**Representations of Violence in Revolutionary Texts**

Before exploring in depth the wider uses of violence in revolutionary literature, it is worth first establishing what is meant by violence in the the context of revolution, why it matters, and how we can critique it. Walter Benjamin’s work on violence is particularly useful here, as it gives us a framework to understand the complex and often symbiotic relationship of violence, revolution, and the state. Benjamin understood the state itself as being defined by its monopoly on violence – so whichever institutions in a society establish a monopoly on violence become the state. That monopoly on violence is used to maintain the power of the state and its institutions, so rejecting that violence which exists to preserve the law and political institutions has potential to lead to a new revolutionary era.[[1]](#footnote-1) Benjamin further elaborates that violence outside the law, a ‘pure immediate violence’ has potential to prove that ‘revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, […] shows by what means’[[2]](#footnote-2). Furthermore, Benjamin said of military law that ‘the possibility of military law rests on exactly the same objective contradiction’, [[3]](#footnote-3) where legal subjects sanction violence whose ends remain and can come into conflict with their own natural ends. To Benjamin, if conclusions can be drawn from military violence and that violence is used for natural ends then ‘there is a lawmaking character inherent in all such violence’.[[4]](#footnote-4) His argument is that the spark created by violent revolutionary struggle has the power to create a new world, therefore justifying those means. In this essay, I will use Benjamin’s understanding of revolutionary violence to analyse how violence is depicted in revolutionary texts, with particular reference to revolutionary violence and violence that is a direct result of revolution.

Revolutionary rebirth through violence is often sublimated into the image of explosive nature, such as the image of the volcano, which David McCallam sees as representing the force of man-made revolutionary violence itself.[[5]](#footnote-5) Beyond the immediate destruction of the image of eruption, McCallam emphasises its long-term symbolism, where following the musings of late 19th century *philosophes* on natural reactions, the volcano ‘was ultimately an agent of natural renewal’, given how lava can create new land and regenerate the earth.[[6]](#footnote-6) Considering the violence of the volcano as a force for renewal, this power affirms Benjamin’s argument of organised human violence as a force for massive social change. Shelley’s ‘Ode to Naples’ (1820) provides a potent references to volcanism, comparing the revolutionary fervour of Naples to the volcanic activity of nearby Mt. Vesuvius and considering it as a ‘City disinterred’, as if the ashes have been lifted like that of Pompeii.[[7]](#footnote-7) The force of the volcano is shown to be something that reverberates through civilian life, where ‘The Mountain’s slumberous voice at intervals/Thrill through these roofless halls’[[8]](#footnote-8), and he himself ‘felt that Earth out of her deep heart spoke’[[9]](#footnote-9), showing the power of natural forces to reverberate with human feelings and forces. The Earth to Shelley becomes a force beyond the human which can communicate its power into human emotion and revolutionary feeling.

Hölderlin’s *The Death of Empocledes* (1797) harnesses the image the volcano, to explore particularly interesting questions about violence. McCallam sees this ‘Empedocles complex’ as representing the forces of volcanism and self-sacrifice to revolutionary writers.[[10]](#footnote-10) There is of course an inherent violence that can be interpreted from the mob, and from the figures of power and their intentions, but in terms of actual violence, we never actually see the realisation of Empocledes’ suicide. Andrzej Warminski sees a particular significance in the fact that all of Hölderlin’s attempts to finish the play failed, and argued that it is the result of a ‘final realization that he cannot make a tragedy out of Empedocles suicide’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Instead, the implied suicide we know by context frames the text as an unseen force. Moreover, *The Death of Empedocles* presents a fundamental conflict between opposing forces in Friedrich Hölderlin’s initial draft of the play. He declares himself as a revolutionary figure, and as such, faces the wrath of Hermocrates (representing the clergy) and Critias (representing the hegemonic governmental force). The play has a deeply political subtext to it, arguing that it the play strongly links suicide and self-sacrifice to the project of national rejuvenation, showing that through death one can bring life to a project greater than oneself. The following lines are particularly prescient:

On human life the grand desire is,  
 Bestowed that it rejuvenate itself  
And from the purifying death that they  
Themselves will choose, upon time propitious  
Will rise, Achilles from the Styx, the nations[[12]](#footnote-12)

These lines are particularly relevant to the philhellenism of contemporary German writers, and their use of classical references to take on radical political positions. Hölderlin here seems to argue that national rebirth (particularly relevant to Germans increasingly concerned with national unification) requires a sacrifice of the old self, and revolution itself necessitates the will to sacrifice oneself. Suicide itself also becomes a way for a prophetic force to liberate himself from the persecution he has faced and thus achieve martyrdom and immortalise his beliefs. David Krell further argues, using Hölderlin’s marginal notes as a reference point, that voluntary death allows him to rejoin his gods, and escape the cruelty and persecution of the material world, arguing that ‘his suicide [is] an essentially affirmative act, an act of love rather than strife’[[13]](#footnote-13). Suicide finds further representation as a result of revolutionary failure, coupled with romantic failure in Ugo Foscolo’s *The Last Letters of of Jacobo Ortis* (1802). In many ways, this is a literary homage to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which itself posits suicide as a semi-revolutionary act in response to social as well as political failures. Violent self-sacrifice becomes reconstituted as an understandable act for the greater purpose of revolution, but also builds upon 19th century romanticism to create an idealised sacrifice which has its own aesthetic value.

Writing from the Greek Revolution further builds upon this narrative of self-sacrifice, but it characterises self-sacrifice as something done not as individual suicide, but through death in war to serve a greater good. ‘War Hymn’ (1797) by Rigas Pheraios specifically conjures the image of the Greek Ottoman subjects as living lives of violent enslavement, asking ‘What does it profit you to live enslaved’,[[14]](#footnote-14) and valorising a free life cut short over a long life of servitude – ‘Better an hour of a life that is free/than forty years in slavery’.[[15]](#footnote-15) He is however keen to point out that a life without order and state-building would also be unbearable, ‘For anarchy too, resembles bondage’,[[16]](#footnote-16) and emphasising the need for law as a protector from violence and chaos. He is however keen to stress the need for willingness to fight and die against the Ottomans for the greater good of Greece, writing:

If I am forsworn, may lightning strike,  
And burn me till I vanish like smoke.  
As long as I am on earth, my sole purpose  
to annihilate them will be unshaken.  
Loyal to my land, I will break the chains,  
standing at my leader’s side.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This shows willingness to die being framed as something virtuous and necessary in order to create and preserve a meaningful revolution, but also situating it alongside loyalty to a leader, showing the need for a meaningful leadership and a revolutionary vanguard as something vital in order to succeed and to avoid chaos. Chaotic natural forces may be used as symbolism, but they are used to symbolise a spark that can create a meaningful change in the state apparatus. Adamantios Koraes further explains the nature of the Greek Revolution in ‘Memoire Sur L’État Actuel de la Civilisation dans la Grèce’ (1803), writing that he has taken up his pen to ‘announce the beginnings of [Greek] regeneration to the whole of Europe’[[18]](#footnote-18), arguing that writing can itself be a way of fighting, and fighting for the people of Greece meant fighting for all subjugated peoples. The idea of revolutionary regeneration is key to this new conception of the Greek citizen, free from Ottoman subjugation, and the framing of a new state. This focus on subjectivity builds upon the idea of citizenship and nationhood framed by the French Revolution, and similarly employs violence in pursuit of that nationhood – this time violent struggle against an external foe rather than an internal one. The Greek Declaration itself further encodes violent struggle into the mythos of the nation itself, explaining that:

‘after years of slavery, we have finally been compelled to take up arms, to avenge ourselves and our country against a tyranny so frightful and in its very essence unjust as to be neither equal nor even comparable to any other’[[19]](#footnote-19)

This emphasis on the need for armed struggle after years of subjugation uses the framework elucidated by Benjamin, where the violence used to maintain unjust legal and administrative Ottoman power must now be overthrown by a violent revolutionary struggle which seeks to replace that oppressive state power with a radically new form of nation. In this case, the millet system of the Ottoman Empire, which categorised ethnic groups into semi-autonomous bodies was now dated and oppressive,[[20]](#footnote-20) and the new idea of nationhood crystallised by the French Revolution became the ideal national construct of moderenity. Paschalis M. Kitromilides argues that the Greek Revolution can be seen through the lens of theoretical approaches that build upon Alexis de Tocqueville’s idea of the revolution of rising expectations, where a disappointment in expectations – in the Greek case, a failure of initial more peaceful agitatation – results in the people resorting to violence.[[21]](#footnote-21) Tocqueville did indeed see this as being the what sparked the French Revolution, but it is one that is excessively simplistic. Kitromilides also introduces alternative perspectives which locate spark of revolutionary fervour in the material conditions of the people, where a contraction in well-being sparks mass popular unrest.[[22]](#footnote-22) Indeed, the declining conditions of the Ottoman Empire, particularly as its Balkan territories became more accustomed to the cultural and economic systems of nearby European Empires[[23]](#footnote-23), meant that there was little to lose in the eyes of many Greeks. Coupled with the power of revolutionary imagination in literature, the force of violence became mythologised in the eyes of both Greeks themselves and philhellenes abroad. Alexander Ypsilantis was keenly aware of this, seeking aid from abroad in ‘The Revolutionary’s Appeal to the Europeans’ (1821). Ypsilantis self-consciously used imagery of antiquity and historical Greek valour to harness sympathy amongst the classicists of Western Europe, arguing that ‘this noble homeland of genius and heroism is lifting itself up from its ruins’, like a Phoenix, and that ‘The Sacred Band impatiently awaits battle; when our effeminate tyrants do not even dare resist us’.[[24]](#footnote-24) To Ypsilantis, reimagining the Greek nation as in its classical form, rather than in any more recent incantations, was a way to not only reassert its legitimacy over ‘effeminate’ Ottomans, but also to resituate Greece and Greek identity within the category of Western European, and to specifically garner sympathy and support from Western European philhellenes. This support did indeed arrive in terms of financial, and often volunteer aid, most famously through that of Lord Byron. Percy Shelley, already an accomplished poet of revolution, also committed much writing to the Greek cause, most famously in ‘Hellas’ (1822). Shelley begins the poem by imagining the previous slumber of the Greeks – ‘’that calm sleep,/ whence none may wake, where none shall weep’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Shelley sees the Greek national project as being the result of historically inevitable forces, and imagines their success as a new age, where:

The world’s great age begins anew,  
The golden years return,   
The earth doth like a snake renew  
Her winter weeds outworn:  
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam,  
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream[[26]](#footnote-26)

The ‘wreck of a dissolving dream’, where empires gleam under the smile of heaven suggests Shelley imagines the destruction of Ottoman power over Greece as being a heavenly mandated natural reaction, and the renewed Greek nation would end once and for all that national subjugation of the Ottoman Empire – a great rival of Britain at the time, and perhaps a big part of why philhellenism had so much British popular appeal. Shelley does not valorise the violence of the revolution the way that Greek poets themselves often do and prefers to think of that violent revolutionary force as being a natural one – one which is more palatable to the English liberal mindset.

Whilst violence and revolutionary self-sacrifice finds firm support in Hellenic writing about the Greek Revolution, other sources are much more ambivalent about the nature of violence. Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839)provides a much more complex account of post-revolutionary war and violence. *The Charterhouse of Parma* presents a radically different approach to war, concluding that war is the result of revolutionary failings. The death of the French Revolution is seen through Napoleon’s conquest of Italy, and the popular violence and unrest of the French Revolution is replaced by an regimented, militarised violence – the very violence Benjamin sought to critique, and argued needed abolition through revolution. The novel tells the story of an Italian nobleman who joins the French forces, which challenges the Greek idealisation of fighting for one’s own nation – Fabrice is fighting for another nation that he sees as representing a universalist rather than national ideal. In this sense, he is more like the Western volunteers who joined the Greek armies than an actual Greek fighter. At the time, Napoleon was initially popular amongst many Italians, but the onslaught of war and occupation would eventually harden this. The relatively backwards life under the Milanese is emphasised at the beginning, where Stendhal notes that ‘the idea of caricature was unknown in this nation of wary despotism’ and that ‘the good people of Milan were still subject to certain minor monarchical restrictions which continued to vex them’.[[27]](#footnote-27) This is contrasted to the arrival of the French, where ‘so much pleasure and happiness poured into Lombardy with these Frenchmen’,[[28]](#footnote-28) justifying the initial invasion as a civilising force bringing freedom and happiness to the Italians. It is in this early justification of French power and occupation that Fabrice becomes tempted to join the French army himself. In many ways, this shows the power of ideology to recruit the young and restless to a military force when they have no real idea of what military violence looks like or what it entails.

After using a friend’s passport to get into France, Fabrice is briefly jailed as a spy, but he manages to escape using a dead soldier’s clothes. The symbolism of this is undeniable, given how the nature of war requires one dead soldier be replaced by another – soldiers are fungible subjects whose lives matter little to the forces of power behind war. He eventually manages to find his way to the front of the Battle of Waterloo using the help of a canteen woman, and is initially delighted to find it, where he ‘heard the sound of cannon-fire’ and the happiness of this ‘immediately erased all memory of the dreadful moments of despair which his recent unjust imprisonment had forced upon him’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Fabrice is however immediately faced with the reality of what war entails even while he still holds onto his delusions of valour, where he is initially subject to noise so loud he is unable to hear, and described as being ‘most unheroic at that moment’.[[30]](#footnote-30) He initially exclaims his excitement that ‘I’ve been under fire!’ and that ‘I’m a real soldier now!’,[[31]](#footnote-31) but also feels perplexed, asking the Sergeant ‘is this a real battle’?[[32]](#footnote-32) Even amongst the carnage of dead horses and soldiers, his reaction to the war remains childlike, and it is only after his horse is stolen that he realises ‘war was no longer that noble impulse shared by all those who loved glory that, after reading Napoleon’s proclamations, he had imagined it to be’.[[33]](#footnote-33) Fabrice’s understanding of war is blinded by ideology and by youthful naiveté, reflecting that naiveté of many different revolutionary projects which indeed ended in carnage and failure.

Contemporary theorists of carceral justice such as Michel Foucault frequently critique the prison system as an innately violent world which is mediated by violence, and which exists to ‘define, classify, control, and regulate people’.[[34]](#footnote-34) *The Charterhouse of Parma* on the other hand offers a very different interpretation of the prison system; it seems that to Fabrizio prison represents an escape from the far worse violence of war, and a place for him to achieve a certain kind of liberty through self-actualisation. Blissfully ignorant of the danger he faces, he falls in love with the commander’s daughter and manages to smuggle letters to her. It is through this confinement that he finds love, negating traditional ideas around liberty, asking ‘am I a hero without realising it? What I, who was always so afraid of prison, I’m in prison, and I’m forgetting to be sad’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Boredom is something Fabrice can cope with due to his passions, and whilst Count Mosco notes to Gina that ‘in Parma I die of boredom’,[[36]](#footnote-36) Fabrice is capable of surviving prison’s inherent boredom through love. Carlo Ginzburg notes the inherently political treatment of boredom, where ‘boredom for Stendhal is a historical phenomenon, tied to specific space and time’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Assuming this boredom as a historical reality, we can perhaps see this as a spark for revolutionary violence and disorder – boredom is the imperative which allows for the cultivation of passion. Giuseppe Mazzini further argues that in Italy, ‘there is a clash of opposing elements, of passions assuming a variety of forms, and of desires tending towards one sole aim’,[[38]](#footnote-38) those passions necessitating a revolutionary spark and providing an alternative view – that it is the accumulation of passions, such as those of Fabrice, which act as the spark for revolutionary change.

The prison system itself has a very different role in Georg Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* (1835). The prison in *Danton’s Death* is a place of reflection but also a place to await horrific punishment, and the play itself frames the French Revolution as a tragedy of violence through that representation of freedom and repression. Prison marks beginning to the end – Danton’s responsibility for the prison massacres is introduced as his fundamental sin, and he must end up being executed for this himself. His brutal treatment of prisoners results in him becoming a prisoner himself. The questions the play asks about revolution and responsibility problematise how we conceive of the French Revolution and its aftereffects generally. Georges Danton himself is portrayed as the architect of the terror, and his conflict with Robespierre acts as narrative fuel. Paul Celan notes the theatricality of the deaths in the play, particularly that of Camille.[[39]](#footnote-39) Indeed, the death of Camille is fraught with theatricality, but it also reflects an aestheticization of violence. Celan further elaborates that the bodies in the play become ‘wooden puppets’, acting in the name of forces far greater than themselves.[[40]](#footnote-40) Camille at points acts as a foil to Danton, feeling regret for the violence that Danton resists responsibility for. In the beginning of the play Danton says to Julie, ‘I love you like the grave’,[[41]](#footnote-41) explaining that ‘there is peace in the grave, the grave and peace are one’.[[42]](#footnote-42) To Danton, there is a peace in death, and it shows his willingness to rationalise death as something resulting in social peace – as seen in his brutal decision-making. The fate of Danton is however manipulated through Büchner’s use of speeches, often very historically accurate ones. The power of rhetoric is strongly at play here in sealing Danton’s fate and laying out revolutionary agendas. John B. Lyon argues that Büchner’s rhetoric makes violence inevitable, with the wounded bodies of the revolution appearing in the language of the play, rather than in the action itself.[[43]](#footnote-43) This is a sharp contrast to *The Charterhouse of Parma*, but builds further on Greek poetry and its rhetorical violence. Furthermore, Robespierre’s speech is of course what also condemns Danton to his death – it is through the power of violent words that his violent death can be actualised. Forced to reflect upon his actions in prison, Danton’s torment must be to know he is receiving a fate he has dealt out to countless others. In this sense, Büchner’s tragedy of revolutionary violence is how it does eventually destroy its own instigators, where the forces of violence unleashed take out those who had initiated it.

The problems of violence in the revolutionary texts I have analysed are numerous and disparate. The power violent action has to stir the masses and initiate a successful uprising is undoubtable, but it is fraught with questions that problematise any future state institution that may emerge from said violence. The cliché of revolutions eating their children is too simplistic to fully apply, but the action and initiation of violence creates inherent struggles that may destabilise the post-revolutionary reality. Violence may create that spark which leads to initiation and change, but greater forces are necessary to sustain it. However, this does strongly support Benjamin’s idea of revolutionary violence having the power to rupture and reconstitute the oppressive state power it is replacing through violent means.

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