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## Two 'Romantic' Fragments: Bürger and Shelley on Revolution

A work abandoned for no obvious external reasons by an author long before his death calls for an explanation, which this essay aims to provide for two such fragmentary texts. These two texts are Gottfried August Bürger's treatise "Die Republik England" of 1792/1793 and Shelley's 1819 "A Philosophical View of Reform". A reading of these two fascinating fragments will reveal a number of enlightening parallels and differences in two crucial moments in history – 1792/1793 and 1819/1820 – and in the attempts of two very different writers to come to terms with them.

I will argue that both these texts had to remain fragments because of central inconsistencies and fundamental conceptual problems in their design and argument and additionally – in the case of Bürger's historical essay – because the course of political events at the time of composition raised doubts as to the validity of central claims the author set out to propose. In each case, then, a fundamental impasse in the argument or the design of the work forced an author to break off and abandon his text.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Gottfried August Bürger's "Die Republik England"

With his 1792/93 treatise "Die Republik England"<sup>2</sup> on the English Revolution of the 1640s and 1650s, which appeared in serial form in Girtanner's conservative journal *Politische Annalen*,<sup>3</sup> Bürger attempted to elicit understanding for the French Revolution through a comparison with the English Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. After the abolition of the monarchy in France and after the September massacres, the conservative readership of Girtanner's journal, which was entirely critical of the Revolution, in many ways even counter-revolutionary, surely craved a condemnation of the French Revolution, but this is not what Bürger had to offer. His intentions of promoting understanding for the French Revolution by pointing out the great achievements of the English Revolution are made clear from the very beginning. This is Bürger, writing late in 1792:

The great and unprecedented experiences of recent times: the complete revolution of an age-old monarchical state, the dethroning and capturing of a king recently ruling so high, the expressions of courage and strength of a republic hardly born [...] accompanied by victorious and glorious major battles and conquests: all these and more experiences remind one of the brief but highly memorable period of British history in which England

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, this essay is not concerned with the fragment as an aesthetic strategy in English and German Romanticism. For an excellent comparative discussion of this cf. Schmitt.

<sup>2</sup> The translation in the text is mine with page numbers in the original indicated parenthetically in the text; the German original will be cited in the footnotes. My reading of Bürger's text is strongly indebted to Gassenmeier.

<sup>3</sup> For the likely time of composition (autumn 1792 and winter 1792/93), publication history, sources etc. cf. Friedrich, who, however, entirely overlooks the conceptual problems and inconsistencies in Bürger's essay.

was a republic and achieved heroic deeds as never before or after. Let it therefore be permitted here [...] to paint a picture of these times with no other obligation but that imposed upon us by reason and taste; a picture for mature and salutary contemplation for everyone, especially those taking part with either sword or pen in the latest events [in France]. (953)<sup>4</sup>

It can be shown that in the course of the essay Bürger entangled himself in the most curious and astonishing contradictions, which ultimately forced him to abandon the endeavour and to leave the essay a fragment.

The idea of campaigning for the French Revolution by means of a comparison with the English Revolution of the 1640s and 1650s was difficult from its very inception, for comparisons of the French and the English Revolutions were frequent at the time – but the historical analogy was virtually always used in anti-revolutionary tracts with the English Revolution of the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century serving as a terrifying example to warn contemporaries of the necessarily disastrous results of the Revolution in France. The first problem for Bürger, therefore, was that he had to write against an established vogue of writings *condemning* the French Revolution by drawing attention to the *failure* of the English Revolution.

Another problem arises from Bürger's remarkably uncritical and inconsistent use of his two major sources. These major sources, it has long been established, were David Hume's *History of Britain* and Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, both, it must be emphasized, strongly monarchist and anti-revolutionary. Bürger, however, frequently uses phrases, sentences, even entire paragraphs especially from Hume. Most of the time, he takes over pieces of information and alters the emphasis, leaving out Hume's polemical comments against the Revolution or eliminating critical remarks. But quite frequently, Hume's anti-revolutionary royalist evaluations filter into Bürger's text.

Thus, in speaking of the execution of Charles I, of which he clearly approved, Bürger imports directly from Hume a long list of charges brought against the king:

The old Asiatic belief of kings that they wear their crowns directly by the grace of God, not by that of the people, [...] countless faults and misdeeds born from this belief, [...] malevolent and duplicitous secret negotiations and despicable treaties [...] these and similar causes finally brought Charles I to the scaffold. (954)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "Die großen und ungemeynen Erfahrungen der jüngst durchlebten Zeit: die gänzliche Umwälzung eines uralten monarchischen Staates, die Entthronung und Gefangennehmung eines vor kurzem noch so hoch gebietenden Königs; die Mut- und Kraftäufferungen einer kaum geborenen Republik [...] begleitet von sieg- und glorreichen Hauptschlachten und Eroberungen: alle diese und mehrere Erfahrungen erinnern an den kurzen, aber höchst merkwürdigen Zeitraum der britischen Geschichte, da England eine Republik war, und Großthaten, wie weder vor noch nachher, vollbrachte. Es sei uns erlaubt, hiervon ein Gemälde [...] zu entwerfen, ohne irgend einen andern Zwang, als den uns Vernunft und Geschmack auflegen; ein Gemälde zu reifem und heilsamen Nachdenken für jedermann, sonderlich diejenigen, die mit Schwert oder Feder an den neuesten Begebenheiten teilnehmen."

<sup>5</sup> "Der alte asiatische Glaube der Könige, daß sie ihre Kronen unmittelbar von Gottes Gnaden, nicht aber des Volkes Gnaden tragen [...] zahllose Mißgriffe und Untaten, die dieser

But while David Hume calls the execution a "criminal measure", "so irregular and lawless a deed [...] shocking to the general sentiments of mankind", "the height of all iniquity and fanatical extravagance", and speaks of "invented" charges resulting from the "blindness of prejudice, and the allurements of interest" (5: 532-534), Bürger affirms the justice of these accusations. The list of charges against Charles, then, Bürger takes over almost verbatim from Hume, but he gives the account an entirely different evaluation.

It is therefore strange to see that in the passage immediately following, he writes that "his unfortunate head fell on January 30, 1649" (954) and suddenly calls this event a "terrible catastrophe" (954).<sup>6</sup> What has happened here is that he has adopted from Hume (6: 4) a formulation about the "tragical death [of the] unfortunate monarch" and from Clarendon (4: 488) the phrase "lamentable tragedy", which he translates as "fürchterliche Katastrophe" (954).

Another example of such inconsistent use of his sources is Bürger's celebration of the achievements of the English Parliament in the early phase of the Revolution, a celebration which of course goes against the grain of his source in Hume. But while Bürger thus celebrates the achievements of Parliament and fully endorses its principles, he suddenly continues: "The commons arrogated the legislative and the executive powers" (965),<sup>7</sup> which clearly condemns this as an unlawful act. This evaluation is directly indebted to Hume's phrasing that "[the commons] violently arrogated the whole authority of government, and deprived the king of his legal prerogatives" (5: 531).

Let this suffice as a few out of many examples in which Bürger introduced curiously jarring evaluations simply through an inconsistent use of his sources. Thus, quite frequently, when Bürger praises a political idea or a group of revolutionaries, he then pinches a paragraph from Hume or Clarendon in which just that idea or group is condemned in the harshest possible terms. Bürger thus entangles himself in a number of curious contradictions in the evaluation of the various currents and developments in the Revolution. And this is true for both marginal and very central points.

What Bürger gets further into trouble is his dilemma of wishing to remain true to his ideals while trying not to offend his publisher and his readers. One section of his essay that reveals such distortions dictated by a desire to make the English Revolution seem a little more acceptable to conservative readers is Bürger's evaluation of the Levellers, who, as one of the more radical groups within the Revolution, played an important role both in Parliament and in the army in the years of 1645-1649.

Bürger's obvious sympathies for the Levellers are apparent throughout the text, a case in point being his praise of Lilburn's heroism in publishing, while already in prison, the best draft of a constitution to have sprung from the entire revolutionary pe-

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Glaube gebar, [...] arglistige Unterhandlungen und verdammliche Verträge [...] solche und ähnliche Ursachen waren es, welche Karl den Ersten [...] endlich auf das Blutgerüst gebracht hatten."

<sup>6</sup> "[S]ein unglückliches Haupt fiel am 30. Jänner 1649"; "diese furchtbare Katastrophe".

<sup>7</sup> "Die Gemeinen maßen sich sowohl die gesetzgebende als vollziehende Staatsgewalt an".

riod: "This draft was distinguished before all others and contained ideas for the abolition of a number of abuses which still plague England to the present day" (961).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, he repeatedly refers to the Levellers as "the courageous and powerful oppositional party" (961).<sup>9</sup> But in order to make the Levellers more appealing or at least acceptable to his conservative readership, he entirely de-radicalizes and bourgeoisifies them by turning them into absolute protectors of property and of hierarchical systems of government:

For a long time, especially among the [parliamentary] troops, a number of such zealots had assembled, who called themselves commonwealth's men, but who had received from their opponents the derogatory name of *Levellers* in order to ridicule, without laborious contrary proof, both them and their principles, which were deemed naïve and unfeasible. But if one considers these their principles [...], the Levellers did not, it seems, overlook the God-given natural differences in intellectual and physical powers and abilities among people, differences which are so readily apparent to everyone. Nor the natural order and hierarchy that of necessity springs from these differences, an order which raises one above the other and makes one depend on another. [...] But that the *Levellers* did not aim to level everything [...] is evident from their oral and written declarations, according to which the legislature was by no means to have the right to make equal the land and real estate of the citizens, to abolish private property or to make common all goods and belongings.—This much we had to say lest the cause of the Levellers should suffer from their name. (957ff.)<sup>10</sup>

For the sake of making them somewhat more palatable to his conservative readers, Bürger here ascribes positions to the Levellers which would have made their most outspoken exponent John Lilburn turn in his grave.

In the following account of how Cromwell brutally eliminated them as a political force, Bürger describes Cromwell and Parliament, which supported his use of the

<sup>8</sup> "Dieser Entwurf zeichnete sich vor allen andern aus, und enthielt Ideen zur Abstellung mancher Mißbräuche, die England noch bis auf den heutigen Tag drücken."

<sup>9</sup> "die mut- und kraftvolle Gegenpartei".

<sup>10</sup> "Schon längst hatten sich, besonders unter den Truppen [des Parlaments], eine Anzahl solcher Eiferer zusammen getan, die sich selbst Republikaner (Commonwealth'smen) nannten, von ihren Gegnern aber den Spottnamen der Gleichmacher (Levellers) erhielten, um sowohl sie selbst, als ihre für schwärmerisch und unausführbar gehaltenen Grundsätze, ohne mühsamen Gegenbeweis, lächerlich zu machen. Erwägt man jedoch diese Grundsätze [...], so verkannten die Levellers wohl nicht den von Gott und Natur schon eingeführten, jedermann von selbst in die Augen springenden Unterschied geistiger und körperlicher Kräfte und Geschicklichkeiten der Menschen, und eine notwendige daraus entspringende Ordnung, die den einen über den anderen hinwegsetzt, und diesen von jenem abhängig macht. [...] Daß indessen die Levellers nicht alles gleich gemacht wissen wollten [...], das scheinen ihre sowohl mündlichen als schriftlichen Erklärungen zu beweisen, nach welchen die Gesetzgebung keineswegs befugt sein sollte, die Güterbesitzungen der Staatsbürger gegen einander auszugleichen, das Privateigentum aufzuheben, oder alle Habe gemeinschaftlich zu machen.—Soviel mußten wir sagen, damit die Sache der Levellers bei niemand unter ihrem Namen litte."

military to quench internal opposition, in terms hardly less damning than those previously used to condemn Charles I. Cromwell is here denounced as a great hypocrite, a notorious and malicious liar ever ready to abuse the general zeal for the good cause for his own selfish ends.<sup>11</sup> In his assessment of Cromwell and of the state of liberty in the young Republic, Bürger is thus in agreement both with a 1649 Leveller pamphlet, which complained "[W]e were before ruled by King, Lords, and Commons; now by a General, a Court Martial, and House of Commons: and we pray you what is the difference?" (Overton 371),<sup>12</sup> and with modern scholarship, which sees in the rule of Cromwell something approaching a military dictatorship. It seems that at this point, having made clear that only the Levellers were willing and able to develop a system of government along the lines of the early republican enthusiasm, and that these Levellers have been annihilated as a political force by Cromwell, Bürger recognized that the Revolution was doomed to fail and that the republican ideals he was trying to champion by giving an account of the Revolution had been betrayed.

It must have been for this reason, then, that in order to save his work from turning into a devastating verdict on the Republic, Bürger turns from this severe criticism of domestic politics in the early Republic, abandons his account of its political development after less than 9 pages out of some total 70, and shifts his focus to the military history of the wars in Ireland and against Scotland. And in order to find something positive to say about the military achievements of the Republic under Cromwell, he delivers the most astonishing apology of English colonial rule in Ireland:

The original inhabitants of Ireland until very recently lived as raw barbarians, without culture and without any system of government becoming humanity. [...] The conquest of Ireland for the British crown, largely achieved by English private entrepreneurs, therefore had to come as a great gift of happiness to its ill-advised inhabitants. [...] But so blind was their predilection for their old disreputable state, so malicious their envy [...] so unreasonable their hatred [...] that not infrequently did they attempt to revolt against British sovereignty. [...] As far as secular and religious freedom and the resulting blessings of prosperity, of peace and of security are concerned, there remained hardly anything the Irish might have wished for. (961f.)<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. 959, "der große Heuchler Oliver Cromwell, der den Eifer für die gute allgemeine Sache schändlicher und gefährlicher, als je ein Sterblicher nur immer zu lügen beflissen war [...] zu[r] Erreichung selbststüchtiger Endzwecke [...]".

<sup>12</sup> Wolfe (356) ascribes this pamphlet of March 1649 to Richard Overton. The 1649 anonymous pamphlet *Tyraniopocrit Discovered* similarly complained that "the new tyrants which have droven out the old, are in all things so bad or worse than the old tyrants were, onely they have, or doe pretend to have a better faith, and a new forme of tyranny, and in all their other practises, they are worse then their predecessors [...]" (Orwell and Reynolds 106).

<sup>13</sup> "Die Urbewohner Irlands lebten bis auf sehr neue Zeiten herab als rohe Barbaren, ohne Kultur, ohne eine der Menschheit würdige Staatsverfassung. [...] Die größtenteils durch engländische Privatunternehmer vollbrachte Eroberung Irlands für die britische Krone, musste daher wohl seinen übelberatenen Einwohnern zu großem Glücke gereichen. [...] So blind aber war ihre Vorliebe für den alten ehrlösen Zustand [...] so boshaft ihre

This passage, as comparison will show, is of course again closely derived from Hume.<sup>14</sup> But while even Hume speaks of the "ill-judged tyranny" (4: 311) of the English rulers, Bürger virtually eliminates any criticism of English colonial rule over Ireland and stylises Charles and the English regime in Ireland into saviours of a barbaric people. And while, throughout Bürger's essay, Charles I is maligned as a tyrant and a despot, he here becomes the herald of "secular and religious freedom", of "prosperity, of peace and of security" (962).

Given this portrayal of the Irish as barbarians, Bürger thus finds praise at least for "the invincible Cromwell[']s" military achievements (995);<sup>15</sup> and Parliament, earlier denounced as an assembly of dim-witted *claqueurs* easily duped by the "great hypocrite Cromwell",<sup>16</sup> is now seen as a noble and heroic body taking all the necessary measures to rightfully quench the unlawful rebellion in Ireland (969, 996); "great and glorious were all these swift conquests of the young [English] republic in Ireland" (999).<sup>17</sup>

In this context, in addition to the glaring contradictions in the evaluation of Cromwell and his policies, and quite apart from the distortions of key Leveller positions discussed above, blatant inconsistencies in the evaluation of the Levellers themselves become apparent – inconsistencies which entirely depend on the Levellers' function in relation to Cromwell at any given moment in the text. When Bürger earlier needed them as a courageous and powerful opposition to Cromwell, his evaluation of the Levellers, as we have seen, was remarkably positive. Now, as soon as Cromwell is needed as a successful military leader defending the Republic – in itself a curious contrast with earlier assessments –, the Levellers are suddenly cast as obstructive and disruptive troublemakers in the army (993).

Let us again imagine the following situation: a writer with clearly republican leanings, who regards the Revolution in France with obvious sympathy, sells himself out to a reactionary journal. On the one hand, he does not wish to bend to opportunism and to betray his ideals; on the other hand, he does not want to put off or offend his conservative sponsor and his readers. He therefore tries his diplomatic best to portray the

Scheelsucht [...] so vernunftlos ihr Haß [...], dass sie nicht selten gegen die britische Oberherrschaft sich zu empören versuchten. [...] Den Irländern [blieb] in Ansehung weltlicher und geistlicher Freiheit; und des daraus entspringenden Segens des Wohlstandes, des Friedens und der Sicherheit, kaum noch etwas zu wünschen übrig [...]."

<sup>14</sup> For a complete account of the parallels with extensive quotations from Hume's work cf. Gassenmeier (61f.).

<sup>15</sup> "der unwiederstehliche Cromwell".

<sup>16</sup> Bürger speaks of "der große Heuchler Oliver Cromwell" on page 959; cf. also "der wortbrüchige Heuchler", 961.

<sup>17</sup> "[G]roß und glänzend waren all diese schnellen Eroberungen der jungen Republik in Irland" (999). Elsewhere Bürger writes: "This republican feeling of courage and strength found expression not only in words but also in actions". "Dieses republikanische Mut- und Kraftgefühl äußerte sich nicht nur in Worten, sondern auch in Taten." (1010). There are many other euphoric assessments of the Republic's military achievements.

English Revolution as a blessed period of unique political and social achievements; and he does so almost exclusively from sources which unequivocally condemn that Revolution as a dreadful political catastrophe. However, what really breaks Bürger's neck in this artistic tightrope act is yet something else: what apparently became clear to him in the course of composing his essay is that the Revolution in England did bring about a large number of very modern and progressive ideas, but that in terms of practical application of these ideas, the *de-facto* dictatorship under Cromwell was quite a disaster. Given these political developments in England, which clearly ran counter to his desire to praise the young Republic, he tried to sidestep the problem by describing the military achievements of the Republic. But even the grotesque denunciation of the Irish people to make the English oppression of Ireland seem more acceptable cannot save his essay. Because with the installation of Cromwell as the sole commander-in-chief of the entire military, the failure of the republic to secure even the most basic forms of new liberty was inevitable:

Cromwell was named Commander in Chief of the entire English army. The Republic, which so far had almost exclusively maintained itself by means of armed power, could not have entrusted more reckless and more dangerous hands with so important a power of command. (1016)<sup>18</sup>

This, according to Bürger's understanding, was a virtually suicidal error.

Given contemporary events in France late in 1792 and early in 1793, he must have begun to have serious doubts that the English Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century could successfully be presented as a beneficial forerunner of the French Revolution or that it could induce understanding or even sympathy for contemporary France in his conservative readers. Clearly, whoever reflected on the succession of events in England in the late 1640s and especially in the 1650s had to realize that without grotesque falsification of history, the English Revolution was entirely unsuitable to appease conservative minds about events in France. And elements of such a falsification of history, as we have seen, are indeed apparent in Bürger's portrayal of English rule in Ireland, in his praise of Cromwell's brutal and bloody quenching of the Irish Rebellion, and in his grotesquely de-radicalized portrayal of the Levellers.

It must have become obvious to Bürger in the winter of 1792/1793 that his purpose of eliciting sympathy for the French Revolution by positively portraying the English Revolution was a hopeless endeavour; and a few pages after the realization that with Cromwell's rise to supreme power the Republic was doomed, Bürger's account breaks off.

## 2. Shelley's "A Philosophical View of Reform"

My second fragment on revolution is Shelley's treatise "A Philosophical View of Reform", written in 1819 after the Peterloo Massacre. On 16 August 1819, brutal intervention of the military killed 11 people and wounded about 500 when some 60,000

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<sup>18</sup> "Cromwell wurde zum Oberbefehlshaber der ganzen engländischen Macht angestellt. Verwegnern und gefährlicheren Händen konnte eine Republik, die bis dahin fast allein durch die Gewalt der Waffen bestand, ein so wichtiges Kommando nicht anvertrauen."

people assembled in Manchester peacefully to protest in favour of parliamentary reform. Upon hearing of this massacre in his Italian exile, Shelley began his essay, in which, after an overview of the development of liberty in world history since ancient Greece, he discusses the need for political and social reform in Britain, outlines a number of these necessary reforms, and attempts to chart a likely path to achieving them.

Desmond King-Hele speaks for many critics of the essay when he calls "A Philosophical View of Reform" "the last and best of Shelley's political utterances" (143).<sup>19</sup> Several commentators have even spoken of it as "the most advanced work of political theory of the age" (Cameron, *Golden Years* 149).<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, it seems that the success of Shelley's essay and the corresponding poems of 1819, which have been influential texts in the history of European socialism, may have made many critics overlook or gloss over the key conceptual problems they pose.<sup>21</sup> An analysis of the structure of Shelley's argument will show that the text has reached a shattering argumentative impasse at just the point at which it breaks off, a fundamental conceptual problem that is quite sufficient to explain why the text had to remain a fragment. Fear of not finding a publisher for his essay, as the standard explanation has it,<sup>22</sup> can hardly have made him

<sup>19</sup> Cameron argues that "His general views on these matters, his social philosophy, received their most complete expression in his long prose work, 'A Philosophical View of Reform'" ("Percy Bysshe Shelley" 10); Kalim calls the "Reform" essay "his greatest single contribution [...] to the social thought of the day." (29); Cantor speaks of it as the "one text among all of Shelley's writings [...] central to any examination of his political and economic views" (22).

<sup>20</sup> Cantor calls it "the most significant and substantive essay on economic matters produced by any of the English Romantics" (42). Cf. also Hoagwood (209) and Foot (*Red Shelley* 180 et passim). Numerous further scholars might be quoted here with similar assessments.

<sup>21</sup> It is plausible, of course, to argue that some of the ambivalence in the "Reform" essay may be due to Shelley's attempt to harmonize the demands of moderate reformers such as Burdett and Leigh Hunt rallied round Hunt's *Examiner* with those of the radicals Henry Hunt, Cartwright, Cobbett etc. with Cobbett's *Register* as their organ. He knew that reform was only possible if reform forces did not neutralize and obstruct each other. But this is hardly enough to account for the key conceptual problems of the treatise.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. for instance the "Editorial Notes" by Ingpen and Peck (7: 332). In his introduction to a 1993 popular edition of the "Reform" essay and the accompanying poetry of late 1819 ("Men of England" etc.), Foot writes about Shelley's failure to complete and to publish the essay and his attempt to get Hunt to publish it or to arrange publication for him: "He knew no one to turn to except Hunt, and Hunt was not amenable. Thus the collection was not published [...]" ("Introduction" 1). Cf. also "Introduction", 4: "[T]he deafening silence from Hunt [who failed to respond to his requests to arrange for publication of the essay] obliged him to abandon it." Cf. also Foot, *Red Shelley*, passim. In *Shelley: Golden Years*, Cameron writes: "Unfortunately, his failure to get a publisher discouraged him from continuing, and the work is unfinished" (128). Some scholars also cite Shelley's letter to Ollier (15 December 1819; *Letters* 2: 164), in which he states that "now that I see the passion of party will postpone the great struggle till another year, I shall not

give up the project: many of Shelley's texts – including "The Masque of Anarchy" (only published in 1832) – remained unpublished in his lifetime.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Shelley himself in a curiously oblique but highly enlightening comment in a letter to the Gisbornes remarked on his endeavours in "A Philosophical View of Reform":

I have deserted the odorous gardens of literature to journey across the great sandy desert of Politics; not, you may imagine, without the hope of finding some enchanted paradise. In all probability, I shall be overwhelmed by one of the tempestuous columns which are forever traversing with the speed of a storm & the confusion of chaos that pathless wilderness. (to J. & M. Gisborne, 6 Nov. 1819, *Letters* 2: 150)

The letter is usually only cited to date the beginning of Shelley's work on the "Reform" treatise – but it is also an uncomfortable hint at potential problems in the endeavour he was undertaking.

Let us turn to an overview of the text itself and of the problems it proposes to solve. In the "Introduction", the first of three sections, Shelley gives an overview of the development of liberty in world history from Greece to the England of his own time; in the chapter entitled "On the sentiment of the Necessity of change", he argues the need for change in British society and makes a good number of very reasonable proposals such as enlarging the suffrage, abolishing tithes, parliamentary reform, reducing the national debt, freedom of religion etc. Difficulties only arise in the section entitled "Probable Means", in which Shelley discusses how these reforms are to be achieved.<sup>24</sup> Here, he uneasily hovers between a call for passive resistance and a realization that revolutionary violence may be necessary.

Throughout the essay, there are passages which seem filled with high hopes for imminent change: "The literature of England, an energetic development of which has

trouble myself to finish [the "Reform" treatise] for this season." Cf. for instance Dawson (197). This is hardly compelling evidence, for as late as May 1820 he was still trying to have it published; cf. the much-quoted letter to Hunt of 26 May 1820 (*Letters* 2: 201).

<sup>23</sup> "A Philosophical View of Reform" was first published by Oxford UP in 1920, edited by T.W. Rolleston. For the history of Shelley's manuscript until 1920 cf. for example Peck.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. McNiece: "The first problem for Shelley, as for every other reformer, was how to persuade Parliament to reform itself when the membership of the House of Commons was for the most part dedicated to and profiting by the perpetuation of the old order" (90). Interestingly, McNiece closely echoes Shelley's crucial crux apparently without recognizing it as a fundamental problem: "Once the people have won their cause, by whatever means, and have 'assumed the control of public affairs according to constitutional rules [...]" (92). Newman Ivey White similarly fails to see this central problem as a potential reason for Shelley to abandon the work: "In the incomplete nature of Shelley's essay it is impossible to state the steps by which these changes were to be realized" (2: 147). White discusses "A Philosophical View of Reform" on pages 144-151. Dawson (5 et passim), also comments on this dilemma in Shelley's thoughts and quotes an enlightening passage from Hobsbawm's remarks on millenarian hopes: "millenarian movements share a fundamental vagueness about the actual way in which the new society will be brought about" (Hobsbawm, 57f).

ever followed or preceded a great and free development of the national will, has arisen, as it were, from a new birth" (19).<sup>25</sup> It is in a similarly optimistic vein that Shelley repeatedly calls for passive resistance in the hope that the tyrants will not be able to uphold for long a system of oppression in the face of a passively resisting multitude prepared to "receive with unshrinking bosoms the bayonets of the charging battalions":

[I]f the tyrants command their troops to fire upon them or cut them down unless they disperse, [the true patriot] will exhort them peaceably to risque the danger, and to expect without resistance the onset of the cavalry, and wait with folded arms the event of the fire of the artillery and receive with unshrinking bosoms the bayonets of the charging battalions. [...] the soldiers are men and Englishmen, and it is not to be believed that they would massacre an unresisting multitude of their countrymen drawn up in unarmed array before them [...]. (48f.)

This is the tone and tenor predominant in much of the "Reform" essay. But despite the high hopes, there are passages in which Shelley comes to realize that peaceful passive resistance may no longer be an option:

It is possible that the period of conciliation is past, and that after having played with the confidence and cheated the expectations of the people, their passions will be too little under discipline to allow them to wait the slow, gradual and certain operation of such a Reform as we can imagine the constituted authorities to concede. (46)

Reform, it seems, may no longer be possible. And after the somewhat stubborn and logically inconsequential assertion that "If the Houses of Parliament obstinately and perpetually refuse to concede any reform to the people, my vote is for universal suffrage and equal representation" (47), Shelley launches into a tortuous line of reasoning that ultimately leads him to the realization that violent "struggle must ensue":

If the Houses of Parliament obstinately and perpetually refuse to concede any reform to the people, my vote is for universal suffrage and equal representation. My vote is—but, it is asked, how shall this be accomplished [...]? This question I would answer by another. [...] When the majority in any nation arrive at a conviction that it is their duty and their interest to divest the minority of a power employed to their disadvantage; and the minority are sufficiently mistaken as to believe that their superiority is tenable, a struggle must ensue. (47)

While, in a number of passages throughout the essay, he maintains that non-violent protest is the appropriate and promising means to achieve the necessary reforms, he here acknowledges that this is no longer an option under the prevailing political circumstances. The clearest recognition that revolutionary violence is inevitable, however, occurs in the following brief passage: "For so dear is power that the tyrants themselves neither then, nor now, nor ever, left or leave a path to freedom but through their own blood"(6). But even advocacy of revolutionary violence is recognized to be an untenable position. For reforms achieved by means of violence are only attained at the

<sup>25</sup> Cf. also the Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, where Shelley writes that "[M]ankind appear to me to be emerging from their trance. I am aware, methinks, of a slow, gradual, silent change" (*Poetical Works* 34).

price of their immediate self-cancellation; they cannot be made to last. If the republic Shelley hopes for and is trying to promote is brought about by means of violence, it risks being an unstable one destined for failure: "A Republic, however just in its principle and glorious in its object, would through violence and sudden change which must attend it, incur a great risk of being as rapid in its decline as in its growth" (41).

What lies behind Shelley's hovering between passive resistance and the call for revolution, more precisely, what lies behind his quick insistence that revolution cannot responsibly be claimed as an option, is a profound despair in view of an anthropological scepticism that is uncomfortably hinted at throughout the essay: Shelley apparently came to believe that the masses were neither prepared nor able to carry out a revolution. But there is an even more problematic thought behind it: the masses clearly would not be able even to handle the liberty they might achieve. This becomes clear in another passage which, given its frame of reference in the English and French Revolutions, brings us back full circle to Bürger's preoccupations. This is Shelley again, arguing by historical analogy that a revolution would lead to uncontrollable violence and could not be a means of achieving the desired liberties: "The authors of both [the English and the French] Revolutions proposed a greater and more glorious object than the degraded passions of their countrymen permitted them to attain" (15). Similarly, he argues that "the poor [...] by means of that degraded condition [...] are sufficiently incapable of discerning their own genuine and permanent advantage [...]" (21).

This is of course a timeless dilemma: in the context of the English Revolution, it occupied and tormented Milton; during the French Revolution, a similar anthropological scepticism prompted Wordsworth and Coleridge to recant their early enthusiasm for the Revolution and made them turn to Burkean conservatism (cf. Gurr).

It becomes painfully clear in the course of Shelley's treatise that this hovering between a call for passive resistance throughout the better part of the text and the acknowledgement that violence may be inevitable cannot be an ingenious double strategy, superficially claiming to warn the masses against violence while obliquely showing it to be the only solution. Rather, it is the result of a fundamental anthropological and political problem that may well have been impossible to solve under the prevailing conditions: Shelley must have come to understand that neither passive resistance nor violence were possible means of bringing about the desired reforms.<sup>26</sup>

This dilemma of not knowing how to counter oppression, whether by means of passive resistance or by means of revolutionary violence, also occurs in Shelley's poetry written at around the same time. It may, for example, be illustrated by quoting from "The Mask of Anarchy", written at exactly the same time. In a very similar way, Shelley here also hovers between passive resistance and revolutionary violence:

And if then the tyrants dare  
Let them ride among you there,

<sup>26</sup>

A letter written nine days before his death in its resigned and defeatist note supports my reading: "England appears to be in a desperate condition [...] I once thought to study these affairs & write or act in them—I am glad that my good genius said refrain. I see little public virtue, & I foresee that the contest will be one of blood & gold [...]" (to Horace Smith, 29 Jun. 1822; Letters, 2: 442).

Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew,—  
 What they like, that let them do.

(ll. 340-343)

This closely echoes the call to "receive with unshrinking bosoms the bayonets of the charging battalions" (48) from the "Reform" treatise; but the acknowledgement we saw in the essay that violent insurrection may be necessary is also present in this versified form of the "Reform" essay. There is a strong revolutionary impetus here in the call to cast off the chains of oppression and in the insistence that the tyrants are outnumbered by their hitherto submissive subjects now awakening to their own potential power:

Rise like Lions after slumber  
 In unvanquishable number—  
 Shake your chains to earth like dew  
 Which in sleep had fallen on you—

Ye are many—they are few. (ll. 151-55, repeated as concluding stanza, ll. 368-372)

Arguing that this is "scarcely the best slogan for promoting the stoic virtues of passive resistance", it is Desmond King-Hele (148)<sup>27</sup> again who voices the discomfort many critics have felt about the consistency of these great final lines with the doctrine of passive resistance Shelley expounds elsewhere in the poem. But this mere uneasiness seems to me considerably to underestimate the extent to which the poem in wonderfully persuasive fashion trumpets two entirely irreconcilable ideas at the same time. These lines, having occurred first at a crucial point as stanza 38 of the text, are repeated in a singularly charged context at the very end of the poem – can they be understood as anything but a very clear call for revolutionary violence? Further evidence of Shelley's tendency to advocate violent rebellion is evident in several poems written around 1819. In "An Ode Written October, 1819", he speaks of the struggle against oppression as "holy combat" (l. 14); and in the "Song to the Men of England" (1819), he urges: "Forge arms,—in your defence to bear" (l. 24).

Given this ambivalence about possible means of attaining the desired reforms, and given the fact that there is no solution in the essay, let us look at what solutions Shelley offers in the poetry, for in several of the poems written at the same time, he does propose solutions to the dilemma.<sup>28</sup> In "The Mask of Anarchy", despite the contradic-

<sup>27</sup> Cameron (*Golden Years* 350), says about the concluding stanzas of "The Mask of Anarchy": "the passage is, in effect, revolutionary without any suggestion of passivity". Cf. also Foot (*Red Shelley*, passim and "Introduction"). Foot quite clearly points to the clash between irreconcilable positions in the poem. On the latent contradictions in Shelley's poetry of the same time cf. also Behrend (129f.) (on "Song to the Men of England", 1819).

<sup>28</sup> Most scholars assume a fairly straightforward and unproblematic relationship between Shelley's poetry and prose of this time. Using *Prometheus Unbound* and the "Reform" essay as his examples, Cantor remarks on the relationship between Shelley's poetry and his prose: "Shelley's poetry inspires us to make life better; prose works, like 'A Philosophical View of Reform', show us how it can actually be done" (38). For a comparable view of the relationship between the poetry and the prose works cf. Hogle 223.

tory impulses sketched above, the liberation from oppression is brought about by "Hope, that maiden most serene" (l. 128), who flings herself heroically in front of the apocalyptic riders of oppression, whereupon they die or disappear – hardly a means of reform one would confidently hope for. And in the "Ode to Liberty" of 1820, who overthrows tyrants all over the world? Well, Liberty, with a capital L, Liberty personified:

[...] like Heaven's Sun girt by the exhalation  
Of its own glorious light, thou [Liberty] did'st arise,  
Chasing thy foes from nation unto nation  
Like shadows [...]  
(ll. 159-162)

And, again, it is only in poetry that the overthrowing of oppression, the breaking of "Spain's links of steel" can be delegated to "virtue's keenest file": "[...] but Spain's were links of steel,/ Till bit to dust by virtue's keenest file" (ll. 190f.). And in *Prometheus Unbound*, it is again an impersonal abstraction, Demogorgon, who overthrows Zeus, the archetypal tyrant.

It is largely through these grand abstractions, I believe, that poems such as "Mask of Anarchy" come across as powerful assertions of political liberty and are still read as great and mature satirical poems and serious contributions to a political debate. This magnificent poetic grandiloquence allows him vaguely to gloss over just that fundamental question of how reform and liberty are to be achieved; the poetic form can sustain such ambiguities; the discursive form of the treatise cannot, even though it is virtually an expository and reasoned version of the contemporaneous poems.

Let us turn to the essay again to see how that central *aporia* forces Shelley to break off at a crucial moment.

What Shelley has unwillingly succeeded in making painfully clear in a number of laborious and evasive argumentative circles in the essay and in the obvious contradiction in the poetry of the same time is that, first, he sees no hope for gradual and peaceful reform. Secondly, he seems to have come to understand that revolutionary violence is inevitable. But he has made it equally clear that a Revolution could only bring about its own decline and could only end in disaster. There is, Shelley has shown at this point in the essay, no solution, for there is no responsible or even feasible means of achieving and securing the desired liberties.

It is virtually on the last page of the essay that this dilemma once more becomes glaringly obvious. This is Shelley again, without any abbreviations or omissions on my part. The hyphen ending in the void and the anguished omission marks of the three dots are all in the original:

These brief considerations suffice to show that the true friend of mankind and of his country would hesitate before he recommended measures which tend to bring down so heavy a calamity as war—

I imagine however that before the English Nation shall arrive at that point of moral and political degradation now occupied by the Chinese, it will be necessary to appeal to an exertion of physical strength. If the madness of parties admits no other mode of determining the question at issue, ...

When the people shall have obtained, by whatever means, the victory over their oppressors and when persons appointed by them shall have taken their seats in the Representative Assembly of the nation, and assumed control of public affairs according to constitutional rules, there will remain the great task of accommodating all that can be preserved of antient forms with the improvements of the knowledge of a more enlightened age, in legislation, jurisprudence, government and religious and academical institution. (54)<sup>29</sup>

The solution to Shelley's fundamental question – how to achieve the necessary reforms – remains undiscovered; it lies in the three dots, after which Shelley happily goes to list all the wonderful changes to be made after "the people shall have obtained, by *whatever means*, the victory over their oppressors" (my italics). Here, in the section "Probable Means", the entire point of which is to point out ways of achieving "the victory over their oppressors", the evasive "by whatever means" at this crucial moment is the ultimate admission of defeat. Half a page later, after another highly significant reflection on the tendency for bloody revenge in the uneducated masses – another argument against revolution – the essay breaks off.

Rarely has the *aporia* of an argumentative endeavour stared one in the face more openly. There is clearly no need to resort to external reasons to explain why the text had to remain incomplete. Under the repressive conditions in England in 1819/1820, culminating in the notorious "Six Acts" of December 1819, long before even the moderate reforms of the Reform Bill of 1832 appeared achievable, it must have seemed impossible to find a solution to Shelley's problem. Let us finally return to Shelley's prescient letter on his endeavours with the treatise:

I have deserted the odorous gardens of literature to journey across the great sandy desert of Politics; not, you may imagine, without the hope of finding some enchanted paradise. In all probability, I shall be overwhelmed by one of the tempestuous columns which are forever traversing with the speed of a storm & the confusion of chaos that pathless wilderness. (to J. & M. Gisborne, 6 Nov. 1819, *Letters* 2: 150)

<sup>29</sup> Duff draws attention to this dilemma in Shelley's thought in general and in the "Reform" treatise in particular: "This, as has often been pointed out, was a dilemma that Shelley never fully resolved. Even in 'A Philosophical View of Reform' (1819), his most considered treatment of the topic, he leaves a vacancy – literally a gap in the manuscript – at the crucial point at which he turns to the question of how the people are to obtain 'the victory over their oppressors' which will free them from 'moral and political degradation'" (110). Foot (*Red Shelley* 189) also remarks upon this gap in Shelley's text. Neither Duff nor Foot, it seems, recognize the centrality of this problem to Shelley's argument, and they certainly do not point it out as a potential reason for the fragmentary nature of the text. Cf. also Foot ("Introduction" 5), where he argues that "the pamphlet is marked throughout with contradictions" (cf. also Cameron, *Golden Years* 350). But even Foot glosses over the central *aporia* in Shelley's argument: "the pamphlet breaks off, leaving two blank pages which Shelley obviously planned to fill in later, perhaps when he had more closely worked out the complex relationship between reform and revolution." Foot further obscures the fundamental problems in the essay when he writes: "'The Philosophical View of Reform' was ready for its reluctant publisher in 1820 [...]" ("Introduction", 7).

Pathless indeed. Should we not read this as an acknowledgement on Shelley's part that the task he had set himself was an impossible one? For the text in a fascinating way allows one to look over Shelley's shoulder, as it were, and to see him fail – if failure we want to call the sincere struggle to solve a problem that literally *was* impossible to solve responsibly under the present conditions. In the contemporary political and economic situation, there could not be a political solution; it was unthinkable; it could not be formulated. The inability to formulate one was not Shelley's; it was inherent in the structure and the determinants of the political discourse in 1819/1820.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

Both of these texts are manifestly not cases of 'somehow not quite getting it right' in the sense of Hershel Parker's thoughts on consistency and intended meanings:

Writers repeatedly fail to achieve their intended meanings during the actual creative process, even though their control over the emerging work is then at its strongest. [...] [F]laws which result from shifting or imperfectly realized intentions commonly survive in the printed text in the form of 'contrary details' which we override in our compulsion to make sense of what we read. (768)<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In his notorious and malicious hatchet-job on Shelley, T.S. Eliot wrote: "I find his ideas repellent [...]". One's ethical sympathies, I should think, are clearly with Shelley rather than with Eliot – a lot of Shelley's ideas are wonderful, and most of the reforms proposed in the "Reform" essay have long been realized and now seem natural. But a lot of people would argue that it is hard not to find some truth in Eliot's remarks on Shelley's occasionally somewhat confused thinking: "I do not mean that Shelley had a metaphysical or philosophical mind; his mind was in some ways a very confused one: he was able to be at once and with the same enthusiasm an eighteenth-century rationalist and a cloudy Platonist" (Eliot, 81f.). While this may well be arguable elsewhere, it is most emphatically not the problem in the "Reform" treatise.

A much more benevolent reading of Shelley's enthusiasm for reform is provided in the figure of Scythrop in Peacock's wonderful *Nightmare Abbey*, though the idea of a somewhat confused mind high up in the clouds remains the same. This is from Chapter II: "He now became troubled with the passion for reforming the world. He built many castles in the air [...] 'Action,' thus he soliloquised, 'is the result of opinion, and to new-model opinion would be to new-model society. Knowledge is power; it is in the hands of a few, who employ it to mislead the many, for their own selfish purposes of aggrandisement and appropriation. What if it were in the hands of a few who should employ it to lead the many? What if it were universal, and the multitude were enlightened? No. The many must be always in leading-strings; but let them have wise and honest conductors. A few to think, and many to act; that is the only basis of perfect society. [...] In the mean time, he drank Madeira, and laid deep schemes for a thorough repair of the crazy fabric of human nature" (14f., 18).

<sup>31</sup> Parker's essay was one of the critical responses in the notorious *Critical Inquiry* debate about Knapp/Michaels' poorly argued but controversial "Against Theory" essay.

These cases are not ones of "contrary details", but rather ones of fundamental problems of consistency; but here, too, there seems to be an urge even among theoretically enlightened critics to assume that such things just do not happen to a major writer.

Late in 1792, in a highly charged atmosphere, a progressive republican poet writes a treatise, "Die Republik England"; he attempts to elicit sympathies for a revolutionary republican movement in France and frequently does so by arguing in historical analogies; he ultimately has to abandon his text because of a fascinating quagmire of multiple contradictions, inconsistencies and conceptual problems. In the situation in which he is writing, the text he is writing just cannot serve the purpose it is meant to serve: Bürger's own political sympathies were at odds with those of his publisher and most of his readers; comparisons between the English and the French Revolutions were usually produced to discredit the latter by historical analogy; inconsistent use of sources entailed a number of curious contradictions; but most importantly, the course of the English Revolution just did not lend itself to making a conservative audience see the promise in events in France in 1792/93, leading Bürger to twist and torture history to adapt it to his needs, ultimately forcing him to abandon his endeavour.

27 years later, in a highly charged atmosphere, a progressive republican poet writes a treatise, "A Philosophical View of Reform"; he attempts to chart a plan for reforms in England and frequently does so by arguing in historical analogies; he ultimately has to abandon his text because of a fundamental conceptual problem. In the situation in which he is writing, the text he is writing just cannot be written, because the problem he is trying to solve just cannot be solved. And here the differences become apparent: Shelley's problem is only superficially one of inconsistency. The central dilemma in an otherwise tightly argued and compelling treatise, "the most advanced work of political theory of the age" (Cameron, *Golden Years* 49), is that both conceivable ways of achieving reforms, passive resistance and violent rebellion, can be shown to be impossible – and for equally good reasons.

It is hard to decide whether Bürger's or Shelley's is the more desperate plight, and whether "Die Republik England" or "A Philosophical View of Reform" is the more fascinating text.

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