equality: I do not mean equality with her, but even with each other. Chatham might have compromised with Washington, because Washington was a gentleman; but Chatham could hardly have conceived a country not governed by gentlemen. Burke was apparently ready to grant everything to America; but he would not have been ready to grant what America eventually gained. If he had seen American democracy, he would have been as much appalled by it as he was by French democracy, and would always have been by any democracy. In a word,

the Whigs were liberal and even generous aristocrats, but they were aristocrats; that is why their concessions were as vain as their conquests. We talk, with a humiliation too rare with us, about our dubious part in the secession of America. Whether it increase or decrease the humiliation I do not know; but I strongly suspect that we had very little to do with it. I believe we counted for uncommonly little in the case. We did not really drive away the American colonists, nor were they driven. They were led on by a light that went before.

That light came from France, like the armies of Lafayette that came to the help of Washington. France was already in travail with the tremendous spiritual revolution which was soon to reshape the world. Her doctrine, disruptive and creative, was widely misunderstood at the time, and is much misunderstood still, despite the splendid clarity of style in which it was stated by Rousseau in the "Contrat Social," and by Jefferson in The Declaration of Independence. Say the very word "equality" in many modern countries, and four hundred fools will leap to their feet at once to explain that some men can be found, on careful examination, to be taller or handsomer than others. As if Danton had not noticed that he was taller than Robespierre, or as if Washington was not well aware that he was handsomer than Franklin. This is no place to expound a philosophy; it will be enough to say in passing, by way of a parable, that when we say that all pennies are equal, we do not mean that they all look exactly the same. We mean that they are absolutely equal in their one absolute character, in the most important thing about them. It may be put practically by saying that they are coins of a certain value, twelve of which go to a shilling. It may be put symbolically, and even mystically, by saying that they all bear the image of the King. And, though the most mystical, it is also the most practical summary of equality that all men bear the image of the King of Kings. Indeed, it is of course true that this idea had long underlain all Christianity, even in institutions less popular in form than were, for instance, the mob of mediæval republics in Italy. A dogma of equal duties implies that of equal rights. I know of no Christian authority that would not admit that it is as wicked to murder a poor man as a rich man, or as bad to burgle an inelegantly furnished house as a tastefully furnished one. But the world had wandered further and further from these truisms, and nobody in the world was further from them than the group of the great English aristocrats. The idea of the equality of men is in substance simply the idea of the importance of man. But it was precisely the notion of the importance of a mere man which seemed startling and indecent to a society whose whole romance and religion now consisted of the importance of a gentleman. It was as if a man had walked naked into Parliament. There is not space here to develop the moral issue in full, but this will suffice to show that the critics concerned about the difference in human types or talents are considerably wasting their time. If they can understand how two coins can count the same though one is bright and the other brown, they might perhaps understand how

two men can vote the same though one is bright and the other dull. If, however, they are still satisfied with their solid objection that some men are dull, I can only gravely agree with them, that some men are very dull.

But a few years after Lafayette had returned from helping to found a republic in America he was flung over his own frontiers for resisting the foundation of a republic in France. So furious was the onward stride of this new spirit that the republican of the new world lived to be the reactionary of the old. For when France passed from theory to practice, the question was put to the world in a way not thinkable in connection with the prefatory experiment of a thin population on a colonial coast. The mightiest of human monarchies, like some monstrous immeasurable idol of iron, was melted down in a furnace barely bigger than itself, and recast in a size equally colossal, but in a shape men could not understand. Many, at least, could not understand it, and least of all the liberal aristocracy of England. There were, of course, practical reasons for a continuous foreign policy against France, whether royal or republican. There was primarily the desire to keep any foreigner from menacing us from the Flemish coast; there was, to a much lesser extent, the colonial rivalry in which so much English glory had been gained by the statesmanship of Chatham and the arms of Wolfe and of Clive. The former reason has returned on us with a singular irony; for in order to keep the French out of Flanders we flung ourselves with increasing enthusiasm into a fraternity with the Germans. We purposely fed and pampered the power which was destined in the future to devour Belgium as France would never have devoured it, and threaten us across the sea with terrors of which no Frenchman would ever dream. But indeed much deeper things unified our attitude towards France before and after the Revolution. It is but one stride from despotism to democracy, in logic as well as in history; and oligarchy is equally remote from both. The Bastille fell, and it seemed to an Englishman merely that a despot had turned into a demos. The young Bonaparte rose, and it seemed to an Englishman merely that a demos had once more turned into a despot. He was not wrong in thinking these allotropic forms of the same alien thing; and that thing was equality. For when millions are equally subject to one law, it makes little difference if they are also subject to one lawgiver; the general social life is a level. The one thing that the English have never understood about Napoleon, in all their myriad studies of his mysterious personality, is how impersonal he was. I had almost said how unimportant he was. He said himself, "I shall go down to history with my code in my hand;" but in practical effects, as distinct from mere name and renown, it would be even truer to say that his code will go down to history with his hand set to it in signature--somewhat illegibly. Thus his testamentary law has broken up big estates and encouraged contented peasants in places where his name is cursed, in places where his name is almost unknown. In his lifetime, of course, it was natural that the annihilating splendour of his military strokes should rivet the eye like flashes of lightning; but his rain fell more

silently, and its refreshment remained. It is needless to repeat here that after bursting one world-coalition after another by battles that are the masterpieces of the military art, he was finally worn down by two comparatively popular causes, the resistance of Russia and the resistance of Spain. The former was largely, like so much that is Russian, religious; but in the latter appeared most conspicuously that which concerns us here, the valour, vigilance and high national spirit of England in the eighteenth century. The long Spanish campaign tried and made triumphant the great Irish soldier, afterwards known as Wellington; who has become all the more symbolic since he was finally confronted with Napoleon in the last defeat of the latter at Waterloo. Wellington, though too logical to be at all English, was in many ways typical of the aristocracy; he had irony and independence of mind. But if we wish to realize how rigidly such men remained limited by their class, how little they really knew what was happening in their time, it is enough to note that Wellington seems to have thought he had dismissed Napoleon by saying he was not really a gentleman. If an acute and experienced Chinaman were to say of Chinese Gordon, "He is not actually a Mandarin," we should think that the Chinese system deserved its reputation for being both rigid and remote.

But the very name of Wellington is enough to suggest another, and with it the reminder that this, though true, is inadequate. There was some truth in the idea that the Englishman was never so English as when he was outside England, and never smacked so much of the soil as when he was on the sea. There has run through the national psychology something that has never had a name except the eccentric and indeed extraordinary name of Robinson Crusoe; which is all the more English for being quite undiscoverable in England. It may be doubted if a French or German boy especially wishes that his cornland or vineland were a desert; but many an English boy has wished that his island were a desert island. But we might even say that the Englishman was too insular for an island. He awoke most to life when his island was sundered from the foundations of the world, when it hung like a planet and flew like a bird. And, by a contradiction, the real British army was in the navy; the boldest of the islanders were scattered over the moving archipelago of a great fleet. There still lay on it, like an increasing light, the legend of the Armada; it was a great fleet full of the glory of having once been a small one. Long before Wellington ever saw Waterloo the ships had done their work, and shattered the French navy in the Spanish seas, leaving like a light upon the sea the life and death of Nelson, who died with his stars on his bosom and his heart upon his sleeve. There is no word for the memory of Nelson except to call him mythical. The very hour of his death, the very name of his ship, are touched with that epic completeness which critics call the long arm of coincidence and prophets the hand of God. His very faults and failures were heroic, not in a loose but in a classic sense; in that he fell only like the legendary heroes, weakened by a woman, not foiled by any foe among men. And he remains

the incarnation of a spirit in the English that is purely poetic; so poetic that it fancies itself a thousand things, and sometimes even fancies itself prosaic. At a recent date, in an age of reason, in a country already calling itself dull and business-like, with top-hats and factory chimneys already beginning to rise like towers of funereal efficiency, this country clergyman's son moved to the last in a luminous cloud, and acted a fairy tale. He shall remain as a lesson to those who do not understand England, and a mystery to those who think they do. In outward action he led his ships to victory and died upon a foreign sea; but symbolically he established something indescribable and intimate, something that sounds like a native proverb; he was the man who burnt his ships, and who for ever set the Thames on fire.