

Introduction

Storming the “Bastille of Words”: Tom Paine’s Revolution in Writing

Thomas Jefferson considered Thomas Paine (1737-1809) as the only man of letters of his own generation that wrote better than he did. Commenting on *Common Sense*, he had this remark: “No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language. In this he may be compared with Dr. Franklin, and indeed his *Common Sense* was, for a while, believed to have been written by Dr. Franklin.”¹ Franklin himself added: “Others can rule, many can fight, but only Thomas Paine can write for us the English tongue.”²

Yet Paine would not practice art for art’s sake. Everything in him was focused on action, on the possibility of changing the established order of things. He believed in the subversive virtue and historical function of writing. His only purpose as a writer was to help public opinion evolve, convinced as he was that a change in the minds of people would sooner or later result in a transformation of society. Such was, to a large extent, the destiny of his first pamphlet *Common Sense*, whose outright plea in favor of independence brought about “a wonderful change . . . in the minds of men” (George Washington)³, and was even deemed by General Charles Lee powerful enough, “in concurrence with the transcendent folly and wickedness of the [English] ministry,” to give “the ‘coup-de-grace’ to Great Britain.”⁴ Similarly, when the French Revolution broke out, Paine viewed the event as the result of what pre-Revolutionary authors had prophetically expressed in their writings. As he put it in *Rights of*

¹ Andrew A. Lipscomb, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, 1903-1907), 15: 305.

² Quoted in *Bulletin of Thomas Paine Friends* 4, no. 3 (August 2003): 3.

³ Jared Sparks, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Boston, 1833-37), 3: 347.

⁴ Jared Sparks, ed., *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1829-30), 1: 136.

Man, “the progress of time and circumstances, which men assign to the accomplishment of great changes, is too mechanical [mechanistic] to measure the force of the mind, and rapidity of reflection, by which revolutions are generated.”⁵

For him, as well as for the Bible or the Christian ‘fabulists’ he so savagely criticized, “in the beginning was the word.”

This was true even in the early days of his own life. When he was eight years of age, his pet bird (a crow) died and young Paine wrote an occasional poem—an epitaph—which tells us a lot about his early view of the world:

Here lies the body of John Crow,
Who once was high but now is low;
Ye brother Crows take warning all,
For as you rise, so must you fall.⁶

Already perceptible in, or between, those lines are Paine’s democratic approach to society, his detestation of rapacious aristocrats (like the Graftons who were then reigning supreme over Norfolk and Thetford, where he was born), and his sober ‘commonsensical’ way of expressing his revolutionary views, however disturbing they might be. In his recent—and excellent—biography of Paine, John Keane rightfully explains that “the crow epitaph not only displays traces of the razor-sharp ability to rally human spirit against injustice for which Paine later became world famous. It also prefigures his immense capacity for writing in militant and down-to-earth language.”⁷

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From a literary point of view, the success of Paine’s books may be attributed to two central causes: the simplicity of the revolutionary doctrines formulated in them, and the simplicity, or directness and accessibility, of the style in which these doctrines were formulated.

It must be remembered that in Paine’s time those who wrote books did so to be read by an elite. They had spent years in schools and universities, learning a language which was both a means of

⁵ Philip S. Foner, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945), 2: 340–41 (henceforward referred to as *FO* 1 or 2).

⁶ Thomas Clio Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine* (London, 1819), 34.

⁷ John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (Boston, London: Little, Brown & Company, 1995), 25.

communication between members of the same dominant social groups and, because of its sophistication and coded character, a language closed to other social groups. This is precisely what Paine exploded in his works, and this is what made his writing (and writings) revolutionary. When the first part of *Rights of Man* came out in 1791, many were those in England who, like Isaac Hunt (the father of Leigh Hunt, the poet), feared that Thomas Paine's "coarse and rustic" style might "seduce his illiterate and unskilled" readers. Hunt saw Paine as a dangerous internationalist—a "Transatlantic Republican"—and likened his rhetoric to "poison."⁸ Horace Walpole went even further, asserting that Paine's way of writing was "so coarse, that you would think he means to degrade the language as much as the government."⁹

A man of the people writing for the people (more particularly for the new emerging class of artisans, craftsmen and small shopkeepers), Paine 'stormed the Bastille of words' (in which titled aristocrats "immured" themselves)¹⁰, inviting the common man to enter the republic of letters and, by doing so, pave the way for the establishment of political republicanism—a form of government based (as he, like Jefferson, saw it) on a well-informed citizenry. Paine was one of the very first plebeian intellectuals of the Age of Enlightenment. As such, he firmly believed that the democratization of writing was a prerequisite for the establishment of political democracy. If only in that respect, he was on a different planet than Edmund Burke. His

⁸ Isaac Hunt, *Rights of Englishmen. An antidote to the poison now vending by the Transatlantic Republican Thomas Paine* (London, 1791). Quoted in John Keane, *Tom Paine*, 307.

⁹ Wilmarth S. Lewis, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973), 11: 239.

¹⁰ It was apropos of "titles" that Paine, in *Rights of Man*, first used the 'Bastille of Words' metaphor: "It is, properly, from the elevated mind of France that the folly of titles has been abolished. It has outgrown the baby clothes of *count* and *duke*, and breeched itself in manhood. France has not levelled, it has exalted. It has put down the dwarf, to set up the man. The insignificance of a senseless word like *duke*, *count* or *earl* has ceased to please. Even those who possessed them have disowned the gibberish, and as they outgrew the rickets, have despised the rattle.

"The genuine mind of man, thirsting for its native home, society, contemns the gewgaws that separate him from it. Titles are like circles drawn by the magician's wand, to contract the sphere of man's felicity. He lives immured *within the Bastille of a word*, and surveys at a distance the envied life of man" (*FO* 1: 286-87, emphasis mine).

target, and his weapon, was “common sense,” not the refined and sometimes euphuistic intelligence of the ‘happy few.’

Who, however uneducated, could not understand the following?

The duty of man . . . is plain and simple, and consists but of two points. His duty to God, which every man must feel; and with respect to his neighbour, to do as he would be done by.¹¹

This is a common sense remark, quite biblical in its simplicity, but indeed much more subversive than one might think at first. As James Boulton explained in his book on *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke*, for Paine “the duty to one’s neighbour should be recognised by all men, by rulers as well as the ruled; Paine’s reader then discovers that the moral injunction has become a means by which rulers are to be assessed and that those who act well according to this principle will be respected, those who do not will be despised”¹²—i.e. rejected from the universe of reason and ousted from their throne. Innocent and harmless at first sight, common sense was now a revolutionary tool.

Paine wanted to be read by all classes of men, and he was. While visiting the British Parliament in 1792, Francisco de Miranda, one of the liberators of Latin America (and a friend of Paine) “noted that copies of the second part of Paine’s *Rights of Man*, at that time proscribed by the British government, were being sold along with sandwiches in the House of Commons.”¹³ But similar attitudes were also to be found at the other end of the social spectrum. As J. T. Mathias, a contemporary of Paine, pointed out in 1797, “our peasantry now read the *Rights of Man* on mountains, and moors, and by the wayside.”¹⁴ Paine was indeed well aware that, in his time, some 90% of the population were farmers or lived and worked in a rural environment. Hence, among many other instances, his famous reply to Edmund Burke’s sympathy for the fate of Marie-Antoinette: “He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird”¹⁵; or the final

¹¹ *Rights of Man*, Part 1, in *FO* 1: 275.

¹² James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1963), 136 (republished by Greenwood Press in 1975).

¹³ A. Owen Aldridge, *Early American Literature: A Comparatist Approach* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 217n.3.

¹⁴ In Boulton, *op. cit.*, 138.

¹⁵ *Rights of Man*, Part 1, in *FO* 1: 260

‘agricultural’ metaphor (on the inevitability of universal revolution) with which Paine wound up the second part of *Rights of Man*

Though the vegetable sleep will continue longer on some trees and plants than on others, and though some of them may not *blossom* for two or three years, all will be in leaf in the summer, except those which are *rotten*. What pace the political summer may keep with the natural, no human foresight can determine. It is, however, not difficult to perceive that the spring is begun.¹⁶

Or again this maritime—and highly derisive—metaphor well calculated for people living by the sea:

I know a point in America called Point-no-Point; because as you proceed along the shore, gay and flowery as Mr Burke’s language, it continually recedes and presents itself at a distance before you; but when you have got as far as you can go, there is no point at all. Just thus it is with Mr Burke’s three hundred and sixty-six pages.¹⁷

Who, in Britain, Ireland or America, could not understand this? No intricate argumentation, no Latin, no Greek like in so many other works, no scholarly or pedantic quotations. Paine used to say: “I scarcely ever quote; the reason is, I always think.”¹⁸ In the first of the *American Crisis* papers (“These are the times that try men’s souls...”), Paine had informed his readers about his method as a political writer: “I dwell not upon the vapours of imagination; I bring reason to your ears and, in language as plain as A, B, C, hold up truth to your eyes.”¹⁹ A world apart from the aristocratic literature of the time, this “vulgar” (Boulton’s phrase)²⁰ or “plebeian” way of writing (my phrase) was for the author of *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* a way of testing “the manner in which a work, written in a style of thinking and expression different to what had been customary in England, would be received.”²¹

The reactions to *Rights of Man* in Britain were commensurate with the provocation. Paine, wrote Sir Brooke Boothby—a romantic poet and friend of Jean-Jacques Rousseau—, has “the natural eloquence of a night-cellar [low-class tavern] [and] writes in defiance

¹⁶ Ibid., Part 2, in *FO* 1: 453-54.

¹⁷ Ibid., Part 1, in *FO* 1: 258.

¹⁸ Third letter “to Cato” (Rev. William Smith, Anglican Provost of the College of Philadelphia) signed “The Forester”, *FO* 2: 78.

¹⁹ *The American Crisis* I, in *FO* 1: 50, 56.

²⁰ Boulton, 134.

²¹ “Preface” to *Rights of Man*, Part 2, in *FO* 1: 348-49.

of grammar, as if syntax were an aristocratical invention.”²² His writing, *The Monthly Review* added, is “desultory, uncouth, and inelegant . . . His wit is coarse, and sometimes disgraced by wretched puns; and his language, though energetic, is awkward, ungrammatical, and often debased by vulgar phraseology.”²³ The most negative assessment came, unsurprisingly, from Edmund Burke himself in a letter to William Smith dated 22 July 1791:

He [Paine] is utterly incapable of comprehending his subject. He has not even a moderate portion of learning of any kind. He has learned the instrumental part of literature, a style, and a method of disposing his ideas, without having ever made a serious preparation of Study or thinking—for the use of it . . . They indeed who seriously write upon a principle of levelling ought to be answered by the Magistrate—and not by the Speculist . . . They who cannot or will not be taught, must be coerced.²⁴

There were nevertheless in Britain a few good minds sufficiently avant-garde to acknowledge that *Rights of Man* was a demonstration “as clear and simple as the first rule in arithmetic” (Charles Fox, leader of the Whig party).²⁵ One English reader went so far as to say that *Rights of Man* “is now made as much a standard book in this country as *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Pilgrim’s Progress*.”²⁶ As Olivia Smith has rightly pointed out, Paine’s “experience of revolutionary America provided him with a range of conventions that was foreign to English literature and English concepts of language. This externality was essential to his becoming an author and to his becoming the type of author he became.”²⁷

For Paine, nothing was supposed to go over the heads of ordinary

²² Brooke Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and on Mr. Paine’s Rights of Man* (London, 1792), 106n, 273-74.

²³ *The Monthly Review* (May 1791): 93.

²⁴ Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., ed., *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 295-96. William Smith was a young Irish barrister who wanted to dedicate to Burke the second edition of his anti-Paine pamphlet *The Rights of Citizens. Being an Examination of Mr Paine’s Principles Touching Government* (spring 1791).

²⁵ Boulton, 137-38.

²⁶ Benjamin Vaughan, 30 Nov. 1792, Home Office Papers, 42.22, cited in E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 108.

²⁷ Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 39. This book contains an excellent study of Paine’s innovative prose—in particular Chapter 2, “*Rights of Man* and its aftermath.”

people: neither politics, (because it concerned their everyday lives), nor literature, at least political literature (because it was about human experience). Paine's plebeian approach to writing had three critical advantages: (1) using ordinary language to address issues that Burke tackled from on high, in a lordly manner, was already a way of exposing his opponent to the mocking eyes of the multitude; (2) writing in a clear, simple way, and making key sentences sound like proverbs or "repeatable" stock phrases, amounted to providing the uneducated reader with linguistic weapons that could easily be peddled around and spread; (3) writing in that particular way gave Paine's prose what was lacking in Burke's, i.e. an exuberant energy, a kind of solar force that tended to turn the most ill-disposed reader into an admirer, if not a supporter.

As a rule, Paine would take his images and metaphors from the reservoir of popular experience. For instance, when he wants to ridicule the "elevation" of thought Burke draws on to impress what he calls the "swinish multitude,"²⁸ Paine skillfully refers to something everybody knew about: the aeronautical experiments of his time (in particular the flight performed in 1785 over the English Channel by Blanchard and Jeffries). Hence his ironical depiction of Burke "mounted in the air like a balloon, to draw the eyes of the multitude from the ground they stand upon."²⁹

The theater, which was very popular at that time, and therefore present in the minds of the general public, was also an important source of inspiration for Paine's imagery. He would readily speak of the "puppet show of state and aristocracy" or describe the system of "mixed government" as a "pantomimical contrivance."³⁰ The theatrical metaphor is always, with him, an aggressive instrument, a way of winning the public over by making them laugh, to the detriment of someone else. Burke also used theatrical metaphors, but he borrowed them from tragedy rather than comedy, inviting the reader not to laugh at radicals, but to view the French revolution as an

²⁸ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1981), 173. One page further, Burke defines the swinish multitude as "a nation of gross, stupid, ferocious, and at the same time, poor and sordid barbarians, destitute of religion, honour, or manly pride, possessing nothing at present, and hoping for nothing hereafter" (174).

²⁹ *Rights of Man*, Part 1, in *FO* 1: 282.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

unsurpassed drama. Paine was, paradoxically, very critical of this kind of rhetoric (when used by Burke):

As to the tragic paintings by which Mr Burke has outraged his own imagination, and seeks to work upon that of his readers, they are very well calculated for theatrical representation, where facts are manufactured for the sake of show, and accommodated to produce, through the weakness of sympathy, a weeping effect.³¹

Burke was good at that, just as Paine was good at producing laughing effects: so his remark was quite unfair. Paine was less good, though, when he was not himself, and tried, in a mimetic way, to write like Burke and imitate the rhetoric of his time:

In the declaratory exordium which prefaces the Declaration of Rights, we see the solemn and majestic spectacle of a nation opening its commission, under the auspices of its Creator, to establish a Government; a scene so new, and so transcendently unequalled by anything in the European world, that the name of a Revolution is diminutive of its character, and it rises into a regeneration of man.³²

Had Paine always written in that somewhat verbose and bombastic way, no one would take the trouble to discuss, nor dare to extol, his clarity and efficiency.

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In terms of immediate efficiency, *Common Sense*, not *Rights of Man*, was Paine's masterpiece. Denouncing the past behavior of Britain, advocating independence and republicanism or describing in anticipation the glorious future of a liberated America, Paine excelled in the art of propaganda and was quite certainly the 'great communicator' of his age. He knew that his readership was socially heterogeneous and that their preoccupations and interests were not necessarily similar, nor necessarily convergent. That was why he tried, with consummate skill, to touch the right chord in each reader or group of readers.

What strikes the reader of *Common Sense* today—as it certainly did when the book came out—is the brilliancy and power of Paine's pamphleteering. "His writing," Bernard Bailyn explains, "has an energy and drama and verbal flair that none of the American

³¹ *Ibid.*, 258-59.

³² *Ibid.*, 317.

pamphleteers had. He brought over a different kind of combative, flamboyant, completely irreverent, even violent, consciousness into the American picture.”³³ Compared to him, all other American polemicists were ‘amateurs.’ Although he rejected Britain *en bloc*, Paine was in fact an heir to the great English tradition of pamphleteering, that of writers like Swift or Defoe—but an heir with a difference.

While explicitly appealing to the reason and common sense of those who read his book, Paine knew how to play with human psychology and, a Freudian before Freud, he kept encouraging American colonists to engage in ‘the murder of both the father and the mother’:

No man was a warmer wisher for a reconciliation than myself before the fatal nineteenth of April, 1775, but the moment the event of that day was made known I rejected the hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England forever and disdained the wretch that, with the pretended title of FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE, can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul.³⁴

The mother comes next. Because, he says, she is motivated by “interest,” not “attachment,” England should no longer be recognized as the “mother country.” Her selfishness, he goes on to say, is worse than that of wild animals or wild people: “Even brutes do not devour their young nor savages make war upon their families.”³⁵ Such an unnatural parent deserves no gratitude, the era of childish docility and humiliation is closed, “the last cord now is broken”³⁶ (meaning ‘umbilical cord’). By emphasizing America’s ‘maturity,’ by opposing maternal metaphors (inherited from the past) to the metaphors of rupture and adulthood, Paine aimed at nothing but stripping the reader of his old beliefs and making him (or her) able to view the future of America in a new light, without any reference to the antiquated images of childish dependency.

To merchants and farmers, Paine spoke the language of economic interest and profit, arguing that independence would keep America away from European conflicts and help the country develop

³³ “The Past IS Unpredictable: A Conversation with Bernard Bailyn,” interview by Mary Lou Beatty, *Humanities* 19, no. 2 (March-April 1998): 7.

³⁴ *Common Sense*, in *FO* 1: 25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18, 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

its commercial relations with the Old World as a whole, instead of restricting it to just the British market. To German, Irish and Swedish immigrants and other citizens of non-British origin, he explained that Europe, not England, was their actual mother country and that America, as an asylum for the victims of universal persecution, was a national melting-pot of a totally different and new nature. To the upholders of reconciliation and to the pacifist members of the Quaker community, whose demotivating influence he dreaded, he enumerated the atrocities and devastations performed by the British occupation forces, playing now on the need for safety of wealthy people, now on the fear of fathers for their families, now on the panic of daughters and wives. Taking his stand on people's religious feelings and the authority of the Scriptures (in which *he* did not believe), he used the Bible to condemn monarchy and hereditary succession. Drawing from the philosophy of his time and echoing the birth of the Frontier spirit, he referred to 'natural law' in order to show that monarchy was a fraud and to denounce the 'unnatural' connection that places a continent under the tutelage of an island. Addressing the business and financial community, whose material support was necessary to the success of the Revolution, he maintained that, by selling Western lands, an independent government could cover the expenses of war and liquidate the national debt *without* milking the taxpayer. To shipbuilders and their subcontractors, then facing paralysis and unemployment, he announced the creation—after the Revolution—of an American navy and the extension of maritime commerce. To the more radical wing of the population, he proposed the establishment of a democracy based on one popular assembly and a broad suffrage with no tax qualifications. Nobody's forgotten, nothing's forgotten: the materialistic and money-oriented inclinations of the population; the deep-seated religiosity of the American people; their combined aspirations to affluence, internal security and external peace; their two-centuries-old sense of autonomy and self-help; the geographic and economic specificity of the continent—indeed all the ingredients that then contributed to the diversified but unified (or unifying) identity of America are to be found in *Common Sense*. Thanks to that virtuoso performance (close to that of a magician), Paine was able to amplify, beyond whatever could divide his contemporaries, a nascent form of patriotism which, within months, was to galvanize the Revolution and ensure its final success.

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When compared to the political writers of his time, Thomas Paine may be viewed as a new kind of artist—the *modern author*—or, as Novalis would have put it, a “harp in the democratic wind” of the history of letters. This, as we have seen, was due to the way he wrote and the peculiar quality of his prose, but if one moves from quality to quantity (the amount of books sold), what one finds is that Paine’s new ‘plebeian’ approach to writing actually won him the admiration of an unprecedented number of readers. And this was true for each of his three major works, *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason*. The fact that these works were all ‘bestsellers’ is remarkable in itself, as a unique historical occurrence, but it is even more important in terms of the impact they had on those who read them.

Common Sense was undoubtedly the most widely circulated bestseller in early American history—a literary contribution to the cause of independence which, according to John Keane, proved to be as important “as that of George Washington on the battlefield or Benjamin Franklin on the diplomatic front.”³⁷ On April 8, 1776, Paine reported with pride that in less than four months, although “the book was turned upon the world like an orphan to shift for itself,” at least 120,000 copies had already come off the press.³⁸ Between January and June 1776, 35 editions were published.³⁹ Three years later, Paine claimed that “the number of copies printed and sold in America was not short of 150,000,” adding rightly, but somewhat immodestly, that this was “the greatest sale that any performance had ever had since the use of letters.”⁴⁰

As far as sales were concerned, Paine was probably not exaggerating, and the figures are astounding: they mean that out of a total population of 2.5 million people (minus 500,000 black slaves, minus a great number of illiterate white people, minus children), at least some 500,000 Americans actually read *Common Sense*, i.e. practically all American adults then able to read: this was indeed, if one excepts the Bible, the first mass phenomenon in the history of

³⁷ John Keane, *Tom Paine*, 110-11.

³⁸ Second letter “to Cato” signed “The Forester”, *FO* 2: 67.

³⁹ Nathalie Caron, *Thomas Paine contre l’impoture des prêtres* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998), 321.

⁴⁰ Letter to the Honorable Henry Laurens (14 January 1779), *FO* 2: 1163.

literature. In Paine's America, the circulation of a 'bestseller' was between five and six thousand copies. The most famous of them was Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*, with 10,000 copies sold every year between 1750 and 1760.

The sales of *Common Sense* brought in a huge amount of money (£1,000 a day at the time of publication just for the city of Philadelphia, where seven editions were released). But Paine had made it a principle not to accept any money for his political and religious writings. *Common Sense* was no exception: "In order to accommodate that pamphlet to every man's purchase and to do honor to the cause, I gave up the profits I was justly entitled to."⁴¹ Paine accordingly gave all his royalties away to the Continental army, so that mittens could be bought for the ill-equipped patriots then fighting the British in Quebec. He later had a similar attitude with *Rights of Man*.

Common Sense was also a success in Europe. As early as 1776, translations appeared in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Russia. The pamphlet, noted John Adams, "was received in France and in all Europe with rapture."⁴² In August of the same year, Silas Deane, then commercial agent of Congress in Paris, reported to the Committee of Secret Correspondence that *Common Sense* had been translated in France, and had "a greater run, if possible, here than in America."⁴³ In Latin America, Paine's 'plebeian' work, although it apparently did not *directly* reach a vast popular audience, actually contributed, through the comments and critical essays it sparked off, to the further development of pro-independence movements, notably in Venezuela, Mexico and Ecuador—as well as in Brazil, where "five thousand translated copies . . . were introduced clandestinely."⁴⁴

Rights of Man, which appeared in England fifteen years after *Common Sense*, was an equally astounding success. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (November 1790), to which *Rights of Man* was a response, was itself a bestseller by 18th century

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Lyman H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), 2: 351.

⁴³ Francis Wharton, ed., *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), 2: 124.

⁴⁴ A. Owen Aldridge, *Early American Literature*, Chap. 8, "Paine and Latin American Independence," 244.

standards: 12,000 copies were sold within one month; the total circulation for the first year was 19,000, and the book continued to sell well afterwards outside of Britain—in Ireland, the United States, Germany and Italy—the circulation was huge too, and in France some 15,000 copies were sold in only three months.⁴⁵

But this was nothing compared to the historic circulation figures achieved by Paine's book. At the time of the publication of *Rights of Man*, the average size of an edition in Britain was about 1,250 for a novel, 750 for more general works.⁴⁶ As John Keane points out, "Sir Walter Scott, the most popular novelist a generation after Paine, sold 10,000 copies of *Rob Roy* in a fortnight," but Paine's figures were beyond belief. Part 1 had appeared on February 22, 1791, and by May 50,000 copies had been sold. In all, 26 editions (of the first and second parts) appeared.⁴⁷ Basing his calculations on information from his publishers, Paine himself, Keane explains, "estimated that in Britain the sales of the complete edition [Part 1 + Part 2] reached 'between four and five hundred thousand' copies within ten years of publication, making it the most widely read book of all time, in any language"—with, again, the exception of the Bible.⁴⁸

Out of the nine or ten million people then living in Britain, four million at most were able to read: this means that one potential reader in ten purchased *Rights of Man*. But even those figures are misleading because they do not take into account pirated and serialized editions—and there were many. Nor do they include the number of those to whom parts of the book were read and who, openly or secretly, discussed the ideas put forward by Paine. There is no doubt that *Rights of Man* was circulated and talked about in the literate public, but, Keane goes on to say, the great novelty was that it was also "read aloud and talked about to the illiterate on an unheard-of scale," i.e. in taverns and radical societies, in much the same way as *Common Sense* had been in America. Therefore "not only did the book touch virtually the whole of the reading public; it also helped transform the meaning

⁴⁵ William B. Todd, "The Biographical History of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*," *The Library*, 5th ser., 6 (1951-52): 100-108.

⁴⁶ Raymond Williams, "Notes on English Prose," in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1980), 69-70.

⁴⁷ Nathalie Caron, *Thomas Paine contre l'imposture des prêtres*, 321.

⁴⁸ John Keane, *Tom Paine*, 307. (For the total claimed by Paine, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 117).

of the public by broadening and deepening its narrow boundaries.”⁴⁹ As far as Britain and Europe were concerned, *Rights of Man* was certainly the first political work to reach what we now call the ‘general public.’ Let alone the ideas contained in the book proper, Paine’s ‘quantitative’ performance was in itself an important step toward the democratization of the publishing world.

Just as he had done with *Common Sense*, Paine did not keep a single penny for himself. All the money went to groups of constitutional reformers and other radical societies who, in turn, contributed to the propagation of the book in popular circles.

Although *The Age of Reason* (1794-1795) was written and first published in France, we have no indication that it met with any success locally. No circulation data have been found, and one has every reason to believe that the book went largely unnoticed, if only because the obsessions and preoccupations of the French were *then* of a political, not of a spiritual, order. In revolutionary France, dechristianization was in full swing, and, since September 1792, “the birth of Christ was no longer the beginning of recorded time”⁵⁰: the republican calendar, which now replaced the Christian one, was supposed to mark the opening of a totally new—and secular—era. In such a context, the publication of Paine’s “thoughts upon religion”⁵¹ could not have occurred at a worse moment. Nor is it irrelevant to point out that, as a critique of the Scriptures, *The Age of Reason* was in itself of much less interest to Catholics (generally inclined to believe in the infallibility of the Pope) than to Protestants (more prone to place their faith in the infallibility of the Bible).

Ignored by the French, the book was extraordinarily successful in Britain and America—and it seems also to have sold well in countries like Germany or Hungary.⁵² In England, *The Age of Reason* rapidly became a bestseller, in spite of the government’s decision to prosecute any bookseller that would circulate it. The book had to be printed and sold underground, and this is why we have no reliable figures regarding the actual sales. In the United States, demand was even more frenetic, and there was no censorship, in any form whatsoever.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 308.

⁵⁰ Keane, *Tom Paine*, 392.

⁵¹ The opening words of *The Age of Reason*: “It has been my intention, for several years past, to publish my thoughts upon religion.”

⁵² Keane, 397.

Eight editions appeared in 1794, seven in 1795, two in 1796. In the year 1797, 100,000 copies were sold in America alone.⁵³

Success, whether in Britain or America, did not mean approval: most readers, including many of Paine's own friends, were scandalized at the 'impious,' disrespectful, iconoclastic audacity of the book. Although Paine's work had originally been composed to keep the French from "running headlong into atheism,"⁵⁴ it was immediately referred to, in the English-speaking world, as the "Devil's Prayer-Book" or "the Bible of Atheism."⁵⁵

The Age of Reason was not the first critique of the Biblical text to be published during the Age of Enlightenment, but it was the first one to have been written in such simple and direct language, larded with wit, humor, verve, cheek (with at times a touch of demagoguery), a clever mixture of popular common sense and scientific analysis that could easily be grasped by the mass of ordinary people—those precisely whom the Bible and the established Churches had always endeavored to reach out to and control. As in the case of *Rights of Man*, it was this, more than anything else, that Paine was never forgiven for, especially in Britain and the United States (where the discreet Deism of leaders like Franklin or Jefferson had never really shocked anyone). And it was this 'socially dangerous' rejection of the Bible as "the word of God" that several American ecclesiastical envoys desperately—but vainly—tried to make Paine *publicly* recant toward the end of his life, including on his death-bed.

One can indeed measure the impact of *The Age of Reason* by the number of 'replies' (most of them negative) that were printed in the months and years that followed the publication of Paine's work. Nathalie Caron has established that 111 such 'answers to Paine' actually came out: none in France, one in Germany⁵⁶—but 110 (almost equally distributed) in Great-Britain and the United States!⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid., 396, 399.

⁵⁴ Paine's letter to Samuel Adams (1 Jan. 1803), in FO 2: 1436.

⁵⁵ W. E. Woodward, *Tom Paine: America's Godfather* (New York: Dutton, 1945), 254.

⁵⁶ F. W. Hagen, *Vindicae Prophetarum Ebraicorum et Jesu Christi contra Thomam Paine ejusque libelli de vera et fictitia religione Germanicum interpretem* (Nuremberg, 1798).

⁵⁷ Nathalie Caron, *Thomas Paine contre l'imposture des prêtres*, 272-81, 323-28. Her full list (522-30) includes 69 replies published in the British Isles—with about 50 in England alone—as against 41 published in the United States.)

The most serious and distinguished of those ‘replies’ was *An Apology for the Bible* published in 1796 by Richard Watson, Bishop of the Welsh diocese of Llandaff.⁵⁸

But Paine’s ‘success’ was this time highly counterproductive: instead of adding to his glory, as *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* had done, it eventually ruined his reputation for many decades to come. More than a century after the publication of *The Age of Reason*, someone like Theodore Roosevelt was still calling Paine a “filthy little atheist,” describing the man as the worst possible sort of infidel, and his anti-religious book as nothing but a “bladder of dirty water” thrown at Christianity.⁵⁹

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While writing *Common Sense*, Paine popularized two words which Benjamin Rush had insistently advised him “to avoid by every means as necessary to his safety and that of the public—*Independence* and *Republicanism*”⁶⁰: six months later, the thirteen British colonies of America proclaimed themselves an ‘independent republic.’ In *Rights of Man*, Paine spoke for the universal character of human rights, insisting that those rights were not only of a political but also of a ... social and economic order! In *The Age of Reason*, he affirmed his deistic faith in “one God, and no more,” condemned all inventors of religious fables, and went so far as to “vindicate the moral justice of God against the calumnies of the Bible.”⁶¹ Because of these radical ideas, Paine was either admired, abhorred or feared. But what was most feared by the powers-that-be, in England more than anywhere else, was less the subversive content of Paine’s philosophy than the fact that, instead of being confined to a select set of customary ‘happy few’ readers, his radical books and ‘devilish’ ideas were able to reach and contaminate the masses, and in so doing to undermine a system

⁵⁸ Paine was still in France when the Bishop of Llandaff’s reply appeared. He immediately began to write a rebuttal, which he intended to publish, once back in the United States, as Part 3 of *The Age of Reason*. But no American publisher wanted to take the risk, and Paine’s rebuttal was not published until after his death. The text may be found in *FO* 2: 764-788.

⁵⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Gouverneur Morris* (New York, 1888), 289.

⁶⁰ Washington C. Ford, ed., “Letters of William Duane, 1800-1834,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 20 (1906-07), 279.

⁶¹ *FO* 1: 523.

based from time immemorial on the ignorance of the people. Those who rejected *Common Sense*, or banned *Rights of Man*, or called *The Age of Reason* “a pamphlet against Jesus Christ,”⁶² did so because they were able to perceive in Paine’s works what Marshall McLuhan was much later to theorize in *Understanding Media* (1964): the revolutionary and bewildering idea according to which the medium, beyond a certain degree of success, becomes the message.

⁶² Letter of Gouverneur Morris to Thomas Jefferson, 21 Jan. 1794, quoted in Moncure Daniel Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine* (Folcroft Library Edition, 1974), 202.