

THOMAS PAINE: FROM MODERN PROMETHEUS TO PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

by Frances Chiu

This article is Part 2 of a three-part series based on Frances Chiu's paper delivered at Iona College in New Rochelle NY on October 9, 2014 at the visit on the Thomas Paine Tour, "Following in the Footsteps of Thomas Paine", sponsored by TPF. Part 1 appeared in the Bulletin, volume 15, number 4. Part 3 will be in volume 16, number 2. The paper itself is drawn from her upcoming textbook for Routledge Books on Paine's Rights of Man. It is scheduled for publication at the end of the year.

In the previous section, we examined some of the ways in which Paine ushered in a new political discourse. Let us now examine how his advocacy of progress and representative government as well as his skepticism towards hereditary privilege and government in turn encouraged the rise of the Gothic novel in the 1790s. Although the Gothic novel traces its roots back at least as far back as to Horace Walpole's novella, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), all the way through Shakespeare back to the Greeks, the demonization of the past and the representation of oppressive authority figures may be said to be influenced at least in part by Paine's *Rights of Man*.

Take, for instance, Paine's dismissal of Edmund Burke's privileging of precedent in the latter's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, namely, the right of the Parliament of 1688 to determine the form of British government. Notice how Paine invokes the idea of the living dead:

Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself in all cases as the age and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies.

This is reemphasized just a few sentences later--

Every generation is, and must be, competent to all the purposes which its occasions require. It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated. When man ceases to be, his power and his wants cease with him....he has no longer any authority in directing who shall be its governors....I am contending for the rights of the living, and against their being willed away and controlled and contracted for by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead, and Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living.

As the Gothic novel was only just beginning to gather steam in the late 1780s before proliferating at full speed in the 1790s, it does not require a great stretch of the imagination to understand how Paine's words may have whetted a Gothic appetite for historical settings. Paine made it easy for writers to project the problems of late 18th-century onto the past as he criticized the "Gothic institutions" that dogged Britain: which helps explain the number of curious anachronisms which appear in novels supposedly set in earlier centuries, including a coach and six in Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. At the same time, despite the dearth of references to vampires, Paine's metaphor can be said to lead the way to vampire literature of the 19th century, beginning with John Polidori's *Vampyre*--the work that was drafted at that famous evening involving Byron, Percy and Mary Shelley, and the latter's half sister, Claire Clairmont.

No less striking is Paine's monster metaphor even if delivered in an offhand manner: "Hitherto we have considered aristocracy chiefly in one point of view....But whether we view it before or behind, or sideways, or any way else...it is still a monster." What is perhaps more interesting, however, are

the features he identifies with the aristocracy--many of which would become hallmarks of the vampire over the course of the following century. For instance, when pointing out that aristocracy is "kept up by family tyranny and injustice," Paine was no less keen to remind his readers how the quest for complete domination would be continued through military might and the "uncivilised principle of governments founded in conquest, and the base idea of man having property in man, and governing him by personal right." When combined with the idea of the living dead, we arrive at none other than Bram Stoker's feudal, militaristic Dracula who acquires property by day and sucks the blood of his social inferiors by night. Although it's admittedly hard to claim Paine as a source of inspiration for Stoker in 1897, it is more than possible that these associations were reinforced throughout the nineteenth century by a combination of radical democratic discourse that questioned aristocratic and capitalist power along with a concurrent interest in vampire fiction.

If the 1790s Gothic novel can be said to express the terror of a dysfunctional, semi-feudal 18th-century Britain, the same Paineite frustration with hidebound customs and traditions can be gleaned from poetry of the same period. It is certainly striking that William Wordsworth, who evinced much disgust for the Gothic (or what he referred to as "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse"), that his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1798) approaches poetry in a manner that is almost comparable to Paine's by articulating a desire to reject traditional conceptualizations of poetry. For just as we've seen how Paine injected an everyday directness into his writings for a broad class of readers, Wordsworth was similarly to "choose incidents and situations from common life" by deploying "a selection of language really used by men." He chose "humble and rustic life" since "the essential passions of the heart...speak a plainer and more emphatic language." "Personifications of abstract ideas" were to be avoided in favor of "the very language of men," thereby keeping the reader "in the company of flesh and blood" while "bring[ing] my language near to the language of men."

Likewise, it is telling that just as Paine had pooh-pooed hereditary government in *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*, Wordsworth rejected "a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as

Continued on page 7, *Paine-Prometheus*

[REDACTED]

the common inheritance of Poets." And just as Paine had emphasized public good, explaining that "all mankind are my brethren and my religion is to do good," Wordsworth equally regarded the true poet as a man "endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul." But perhaps what is even more striking is Wordsworth's paradigm of poetry as a system of laws--

Our feelings are the same with respect to metre; for, as it may be proper to remind the Reader, the distinction of metre is regular and uniform, and not, like that which is produced by what is usually called POETIC DICTION, arbitrary, and subject to infinite caprices upon which no

calculation whatever can be made. In the one case, the Reader is utterly at the mercy of the Poet, respecting what imagery or diction he may choose to connect with the passion; whereas, in the other, the metre obeys certain laws, to which the Poet and Reader both willingly submit because they are certain....

The poet, in other words, is not to be the mysterious tyrant that Paine—or indeed, Wordsworth's despised Gothic novelists—abhorred so thoroughly.

Frances Chiu, a TPF board member, is faculty at the New School University where she has taught courses on Paine, and on English 19th century literature, especially the horror genre. She has published on Ann Radcliffe and other writers, and currently is writing a textbook on *Rights of Man* for Routledge Books.