

ACADEMIA | Letters

Heaven in a Wild Flower: political imaginings of Innocence in the passage to the French Revolution

Tadd Fernée

The British Enlightenment: from Civil War to Heathen Earth

In 1699, the Earl of Shaftesbury responded to John Locke, questioning rational primacy over inherited convention. Prior to reason was a “moral sense” in nature everywhere. Locke, conceiving human nature as a “blank slate”, had “struck at all fundamentals, threw all order and virtue out of the world”, leaving only “fashion and custom”. “Moral sense” was “naturally imprinted on human minds” (Himmelfarb, p. 29). This early modern nature/nurture debate had common ground in the history- salvation split, seeking a secular ethics and identity.

The soil was English Civil War violence. A child between 1640 and 1649, Locke experienced arbitrary power. His exile resulted from upheaval preceding the 1688 Glorious Revolution. Locke’s secularized epistemology rejected “perfect certainty”, promoting “degrees of assent”. This critiqued the theologically legitimized violence of Providence while demoting reason from its Platonic heights to the public world of transient dialogue. He wrote: “all those tragical revolutions which have exercised Christendom these many years have turned upon this hinge, that there hath been no design so wicked which hath not worn the visor of religion” (Locke, p. 160).

Shaftesbury demarcated “public moral sense” from religious affiliation. The “natural affection” was prior to “speculative Opinion, Persuasion or Belief”. The opponent to “moral sense” was “tragic sense”, whose excess would “destroy its own End”. Inflexibly dogmatic worldviews persecuted others, lost in imagination: “never can such a Phantom as this be reduc’d to any certain Form” (Shaftesbury, p. 48). Calling for “a more easy and pleasant way of thought”, Shaftesbury dismissed metaphysics (Kramnick, p. 92). It matters not, he wrote, whether experiences “are Realities, or mere illusions; whether we wake or dream...In this dream of Life our Obligation to VIRTUE is in every respect the same” (Shaftesbury, p. 63).

Academia Letters, January 2021 ©2021 by Academia Inc. — Open Access — Distributed under CC BY 4.0

Corresponding Author: Tadd Fernée, taddyas2@gmail.com

Citation: Fernée, T. (2021). Heaven in a Wild Flower: political imaginings of Innocence in the passage to the French Revolution. *Academia Letters*, Article 204. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL204>.

A just society requires no unveiling of supreme truth or holy war. Shaftesbury denounced “bloodshed, wars, persecutions, and devastation”, promoting pagan pluralism where Europe might “bring back the whole train of heathen gods” (Kramnick, p. 96). He imagined the return to innocence.

The French Revolution: between Representation and Regeneration

The national crisis defining the French Revolution produced two modern equality ideals. Interpretation abounded in 18th century France to theorize nation-state legitimacy as arisen from the 17th century post-Reformation religious wars. With emergent 18th century state mobilisation of social resources, maximisation of agricultural production through accelerated commerce and industry, road and canal building, and measures promoting prosperity, a new post-Bodin state discourse defined French Enlightenment intellectuals. Sovereignty would forcibly recompose traditional society, favouring integrated community over hierarchical estates and functional citizens over passive subjects. Enlightenment civil equality presented a rupture with the Great Chain of Being, despite continuity with the monarchical state centralization project beginning with Louis XIV. This tension finally destroyed monarchical state power in 1792, opening a double revolutionary horizon: representation and regeneration, the germs of civil and ethnic nationalisms.

Two equality discourses emerged. The first, circulating in popular pamphlets in the decades preceding the 1789 Estates General assembly, was the French Constitutional tradition. It promoted a ‘social contract’ conjoining monarch and population, while constraining power to legislation receiving public consent. This ‘representation’ tradition followed the 1688 English revolution. New institutional experiments from neighbouring countries faced with comparable modern challenges provided a pragmatic guide.

The second stream, articulated by Jean Jacques Rousseau, invoked a mythic history. A widening disjuncture distanced sovereign power from the natural order. Seeking an ‘original state’ of innocence, Rousseau’s concept of *ame déchiree* (divided soul) proposed equality as a deeper national belonging than the civil technicality of equal rights. It targeted the “fabric of society” before “the structure of the political realm” (Arendt, p. 25). Against usurpation by corrupted interests, the General Will targeted the ‘artificial estates order’, seeking to restore the ‘original state’ of ‘natural’ equality, pursuing national ‘regeneration’. Unlike Shaftesbury’s pagan pluralism, the return to innocence meant universal homogeneity. Any resisting the General Will “shall be forced to be free” (Rousseau, p. 19). This political ontology dichotomized collective belonging and the enemy, endorsing organized violence to achieve national unity.

The French Revolution as a Clean Platonic Blade

Academia Letters, January 2021 ©2021 by Academia Inc. — Open Access — Distributed under CC BY 4.0

Corresponding Author: Tadd Fernée, taddyas2@gmail.com

Citation: Fernée, T. (2021). Heaven in a Wild Flower: political imaginings of Innocence in the passage to the French Revolution. *Academia Letters*, Article 204. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL204>.

June 1789 saw sovereignty transferred from King to nation, in a constitutional monarchic experiment. In 1792 the belief that monarchy intrinsically opposed national progress arose through a popular insurgency spearheaded by the *sans-culottes*. Increasing rejection of religious tradition witnessed a struggle over the fundamental meaning of French nationalism. The arbitrary outcome came to represent a modernity long considered universal, proposing a rupture between past and future equal in its imaginative calibre to the parting of the Red Sea.

This modern-tradition dichotomy expanded with the violence of a black hole in the minds of leading revolutionary actors. The French Revolution mutated from civic equality to French national identity as the outermost limit to universal human possibility, with a bid to transcend the conundrum of individuality – that is, all hidden and traitorous thoughts fomenting an anti-national conspiracy.

With the 1791 Second Revolution, the Jacobin club attained national power. It had been established in 1789 simultaneously with the Constituent Assembly, when the King was forced to accept the August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Constituent Assembly pursued a national market and decentralized representative government based on uniform legality and reformed penal code. The Jacobin club initially served the parliamentary process, discussing texts destined for Assembly debate. Following the 1688 tradition celebrated by Montesquieu, it sought legal closure to the revolutionary process.

Class war transformed the Jacobin club into the popular symbolic centre for controlling the Constituent Assembly. When the Constituent Assembly prepared to compromise with the King over the August 4 decrees, the Jacobin club championed the popular masses. The royal family was forced from Versailles to imprisonment at the Tuileries. By 1790, the Jacobin club became a nationwide grassroots network, financing local political organizations, creating *de facto* revolutionary hegemony. As such, it harboured unprecedented potential for democratic power and wealth redistribution. Its idiosyncratic intellectual leadership, however, attests to the limits of messianic political violence wedded to state power seizure.

Seizing the mass imagination is part of seizing power. French Revolutionary ideologues imaginatively sought origins and legitimacy for their cause in the tradition of the “century of Enlightenment” (Furet/Ozouf, 2006, p. 276). Moved by a “pathos of novelty”, nothing of comparable “grandeur and significance had ever happened”. The anticipated “new beginning” would spring from violence in a “new body politic” (Arendt, pp. 34-35). Providence had linked early modern political violence to the sacred, inscribing the horror of ordinary people in wartime with mythic fatality. In a new violence-sacred-truth nexus, ‘nature’ replaced the ‘sacred’. Robespierre’s 1794 speech argued that the Revolutionary “end” would “fulfil the wishes of Nature, realize human destiny [and] uphold the promises of philosophy” (Robespierre, p. 225). Celebrating myth over institutional law, Robespierre said “a regenerator

must see big, he must mow down everything in his path” (Furet/Ozouf, 2006, p. 160). Saint Just’s *Report on the Police* (1794) invoked Manichean “regeneration” as “the passage from evil to good, from corruption to integrity” (Saint Just, p. 747). Violence was sown into French revolutionary discourse from the outset. Only with the second Revolution, however, did the premise of a legal framework for national conflict resolution become jettisoned to celebrate an eternal war echoing Providence.

The King’s flight to Varennes in June 1791 instigated the Second Revolution. The Church of Rome completed the Rome-Paris rupture by opposing its doctrine to the Rights of Man. The 1793 Vendee Rebellion set the conditions for dictatorship by the Committee of Public Safety and the Terror. The Jacobin Club became a political machine enforcing social unanimity, hunting “hidden conspiracies” and “hypocrisy”. Saint Just saw the guillotine as the “fatal instrument which decapitates in a single sweep both the conspiracies and the lives of their authors” (Saint Just, p. 675). Aiming to create a “new people”, the “regeneration” stemmed from the 18th century imaginings of “innocence regained”, inspired by the American conquest with the Huron representing purity uncontaminated by civilization (Furet/Ozouf, 2007, p. 274). In a mythologized war, Saint Just saw “detentions [not having] their source in judicial relations”, but “[establishing] an order where a single universal tendency to good will prevail” (Furet/Ozouf, 2007, pp. 263-288). A new state function corresponded: “If there were morals, everything would be fine; we require institutions to purify them” (Furet/Ozouf, 2007, p. 9).

Institutions ceased to instrumentalize non-violent conflict resolution, as Montesquieu urged. They became tools for refashioning the intangible soul. The scepticism-cum-illumination of William Blake’s 1863 *Auguries of Innocence* was perhaps an afterthought to his earlier enthusiasm for the mythic power of the French Revolution as a great religious event:

“We are led to Believe a Lie
When we see not Thro the Eye
Which was Born in a Night to perish in a Night”

This moreover explains Blake’s more optimistic but equally anti-metaphysical invocation of “Heaven in a Wild Flower” (Blake, p. 7), as the materialisation of deep human religious intuitions in the everyday world. John Dewey gave this fuller expression by distinguishing “religion and the religious”, linking faith not to the “supernatural” but our “relationships to one another” amidst the “doings and sufferings of the continuous human community” (Dewey, p. 712).

Bibliography

- Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity. The British, French and American Enlightenment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004)
- John Locke, *The Selected Political Writings of John Locke* (New York: Norton and Co., 2005)
- Earl of Shaftesbury, *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit in British Moralists: Selections from Writers principally of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897)
- Earl of Shaftesbury, “On Enthusiasm” in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, Ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995)
- Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*. (New York, Penguin Books, 1990)
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (London: Penguin, 1968)
- Francois Furet/Mona Ozouf. *Dictionnaire Critique de la Révolution française. Acteurs*. (Paris: Flammarion, 2007)
- Francois Furet/Mona Ozouf. *Dictionnaire Critique de la Revolution Francaise. Idees*. (Paris: G.F. Flammarion, 2006)
- Maximilien Robespierre, *Robespierre : Entre Vertu et Terreur* (Paris: Stock, 2008)
- Saint Just, *Œuvres Completes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004)
- John Dewey, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (University of Chicago Press, 1981)
- William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence and Other Lyric Poems* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014)