Representing the French People : Thomas Carlyle's Vision of an Instrument of Nature

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Representing the French People: Thomas Carlyle's Vision of an Ambivalent Instrument of Nature

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> « Other mobs are dull masses; which roll onwards with a dull fierce tenacity, a dull fierce heat, but emit no light-flashes of genius as they go. The French mob, again, is among the liveliest phenomena of our world. So rapid, audacious; so clear-sighted, inventive, prompt to seize the moment; instinct with life to its finger-ends! »
> Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, I, 260-261

Thomas Carlyle, born in 1795, is not as well known today as he used to be. From the 1830s to the second world war, he was considered by many to be one of the major writers of his day. Contemporaries like Dickens or George Eliot admitted, sometimes grudgingly, that it was impossible not to read him, and that he had been the first to voice ideas that were to become deeply anchored in the minds of 19th century Britons.

Carlyle's most influential and popular views are, notably, his strong opposition to the Corn Laws, his denunciation of industrial working conditions, and, what interests us here, his ground-breaking interpretation of the French Revolution. After 1792 and the Terror, British people had held very negative views on the revolution. Madame Tussaud's wax museum, which opened in London in 1802, famously comprised a chamber of horrors. It featured genuine casts of beheaded aristocrats' heads, obtained through Madame Tussaud's behind-the-scenes work.

British citizens of all classes (even the more respectable ones) flocked to the museum to view the ghastly massacres perpetrated by the barbaric French people. Carlyle sought to provide a more balanced representation of the events and, in 1837, published his *History of the French Revolution*, which made him famous almost overnight.

Carlyle's history of the French revolution is remarkable for its pioneering representations of the people. In 1790, Edmund Burke had insisted that revolutionary French people were brutes responsible for events that were «unnatural» and «not inevitable» (Burke 34) – they had, according to him, set out against a benevolent sovereign only to seek opportunities for vice, crime, irreligion and pillage. Carlyle, on the contrary, tried to show that the people were not to blame: their actions were at least in part justifiable but also «inevitable» and «natural» – they could no more have been avoided than a natural disaster. The representation of the French people as mere instruments of nature enabled Carlyle to bring about a new vision of the revolution and a novel way of writing history. Although Carlyle greatly admired the Germans, it is the French people and their representation that enabled him to give scope to his talents as a historian. Writing about the French people made it possible for him to transition from the biographical genre he had hitherto favoured to a collective mode of representation.

This paper will try to highlight and analyse three major aspects in Carlyle's history of the French Revolution: the lexical blur around the word «people»; the representation of the people as a force of nature; and finally the representation of the French people as a paradoxical entity, to admire but not to be followed. We will see how the French are depicted as a remarkable, almost mythical, yet somewhat terrifying people, whose tribulations may serve as a cautionary tale to others, especially the British. Emphasis will be put on a semantic analysis of Carlyle's text.[1]

1. Cross-references with critics and historians can be found in my other articles, for instance: «Re-presenting the French Revolution: the impact of Carlyle's work on British society and its self-representation», in *Revue française de Civilisation Britannique*, vol. XV, 4, spring 2010, 29-41.

The lexical blur around the word people

Carlyle uses many interchangeable words to describe the French people, from the terms «mob» or «rabble» to more obscure periphrases, such as «a dim compendious entity». «Mob» is used 28 times, and «populace» 16 times. «Canaille», used in the original French , can be found in 9 places (I, 179 or 203). «Rascality» (with a capital letter) is an especially common occurrence, used 29 times, and not necessarily with the negative implications it may hold today. «Rascality» is often opposed to other groups such as «Nobility, Gentry, Commonalty» (I, 118) or even «Royalty» (I, 280). During the first weeks of the revolution, when Monseigneur d'Artois (the future Charles X) tries to cross Paris, «an irreverent Rascality presses towards him» (I, 91). Similarly, the king is assailed by «black deluges of Rascality» (I, 299) and later, once captive, offered a glass of wine by a «half-drunk Rascality» (II, 72). General Ronsin himself, speaking of his revolutionary troops, describes them as «the elixir of the Rascality of the Earth» (II, 359).

The closest Carlyle comes to a definition, or rather an assessment of representations of the people, is perhaps this passage:

> With the working people, again, it is not so well. Unlucky! For there are twenty to twenty-five millions of them. Whom, however, we lump together into a kind of dim compendious unity, monstrous but dim, far off, as the canaille; or, more humanely, as `the masses.' (I, 35)

Clearly, the people are for him the poorer part, but also the majority of the population. He tends to use the word «masses» frequently, with the word «people» thrown in as a synonym:

> Clearly a difficult 'point' for Government, that of dealing with these masses; […] the masses count to so many millions of units; made, to all appearance, by God,--whose Earth this is declared to be. Besides, the people are not without ferocity; they have sinews and indignation. (I, 37)

However, Carlyle is also eager to point out that the people cannot be simply lumped together as a mass. Perhaps because he was a biographer before truly becoming a historian, he takes care to single out the individualities in the crowd:

> Masses, indeed: and yet, singular to say, if, with an effort of imagination, thou follow them, over broad France, into their clay hovels, into their garrets and hutches, the masses consist all of units. Every unit of whom has his own heart and sorrows; stands covered there with his own skin, and if you prick him he will bleed. (I, 35)

Though he does entertain the notion of an organic mass, Carlyle stops the people from being an aggregate, by reminding his reader of the distinct personalities among them, breaking his collective narrative to extract a personal anecdote, for instance that of the widow gathering nettles for her children's soup, while an aristocrat lounging on a chair is figuring out how to get the most taxes from her (I, 239). Also, by using frequently the expression «the 25 million», he emphasises the plurality of what could appear as a single unit. One effect is perhaps to make the reader more compassionate towards the people, who could otherwise appear as a violent and inhuman entity.

The representation of the people in the assembly, at a more electoral level, is broached by Carlyle, but not very extensively or strikingly. «Third estate» is used over fifteen times, with an additional five occurrences of «Tiers-Etat» in French. The indignant nobility is seen plotting the repression of «this which you call Third Estate, and which we call canaille of unwashed Sansculottes» (I, 179). Quite differently, the clergy is told in no uncertain terms that «the Third Estate is the nation» (I, 123). Carlyle does bring up the problem of representation or rather representativeness, once the assembly has lost members: «the wise Commons, considering that they are, if not a French Third Estate, at least an Aggregate of individuals pretending to some title of that kind» (I, 163) but overall, the main interest of Carlyle's works lies not in representativeness but in representation proper.

Representing the people as a force of nature

Another way of changing existing representations of the French people is to lessen their responsibility in the violence that took place. To do so, the revolution is described as a natural phenomenon: the people are like mere animals, acting by instinct in the face of adversity and natural disaster. Though this device is ambivalent and not entirely positive, it was innovative and a step forward at the time.

But before bringing about his new vision, Carlyle had to take up certain topoi of revolutionary history. Indeed, well into the 19th century, British representations of the revolutionary French people had involved emphatic, even graphic descriptions of violent events. Walter Scott includes some truly gruesome episodes: for instance, a baker is hung by a mob on account of the bread prices being too high. His severed head is then presented to his widow for a kiss (Scott I, 228). Carlyle has his own version of this. Unflattering words like «Rascality», «populace» or «masses» are often combined with semantic fields of wildness («wild», «wildness», «bewilderment», «savage», «savages», «ferocious», «cruel»), evil («daemonic», «daemons», «Pandemonium», «devils», «Satan»), madness («mad», «madman», «maddened», «madness», «frenzy», «hysterics»), with the narrator giving the following definition:

> *La Revolution* is but so many Alphabetic Letters; a thing nowhere to be laid hands on, to be clapt under lock and key: where is it? what is it? It is the Madness that dwells in the hearts of men. (II, 377)

Hysteria, frenzy and delirium[2] are also present, as is ferocity: «Has the Reader forgotten that 'flood of savages' […] shouting fiercely; the lank faces distorted into the similitude of a cruel laugh. However, the redeeming factor in his representation of the people, is his claim that these brutal tendencies are present in everyone and will unavoidably be unleashed in situations of famine and decline of a civilisation. It is as inevitable as it is

2. I, 200, 342, 441; II, 124, 259.

cyclical: «the 'daemonic element,' that lurks in all human things, may doubtless, some once in the thousand years -- get vent!» (I, 41). And as far as maddened crowds go, the French are especially ingenious and resourceful, leaving the narrator to wonder, when the French use a balloon to check on Prussian positions, «What will not these devils incarnate contrive?» (II, 374).

Carlyle actually uses those elements of violence and wildness in conjunction with animality. The representation of the people as animals works more to their advantage than could be anticipated. The animals are sometimes generic, for instance when the narrator addresses the people living in misery: «O ye poor naked wretches! and this is your inarticulate cry to Heaven, as of a dumb tortured animal, crying from uttermost depths of pain and debasement?» (I, 15-16).

But most of the time, the narrator resorts to specific animals, with a very strategic progression throughout the book. To begin with, the people are a «flock», while the nobility makes imperfect «shepherds» – the narrator is led to comment: «they are not tended, they are only regularly shorn» (I, 15) Without using the word sheep, Carlyle does represent the people as cattle. This status is shaken off after Carlyle reports the unverified statement by Finance minister Joseph-François Foulon de Doué: «the people may eat grass» (I, 117).

In the meantime, the domestic animal metaphor culminates, when Carlyle strategically chooses to evoke a barnyard caricature that he came across:

> The force of private intrigue, and then also the force of public opinion, grows so dangerous, confused! […] The gaping populace gapes over Wood-cuts or Copper-cuts; where, for example, a Rustic is represented convoking the poultry of his barnyard, with this opening address: «Dear animals, I have assembled you to advise me what sauce I shall dress you with;» to which a Cock responding, «We don't want to be eaten,» is checked by «You wander from the point (Vous vous écartez de la question). (I, 78)

The people is thus represented as cattle and fowl, but also occasionally as game. One day, the king, who is officially

planning a hunting expedition, goes to the assembly instead, effectively hunting what the narrator describes as «two-legged unfeathered game» (I, 95). But when the assembly becomes more rebellious, new animal cries are to be heard:

> Behold, this monstrous twenty-million Class, hitherto the dumb sheep which these others had to agree about the manner of shearing, is now also arising with hopes! It has ceased or is ceasing to be dumb; it speaks through Pamphlets, or at least brays and growls behind them, in unison,--increasing wonderfully their volume of sound. (I, 121)

In the end, the convention, which had been described as «mere angry poultry in moulting season» (II, 173), fails to flee when confronted with the enemy. Condorcet is a «mouton enragé» (in French in the text), and the patriots, who have upgraded to a bigger animal than fowl, now almost turn into a dragon: «This huge mooncalf of Sansculottism, staggering about, as young calves do, is not mockable only, and soft like another calf; but terrible too, if you prick it; and, through its hideous nostrils, blows fire!» (II, 171). The horse succeeds the calf, when the Director of Finance Loménie de Brienne is faced with a task as considerable as the cleaning of the Aguean stable (I, 43). The narrator then wonders: «When a team of Twenty-five millions begins rearing, what is Loménie's whip?» (I, 97).

Finally, carnivorous animals come to prevail: lion, tiger and wolf. Mirabeau, a typical Frenchman, is also very much a lion (I, 144, 173), and the members of the assembly follow in his footseps, refusing to be intimidated by the court:

> Did the distracted Court […] imagine that they could scatter six hundred National Deputies, big with a National Constitution, like as much barndoor poultry, big with next to nothing,--by the white or black rod of a Supreme Usher? Barndoor poultry fly cackling: but National Deputies turn round, lion-faced; and, with uplifted right-hand, swear an Oath that makes the four corners of France tremble. (I, 171)

Though patriots will occasionally cackle still (I, 432), patriotism «snarls dangerously and shows teeth» (I, 305). The people are eventually represented by an «enraged National Tiger» (I, 191) with which it would be foolish to play cat and mouse. The tiger is more and more bloodthirsty: «Blood is shed, blood must be answered for;--alas, in such hysterical humour, more blood will flow: for it is as with the Tiger in that; he has only to begin.» (II, 105) Eventually, it is a tigress that will represent the nation, the «Tigresse Nationale» (in French in the text) showing no mercy at all (II, 352). The Jacobins, who played a part in the Terror, are represented as a lion (II, 431-432). At the worst of the massacres, Carlyle gives up on his animal metaphors: «Cruel is the panther of the woods, the she-bear bereaved of her whelps: but there is in man a hatred crueller than that.»

Logically, the aristocrats, eager to emigrate, then become the hunted party, and are described as game (I, 242), while the king is compared with a deer, to his disadvantage: «The silliest hunted deer dies not so» (II, 108). Eventually, the revolutionary people are crows plucking at a scarecrow (I, 303) – the king. It can be seen as a revenge since it is the people themselves who were described as «lank scarecrows» (I, 6) at the beginning of the book.

To conclude on the animal metaphors, they may not be very flattering, but they highlight the initial suffering and helplessness of the people in a way which is bound to create compassion, and may give the impression that the people's subsequent violent actions are natural and unavoidable, since they are dictated by instinct.

The metaphor of natural disaster, which is directly juxtaposed, reinforces the effect. The four elements intervene to create the impression that, again, the French people are a mere instrument of nature, tossed around by the elements, or constituting themselves an element.

Air is used to highlight the volatility of certain situations. French people are all «Gallic-Ethnic excitability and effervescence» (I, 345), «a fiercely effervescent Old-Gallic Assemblage» (II, 195). Their convention can be seen «storming to the four winds» (II, 436), while insurrection is approaching

like «one enormous Revolutionary thunder-cloud» (II, 364). The events are in turn «turbulence», «tornado», «ouragan», «wind», «whirlwind of human passions», «whirling», «whirls», «red blazing whirlwind».[3] Overall, the air is dry, hot, and agitated, tying up very easily with fire.

Fire, the most important element for critics like Jacques Cabau (Cabau 316), emphasizes anger and action, but also, simply, life: the people are «Five-and-twenty million hearts all burning together» (I, 371). Carlyle deplores their inability to use their internal fire strategically:

> But how wise, in all cases, to 'husband your fire;' to keep it deep down, rather, as genial radical-heat! Explosions, the forciblest, and never so well directed, are questionable; far oftenest futile, always frightfully wasteful: but think of a man, of a Nation of men, spending its whole stock of fire in one artificial Firework! (I, 372)

The people's renewed but short-lived enthusiasm for the monarchy during the revolution is described in terms of a fire too:

> A tragical combustion, long smoking and smouldering unluminous, has now burst into flame there. […] All this was a tragical deadly combustion, with plot and riot, tumult by night and by day; but a dark combustion, not luminous, not noticed; which now, however, one cannot help noticing. (II, 20)

After any hope in the monarchy has been abandoned, Carlyle describes a revolutionary army marching «fierce as fire» (II 426) and entitles an entire chapter «Flame-Picture» (II, 372-376). The insurrection of the people is a «volcanic lava-flood» (II, 239) about which politicians attempt in vain to make predictions. Summary executions are likened twice to a «thunder-cloud» (I, 218), an image perhaps reminiscent of Blake's engravings.

Predictably, stormy weather conditions lead to a downpour, and water appears as a key element. It is ubiquitous, from flood (39 occurrences) to deluge (22), from tempest to waves.

3. I, 116, 111; II, 421, 193, 125

These images are used mostly to describe the people, and more especially the people of Paris, where most of the scene takes place, e.g. «Rascal-flood» (I, 92), «black deluges of Rascality» (I, 299). Thus, the narrator warns Loménie: «Thou seest the whole loose fluent population of Paris (whatsoever is not solid, and fixed to work) inundating these outer courts, like a loud destructive deluge […]» (I, 88).

Women are described as Menads, who, emerging from the crowd as from water, are «dripping» (I, 272, 278). Further, «deluges of frantic Sansculottism» (II, 114) pour into the Tuileries, seeking revenge. On a colder note, there is «a sheer snowing of pamphlets; like to snow up the Government thoroughfares» (I, 123). And when France is shaken by the fall of the Bastille, «it instantaneously congeals: into one crystallized mass, or sharp-cutting steel!» (I, 214).

But nothing, even the deluge, compares with the sea imagery. The word «sea» appears 88 times (including 14 in a plural form). In the vast majority of cases, it is used for the metaphoric sea of the revolutionary people, sometimes conveying a potent sense of threat: «seas of people», «sea of persons», «roaring sea of human heads», «insurrectionary sea», «ocean-tide of pikes and fusils».[4] Sometimes, the flows of sans-culottes combine into a major river (II, 69), and, under the terror, become «a howling sea» (II, 151). As a matter of fact, the sword of sans-culottism is described as «tempered in the Stygian hell-waters» (II, 266).

Again, these metaphors are ambiguous, but they do detract from the notion that the people are responsible for the violence of the revolution, since nobody can control a storm. The only check is that of Mirabeau, who is to the multitude what the moon is to the tide (I, 131). The republic appears as a precarious boat.

Logically, the earth is underrepresented: everything points to the absence of a safe shore. The revolution is one giant shipwreck and the action is, according to Carlyle, a «Shoreless Fountain-Ocean» (I, 408). The shouts of the rioters resound in Paris like the ocean in a cave. When the president of the convention, comte de Boissy d'Anglas (1756-1826), seeks to re-establish the terror, he

4. I, 174-175, I, 292, 110-111; II, 107.

is «a rock in the beating of seas» (II, 438). But the coastline only appears at the end, when the narrator exclaims: «O Reader! – Courage, I see land!» (II, 418). In the meantime, the earth is not a reassuring element, serving only to evoke earthquakes.

The relative absence of the earth, and the combination of the other elements in the most frightening way (for instance into a rain of fire, or a volcanic cloud in the Antarctic) point to natural disasters, with some short-lived «vapoury rainbows» (II, 61) in between. The result is a total destruction:

> IMPOSTURE is in flames, Imposture is burnt up, one Red-sea of Fire, wild-billowing enwraps the World; with its fire-tongue, licks at the very Stars. Thrones are hurled into it, […] and -- ha! what see I? -- all the Gigs of Creation; all, all! Woe is me! Never since Pharaoh's Chariots, in the Red-sea of water, was there wreck of Wheel-vehicles like this in the Sea of Fire. Desolate, as ashes, as gases, shall they wander in the wind.
> Higher, higher yet flames the Fire-Sea […]. The World is black ashes; which, ah, when will they grow green? The Images all run into amorphous Corinthian brass; all Dwellings of men destroyed; the very mountains peeled and riven, the valleys black and dead: it is an empty World! (II, 452-453)

France, «a burning volcanic land» (II, 301) is tossed around, while its elemental people (from the sea of pikes to the fiery temper) proves to be unique and essential to the world. The French people are truly represented as a force of nature, and a unique one in Europe. Carlyle eventually states that the «gaelic fire» may be more scorching and less durable that the «Teutonic» one, but concludes that Europe is lucky to have both kinds (II, 427-428).

A cautionary tale revisited

Besides the representation of the people that have been reviewed, there is also a more direct justification. Thus, the people's violent actions would be «Horrible, in Lands that had known equal justice! Not so unnatural in Lands that had ever known it» (I, 217). The narrator proves sensitive to the plight of the people, often associating «Rascality» with «drudgery»

and «scarcity». The way he uses pronouns suggests that he sides with the French people, addressing them directly, or associating himself with them through the third person plural (e.g. «O much-suffering people, our glorious Revolution is evaporating!» I, 253). The fraternity, heroism and ingeniousness of the people (e.g. «enthusiasm, good-heartedness and brotherly love» I, 359) are also praised often enough to redeem the more cruel characteristics. And the reader is frequently reminded of how difficult the people's predicament is:

> Reader, fancy not, in thy languid way, that Insurrection is easy. Insurrection is difficult: each individual uncertain even of his next neighbour; totally uncertain of his distant neighbours, what strength is with him, what strength is against him; certain only that, in case of failure, his individual portion is the gallows! (II, 102)

Thus, Carlyle's view is constantly ambivalent – and critics did seem confused[5]. The narrator himself declines to issue a clear-cut judgement: «How it was and went, what part might be premeditated, what was improvised and accidental, man will never know, till the great Day of Judgment make it known» (II, 147). The narrator will however put things into perspective, and try to counterbalance the accounts of those who were then heard more than the people. Indeed, the aristocrats and the minority who suffered during the Terror were more literate and more likely to write and be heard, whereas the people had few means of representing itself:

> History […] confesses mournfully that there is no period to be met with, in which the general Twenty-five Millions of France suffered less than in this period which they name Reign of Terror! But it was not the Dumb Millions that suffered here; it was the Speaking Thousands, and Hundreds, and Units; who

5. Royalist Alexis Rio thought Carlyle was a fierce Republican, while Léon Bloy claimed to enjoy his scornful cruelty towards the revolutionary people. W. M. Thackeray explains that the book "raised among the critics and the reading public a strange storm of applause and discontent" in the first months after its publication (Thackeray 69).

> shrieked and published, and made the world ring with their wail, as they could and should: that is the grand peculiarity. (II, 443)

The French people's status is uncertain, hovering from «Rascality» to «envy of the universe» (II, 113); yet one idea is presented as unwavering: they are unique in Europe. Their fiery temper makes their rebellions a telltale sign of what is wrong in Europe. Their revolution constitutes «the most remarkable transaction in these last thousand years» (II, 334); «it is Surely a great Phenomenon: nay it is a transcendental one, overstepping all rules and experience; the crowning Phenomenon of our Modern Time» (I, 221-222).

Be that as may be, the unfortunate consequences of the French people's uprisings are not to be wished on any nation. Representations of the people are linked with their perceived national identity: while the fiery French provide an edifying spectacle for all to behold, others, like Britain, can enjoy peace and learn lessons from their unruly neighbours. Germany, for instance, seems strongly incline and destined to play the part of the spectator.

Carlyle, however, disturbs the British peace of mind and self-satisfaction by making subtle comparisons with France. He does mention moments of British history that parallel the revolution, as the fact that he started writing his book in 1834, the year the New Poor Law was passed, does show. When the narrator eventually asks «Can the human stomach satisfy itself with lectures on Free-trade» (II, 261), he might as well be speaking about Britain. His appreciation of the new tax system set up under the French republic makes us wonder if he would advocate the same for Britain – he comments: «Unexampled enough; it has grown to be no country for the Rich, this; but a country for the Poor!» (II, 268) Further, perhaps as a warning to his countrymen, he states that injustice is doomed to failure (II, 402).

Eventually, the representation of the French people is that of extraordinary men and women whose actions will influence the future of the entire world. The French «preside at a new Era in

the History of Men» (I, 141), and each French person is a prophet («In every French head there hangs now, whether for terror or for hope, some prophetic picture of a New France» I, 333).

Paradoxically, the representation of the French as elements of nature, tempest-tossed animal figures, played in their favour at the time: the accepted stereotypes of violence and bestiality were upheld to an extent, but revisited and subverted by the natural and inevitable dimension the events then took.

Representing the French people in a new way was important for the historiography of the period – it renewed the stylistic ways of writing history but also the perceptions of the revolution. It was also a way of showing other aspects of the events and of the debate that were more favourable to the people – and those aspects were novel because the people could not represent themselves much, it was the viewpoint of the literate aristocracy that had the most visibility in the writings of the period. Ultimately, representing the French people in this new manner was helpful for Carlyle's career, but he also meant for it to be useful to the British people, who may have been too secure in their belief that such a revolution was impossible at home. It was Carlyle's view that, by representing the people, he would expose crucial elements in the destiny of mankind. The people were not just an instrument of nature, but a means for the higher powers to impart a message to mankind about its future and its destiny:

> The depths of Eternity look thro' the chinks of that so convulsed section of Time; -- as thro all sections of Time, only to dull eyes not so visibly. To me, it often seems, as if the right History (that impossible thing I mean by History) of the French Revolution were the grand Poem of our Time; as if the man who could write the truth of that, were worth all other writers and singers. (*Collected Letters* VI, 446)

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