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REVIEW ARTICLE

SHALL WE TAKE THE LINGUISTIC TURN? BRITISH RADICALISM IN THE ERA OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Intertextual war: Edmund Burke and the French Revolution in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and James Mackintosh. By Steven Blakemore. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997. Pp. 256. ISBN 0-8386-3751-5. £32.

Radical expression: political language, ritual, and symbol in England, 1790–1850. By James Epstein. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. xi+233. ISBN 0-19-506550-6. £30.

Tom Paine: a political life. By John Keane. London: Bloomsbury, 1996. Pp. xxii+644. ISBN 0-7475-2543-9. £8.99.

Gothic images of race in nineteenth-century Britain. By H. L. Malchow. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. xii+335. ISBN 0-8047-2664-7. £35 (hb). ISBN 0-8047-2793-7. £12.95 (pb).

Popular contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834. By Charles Tilly. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. Pp. xvii+476. ISBN 0-674-68980-1. £31.50.

Radical culture: discourse, resistance and surveillance, 1790–1820. By David Worrall. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992. Pp. ix+236. ISBN 0-7450-0960-3. £40.

Most of these books are influenced by current philosophical or methodological concerns which might be labelled, according to taste, as poststructuralism, postmodernism, or the linguistic turn; but they are influenced to very varying degrees. At one end of the spectrum stands Tilly's substantial study, essentially modernist, rejecting the latest fashions. At the other stand the books by Blakemore and Malchow, their colours firmly nailed to the mast of deconstruction. Blakemore teaches in a department of English, and although Malchow's institutional affiliation is as an historian, his book is a hermeneutic of literary texts. The great majority of 'postmodern' analyses of texts from this period have come from the stable of literary studies, perhaps especially from scholars concerned, as Malchow is, with the construction of gender, that great growth area of the present time. None of these books subscribes in practice to a postmodern relativism, declaring itself to be merely a construction or representation of the past: all arrive at some kind of closure, explicitly or implicitly asserting the truth of their interpretations. Historians concerned to justify their subject to funding bodies may judge this to be prudent; nevertheless a greater degree of reflexivity, of self-doubt, would have been welcome in some instances, as we shall see.

Tilly's book reports the results of a social science inspired endeavour by a research team working on a database. The object of study is *repertoires of contention*, and the data takes the form of a catalogue of 8,088 *contentious gatherings* – 'In a contentious gathering,

a number of people – here, ten or more – outside of the government gathered in a publicly accessible place and made claims on at least one person outside their own number, claims which if realized would affect the interests of their object.'[1] The catalogue is a regional and temporal sample of the total of recorded contentious gatherings in Great Britain between 1758 and 1834. Forms of popular contention run a gamut from food rioting, rough music, donkeying, smashing unilluminated windows, pulling down houses, mobbing executioners, and freeing condemned men, through machine-breaking to mass demonstrations and mass petitioning meetings. Tilly refuses to take the linguistic turn, refuses to explain radical culture, after the manner of Stedman Jones's 'Rethinking Chartism',[2] as if it were relatively autonomous in relation to material context. He seeks to relate changes in the repertoire of contention to the processes of industrialization and state formation. He avows a 'social interactionist' perspective according to which 'social relations (rather than individual mentalities of societies) are the fundamental realities' and which views changes in repertoires of contention as caused by creative activity in the light of experience of the results of previous contentions. These emphases upon economic interests and conflicts, on the formative interaction between popular protest and state repression, upon experience and innovation, align him with the late E. P. Thompson. One emphasis is conspicuous by its absence, however. Given that a shift from the local to the national is a major theme of this book, in the discussions of causation one would have expected attention to be directed at communication, at publishing and readership.

Contentious gatherings are analysed and quantified, and the results presented in tables and graphs: number per year, regional distribution, number of persons arrested, wounded or killed, types of gathering, issues addressed, nature of participants. There are quantitative content analyses of verbs used in reports of contentious gatherings. Attempts are made to correlate these statistics with other tables and graphs of population, occupational shifts, economic growth, prices, incomes, and government spending and taxation. Not that the book is merely a dry compilation of statistics: these are set into a narrative of the period, and enlivened with illustrative examples.

Not being postmodern, this book has no qualms about proposing a grand narrative. Tilly thinks that the analyses conducted by his team demonstrate a marked shift in forms of popular contention over the eighty-year period, from the parochial to the national, from modes of action adapted to single issues to flexible modes capable of exerting pressure on a range of issues, from addressing central government through a local mediator/notable to unmediated petitioning of king, ministers, and parliament. Violent and spontaneous action declined, peaceful, planned activity increased: 'Much as a distinguished line of mechanics conceived, introduced, and perfected the power loom, British political entrepreneurs such as Wilkes, Lord George Gordon, Wyvill, Wilberforce, Burdett, Place, Cobbett, Hunt, Carlile and Gast collectively and incrementally *invented* the national social movement as a routine way of making claims.'[3] Tilly is prepared to regard all of this as an extension of citizenship and even of democracy.

In spite of his protests, it is difficult not to regard this as a good old-fashioned narrative of progress or modernization. But Tilly insists that the new repertoire of contention, epitomized by the national association with lecture tours and mass petitions

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[1] Tilly, *Popular contention*, p. 63.

[2] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of class: studies in English working class history, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983).   [3] Tilly, *Popular contention*, p. 371.

to parliament, did not produce results as quickly or as often as older forms of direct violence: 'Claim-making Britons seem to have traded simple, sturdy, reliable hammers and hoes for great wheezing steam engines consuming vast quantities of fuel, requiring constant cleaning, and destined to spend much of their time under repair.'[4] He confesses himself bemused by this. An answer to the puzzle can perhaps be teased out of some of the other books under review, as we shall see.

British historians, few of whom can even hope to command research teams on this scale, are bound to feel a touch of envy as well as of admiration. But one thing seems clear: team efforts of this kind cannot obviously be directed at or affected by many of the methodologies we might crudely lump together under the label of the linguistic turn. If a team is listing and counting the verbs used to describe contentious gatherings, and pooling their results, then sensitive and subtle explorations of the meanings of those verbs in particular contexts are absolutely ruled out. Teamwork requires a stable, agreed set of meanings so that the objects of study can be coded and categorized automatically and consistently. Hermeneutics by contrast requires a relationship between an individual scholar and a text (is one permitted to go on and say, and deconstruction is a solitary vice?) Unfortunately, the kind of research Tilly has directed, and hermeneutics, are not simply alternatives, asking entirely different questions and occupying entirely different fields of inquiry. If the verbs used to describe contentious gatherings are to be taken as indices of changes in the character of popular protest, then everything depends on interpreting the meaning of those verbs correctly. Nor can the objects and aims of contentious gatherings be read off in a simple way from what participants say; after all, the debate about the aims of Chartism is as old as the historiography of Chartism itself, and still goes on. But not all of Tilly's findings can be called into question in this way, and his remains an important book.

For sensitive and imaginative explorations of meaning in context the reader might turn to Epstein's *Radical expression*. The book is a collection of essays, three of them published in some form previously. Chapter 2 is entirely new, and is a fine account of how Wooler, editor of the *Black Dwarf*, successfully exploited the language, rituals, and theatre of the courtroom when defending himself in 1817, not only securing his own release after only a month in jail but also winning a rhetorical and political triumph. There is an even more impressive chapter on political discourse by means of symbols as well as words, centring upon the rich and complex meanings of rituals of parading and wearing the cap of liberty. Epstein understands the hoisting of the cap as an attempt to take popular control of public space, and to create a sense of communal solidarity. Against Stedman Jones, who has argued that popular protest of this period, imprisoned in a traditional radical discourse, failed to develop a language of class, Epstein argues that the rituals, and symbols such as the cap of liberty, are ways of expressing class identity and of engaging in class conflict.

The arguments of Stedman Jones have something of the air of a ghostly or residual Marxism, or Marxist–Leninism or Althusserianism, contending that radicals of this period failed in part because they failed to develop a proper class consciousness. In a remote way this joins hands with Blakemore's contention that the critics of Burke – Wollstonecraft, Mackintosh, and Paine – failed to win the argument because they did not break free from a discursive field organized and controlled by a traditionalist conservatism. Epstein's stance is quite different: he is unwilling to assume that

[4] Ibid., p. 353.

the learning of a new language, rather than the radical appropriation of the old, is a prerequisite to truly revolutionary practice…this leads to the concluding observation that ideological struggle often goes on not between two sharply antithetical systems of political reasoning, but rather within a 'shared' idiom or narrative discourse; the struggle becomes that of appropriating shared forms of rhetoric and symbolism to a particular class or political position, of restructuring this language – often from a class perspective – while maintaining an appeal to a presumed system of national political and cultural values that transcends class.[5]

Unlike E. P. Thompson, Epstein does not think that an ahistorical, universalist Paineite language largely replaced a traditional one in radical discourse; the constitutionalist idiom continued to flourish alongside it, perhaps to predominate. Most radicals were not engineers, like Godwin, constructing coherent systems: they were eclectic artisan-bricoleurs, as McCalman has depicted them, or like Blake in Mee's persuasive account.[6] Worrall's book too belongs with this trend in the study of radicalism.

The books in this trend, though they take the linguistic turn, secrete a grand narrative (at least I think it is grand – what is the difference between a grand and a *petit* one?). What is more, the story is not so very far away from Tilly's, for it is the story of a radicalism evolving from the 'rough' to the 'respectable'. As with Tilly, there is a reluctance to see this evolution as a *progression*, an improvement; in this sense at least the current suspicion of grand narratives carries weight. 'Rough' radicalism is nostalgically celebrated in these books for its vigour, its conviviality, is carnivalesque humour and subversion. One gets an image as one reads of bearded, besandalled academics sipping their coffee while dreaming of authentic, masculine, working-class tavern rowdiness. But both Epstein and Worrall are aware that 'rough' radicalism was homosocial, uncongenial to women of the day; the move towards respectability went hand in hand with a mobilization of women. Cruikshank's ugly print of a delegation of women, their skirts hitched up, mounting the platform to place a vaginal cap of liberty on a phallic flagpole held by a group of ragged men is a travesty of the way in which radicalism was evolving.

Worrall sets out to recapture the culture of 'ultra-radicalism' between 1790 and 1820, to reconstruct it from its songs and ephemeral publications, from the Home Office papers, and from court proceedings. This book is a defence, almost a hagiography of these 'ultras', of Thomas Spence and of Thomas Evans who picked up the baton after Spence's death, of Thomas Preston, Allen Davenport, Robert Wedderburn, and E. J. Blandford, of Colonel Despard and the Cato Street Conspirators. Its strength lies in the detail of its narrative, its weakness in a tendency to take the documentation, including the reports of spies, too much at face value in an endeavour to demonstrate an unambiguously revolutionary culture.

Worrall recognizes that the ultras could command a very limited popular following – indeed he judges that it was their frustration about this, and government repression, which drove them to increasingly desperate measures. Not that Worrall himself thinks that Spencean schemes and revolution were absurd:

Instead of an industrial economy, we could have had an agrarian society, even a 'green' one…Instead of nineteenth-century imperialism, there might have been a self-sufficient and equable nation decentralized into parishes, perhaps even into a welfare state, on a Paineite model,

[5] Epstein, *Radical expression*, pp. 26, 28.

[6] Jon Mee, *Dangerous enthusiasm: William Blake and the culture of radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford, 1992): Iain McCalman, *Radical underworld: prophets, revolutionaries, and pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge, 1988).

whose clock could not be turned back by successive trimming and cutting. It did not have to be the way it is now.[7]

This is rescuing the Spenceans from the massive condescension of posterity with a vengeance. Worrall's nostalgic endorsement of a Spencean or Cobbettite vision is not entirely absurd – after all, so central a political economist as John Stuart Mill is on record as saying that the large-scale creation of peasant proprietors after the French Revolution of 1789 had been good for French agriculture and had created the happiest people in Europe.[8] But surely the growth of British population had by 1800 produced a situation in which the only possible route to rising living standards was via some kind of industrialization. And I wonder whether an instrumental account of these ultras, one which treats them as revolutionaries oriented primarily towards a vision of an alternative society which they hoped rapidly to create in an act of surgical violence, is the whole story. Their fiery speeches, their 'secret' gatherings so easily penetrated by informers, their brandishing of home-made pikes can also be read as theatre, bravado, coat-trailing. These were men who gave meaning to their lives by casting them into dramatic narratives, and when they vowed themselves to liberty or death, they meant it, acting out the tragic closure in the expected manner in the condemned cell, and on the scaffold before a deeply moved audience.

The ideological commitment of the books under review is perfectly plain: like much, perhaps most of the scholarly literature they shadow and echo the political conflicts of the period. After two hundred years the battles are not over yet. A key battleground is over the strength or marginality of popular radicalism. Present-day radical historians of popular radicalism feel obliged to respond to the dismissive attitude of J. C. D. Clark, who thinks that popular radicalism was so insignificant as to be barely worth studying, or to the more balanced judgement of H. T. Dickinson, who acknowledges the significance and achievement of popular radicalism but judges that the old order responded successfully and in a largely non-repressive manner, that popular loyalism was overwhelmingly weightier and probably authentic and spontaneous.[9] Worrall attempts to refute the allegation of marginality by a rather obscure invocation of Saussurian linguistics. I think that what he is saying is that since any speech is the uttering of that which is already present or possible in the language as it is constituted at the time, therefore all utterances are equally 'in' the language, notions of centrality and marginality are out of place. But this only convinces if we agree that the language is more important or fundamental than the human beings who use it – if we think that it is not individuals who speak through the language, but the language which speaks through individuals. If, in a naïve and old-fashioned way, we think the reverse, then it will matter how many individuals are prepared to agree with a particular utterance: judgements of centrality and marginality will be possible.

Epstein has a half-explicit response to the charge of marginality in terms of Habermas's ideas of dominated discourse and its opposite, an ideal speech situation. The argument is clearest in his chapter on Richard Carlile, radical journalist, publisher,

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[7] Worrall, *Radical culture*, p. 7.

[8] *Collected works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson and others, vol. XXIV (Toronto, 1986), p. 1004.

[9] H. T. Dickinson, *The politics of the people in eighteenth-century Britain* (London, 1995). The spontaneity and genuineness of popular loyalism at a particular moment has been nicely challenged by Mark Philp, 'Vulgar Conservatism, 1792–1793', *English Historical Review*, 110 (1995), pp. 42–69.

and bookseller. Carlile was an Enlightenment rationalist with philosophical aspirations, a republican and a feminist and, until his conversion in the early 1830s, an infidel. Through men like him, popular and 'philosophic' radicalism came close together. His ideal was a politics based on free and equal discussion, in which

ideological constraints – the mystifying force of superstitious belief – as well as external or institutional constraints are eliminated, making rational consensus possible. It was a profoundly democratic and essentially utopian vision of communicative conditions, of speech unencumbered by power or restraint, where nothing but the persuasive force of rational argument would prevail among equals dedicated to the pursuit of truth and mutual improvement.[10]

In this Carlile offers one possible answer to Tilly's puzzle, why popular radicalism gave up the quickly effective hammers of violent action and adopted the slower, less certain steam engines of meetings, lectures, and petitions. It was not just a question of effectiveness, of means; for men like Carlile what was also at issue was the kind of society to be created. The rough and the carnivalesque, the untheorized and even unverbalized would not advance reason's empire, would not create an informed democracy, nor would they involve women as Carlile sought to do.

British governments of the time may not have imprisoned, transported, or hanged many men, and in this sense they were not especially repressive when measured on a world-historical scale. But it is also perfectly clear, as Worrall and Epstein illustrate, that they did their best to prevent an ideal speech situation and to generate a discourse dominated by the voices of conservatism and loyalism. So many of the prosecutions and threats of prosecution were for acts of speaking or publishing. Despard was hanged and decapitated for speech. Whatever else government informers achieved, they certainly created an atmosphere of intimidation. In 1817 the House of Commons refused to accept more than thirteen out of over five hundred popular petitions; even when the people dared to speak, they were not to be heard. And when radical voices were briefly licensed in the courtroom, attempts were made to manage the way their utterances were received by jury rigging. When Wooler was tried in 1817, the prosecutor challenged his right to set himself up as a 'public writer', declaring 'I am sometimes astonished when I hear these opinions and declarations about public writers – one could suppose they were some peculiarly educated, established and authorized body of men, who had passed through some previous course of probation and examination and had a right to set themselves up as *censores morum* of public men.'[11]

A possible outcome of taking the linguistic turn is to argue that, in spite of what establishment writers and caricaturists said and depicted at the time and in spite of 'marxisant' writers since, the immediate aim of most radicals was not revolution, but popular access to what Habermas calls the 'bourgeois public sphere'.[12] If this aim is taken as the measure of their achievement, then the questions will not be about how numerous they were, or how large their following, or how suitable their ideology as a means of mass mobilization. They will be about the extent to which, against all the odds, they expanded what could be said, where it could be said, and by whom it could be said (and published and circulated); and about how effective they were in getting themselves heard. If this was their immediate aim, then we can understand why Tilly's repertoires of popular contention changed as they did. Continuing with Habermas's framework, insofar as they pushed back the restrictions on speech and writing they were not utterly

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[10] Epstein, *Radical expression*, p. 114.   [11] Ibid., p. 45.

[12] Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge, 1989).

defeated in 1820, or 1848; defeat came later, and gradually, as the means of communication and discussion came to be dominated by commercial interests having no aspiration to create an informed and active democratic citizenry.

The books by Tilly and Epstein significantly advance our knowledge and understanding: the same cannot be said of Keane's *Tom Paine*. Those who want illuminating modern discussions of Paine's thought will turn to Gregory Claeys and Mark Philp; Keane's is predominantly a biography. It is full, lively, and readable, but Dickinson has revealed the extent of the errors of fact it contains.[13] In his prologue, Keane makes obeisance to postmodernity:

I try to rely on techniques of modest writing, including…awareness that the methods of narrative storytelling adopted here are indeed reliant on interpretation and structured by plot; and, above all, recognition that Paine's life was riddled with complexity. While often admiring and defending Paine's pathbreaking achievements, I try to create an 'open' rather than a 'closed' text by encouraging readers to spot the plots buried in my own stories of Paine's life and to formulate their own questions and doubts about its knottiness.[14]

I cannot see that these protocols have been much observed in what follows.

What might a moderate follower of the linguistic turn say about the writing of biographies? Something like this perhaps: biographies are narratives which select from the events of a life and arrange them into intelligible and meaningful patterns. Narrative patterning is strictly unavoidable; it is impossible to make an unnarrativized heap of all known relevant events, even if anybody would wish to read such a thing. To give just one example, many of the words used to refer to events – reject, reply, agree, assist – imply the linking of one event to another in a pattern. Lives are narrativized not only by later and contemporary biographers, but also by the subjects of those lives and their associates. Therefore the subject's own testimony, the word from the horse's mouth, has a pattern or patterns imposed upon it. The number of *possible* narrative patternings is unlimited, and the number of patterns *likely* to be produced increases with the amount of data and the number of biographies. Because no human self is completely coherent or self-transparent, even the subject is likely to tell more than one story. All of this need not imply an absolute relativism: some narratives could be falsified by reference to known events, some might be more plausible than others, for example because they fitted more events together into an intelligible pattern.

If the remarks in the preceding paragraph were accepted, they would have significant implications for the writing of scholarly biographies. Now Keane does indicate that sometimes Paine contradicted himseluf, or misled himself and others. He notes that there were hostile accounts of Paine, and criticizes them. He challenges the illusion of objectivity in Conway's standard account. He recognizes that Paine was a flawed human being, not a perfect hero. But at the end of the day, what he produces is not openness but closure – a single, coherent, unproblematized narrative, as if from an objective, godlike narrator. Keane thinks that he knows what Paine was like, and what was the significance of his life. There is nothing new about his way of writing a biography whatsoever: nineteenth-century standard lives did the same.

Perhaps a postmodern, scholarly historical biography would be reluctant to construct its own narrative. Perhaps also it would not present itself as an account of the subject's life. Rather, it would present itself as an exposition and discussion of the narratives that have been told or could be told about the life, by the subject, by contemporaries, by subsequent biographers. Narratives, their plurality and their essentially constructed

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[13] *History*, 81 (1996), pp. 228–37.   [14] Keane, *Tom Paine*, p. xvi.

nature, would thus be foregrounded, and reflexivity would be built into the methodology. Attention would necessarily be directed at the hermeneutics and criticism of the sources on which the narratives were based. A scholarly historical biographer would only construct a new narrative under very specific circumstances: for example for a 'minor' or obscure figure about whom few narratives were in existence; or if new data became available about the subject or context; or if a new way of understanding the significance of lives had been produced by the philosophical, sociological, psychological, or literary imagination.

So far, such an approach to biograpy has found little favour.[15] One of the best biographies of the period under consideration, Richard Holmes's recently completed two-volume study of Coleridge, far better than any previous life of the poet, wonderfully sympathetic and insightful, proceeds essentially in the traditional manner. Holmes's bibliography and references reveal this. The bibliography lists very few previous lives, for there is no intention to survey previous narratives. The references are almost exclusively to Coleridge texts, especially the letters and notebooks. So what we are given is Holmes's narrative, constructed (obviously in a critical way) out of Coleridge's narratives. Holmes recognizes that at certain points more than one story is possible – for example, about the person from Porlock. Coleridge's narratives are problematized, but Holmes's, as a whole, is not.[16] But a moderate postmodernist would say that it is difficult to believe that Holmes's life of the poest is shaped and directed entirely by the primary sources he has read, innocent of any orientation supplied by the biographical tradition. Only a systematic attention to that tradition could hope to uncover the predetermining that must have gone on.[17]

Blakemore's *Intertextual war* is noteworthy because it forthrightly proclaims its application of a deconstructive methodology to classic political theory texts – Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the rights of Man*, Paine's *Rights of man*, and Mackintosh's *Vindiciae gallicae*. Whether it makes out a good case for such a methodology is another matter. Blakemore's allegiance to the linguistic turn is metaphysical as well as methodological, and he turns the radicals of the 1790s into idealists like himself:

> the debate over revolution and counterrevolution was often about the very meaning of that world and the language that sustained it … they knew that the linguistic, ideological war was an extension of the military war – they sensed that language and ideology are intimately intertwined and that whoever controls language controls not only the terms of 'war' but the terms of 'reality' itself.[18]

Did they sense, let alone 'know' that? And even a historian convinced of the importance of ideas may feel uneasy at Blakemore's reiterated assimilation of intertextual debate to war and battle: 'in the war over meaning, they both invade an enemy text and impose their own meaning and hence control over the text's semantic territory'.[19] Arguing and killing are not the same, to jaw-jaw is not to war-war.

Readers unversed in deconstruction will find the language of this book strange and difficult. Deconstruction needs its own technical terminology because it refuses to talk in a commonsense way about men and women – in this instance Burke, Wollstonecraft,

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[15] I attempted something like it in my *Mozart's death: a corrective survey of the legends* (London, 1991).

[16] Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: early visions* (London, 1989); idem, *Coleridge: darker reflections* (London, 1998).

[17] A useful review of some of the problems of biography is Giovanni Levi, 'Les usages de la biographie', *Annales ESC* (novembre–décembre 1989), pp. 1325–36.

[18] Blakemore, *Intertextual war*, p. 114.   [19] Ibid., p. 113.

Paine, and Mackintosh – having an argument about what was going on in the 'real' world of the French Revolution. Instead, it concentrates upon texts and the language out of which they are written, thinking of them as 'representations' or constructions which are largely autonomous in relation to 'reality'. For this approach the issue is not which arguments are the best in the sense of being logically and factually correct. Rather, texts are understood in relation to each other, as rival attempts to control meaning by capturing and reinterpreting the system of binary oppositions out of which meaning is constructed. Blakemore's book is worth reading as a pretty consistent attempt to apply this approach – though alas he sometimes lapses into common sense, even accusing Paine of ignoring the facts.[20]

Quite apart from obstinate commonsense doubts about the idealism of all this, at a practical level Blakemore's book does not convince me that the conceptual apparatus of deconstruction produces readings and insights which could not have been obtained by more traditional methods of analysis. Blakemore reveals that the protagonists had more in common than they were prepared to admit, that they 'wrote out of the same representational system', that Burke's critics misrepresented him, that they blamed him for rhetorical tricks of which they were themselves guilty, and that they contradicted themselves. Surely most if not all of this could be done with pre-deconstructionist methods of analysis. Sometimes the results have a somewhat old-fashioned air. Blakemore claims to be reading texts in context, intertextually, but we should not mistake what that means. He draws upon the work which others such asocock have done in reconstructing discourses or languages by reading a wide range of texts, but does not do that kind of work himself. Here the context of a text essentially means a 'con' text, *contra* text, one with which the first text is at war. Text is pitted against text, and points are awarded. Deconstruction here reveals itself as destructive criticism of radical texts – by an author who counts himself one of Burke's admirers[21] – rather than sympathetic hermeneutics.

But an old-fashioned historian of political thought would not have focused upon the language of gender, as Blakemore does in his discussion of Wollstonecraft's reply to Burke. His linked consideration of Wollstonecraft's two Vindications, Burke's *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, and his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is the most interesting part of his book. The gendered language of Burke's texts, and Wollstonecraft's response to it, have also been explored by others.[22] However, when he turns to attempting to show that Wollstonecraft deconstructs herself, I think he misreads her, failing to identify precisely how she uses, and criticizes, the language of gender, perhaps also failing to elicit her meaning in the context of contemporary language use: 'I analyze Wollstonecraft's intertextual war with the language of Burke's *Enquiry*, focusing on how her deconstruction of the *Enquiry*'s opposed values (the sublime and beautiful) and hence the distinction between Burke and herself turns into the very contradiction she erases only to reinscribe with finality.'[23]

Others would agree with Blakemore that Wollstonecraft takes conventional gender stereotypes, illustrates them with reference to Burke's 'masculine' sublime and 'feminine' beautiful, and then turns these against Burke, depicting the author's

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[20] Ibid., pp. 96–107.   [21] Ibid., p. 25.

[22] E.g., Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's aesthetic ideology: language, gender, and political economy in revolution* (Cambridge, 1993); Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal beings: politics, gender, and sentimentality in the 1790s. Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (Chicago, 1995).

[23] Blakemore, *Intertextual war*, p. 27.

sentimental repudiation of the French Revolution as effeminate, and her own rational acceptance of it as manly. But Blakemore then goes on to argue that she is self-contradictory, because she elsewhere attempts to deconstruct and repudiate Burke's distinction between masculine and feminine qualities, offering 'a linguistic critique of patriarchal language and categories' and insisting that '*both* the sublime and the beautiful are human qualities and that Burkean separations of them result in the dehumanization of both sexes'.[24] In other words, according to Blakemore Wollstonecraft contradicts herself by rejecting a language of masculine and feminine which values the former and evaluates the latter, and at the same time using that language in her polemic against Burke, thereby accepting and validating it.

Now I do not think that Wollstonecraft ever sought to deconstruct, or do without, a conception of the *degraded* feminine, the *effeminate*, which she deplored in both men and women and which she was not willing to dignify as 'beautiful'. Blakemore has misinterpreted Wollstonecraft by not registering the distinction between an eighteenth-century moral binary of 'manly' versus 'effeminate' (which Wollstonecraft often employed and never challenged) and a usage of 'masculine' and 'feminine', largely late twentieth-century but with which Wollstonecraft shares some common ground, which sometimes refuses to place the two hierarchically, and sometimes questions whether the characteristics conventionally labelled in this way need to be sexually specialized. Obviously Wollstonecraft would not have wished to devalue some of the qualities which some twentieth-century writers label as 'feminine' – altruism, sympathy, nurturing – her attack is solely upon 'effeminate' weakness, irrationality, and excessive sensibility. It is certainly the case that she wishes women to develop 'manly' (by this she means human) virtues. But this revaluation and reallocation of masculine and feminine was not at issue in, nor was it contradicted by, her critique of an 'effeminate' Burke.

Postmodernism is supposed to imply a loss of faith in grand narratives: but in fact there has been a wonderful proliferation of them. For example, it has been argued that some time in the long eighteenth century there was a 'feminization of culture'; that gender roles became more sharply defined and naturalized;[25] that 'homosexuality' came to be seen as an identity, not merely as behaviour; that there was a shift from a situation where it was a mark of superiority to be looked at, to a situation where it was a mark of superiority to look.[26] The abandonment of grand narratives appears increasingly to be an abandonment only of narratives of progress, and especially of the Marxist version. Many of the new ones are pessimistic, stories of things getting worse. Many, as well as taking a linguistic turn, are histories of the construction of the self.

Malchow's book belongs with these trends. It also exemplifies another scholarly growth industry; the concern, inspired by, for example, Edward Said, with how self-identity is secured by the construction of a constrasting and inferior 'other'. The most favoured 'alterities' are those of race, class, and gender, and Malchow focuses on the first while not ignoring the other two. He is aligned with those who have 'argued for a single field in which images of race, sexuality, and class are interwoven systems that mutually confirm the hegemony of the European, heterosexual, bourgeois male'.[27]

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[24] Ibid., p. 45.

[25] Thomas Laqueur, *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Dror Wahrman, '*Percy*'s prologue: from gender play to gender panic in eighteenth-century England', *Past and Present*, 159 (1998), pp. 113–60.

[26] Kristina Straub, *Sexual suspects: eighteenth-century players and sexual ideology* (Princeton, NJ, 1992).   [27] Malchow, *Gothic images*, p. 2.

(The poor bourgeois male is getting a very bad press these days.) Now if, as Hegel, Sartre, and various deconstructionists have argued, it really is the case that selfhood is established contrastively in this way, why should it be just those three contrasts? What about, for example, religious and moral polarities? Is it legitimate to subsume hostility to the Catholic Irish under the general heading of racial hostility, as Malchow does? But he is not an idealist deconstructionist: he wishes to explain his texts and the shifts in language they embody by reference to economic, social, and political events. He also thinks that deconstructions of alterity have often been ahistorical, writing as if the polarities of race, class, and gender were timeless. His aim is to show how these polarities vary and evolve. A linking theme is the 'gothic', horrific, dimension of nineteenth-century alterity, exemplified in rich studies of popular cultural constructions of the cannibal, the vampire, and the half-breed.

Though he pays attention to a great many texts, he focuses especially on two extra-canonical or marginally canonical ones: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. He reads the Monster and the Count as concealed racial others: 'If a plausible case can be made for Frankenstein's Monster as an escaped Jamaican slave, a parallel argument for seeing Stoker's Count Dracula as the eternal Jew seems obvious and compelling.'[28] But gender and class are not forgotten: for example, 'The Monster, unnaturally conceived without woman, oversized, oversexed, physically repulsive, and economically and socially marginal, encompasses three confused elements of middle-class nightmare: racial, sexual, and proletarian.'[29]

Malchow's narrative proposes that these alterities result from an endeavour by middle-class males to establish themselves as *self*-controlled, with a secure and stable identity, and therefore worthy to be *in* control, in a competitive-market, meritocratic society. But the precise form and causation differs in early and late century. The half-century following the French Revolution witnesses the assertive self-definition of an aspiring but thwarted middle class, the end of the century the anxieties of an established middle class threatened by the 'new woman', a militant proletariat, and the non-white subjects of 'new imperialism'.

Well, all of this is exhilarating; but how, in practice, are new narratives on this scale to be proved? And how are readings of texts which delve below their surface, ostensible meaning to be validated? There is some distance to travel between showing that Mary Shelley's description of the Monster bears a resemblance to contemporary descriptions of revolting Jamaica slaves and showing that she was representative of a general attempt to secure middle-class identity by contrast with a racial other. Malchow is certainly aware of the problem: 'To a historian's mind, making the case requires more…than a deconstructionist assault on the text.'[30] His interpretation of *Dracula* is supported by copious reference to other texts, and to Stoker's biography. Is the evidence being overinterpreted to fit a theory? 'It is not inconceivable that Stoker himself, christened Abraham, with a foreign-sounding surname, suffered from some degree of peer prejudice in childhood, or that he was sensitive that on this score he might be "misjudged".'[31] But would 'Abraham' have sounded foreign, or Jewish? Would it simply have sounded Old Testament?

In 'The Man from Shorrox', Stoker tells a story of a commercial traveller in Ireland who insists on the best room in a small hotel, goes to bed in the dark, and awakes in horror in the morning to discover that he is sharing the bed with a corpse. Significantly, the corpse is male. Here the horror

[28] Ibid., p. 153.   [29] Ibid., p. 40.   [30] Ibid., p. 154.   [31] Ibid., p. 155.

of pollution from the dead is reinforced by that of unwittingly having gone to bed with another man. That the other man is lifeless may suggest the taboo of necrophilia, but perhaps also the sterility of homosexuality.[32]

I do not find this absolutely convincing. Perhaps the corpse in the story is male because a female corpse would have been unacceptably shocking, and much more likely to suggest necrophilia.

It would be absurd to suggest that texts must always be taken at face value; there may well be half-buried or implicit meanings, including meanings of which the author was not aware. Furthermore, the obvious or common-sense meaning of a text may simply be what seems obvious to an unselfconscious late-twentieth-century reader. Deconstructionists such as Malchow seek to problematize texts. They pose in extreme form the difficulties involved in attempting to recover the meanings of texts and the intentions of authors. But such problematizing must always be historically sensitive. Anachronism is doubly threatening: on the one hand the Charybdis of naïve, unproblematized readings; on the other the deconstructionist Scylla of imposed readings grounded in present-day theories and agendas. So if asked the question at the head of this article, 'Shall we take the linguistic turn?' my reply would be 'It depends on *which* linguistic turn.'

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[32] Ibid., p. 143.