War of the Words: Literary Rebellion in France and Ireland

Edited by:

Eamon Maher and Eugene O’Brien

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Introduction

Eamon Maher and Eugene O’Brien

Revolution and rebellion have always been at the heart of literature. From the earliest stories of Prometheus and Pandora’s Box and Adam’s taking of the apple in the Garden of Eden, down through literary and cultural history, the rebellion of the individual against some form of unjust system has been an abiding literary trope. Some of the greatest characters in literature across all cultures have been rebels, and some of the most resonant lines from literature have been those wherein characters voiced their desire to break free of a system which they found oppressive or constricting. One only has to think of John Milton’s Satan and his resonant lines in *Paradise Lost*:

> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
> What matter where, if I be still the same,
> And what I should be, all but less than he
> Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
> We shall be free; th’ Almighty hath not built
> Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
> Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,
> To reign is worth ambition, though in hell:
> Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven.[1]

Here the image of rebellion as beginning in the mind and then progressing into the world of social and cultural interaction. To personify Satan in this way was quite radical and of course this portrayal has the famous imprimatur of another great Romantic rebel, William Blake:

> Note. the reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of
> Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because

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[1] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, edited by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), I, ii, 254-263.

> he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.[2]

As a medium for the expression of an alternative viewpoint, literature has long been the home of rebellion. Its resonant ambiguity and foregrounding of the aesthetic dimension of language can allow it to voice political perspectives that, in a different genre, could well have negative consequences for the author. Also, Milton is able to voice the negative connotations of rebellion while at the same time making a subtle point about the fear of change that is to be found in his own revolutionary culture while ostensibly writing about the depths of a mythological and imaginary hell:

> He above the rest
> In shape and gesture proudly eminent,
> Stood like a tower; his form had yet not lost
> All her original brightness, nor appeared
> Less than archangel ruined, and the excess
> Of glory obscured: as when the sun new risen
> Looks through the horizontal misty air
> Shorn of his beams, or from behind the moon
> In dim eclipse, disastrous twilight sheds
> On half the nations, and with fear of change
> Perplexes the monarchs.[3]

The same can be said of Shakespeare, who has given voice to some of the most emblematic images of rebellion and revolution in literature, but like Milton he too points to the darker consequences of rebellion:

> [*Aside*] The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step
> On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
> For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
> Let not light see my black and deep desires:
> The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
> Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.[4]

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[2] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*: *The Major Authors*, *Volume B*, Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (eds) 8th ed. (New York: Norton, 2006), pp.1430-1441, p.1433.

[3] *Paradise Lost*, I, ll, 499-509.

[4] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Sylvan Barnet (ed.) (Signet Classics Series,

By the end of the play, the image of the doomed rebel, risking all on one final act is expressed in the ringing lines:

> Arm, arm, and out!
> If this which he avouches does appear,
> There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here.
> I gin to be aweary of the sun,
> And wish the estate o' the world were now undone.
> Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!
> At least we'll die with harness on our back.[5]

In an Irish context, perhaps the most famous rebellion in Modernist literature as Stephen Dedalus uses a translation of the very language of the Catholic Church, Latin, to voice his personal rebellion against the strictures of that Church, and the allied constraints of identitarian politics. In keeping with the rebellion of *Paradise Lost*, Stephen is taught about the rebellion of Lucifer but from a very Catholic and religious perspective, and the rebellion here is seen from a theological perspective: 'Theologians consider that it was the sin of pride, the sinful thought conceived in an instant: *non serviam*: I will not serve. That instant was his ruin'.[6] Stephen learns this lesson but not in the way his teacher might have expected. Later in the book, as he ponders the role of the artist in society, he gives voice to the words of Lucifer but in a very altered context: 'I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church'.[7]

Of course, in all three of these examples, the cultural is always already imbricated in the political, as we can see in Milton's subtext about the consequences of political change, and Shakespeare's nod towards James the Second in *Macbeth*, and of course in Stephen's mention of the term 'fatherland', with all of the attendant associations of political patriarchy that this term invokes. And the same is true of the issues discussed in the present book.

In the French context, literary creation has always been linked to rebellion in one way or another. When one considers how Flaubert set

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New York: New American Library), I (iv) l48-53.

[5] *Macbeth*, V (v) 38-51.

[6] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Edited by R.B. Kershner (Boston: Bedford Books of St Martin's Press, 1993, first published 1916), p.131.

[7] *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* p.283.

about writing a novel that would be held together by style alone and where the novelist would remain like God in nature, always present but nowhere visible, it is not an exaggeration to say that he was breaking with the approach of his illustrious predecessors, Balzac and Zola. Flaubert is only one in a long list of French writers who saw in the art of creation a rebellious act. Baudelaire expressed his desire in *Les Fleurs du Mal* in the following manner:

> Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe ?
> Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau* ![8]

Clearly, innovation and art are synonymous for many artists. Baudelaire's quest to discover what was new and original is typical of the manner in which French writers sought to push the boundaries of language to their limits. Joyce and Beckett felt comfortable in a Parisian environment where experimentation was the order of the day and where writers were not afraid to declare themselves dissatisfied with the power of traditional language to convey reality. Hence, it is no surprise to have Nathalie Sarraute writing about 'l'ère du soupçon' in the 1950s. By the 20th century, writers and critics were becoming increasingly suspicious of all the carefully constructed mythology associated with literary traditions. A writer like Jean Sulivan (1913-1980) gives voice to the profound dissatisfaction with traditional approaches in a novel like *Joie errante* (1974), where the narrator makes no attempt to hide his presence in the text and provokes the reader with remarks like the following:

> Votre trouble m'émeut. Tous ces va-et-vient dans l'espace et le temps… Vous aimeriez un ouvrage plein qui vous happe ! Je ne veux pas mentir à ce point. Pourquoi me laisserai-je conduire par la mécanique d'une intrigue ? [..] Pourquoi vous tendre ce piège, tandis que je me tiendrais derrière la paroi lisse de l'écriture, glace sans tain, à vous regarder vous regardant, comblés par mes impostures ?[9]

Sulivan and his generation of French writers display a marked distrust of accepted literary canons. Devices such as plot, organic development of characters, objective narration, are all abandoned by Sulivan for a type of conversational style where the point of view alternates between the narrator and the characters. Similarly, one often encounters in his work the breakdown of syntax and punctuation as the novelist searches desperately to find the style that will best capture the intense experiences he is trying to describe. 'Pour trouver du nouveau', to repeat Baudelaire's phrase, it is necessary to break with the past, to rebel against what others have done, to start again from zero. Writing about the Nouveau Roman at the end of the 1950s, Olivier de Magny stated:

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[8] Charles Baudelaire, "Le Voyage", in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Claude Pichois (ed.), *Charles Baudelaire* : *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 2001), p.134.

[9] Jean Sulivan, *Joie errante* (Paris : Gallimard, 1974), p.147.

> Si nos romanciers actuels, entrés dans l'ère du soupçon, dans l'ère où tout est soupçonné faux, ont un trait en commun, le voici : ils écrivent tous quand une connaissance véritable des hommes et du monde n'est plus possible, quand la vérité n'est plus possible.[10]

It is at such moments of uncertainty and doubt that great literature can emerge, as was most certainly the case in France in the latter half of the 20th century, a time of rebelliousness and innovation. French writers have always played a pivotal role in the political and intellectual life of their country in a way that their Irish counterparts have not tended to do to the same extent. In the 20th century alone, the names of Bernanos, Mauriac, Proust, Gide, Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, Genet, Céline, Drieu and Malraux are synonymous with agitation of one kind or another, whether it be to do with the cultural, social or political domains. In his study of Occupied France, Frederic Spotts makes the following observation:

> Failure to understand the importance of culture in a nation's life was not a mistake Hitler made. Culture was not peripheral but central to his Occupation policy. In the arts he saw a narcotic to be used to pacify the French and make them amenable to collaboration while he was busy with his war in the Soviet Union. … But he had a further aim. Hitler's racial theories compelled him to assert German cultural supremacy over the French and in that way to challenge their self-confidence and to weaken their sense of national identity.[11]

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[10] Olivier de Magny, « Panorama d'une nouvelle littérature romanesque », in *Esprit*, Juillet-Août 1958, p.12.

[11] Frederic Spotts, *The Shameful Peace*: *How French Artists and Intellectuals Survived the Nazi Occupation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,

It is doubtful if Hitler succeeded in the latter objective. While some writers and artists were happy to appear to accept the Nazi presence in their country, many others used the tools of their trade, most often words, to fight German attempts at acculturation. Defending their cultural patrimony became a rallying cry among many French intellectuals who jealously guarded their intellectual independence. In this, there are more than a few similarities with their Irish equivalents who, while apparently assimilating the culture of the colonial power, nevertheless retained many traits that were quintessentially Irish. Thus Joyce's special form of Hiberno-English came to be acknowledged as being distinctively 'Irish' rather than 'English'. Joyce thus corresponds to the model contained in that well-coined phrase, 'The Empire wrote back!'

Long before the 20th century, however, Ireland had looked to France for its inspiration. Connections between Ireland and France have been long-established at all levels of societal, linguistic and cultural interaction. In terms of historical specificity, the French Revolution has long been seen as a template for the actions and ideological position of the United Irishmen whose 1798 rebellion in Ireland owed a lot, in both form and substance, the revolution that begun in Paris on July 14th, 1789.

These connections were both political and cultural. Theobald Wolfe Tone said that political position was influenced largely by the French Revolution, which, as he wrote later 'changed in an instant the politics of Ireland', dividing political thinkers from that moment into 'aristocrats and democrats'.[12] Perhaps the central socio-political influence of the French Revolution was the libertarian and emancipatory thrust of its informing secular Enlightenment ethic. The writings of Enlightenment thinkers were disseminated thoroughly throughout different parts of Ireland, especially in the North of Ireland, where they found a receptive reading public among Presbyterians. The work of Tom Paine was especially influential, with four Irish newspapers reprinting *The Rights of Man*, a work labelled by Tone as the Koran of Belfast.[13] Enlightenment theories of society and government, embodied in practice by the French Revolution, offered an example of how a seemingly stratified and hierar-

2008), p.3.

[12] William Theobald Wolfe Tone (ed.), *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 2 volumes, (Washington, 1826), I, p.43.

[13] Edith Mary Johnston, *Ireland in the Eighteenth Century. The Gill History of Ireland volume 8* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), p.168.

chical society could be completely changed according to the will of the people. They also offered an ethical demand that alterity, in the shape of the people, be protected by the force of law.

It was through the shaping of this will of the people that the United Irishmen sought to achieve their aims. Drawing again on the example of revolutionary France, the press would be a forum wherein conflicting ideas and ideologies would be debated and mediated. They were intent on creating a climate of informed opinion, analogous to Habermas's culturally produced social sphere, and again, theirs was a centrifugal impulse drawing comparative inspiration from the revolutions, and revolutionary philosophies of America and France. Indeed, this form of educational improvement was central to the Enlightenment project, specifically Kant's 'What is Enlightenment', where what came to be known as the *credo* of the Enlightenment, *Sapere Aude*, 'have courage to use your own reason', was first enunciated.[14]

That most of the sources of this Enlightenment knowledge came from locations outside Ireland further underpins the cosmopolitan impetus of the United Irishmen, and the French connection To this end, pamphlets, which distilled the writings of Enlightenment thinkers, were distributed among the peasants of the north of Ireland, between 1795 and 1797, which contained the writings of Godwin, Locke (especially his notion of the implied contract between ruler and ruled), and Paine as well as those of Voltaire and De Volney.[15] The selection of writers distributed and read by the United Irishmen makes for an impressive list of liberal thinkers on social and political issues, and further reinforces the claim that their views on identity were necessarily pluralist – their aim was to broaden the notion of Irishness so that it might be inclusive of the different socio-religious traditions of Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter. The Francophone origin of so many of these writers further underscores the point: Montesquieu, Schiller, Raynal, Condorcet, Rousseau, Diderot, Sieyès and de Montesquieu.

Print and reading were crucial to the disseminating of such ideas and the logistics of this enterprise were impressive, with a whole printbased culture set up to broadcast the United Irishmen's agenda. Whelan cites at least fifty printers in Dublin, thirty four Irish provincial presses and some forty newspapers in print,[16] all of whom were sympathetic to the United Irish cause. The United Irishmen's own paper, the *Northern Star*, a vehicle for the spread of Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals, at its peak sold some 4,200 copies per issue. It is reckoned that, due to collective reading of each copy by at least ten people, the effective readership was some 42,000.[17] And of course there was also the prospect of a more practical form of French aid. Guy Beiner, in his book describing the effect of the landing of a French army under General Humbert in Killala Bay, county Mayo, on August 22, 1798, makes the point that 'Songs hailing the imminent arrival of French troops on vessels prepared the ground for reception of radical ideologies influenced by the French Revolution and anticipated poetic descriptions in Irish of the French invasion attempts in 1796 and 1798.[18]

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[14] Isaac Kramnick (ed.), *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 1.

[15] Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty*: *Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760-1830, Critical Conditions Series*, (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1996), p.63.

The revolution is paradigm-shift in terms of influence on Ireland, but it would be a mistake to locate this influence purely and simply in the historical past. As Slavoj Žižek notes, the 'real' effect of the French Revolution is more lasting:

> The real Event, the dimension of the Real, was not in the immediate reality of the violent events in Paris, but in how this reality appeared to observers and in the hopes thus awakened in them. The reality of what went on in Paris belongs to the temporal dimension of empirical history; the sublime image that generated enthusiasm belongs to Eternity.[19]

And Walter Benjamin makes the point that the true task of Marxist historiography, apropos the French Revolution, is 'to unearth the hidden potentialities (the utopian emancipatory potentials) which were betrayed in the actuality of revolution and in its final outcome (the rise of utilitarian market capitalism)'.[20]

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[16] *The Tree of Liberty*, p.63.

[17] *The Tree of Liberty*, p.66.

[18] Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French*: *Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), p.87.

[19] Slavoj Žižek, *Defense of Lost Causes* (London, Verso, 2008), p.15.

[20] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 2006), p.78.

This collection is an embodiment of Žižek's position that the French Revolution has been a significant influence on world culture. The chapters here, dealing with politics, literature and culture, will trace the connections and influences that exist in a Franco-Irish public and cultural sphere. It is our hope, as editors, that the collection will proceed, in a small way, the Žižekean idea of a fairer and more utopian present and future.

This current volume is the 5th in the annual series inaugurated by the Association for Franco-Irish Studies (AFIS). Like its predecessors, it is the fruit of a conference, this time the highly successful gathering at University College Cork in May 2009. Our sincere thanks go to all those who contributed to the success of this conference, most particularly Professor Grace Neville and Mary O'Rourke, whose organisational acumen has become legendary at this stage! The theme of 'rebellion' seemed most apposite at a venue located in the heart of 'The Rebel County', but there was no conflict in the unanimous appreciation among the conference delegates of the huge effort and good humour expended by Grace and Mary to ensure a most enjoyable stay in Cork.

Thanks also must go to all at the highly efficient TIR publications in Rennes2 for producing such an attractive tome so quickly. It would be remiss of us not to mention the superb international editorial board consisting of Yann Bévant, Scott Brewster, Anne Fogarty, Anne Goarzin, Peter Guy, Sylvie Mikowski, Paula Murphy, Grace Neville, Mary Pierse and James Rogers, all of whom worked tirelessly on vetting and proofing texts. Enfin, nous voulons exprimer notre sincère gratitude aux Services Culturels de l'Ambassade de France en Irlande pour leur généreuse aide financière des activités de l'AFIS.

EAMON MAHER and EUGENE O'BRIEN