Nationalism and Internationalism in Europe's 'Spring of Nations' (1848) and its Impact on British Literary Culture

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ABSTRACT:

The Revolutions of 1848 may have ended in failure, exile, imprisonment, even death, but their momentum represented a seismic wave to European administrations, changing structures and ideas, reframing political debates (Clark, 2019). Though the Victorians were by nature conservative, they felt that constitutions should be conferred from above and not extracted by force from below; hence their violent reaction to the Chartist challenge in 1848. Not surprisingly, in responding to the revolutions on the continent, Great Britain resolved to remain neutral and insist on the preservation of law and order. Carlyle (1850) attacked hereditary aristocracy but saw democracy as a quasiutopian ideal, unworkable and ultimately heralding complete social collapse. Within Britain there was, nevertheless, considerable sympathy for some of the liberal movements on the continent. The poets of the mid-nineteenth century lived in a time of 'nation-building' and the Italian Risorgimento raised questions about community and individual liberty that were especially problematic for subjects of the multi-national United Kingdom (Reynolds 2005).

These questions are at the heart of the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Browning, Tennyson, and Clough, which investigates the symbolic and actual interactions between personal union and national unity, and exploits correspondences between political government and poetic form. Clough's The Bothie and Amours both come to grips with nationalism and nationalist rhetoric. Later poets who openly espoused republican political ideals sought to embody and advance those principles: Landor, Meredith, Thomson and Swinburne connect the formal strategies of republican poems to the political theory and expressive cultures of republican radicalism (Weiner, 2005). The general understanding was that the foundational basis of politics was the nation, and that it was towards the national state that the forces of history were inexorably drifting (Dengate, 2017). The Democracy, therefore, was usually imag(in)ed as a European order characterised by a confederation of free nations. Nationalism and internationalism were not viewed as opposing forces: a true patriot was imagined an internationalist, a supporter of universal liberty and the claims to nationhood.

THE EUROPEAN REVOLUTIONS OF 1848 – NATIONALISM AND 'A NEW KIND OF POLITICS'

In the **London Review of Books** of March 2019, **Christopher Clark** asks "Why should we think about the Revolutions of 1848 now?" (Vol. 41 No. 5 · 7). He answers that 'In their combination of intensity and geographical extent, the 1848 Revolutions were unique – at least in European history. … Parallel political tumults broke out across

the entire continent, from Switzerland to Portugal'. He adds that 'This was the only truly European revolution that there has ever been. It was also in some respects a global upheaval.' Besides, they 'involved a panorama of charismatic actors, from Giuseppe Garibaldi and the French socialist Louis Blanc to the leader of the Hungarian national movement, Lájos Kossuth.' Indeed, for politically sentient Europeans, 1848 was an all-encompassing moment of shared experience.

More importantly, Clark argues that 'Nothing demonstrates better the immense power of **the nation-state** as a way of framing the historical record than these connected upheavals and their place in modern memory'; he says that we still feel that power today.' These were the 'spring days' of 1848, but also 'the long hot summer of 1848, gleefully diagnosed by Marx as the moment when the revolution lost its innocence and the sweet (but deceptive) unanimity of spring made way for the bitter struggle between classes. Parliaments were shut down, troops returned en masse to the streets, insurgents were arrested and sentenced.' But, as if by magic, by the end of the summer, the revolutions were largely over and conservative governments reinstalled. What remained, then? Clark refers that 'political movements and ideas, from socialism and democratic radicalism to liberalism, nationalism, corporatism, syndicalism and conservatism, were tested in this chamber; all were transformed, with profound consequences for the modern history of Europe.'

Clark emphasises that 'The most striking feature of the 1848 Revolutions was their simultaneity – this was a puzzle to contemporaries and has remained one to historians ever since.' Not only were the radicals and liberals impressively successful in creating transnational networks, but across North and South America, South Asia and the Pacific rim, the ripples generated by the revolutions polarised or clarified political debate. Clark mentions, for example, that in the colonial Caribbean, the news of revolution in Paris triggered local insurrections that put an end to slavery. He remarks that there were no revolutionary armies, only civilian insurgents. Their 'weapons' arrived in the form of books, newspapers and charismatic personalities; they reverberated in cafés and political clubs, circulating in networks that were more dense, socially deeper and more sophisticated than their late 18th-century predecessors.' Clark concludes that 'The result was a new kind of politics – *uma nova política* – as the Portuguese Regenerators liked to put it.'

A NATIONAL STRATEGY? - LIBERAL GREAT BRITAIN AND ITS 'NEUTRAL' ROLE

What role did Great Britain play in these revolutions? **Keith Sandiford**[1] explains that it had originally 'served as a source of inspiration to many generations of European liberals and, thus, might have been expected to show considerable sympathy to the revolutionaries in 1848. In fact, however, the British government viewed the revolutions with alarm and did its best to preserve the *status quo* in Europe. The Victorians were by nature a conservative people and did not believe in the idea that governments could be dissolved by threats and violence - hence their violent reaction to the Chartist challenge in 1848. Unsurprisingly, in responding to the revolutions on the continent, Great Britain resolved to remain neutral in every instance and to insist on the preservation of law and order. This in spite of the fact that the liberal-nationalists in Greece, Italy and Poland, for instance, had consistently won the moral support of the British public. But in 1848 the government was disturbed by the spread of revolutionary fervour in Italy.

Palmerston wanted mild constitutional changes to forestall the republican aspirations of Giuseppe Mazzini, and Great Britain gave little material support to the Italian cause during 1848-49 because it did not favour a united Italy, which could ultimately pose a serious threat to her considerable interests in the Mediterranean. A friendly neutrality was the most that the Italian nationalists could be offered. And this was a great deal more than the Hungarian revolutionaries received in 1848-49. To appease the liberals at home, Palmerston was prepared to do no more than protest the brutal treatment of the Hungarian leaders (summary executions) after the revolution was suppressed. Also, none of the German revolutions received moral or material support from Great Britain in 1848 either; besides, Palmerston did not think that British interests would be well served by an overly strong combination of German states or nationalism. It is easy to conclude that Great Britain did not welcome revolutionary change, either at home or on the continent, and did its best to frustrate the Chartists as well as their European counterparts.

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[1] Keith A. P. Sandiford, "Great Britain And The Revolutions of 1848", *Encyclopedia of 1848 Revolutions*, 1999, 2005 James Chastain. https://www.ohio.edu/chastain/index.htm

INTERNATIONALISM - THE ENGLISH RADICALS & REPUBLICAN EUROPE

In his PhD thesis about the *Chartist Political Culture,* between 1838-1852, *Lighting the Torch of Liberty* (of 2017)*,* **Jacob Dengate** explains this radical context and its links with Republican Europe. He mainly argues that during the 1840s Chartist internationalism was contextualised by a framework of thinking about international politics. The convulsions of Continental Europe during 1848 were interpreted as both a confirmation of Chartist historical discourse and as the opening of a new era of international struggle (95-96). But it seems that Chartist Internationalism often hesitated in drawing clear distinctions between the claims of romantic nationalism and those of class. Thus, the genius of labour could still be celebrated while radicals toasted the nationalist movements of Ireland, Italy, Germany, Hungary, and Poland. However, equally important to this process was the general understanding that the foundational basis of politics was the nation, and that it was towards the national state that the forces of history were inexorably drifting. The Democracy, therefore, was usually imagined as a European order characterised by a confederation of free nations. Nationalism and internationalism were not viewed as opposing forces, but actually constituted through each other: a true patriot was imagined an internationalist, a supporter of universal liberty, and conscious of the interdependence and claims to nationhood of all of humanity.

It was the duty of radicals in Britain to support the claims to nationhood of other European peoples, and oppose the forces of imperialism. In the *Democratic Review* a slew of writers, including Julian Harney and Helen Macfarlane urged support for the independence of Italy and Hungary as furthering the goal of a European union of sovereign republics. The importance of this goal was not simply expressed in terms of the natural right to self-government for the peoples of Europe, but also as a means to break the established European order, the hated Holy Alliance, which was described in terms of an international conspiracy against democracy. The manifesto issued by the Fraternal Democrats in 1846 described 'an inter-woven European struggle.' Spain, Portugal, Greece, Poland, and Switzerland, at the mercy of foreign interventions and illegal annexations, provided living truths of the evils of national avarice fostered by the terms of the Treaty of Vienna. The only means by which the people of Europe could

challenge the 'congresses of kings', the manifesto declared, was by forming a 'congress of nations'. While the People's International League, associated with parliamentary radicalism and more tightly bound to Mazzini's Young Europe, also championed the right of national self-determination, peaceful co-existence between nations, and free trade, it fell far short of supporting universal suffrage and the political rights of the working class as central components of the international agenda.

The 'Heroic Citizens' of France were rendering 'a glorious service' to mankind and providing 'an example to all the enslaved nations of earth'. The Chartist leadership further hoped 'the fire that consumed the throne of the royal traitor and tyrant will kindle the torch of liberty in every country of Europe.' For the Chartists of the metropolis, with **the Charter** due to be presented to Parliament in April, its meaning for Britain was clear - 'to advocate the right of every man to the elective franchise.' Not only did Chartist participation see British democrats taking their place among continental radicals, but celebration of the imminent approach of the 'European Republic' suggests that conceptions of Europe, what it meant and represented, were in a profound state of flux. Indeed, American observers also viewed 1848 as a movement towards a united states of Europe along the American model. (130-131) A speech on Europe from **Julian Harney** exemplified the prevailing sentiment of internationalism: 'One feature distinguishes the present revolution—I will not say French, but European Revolution— (great applause), that the people of every nation are of the same mind … one aspiration arises from the hearts of the long oppressed millions—the aspiration for Equality, Liberty, Fraternity.' The wave of revolution that swept across Germany, Austria, Italy, and Hungary was interpreted as the final realisation of democracy, which would assure the success of the Chartist agitation commenced at the beginning of the year. In the moment of euphoric victory, romanticised imaginings of the inevitable advance of democracy hit hard against the material reality of state power. (134) Lack of organisation and foresight left the popular movements reeling and the revolutions were essentially thought to have already ended by 1850.

T. **Carlyle's** *Latter-Day Pamphlets,* published between February and August 1850, contain an essay entitled **'The Present Time'**, in which he represents his analysis of the Revolutions of 1848. Carlyle attacked both hereditary aristocracy and democracy, believing the former to have brought about the social convulsions through a toxic

combination of mismanagement, corruption, and greed. Democracy, on the other hand, was not the answer but a quasi-utopian ideal, unworkable and ultimately heralding complete social collapse. In summarising the year of revolutions, Carlyle likened the state of Europe to a leaderless anarchy. Stressing his inability to understand the nature of democracy, the **Chartist Helen Macfarlane** (the first probable translator of *The Communist Manifesto*) wrote that 'Carlyle, like Goethe, appeared to find the nature of revolutionary democracy deeply dismaying. Rather than dictating what people should believe, as she argued Carlyle's heroic leadership necessitated, the democracy preached by the Red Republicans was in tune with the 'spirit of the age'. For Macfarlane, Carlyle was raging against the tide of history, and in the process had become the perfect caricature of an old romanticist, disoriented in the wake of unfolding events. (158-60)[2]

THE POETICS OF POLITICS - ENGLISH POETRY ON NATIONALISM AND REPUBLICANISM

That "The poets of the mid-nineteenth century lived in a time of 'nation-building' is Matthew Reynolds' argument in *The Realms of Verse 1830-1870. English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building* (Oxford, 2005). He brings this political and intellectual context to life, by showing that the Italian Risorgimento raised questions about community and individual liberty which were especially problematic for subjects of the multi-national United Kingdom. And he also argues that these questions are at the heart of the poetry of **Robert and Elizabeth Browning, Tennyson, and Clough.** Their long poems characteristically tell stories about marriage, but investigating the symbolic and actual interactions between that personal union and national unity. Their verse as a whole exploits correspondences between political government and poetic form, and is alert to its own role in fostering a common culture.

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[2] In *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (1962) ERIC HOBSBAWM states that the self-consciously nationalist movements, 'Youth' movements founded or inspired by Giuseppe Mazzini, mark the disintegration of the European revolutionary movement into national segments. Doubtless each of these segments had much the same political programme, strategy and tactics as the others, and even much the same flag—almost invariably a tricolour of some kind. Its members saw no contradiction between their own demands and those of other nations, and indeed envisaged a brotherhood of all, simultaneously liberating themselves. On the other hand each now tended to justify its primary concern with its own nation by adopting the role of a Messiah for all. They did not always like or approve of each other, but they knew each other, and that their fate was the same. Together they prepared for and awaited the European revolution which came—and failed—in 1848. (132) But the very fact that nationalism was represented by middle class and gentry was enough to make the poor man suspicious.

What the words 'nationhood' or 'nationality' had come to signify by the mid-19th-century was, for Reynolds, explained with characteristic clarity by **John Stuart Mill** in *Considerations on Representative Government*, 1860: "A portion of mankind … united amongst themselves by common sympathies – which make them co-operate with each other [more] willingly … under the same government … a government by themselves.". But "For conservatives, nationalism [at this early stage] was the monstrous twin of socialism, yoked with it in opposition to political and moral law." Reynolds argues that 19th-century nationalism ascribed a very important role to imaginative writers: "As literacy spread and readership grew, people would find reflected in their national literatures images of themselves as, precisely, nationals" (21).

Unhappy with his own country's conservative politics and religion, **Arthur Hugh Clough** visited revolutionary Paris in the fabulous Spring of 1848. Soon after his return, he began a poem – set on the borders of England and Scotland - in which he imagines how French-style aspirations towards democratic national unity might take shape within the British Isles. His pastoral poem *The Bothie* is, for Reynols, an attempt "to expand the lexis of poetry" to [a socialistic] reality – it "welcomes its readers into a liberal polity of diction" (36), drawing "our attention to the workings of national or inter-national unification …" (37). Reynolds states that "Of all the English poems about Italy, it is Clough's *Amours de Voyage* (1858) which conducts the most acute and thorough enquiry into the seductions of nationalist rhetoric." (42). The work is set in Rome during Mazzini's revolutionary rule of 1849. His tourist-protagonist, Claude, "offers criticism of the clichés of national solidarity, but is equally cutting about the clichés of individualism." He is himself "put into a critical light by the narrative, in which his inability to commit himself to anything at all leaves him stranded and solitary. […] the poem shows us both the dangers of bowing to coercive social and political rhetoric and the costs of not doing so." (42-3).

In her book *Republican Politics and English Poetry* (Springer, 2005), **Stephanie K. Weiner** in turn explores how poets who espoused republican political ideals sought to embody and advance those principles in their verse. By examining a range of canonical and non-canonical authors, Kuduk Weiner connects the formal strategies of republican poems to the political theory and expressive cultures of republican

radicalism. Her study traces a strain of powerful, complex political poetry that casts new light on the political and literary history of nineteenth-century England.

In her Introduction, Weiner asserts the importance of Republicanism to the literary history of Romantic and Victorian England. And argues that attending to republican poetry – popular and elite – reconfigures that history, and reveals a series of ties across class and period, highlighting both continuities and changes in England's cultural engagement with the idea of representative government. Her work follows the claims made by republican poets themselves – that poetic forms were essential to the political role of poetry: "They tended to ally formal innovation with political progress, and defined poetry's agency in emotional and epistemological terms." Weiner argues that "it cultivated readers' ethical sympathies and opened their minds to a clear vision of the world as it is and could be". Poetry's "formalism, compression and multivalence organized knowledge and experience in ways that shaped and conveyed republican ideas." (1-2).

She claims that "Throughout the 19th century, republican poets, philosophers, editors and artists contributed to some of the most vibrant strains of intellectual and artistic life." In particular, the democratic commitments of figures like **Blake, Shelley, Hunt, Mill, Lewes, Clough, Meredith, Rossetti, Swinburne and Morris** connected republican thought to the canonical tradition of British art and letters. She thus concludes that if politically republicanism was a marginal movement marked by repeated failures and disappointments, intellectually it was a powerful stream running through the main currents of culture. (3).