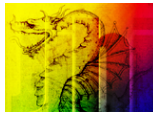


JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS



2013

Volume 2 Issue 4

Item 4

– Section 2: Articles –

Crossing Boundaries
Cosmopolitanism, Secularism and Words in
the Age of Revolutions

by

Erica J. Mannucci



JIHI 2013

Volume 2 Issue 4

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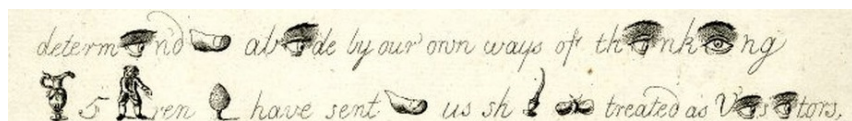
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Crossing Boundaries

Cosmopolitanism, Secularism and Words in the Age of Revolutions

Erica J. Mannucci *

This study is focused on a cosmopolitan group of both famous and less famous radical intellectuals from both sides of the Atlantic—some of them of popular origin and self-educated—all linked by relations of personal friendship or at least collaboration or contiguity: Thomas Paine, Joel Barlow, Nicolas de Bonneville, John Oswald, Joseph Ritson. The analysis of the language strategies they used to attempt a democratization of the universal communication that had been until then kept among the educated members of the Republic of letters—in particular insofar as the high tradition of the critique of revealed religion was concerned, considered here as an absolutely crucial point—centers on the themes of political etymology and of confidence in the performative energy of decoded words.



In August 1809, in a letter to James Cheetham where he defended the memory of his recently deceased friend Thomas Paine, the American poet and diplomat Joel Barlow wrote: “You ask whether he took an oath of allegiance to France. Doubtless the qualification to be a member of the Convention, required an oath of fidelity to that country, but involved in it no abjuration of his fidelity to this.

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He was made a French citizen by the same decree as Washington, Hamilton, Priestley, and Sir James Mackintosh”¹.

On the 26th of August, 1792, just a few days after the fall of monarchy—and even before its official abolition on September 21st by an act of the newly elected Convention, where Paine himself would sit—the French National Assembly had indeed granted French citizenship to a few foreigners who had acquired merits in the international fight against the tyranny of kings and for the progress of Liberty: besides those mentioned by Barlow, who himself lived in revolutionary Paris at the time and had been granted French citizenship, the group included Anacharsis Cloots: German-born *orateur du genre humain* and atheist cosmopolite who had convened the *States-General of the world* in revolutionary Paris, and who was then promptly elected to the Convention; the philosopher and champion of universal peace Jeremy Bentham; the Milanese political writer and restless wanderer Giuseppe Gorani; William Wilberforce, Member of the British Parliament; the German poets Schiller and Klopstock; and the Polish officer Kosciuzko, who had participated in the American war of Independence and was a US citizen as well. Although this occasion was more symbolic than previous local occasions conferring citizenship, as most new citizens were not actually living in France, this was the apex of revolutionary universalism, soon to be followed by a wave of outright xenophobia, where the word ‘cosmopolitan’ itself became an insult, practically the equivalent of ‘aristocrat’².

Most of those cosmopolitan representatives of the fight for freedom were writers—intellectuals, as we would say today. As Marcel Dorigny has observed, speaking of the Cercle social, an international revolutionary club founded by Paine’s closest friend in France Nicolas de Bonneville—a poet, literary translator from German and English, and journalist—political cosmopolitanism in this period was the extension of the idea of the Republic of letters as the ideal

¹ Joel Barlow to James Cheatham, Kolarama, August 11, 1809, in *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine* (London: Carlile, 1824), xxii-xxiii. Thanks to renewed scholarly interest in the history of secularism in the United States, Barlow’s biography has recently been reconsidered as well: R. Buel Jr., *Joel Barlow: American Citizen in a Revolutionary World* (Baltimore-London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2011).

² See J.-R. Suratteau, “Cosmopolitisme et patriotisme au siècle des Lumières”, *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française* 253 (1983): 364-89; and S. Wahnich, *L’impossible citoyen. L’étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).

network of the *philosophes*¹. In 1763, Denis Diderot had said to David Hume: “Dear David, you belong to all the nations of the earth and you will never ask a man where he was born. I am honored to be, like you, a citizen of the great city of the world”. In the early 1790s, “in British circles zealous for the cause of the French Revolution, a remarkable argument surfaced. It said that fraternizing in local political societies with ties to French revolutionaries should be seen as analogous to the international contacts needed for science”. Scientists like Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper, M.C. Jacob continues, “saw themselves as doing in politics what had been done in science (...) Pushing the boundaries through cosmopolitan communication in one area became a technique appropriated, used now to facilitate new and personal politics”². Through this militant communication, of course, these men had previously supported, directly against their own government, the American revolution as well. They were now ready to attempt a democratization of the universal communication that had been until then kept among the educated.

Eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism certainly did not consist only in a set of ideas—which has usually been read in a philosophical or political *longue durée* perspective—but in a series of cultural and personal practices, as Margaret Jacob observes. These practices were characterized by the crossing not only of national, but social and religious boundaries³. The democratization of critical knowledge, or the “popularization of the *philosophes*’ work”⁴, one of the primary purposes declared by the Cercle social at its beginnings in the autumn of 1790, might be singled out, as we will see, as one of those forms of boundary-crossing.

¹ According to M. Dorigny, “Le Cercle social ou les écrivains au Cirque”, in J.C. Bonnet (ed.), *La Carmagnole des Muses* (Paris: Colin, 1988), the Cercle social had a central role in the intellectual life of the first years of the French Revolution. See also G. Kates, *The Cercle Social, the Girondins and the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985); D. Goodman, *The Republic of Letters. A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 288-300; R. Monnier, *L’Espace publique démocratique* (Paris: Kimé, 1999).

² M.C. Jacob, *Strangers Nowhere in the World. The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2006), 134.

³ In the above cited book, M.C. Jacob offers a new perspective on cosmopolitanism in the 18th century and in the revolutionary period.

⁴ R. Monnier, “Nicolas de Bonneville, tribun du peuple”, in *Langages de la Révolution (1775-1815), Actes du 4ème colloque international de lexicologie politique* (Paris: INALF-Klincksieck, 1995), 384.

Thus cosmopolitanism was still, in a deep sense, a world of words, built upon the circulation of words, the relationship among writers and readers as speaking subjects. These words of truth had a performative thrust—their communication would make things happen. The Cercle social—and Bonneville in particular—meant to go one essential step further with their planned ‘Universal Confederation of humankind’: this would have a common language, a ‘langue federative’ of free and truthful words. “Régénérons le genre humain, comme il a été créé, par la *parole*”, Bonneville wrote in *L’Esprit des religions*¹: this meant tracing the roots of language, of significant words, to find their original message, which was both enlightening and creative. The notion of ‘Confederation’ itself represented what ancient wisdom really meant by ‘Religion’: Une “*assemblée fédérative* est littéralement et clairement la traduction dans nos langues modernes, de ce que les anciens sages ont entendu par *église, religion* et *république*”². In other words, “au niveau de la métaphysique bonnevillienne, le social, étant le mystère du lien entre les hommes est, au sens étymologique du mot, la vraie ‘religion’”³.

The immediate intellectual antecedent of this political philology was the work of comparative philologist Antoine Court de Gébelin, who had died in 1784. His was a key figure in the history not only of French Freemasonry (he had an important role in the famous *loge philosophique* des Neuf soeurs where Voltaire was received and Franklin was a Venerable), but of the larger galaxy of 18th century esotericism, mostly made up of Masonic initiates who refused mainstream Freemasonry and often wandered from one ritual or practice to another, caught in an interminable spiritual quest⁴. This world—as theosophist Louis-Claude de

¹ N. de Bonneville, *De l’Esprit des religions* (1791) (nouv. éd., Paris: 1792), t. I, 19 (the italics in quotations from this work are Bonneville’s). See R. Monnier’s comments on this crucial feature of his thought, “Nicolas de Bonneville, tribun du peuple”, p. 387. Discussing the theme of Declarations of rights, C. Fauré, *Ce que déclarer veut dire: histoires* (Paris: PUF, 1997), has drawn attention to a new institutional language performativity in the revolutionary context, stressing the performative character of the French Declarations, as enunciations which were posited as capable of producing acts and transforming situations, but were also structured in a self-referential way, to justify by *fait accompli*.

² *De l’Esprit des religions*, I, 82.

³ P. Brasart, “Bonneville et le Cercle social, ou le bizarre en révolution”, *Littérature* 169 (2013): 67-86 (quotation, p. 80).

⁴ I treated this cultural milieu and its politics in E.J. Mannucci, *Gli altri lumi. Esoterismo e politica*

Saint-Martin's mystical reflections on signs and language show¹—shared the strong passion for the issue of primitive and/or perfect language that spanned the entire 18th century's intellectual debate.

The significance of Court de Gébelin's relationship with Saint-Martin is still debated, as the sources are not very forthcoming, although some authors present as given that they were friends and reciprocally influenced precisely on signs and language². The exploration of Masonic filiations and connections as such (most of the writers who will be mentioned here were in more or less significant ways connected to Freemasonry) is time-consuming and will not yield much in terms of an evaluation of the difference those ever-changing affiliations could make in the political motivation of an individual. Similarly, an intellectual outlook like the eschatological perspective Gébelin, Saint-Martin and others shared could offer means to different—secular or mystical—ends. Gébelin had hoped to re-establish, with his research on primitive universal roots in known languages, the original correspondence of words and things and, through this knowledge, announce the key to future earthly social happiness: “Persuadé que tout est langage et que le monde est lui-même une allégorie, il a cherché à travers les racines des mots et des choses les secrets d'un grand ordre nécessaire et oublié”³.

A revolutionary “vulgarizer”, however, was not always or necessarily really familiar with the work of the original author of the ideas he was reinterpreting and using as actual instruments of change. Bonneville candidly admitted that he had never read Court de Gébelin's work on primitive language: his knowledge was second-hand, but he was sure he could cite the monumental *Monde primitif*

nel Settecento francese (Palermo: Sellerio, 1988) and *Dai cieli la ragione. Gli illuminati dal Seicento alla Restaurazione* (Napoli: Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici, 1992). The bibliography on these themes is vast, but the subject has now come to the general attention of historians of the 18th century thanks to D. Edelstein (ed.), *Super-Enlightenment: daring to know too much* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010).

¹ The *Cahiers des langues de Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin*, probably written in 1787-88, was published by R. Amadou, who had to use a copy because the original manuscript is lost: *Les Cahiers de la Tour Saint-Jacques*, VII, 1961, 143-200. Bonneville printed a work of Saint-Martin in 1792, then another in Year VII (1799), *Le Crocodile, ou la guerre du bien et du mal arrivée sous le règne de Louis XV*, which included a part on the “Nature des signes”.

² On this subject see A.-M. Mercier-Faivre, *Un supplément à l'“Encyclopédie”: Le “Monde primitif” d'Antoine Court de Gébelin* (Paris: Champion, 1999).

³ *Ibid.*, 45. See also J. Trabant, S Ward (eds.), *New Essays on the Origin of Language* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001).

(1773–82) to support his own arguments: “sans jamais l’avoir ouvert, je le cite avec confiance pour appuyer cet écrit”¹.

Gébelin’s work—and a specific part of the *Monde primitif* in particular, the *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*—had a widespread influence at the time. Of course, Gébelin’s linguistics had an important poetic and, what is more, mythopoeic side². He thus created a multipurpose cultural machine³. His myth of ‘Celtique’ as the historical primitive language from which both the ancient and modern European languages had originated could be used in different ways⁴. Potentially, it constituted a support for both an ethnocentric or nationalist and a universalistic vision, which would search for meaningful linguistic affinities as a basis for political internationalism.

Thus, Gébelin figures as an important reference in the context of revolutionary language policies. He was a reference of the abbé Henri Grégoire and the middle-class correspondents who in 1790–91 replied to his survey on the use of patois in the different regions of the French territory. The answers to this official political initiative showed—among other things—the success of Gébelin’s myth of Celtic identity among the reading public⁵. The ultimate purpose of this investigation from Paris, however, was to revolutionize and nationalize country people from above, mostly through public education. As national language, French was seen by definition as the language of revolutionary principles and political representation, and it must take the place of patois, the language of particularism, prejudice and superstition. In this perspective, minority languages (such as Flemish) were also candidates to absorption into French uniformity or, better, a newly-minted national popular language⁶.

¹ *De l’Esprit des religions*, I, 27. Bonneville certainly used as evidence the same “homophonie approximative” that could be found in Gébelin’s argumentation: P. Brasart, “Bonneville et le Cercle social”, 84.

² The ‘fantastic’ nature of his linguistics is explained in S. Auroux et al. (eds.), *La linguistique fantastique* (Paris: Denoël, 1985), “Présentation”, 22.

³ On the ‘mythological machine’ see F. Jesi, *Mito* (Milan: ISEDI, 1973).

⁴ On the corresponding Celtic myth in Great Britain, see P. Bergheaud, “Le mirage celtique: antiquaires et linguistes en Grande-Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle”, in *La linguistique fantastique*, 51–60.

⁵ M. de Certeau, D. Julia, J. Revel, *Une politique de la langue. La Révolution française et le patois: l’enquête de Grégoire, Postface inédite de D. Julia et J. Revel* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 63 and 87–98.

⁶ On the efforts of political ‘translation’ of *notions-concepts* by revolutionary *porte-parole*, on the building of a new political language and in particular of a legitimate ‘langue du peuple’ during the

Moreover, as Bonneville's work shows, political cosmopolitanism could indeed retain in France the same underlying 'gallocentrism' that had characterized most French *philosophes*¹. After all, the *exception française* represented by the Revolution itself could well fuel this attitude. However, in that interest for words and the philological, etymological interpretation or even invention of language, we can sense a key to the understanding of the actual effort to cut across frontiers of different kinds.



In this effort to popularize the ideas and critical attitudes of high radical culture for political purposes, a crucial point was the transmission of the critique of revealed religion, an aspect that is sometimes underestimated in recent historiography. It was an essential aspect of the formation of political consciousness, however, as E.P. Thompson first showed for his "radical and free-thinking" artisans, whose minds felt the "profoundly liberating effect" of Paine's *Age of Reason*, of Volney's *Ruins*, translated into English and sold in cheap pocket-book form, as well as of the abridgements of Voltaire or d'Holbach². Bonneville wrote

Revolution, and on the phases of this process, J. Guilhaumou's books and articles are essential reading. See in particular his *La langue politique et la Révolution française* (Paris: Méridiens-Klincksieck, 1989) and "La langue politique et la Révolution française", *Langage et Société* 113 (2005), 63-92; also, Id., *L'Avènement des porte-parole de la République (1789-1792)* (Lille: PU du Septentrion, 1998); and "La langue politique: des notions-concepts en usage", in J.-C. Martin (ed.), *La Révolution à l'oeuvre. Perspectives actuelles dans l'histoire de la Révolution française* (Rennes: PU de Rennes, 2005), 125-138.

¹ M. Dorigny, "Un autre cosmopolitisme: Bonneville et le Cercle social", in B. Vincent (ed.), *Thomas Paine ou la République sans frontières* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1993), 170-77. See also M. Belissa, *Fraternité universelle et intérêt national (1713-1795). Les cosmopolitiques du droit des gens* (Paris: Kimé, 1998). R. Monnier, "Nicolas de Bonneville", 394, cites a typical example from Bonneville's newspaper *La Bouche de Fer*: "Dans un pays tel que la France moderne, dans une langue aussi populaire, langue européenne, et pour ainsi dire universelle, nous aimons à croire qu'il ne nous sera pas impossible de réaliser les sublimes idées des premiers amis de la vérité".

² E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 107.

that before discussing the “premiers principes de la *création sociale*”, it was necessary to “enlever les décombres, de mettre l’homme *debout* sur des ruines qui s’opposent à tous les premiers pas d’un ami de la vérité!”; in other words, “C’est parce qu’il y a encore sur la terre des prêtres, intolérants et cruels, que la Patrie est en danger!”¹.

Deism, like materialism and atheism, had been the prerogative of the kind of man who was traditionally called a Sage. In revolutionary times, a certain culture came to change its language, to abandon neo-Cynic self-sufficiency and embrace community and solidarity, to popularize itself, to campaign to gain support among the uneducated. Individual French and British and Irish-born radical intellectuals, some of them of popular origins, had large roles in this change and in finding the words to express it. The results would often personally disappoint them, but were nonetheless culturally irreversible. Bonneville’s work spells out this effort in an idiosyncratic but unequivocal way:

D’où vient le mot Dieu en français (...) Ce mot ne signifie rien dans notre langue. Il veut dire en ses racines grecques. *Theos*, celui qui voit. Pourquoi nous payer de mots intelligibles? Cessons d’être esclaves².

He then explained his religious view: “Oui, j’arracherai à la nature un aveu dont elle est épouvantée: *L’homme est Dieu!*”³. There are, moreover, signs of interest in the development of Anglo-French words, as in Bonneville’s reflections on the goddess “*Earth*”; or in the use of English to express concepts effectively, as when he quotes Shakespeare’s *unking and unpriest the Earth*⁴; or he points out the literal meaning of the word *Club*—a *massue*, in French—implying a kind of political association which will not be open and tolerant: a clear allusion to existing revolutionary *clubs*⁵.

Bonneville’s close friend Thomas Paine, thrice citizen though not bilingual, offers, in more than one sense, a classic example of boundary-crossing⁶. He

¹ *Appendices de la seconde édition de l’Esprit des religions*, Paris, 1792, 96 and 99. See also A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), 483-485.

² *De l’Esprit des religions*, I, 19.

³ *Appendices*, 95.

⁴ *Appendices*, 117.

⁵ *De l’Esprit des religions*, I, 55 and II, 29.

⁶ His cosmopolitanism was the main subject of a conference sponsored in Paris by the Thomas

practically transformed the arguments of the tradition of radical deism (and of republican cosmopolitanism as well) into *new* ideas. He showed the uses that high tradition could have in a new historical situation, where the secular common sense language of a self-taught man of the people could prove capable of revealing what was behind abstract words masking power, religious hypocrisy and social oppression and become the language of political initiative and of sovereignty¹. His effectiveness was based, in other words, on a ‘coup de génie’ which went deeper than rhetoric power: “il fut le seul à avoir conçu le rôle du sens commun dans la liaison novatrice que devait contenir le binôme raison-révolution”².

We know that the secularism Paine represented was already taken for granted in France at the time he wrote the first part of *Age of Reason*, at least by the political leadership and activists of the Revolution. When he was arrested in Paris at the end of December 1793, Paine was allowed to entrust the manuscript to Barlow and the work would be first published in Paris in both English and French in 1794. In the United States, he was much more widely read than in France: in fact, “Thomas Paine was the author of the three most widely read and influential pamphlets in the English language in the last quarter of the eighteenth century”³.

There, however, his perspective on revealed religion was very controversial: it would not prevail politically in the long run, and would become the basis of an ideological misrepresentation of Paine himself, only recently disputed by a ‘Paine Revival’ in American academia and civil society⁴. Perhaps, however, the

Paine Association: B. Vincent (ed.), *Thomas Paine: ou, la République sans frontières* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1993). See now also A. Kontochristou, *Thomas Paine. The Man of the Two Revolutions* (Athens: Ardin, 2013).

¹ N. Caron, *Thomas Paine contre l'imposture des prêtres* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), examines Paine's language style and the language of his deism in particular: “Le langage de Paine était bien son arme majeure, sa force de frappe (...) Crucial dans tous les cas, le langage occupe une place toute particulière dans les textes théologiques”, because there it is founded on his own reading of the Scriptures (p. 174). See also E. Larkin, *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005).

² L. Marcil-Lacoste, “Sens commun et révolution: Thomas Paine”, in *Langages de la Révolution*, 535.

³ A. Young, “Common Sense and the Rights of Man in America. The Celebration and Damnation of Thomas Paine”, in K. Gavroglu (ed.), *Science, Mind and Art, Essays in honor of Robert S. Cohen* (Dordrecht-Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 411-439 (quotation, p. 412).

⁴ See A. Young, *ibid.* and M. Belissa, “La légende grise des dernières années de Thomas Paine en

revolutionary secularists did not fail as much as has been maintained for a long time afterwards: according to Susan Jacoby,

Although the pace of change in customary religious arrangements seemed glacial to those members of the revolutionary generation most committed to Enlightenment values, what is striking from a twenty-first century perspective is the speed with which many Americans came to support freedom of thought and religious practice that overturned millennia of religious authoritarianism¹.

Finally, we know that in England the popular reading public itself was practically created single-handedly by the sixpence editions of *Rights of Man*, followed by those of *Age of Reason*, which was an exceptional best-seller in its own right in Britain as well as in the United States. The Evangelical Hannah More lamented at the time that: “Vulgar and indecent penny books were always common, but speculative infidelity, brought down to the pockets and capacities of the poor, forms a new era in our history”². She fought *Age of Reason* using the pseudonym Will Chip to confute it in *A Country Carpenter’s Confession of Faith* (1794). More used, in other words, a fictitious working man and a literary vernacular language to counter Paine’s proud new “language of the people”, the attitude that made him write the famous sentence, “My own mind is my own Church”, in the first pages of *Age of Reason*. The fictitious Will Chip is proud to defer, first of all on the obscure passages of the Bible—that is, precisely the mythological mystery Paine denounces: “These difficult things can be explained, they have been explained to me, by our worthy vicar (...) I shall never puzzle my head any more about matters which are too high for me”. He similarly defers to his ‘betters’ on politics: “Republicanism and infidelity (our vicar tells me) are sworn friends both here and in France”³. As Paine had written

Amérique, 1802-1809”, *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 360 (2010/2): 133-172.

¹ S. Jacoby, *Freethinkers. A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 32.

² R. Altick, *The English Common Reader. A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: Chicago UP, Midway reprint 1983), 74.

³ About More’s and other religious but essentially political attacks on *Age of Reason* in England, see F.K. Prochaska, “Thomas Paine’s The Age of Reason Revisited”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33, 4 (1972): 561-576 (quotations, p. 573). A precious database source on the subjects of non-published debates at the time is D.T. Andrew (ed.), *London Debating Societies, 1766-1799* (London: London Record Society, 1994), <http://www.british-history.ac.uk>. Public discussions on religion and theology were quite common, and *Age of Reason* was a frequent topic.

in *Rights of Man*, the paradoxical position of social and political conservatives was that men should fight “not to maintain their rights, but to maintain they have not rights”¹.

This social development of political language was linked to the change of the figure of the intellectual itself during the last decades of the 18th century. If in Paris in the middle of the 18th century more than 18 per cent of the published authors already were sons of artisans and shopkeepers who had had access to secondary education², with the later advent of the professional writer—typically of the Grub Street variety both in London and Paris—the presence and role of intellectuals of popular origin—often self-taught—became more prominent. In the revolutionary period, Paine and other less commercially successful writers brokered for the popular public ideas that had been part of a heterodox high culture. They had needed to understand those ideas themselves, first, and appropriate them. A man like Paine had had to pit his mind against enigmatic words and uncover their real meanings and power implications. Consequently he was able to build upon his own reading experience his “intellectual vernacular prose”³, questioning, from *Common Sense* onwards, all the significant ‘unmeaning’ words (such as king, aristocracy, revelation etc.) and adopting the plain meaningful ones, like ‘deist’, deriving directly from *Deus*⁴. Paine thus offered as common sense the sophisticated idea that truth could be found through the unravelling of the historical and political ambiguities and potentialities of existing terms⁵.

In this renewed ‘intellectual vernacular’ context, the philology founding both the critique of institutionalized religions and their political implications, and the search in language or in languages for meaningful roots of opposition, could merge again with cosmopolitanism—that of a new generation, a new demo-

¹ *Rights of Man* in *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. by P.S. Foner (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1974), 250.

² R. Darnton, “Policing Writers in Paris Circa 1750”, *Representations*, 5 (1984): 1-31.

³ O. Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 36.

⁴ See N. Caron, *Thomas Paine*, 190-192.

⁵ As S. Auroux, *La sémiotique des encyclopédistes* (Paris: Payot, 1979), 295, reminds us, in the *Encyclopédie*, “Dans l’article *art étymologique*, De Jaucourt emprunte à Falconet une définition; c’est ‘l’art de débrouiller ce qui déguise les mots’, de ‘les ramener à la simplicité qu’ils ont tous dans leur origine’”.

cratic Republic of letters. This went beyond a sentiment of intellectual or political fraternity, or of universal benevolence, to become a culturally creative perspective.

Let us go back to Barlow's correspondant, Cheetham, the editor of the New York *American Citizen*. He had quarreled years before with Paine, who had called him *Cheat'em*, and he would publish a vicious biography of Paine in London, in 1817. In September 1807, Paine had accused Cheetham of being a war-monger and in particular of "seeking to involve the United States in a quarrel with France" Napoleon's France, of course "for the benefit of England"¹. With his attitude on war and peace and his denunciation of Paine's supposed anti-patriotic behavior, Cheetham apparently represented what had already become the prevailing mentality both in Europe and in America, an aggressive and exclusive idea of patriotism, where universal brotherhood became little more than an ideological travesty, as for example the Italian revolutionaries had unhappily discovered, after having greeted the French armies in 1796 as liberators.

Joel Barlow, always faithful to his idea of the American model as the foundation of a new era of universal peace and federation, reasoned in ethical and interpersonal rather than political terms. Paine, he continued in his above mentioned letter—a text we may use as a sort of guide into the conflicting visions of this transitional period—was always

charitable to the poor beyond his means, a sure protector and friend to all Americans in distress that he found in foreign countries. And he had frequent occasions to exert his influence in protecting them during the revolution in France. His writings will answer for his patriotism, and his entire devotion to what he conceived to be the best interest and happiness of mankind².

As we see, in Barlow's vision, as in Paine's, there is no opposition between patriotism and devotion to the interest of all mankind: when he wrote in his poem *The Conspiracy of Kings* (1792) that the French Revolution "make[s] pa-

¹ On the complex relationships among radicals of British and Irish origins in the United States—Cheetham among them—see R.J. Twomey, "Jacobins and Jeffersonians: Anglo-American Radical Ideology, 1790-1810", in M. Jacob, J. Jacob (eds.), *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (London-Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 284-99; and K.W. Burchell's introduction in K.W. Burchell (ed.), *Thomas Paine and America, 1776-1809* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009).

² See above, note 1.

triot views and moral views the same”, he referred to an idea of universal, not national, patriotism¹. In this poem he showed in turn an interest in political etymology, in his variations on the Latin word *Liber*, meaning free, but also used as an epithet of Bacchus—which created a filiation from the *Phallus*, emblem of *Libertas*, and the modern Liberty Pole, that had re-crossed the Atlantic from revolutionary America to revolutionary France².

Barlow clearly showed his vision of citizenship in an appeal to the Convention—published in two languages in November 1792—when he stated that citizen rights were natural rights, that is, dissociated from nationality, from the place of birth, and belonging instead to the individual, for him or her to exercise and be recognized wherever they wanted to live. As Sophie Wahnich argues, this idea of citizen rights suggests a notion of *nomadic citizenship*. A notion that was opposed to the idea of an exclusive citizenship, a feudal notion of citizenship, as Barlow called it, because it implied that fidelity to one country was incompatible with one’s duties towards another country³. The historical passage from “home is where Liberty is” and a philanthropic commitment to the community of mankind, or, at least, European countries and America, to the aggressive “God-blood-soil-one language” vision of patriotism—to the antinomy between cosmopolitanism and patriotism—was not necessarily an abrupt and univocal break taking place not only in revolutionary France, but in the whole Western world, at the turn of the century⁴.

Barlow concluded his letter referring to Paine’s religion: it was simply not the exception, but the rule among men of science. What he implied is that affecting to be shocked at Paine’s deism was hypocritical, as most philosophical men thought as he did, although they did not say so for expediency, for political reasons. That is exactly what another radical friend of Bonneville’s, Sylvain

¹ Cited in C. Mulford, “Radicalism in Joel Barlow’s *The Conspiracy of Kings* (1792)”, in J.A.L. Lemay, *Deism, Masonry and the Enlightenment. Essays honoring Alfred Owen Aldridge* (Newark: Delaware UP, 1987), 145.

² *Ibid.*, 146.

³ J. Barlow, *A Letter to the National Convention of France, on the Defects in the Constitution of 1791, and the extent of the amendments which ought to be applied* (London: 1792), 55-57, reprinted in C.B. Todd (ed.), *Life and Letters of Joel Barlow* (New York and London: 1886); see S. Wahnich, *L’impossible citoyen. L’étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française*, 72-73.

⁴ On these themes and their contemporary relevance, see M. Viroli, *For the Love of Country: an Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995).

Maréchal, had affirmed in 1800 in his *Dictionnaire des athées*, particularly when criticizing his contemporaries, and the members of the Institut in particular¹. Even if we knew nothing of this historical period, the organization of argument in Barlow’s letter would let us guess that there are conceptual links to be explored: as we have seen, conflicting visions of nation and citizenship; moreover, the relationship between cosmopolitan attitudes and religion, or between devotion to the universal happiness of mankind and a heterodox view of religion.



Philology, etymology, neologisms and the search for a simple common language (consider its longevity, in the early 20th century *esperanto* wave) had all been elements present in strands of radical thought. Philological specifications—typical as we have seen of Paine’s style—are also, in a few instances, the most evident testimony to a direct, though by no means exclusive, Spinozian inspiration in the arguments of Paine’s attack on revealed religion and particularly the Scriptures. Of course, he alludes only fleetingly to Spinoza, to avoid shocking his American and English readers any further². Nonetheless, philology had been and still was for him a way to reveal underlying facts—or non-facts: “The point between deists and christians is not about doctrine” Paine wrote in 1804 for Elihu Palmer’s *Prospect* “but about fact—for if the things believed by the christians to be facts, are not facts, the doctrine founded thereon falls of itself”³.

Thus, fact manifested itself in the roots of words, as Paine showed in another fascinating piece—*Of the Word Religion and other Words of Uncertain Signification*—written for the journal *Prospect*. Here, starting from the Latin roots *ligo*,

¹ S. Maréchal, *Dictionnaire des athées anciens et modernes* (Paris: 1800); see E.J. Mannucci, *Finalmente il popolo pensa. Sylvain Maréchal nell’immagine della Rivoluzione francese* (Napoli: Guida, 2012).

² On this point see N. Caron, *Thomas Paine*, 240-241, and E.J. Mannucci, “Introduzione”, *Thomas Paine, L’età della ragione* (Como-Pavia: Ibis, 2000), 30-31.

³ *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine*, “Miscellaneous Pieces”, 314.

to tie or bind, and *religo*, to tie over again, Paine explained the word religion in the sense of being tied to the performance of an oath.

We have seen Bonneville's interpretation of this etymology: Paine's friend, who is as contrary to oaths as Anglo-Americans of nonconformist backgrounds were, preferring the honest promise of a man—a 'Franc', Bonneville would say—focuses on the 'tie' in itself. He identifies the real meaning of 'religion' as 'confederation' and he constitutes at the same time an actual international Confederation of friends of truth. In Paine's view, on the contrary, the etymology shows the emptiness of the word.

In other words, while Bonneville literally believes in the positive creativeness of language, the "parole créatrice"¹—incidentally revealing his esoteric influences in this instance perhaps more than elsewhere—Paine is more of a traditional free-thinker. He believes that the unmasking of the negative implications that have become historically fused with significant roots and terms will bring about action for moral and political change². He thus concludes that *religion* "has no definitive meaning, because it does not designate what religion a man is of". It applies to the religion of the Chinese, or of the Brahmins, as much as to Christians.

He then examined the words *Christianity*—though from a historical point of view, coming to the conclusion that "the word Christian describes what a man is not, but not what he is"—and *Theology*, which by its etymology in the Greek word for God should belong only to deists. The consequence of the fact that, in usage, there is no agreement on the meaning of those words and of terms such as *revealed religion* is, of course, that they are empty words, contrived for the support of priestcraft, and a source of conflict and violent intolerance.

The Christians for Paine were the real 'infidels', precisely because they pre-

¹ *Appendices*, 115. On the word 'Constitution' he wrote: "Ce mot là, bien ou mal compris, doit avoir une influence *prodigieuse* sur les *destinées* de la race humaine": *ibid.*, 107. The italics show that "prodigieuse" here is literal, from *prodige*.

² The posthumous pamphlet *On the Origin of Free-Masonry* (New York: 1810), published thanks to Nicolas de Bonneville's wife, Marguerite, shows Paine's effort to reduce mystical language to reason and historical necessity, seeing silence and dissimulation as the products of persecution; secrecy clearly makes him uncomfortable, yet he does seem to accept the Masonic narrative of ancient origins and the preservation of primitive knowledge (Egyptians and Druids: see also Bonneville's *L'Esprit des religions*). On the debated issue of Paine's relation with Freemasonry, see B. Vincent, *Thomas Paine ou la religion de la liberté* (Paris: Aubier, 1987), 49-55.

sented the Bible as the ‘word of God’, while it was a deliberately confused collection of human words. The real word of God was simply his natural Creation—the structure of the universe. Paine kept to his common sense style in explaining that “Books, whether Bibles or Korans, carry no evidence of being the work of any other power than man. It is only that which man cannot do that carries the evidence of being the work of a superior power”¹. What man could not invent and make was the universe, or nature.

Paine insistently underlined this in *The Age of Reason* and his countless later writings on the Bible. These also show his re-elaboration of the powerful thesis of the three impostors—Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. In *Of the Word Religion*, he gave further details on his concept that “Man has the power of making books, inventing stories of God, and calling them revelation or the word of God”. The Koran, he went on, “exists as an instance that this can be done, and we must be credulous indeed to suppose that this is the only instance, and Mahomet the only impostor”². And of course Mohammed was not the impostor that interested him most, as shown by his piece of the same period *Of the Religion of Deism compared with the Christian Religion, and the superiority of the former over the latter*, all centred on the refutation of doctrine on Jesus (his divinity, his birth from a Virgin, his resurrection) along the classic lines of free-thinker reasonableness and historical contextualization. He does not attribute however to the man Jesus himself—the “person as is called Jesus (for Christ was not his name)”³—the will to invent a deceitful religion⁴. The tract on the three impostors was a medieval ghost which had found its incarnation at the beginning of the 18th century in a famous manuscript in French, many times reprinted—since the first Hague edition in 1719—translated in various languages and circulated through clandestine channels until the revolutionary period⁵. Notwithstanding the accusations of his English and American denigrators, Paine never crossed

¹ “Miscellaneous Pieces”, 317.

² *Ibid.*

³ “Miscellaneous Works”, 326.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 320-326.

⁵ The most recent account of the story of that mythical text is G. Minois, *Le Traité des trois imposteurs* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2009); see S. Berti’s authoritative edition in French and Italian, *Trattato dei tre impostori. La vita e lo spirito del signor Benedetto Spinoza*, Preface by R. Popkin (Torino: Einaudi, 1994).

the line into atheism, as he never accepted philosophical materialism. In 1804, replying ironically to one of those denigrators, he wrote:

To show the necessity of understanding the meaning of words, I will mention an instance of a minister, I believe of the Episcopalian church of Newark, in Jersey. He wrote and published a book, and entitled it, “*An Antidote to Deism*”. An antidote to Deism, must be Atheism. It has no other antidote—for what can be an antidote to the belief of a God, but the disbelief of God. Under the tuition of such pastors, what but ignorance and false information can be expected¹.

The succession of his writings gives nonetheless the impression of an evolution of his religious attitude—from the language of Anglo-American non-conformist Dissent to the rationalist deism of British and continental free-thinkers—in the intervals between *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, *Age of Reason* and later writings.

Paine thus reinterpreted for the larger public, for the new popular public opinion of the age of revolutions, what had already been re-elaborated for a smaller public by previous generations of free-thinkers: the philological and historical model of Bible criticism which traces its finest intellectual origin to Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus*². Paine was not an original philosopher, but theoretical developments are not what we should look for or expect in his generation of fast-living activists, wholly committed to *doing*: he cer-

¹ *Of the Word Religion*, 317-318. In both Britain and the United States, particularly between 1794 and 1797, but for many years afterwards as well, there was a flood of vehement replies to *Age of Reason*, part I and part II. Here Paine is presumably referring to the American C. Leslie, *Antidote to Deism. The Deist Unmasked; or, an ample refutation of all the objections of T. Paine against the Christian Religion; as contained in a pamphlet, intitled, The Age of Reason...To which is prefixed, Remarks on Boulanger’s Christianity unveiled. And to the Deist unmasked, is annexed, a Short Method with Deists*, (Newark: 1795).

² For an impressive interpretation of international radical Enlightenment where Spinozist inspiration is absolutely and even exclusively pivotal, see J. I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford-New York: Oxford UP, 2001) and his later works: Paine is treated by Israel particularly in *A Revolution of the Mind. Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010) and *Democratic Enlightenment. Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford-New York: Oxford UP, 2011). On the philosophical critical reading of the New Testament see M.-H. Cotoni, *L’Exégèse du Nouveau Testament dans la philosophie française du dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1984, “Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century”, 220).

tainly was, instead, a very good communicator. His innovative common sense communication, as we have seen, was much more than simple rhetoric skill and its effects were consequently deep and long-term. What he did was to render the critique of revealed religion and its pious lies, devised to maintain the power of churches, accessible to the popular public—not so much in France, as in the Anglo-american world, and especially in Britain, where *Age of Reason*, as we have recalled, ferried these ideas or even the Enlightenment itself into the nascent working class movement.



A further example of the association of cosmopolitan republicanism and the interest in political etymology can be found, again in Bonneville's milieu, in a representative of the younger generation of radical intellectuals, the Scotsman John Oswald. A soldier in India, he had embraced anti-colonialism there, along with vegetarianism and the idea of continuity between man and animal—which he interpreted in a materialist sense. Having come back to Britain by land in a one-year journey, he then became an anti-government journalist in London. Going to Paris to participate in the Revolution, he became a member of the *Cercle social*—he had met Bonneville in London, before the Revolution—and of the Jacobin club as well. He was also for a period in the group of journalists of the *Chronique du mois*, again with Bonneville. He finally left the Girondin newspaper, but only at the end of 1792, opting for the Jacobins. Always very active in maintaining and promoting contacts between the French revolutionaries and the British republicans, in January 1793 he was among the founders of the *Club britannique de Paris*, which was attended by Paine himself.

Oswald published writings both in English and in French: among these, one of the replies to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (the most famous was, of course, Paine's *Rights of Man*); the book *The Cry of Nature*, 1791, an appeal for a further revolution to extirpate the social and political roots of evil. It would be a universal—in fact, a pan-European—revolution, where the inter-

personal circle of fraternity and benevolence would widen to include the animals. Finally, *The Government of the People; or, Sketch for the Universal Common-Wealth*, a pamphlet printed in two languages in Paris in the spring of 1793, during the French debates for the new republican constitution¹. Oswald would die a few months later at the age of thirty in the Vendée, fighting for the French Republic².

John Oswald related to a specifically political use of etymology, as his pamphlet *The Government of the People* shows, and his two main inspirations, though undeclared, were not difficult to discern: Nicolas de Bonneville himself and, not surprisingly, Antoine Court de Gébelin.

John Oswald proudly presented himself on the title-page of his pamphlet as *Anglo-franc*, which strongly resembled Bonneville's expression *Francs-Anglois* (in fact, Oswald had signed himself "Franc-anglois" in an article he had published in Bonneville's *Bouche de fer* in 1791): for the French writer, *Franc*, as we have seen, was an important word, because it referred to the ancient Frank, a free and truthful man, as the word itself showed. The useless syllable '-ais' of *français* was the product of "the shame of slavery". The *Francs-Anglois*, in turn, were losing for Bonneville their condition of frank-men. Perhaps Oswald wanted to cut off the useless '-ish' syllable as well, to express, as a double patriot, a revolutionary union of free Briton and free Frank.

What is interesting for us is that Oswald uses etymology in order to explain that man is endowed with will, so that governing himself according to his own will is part of his nature: rights of man correspond to life according to one's own will, and anything else is slavery. In "primitive languages", he says, *will, liberty, law*—and, we will discover toward the end of the pamphlet, a fourth word, *love*—

¹ In English: *The Government of the People; or, Sketch for the Universal Common-Wealth* (Paris: English Press, An I-1793); in French: J. Oswald, *Le Gouvernement du peuple; ou Plan de constitution pour la République universelle, traduit de l'anglais* (Paris: 1793); modern edition, edited by Y. Blavier (Paris: Éd.de la passion, 1996).

² John Oswald's life is not well documented. The only modern biography is D.V. Erdman, *Commerce des Lumières. John Oswald and the British in Paris, 1790-1793* (Columbia: Missouri UP, 1986). This book only treats the strictly political aspects. On the meaning of Oswald's vegetarianism, see E.J. Mannucci, "'Malheur aux faibles!' Condamnations de l'oppression des animaux", *Dix-Huitième Siècle* 28 (1996): 353-66, and, for my general assessment of the historical implications of ethical vegetarianism, *La cena di Pitagora. Storia del vegetarianismo dall'antica Grecia a Internet* (Roma: Carocci, 2008).

have the same root, and thus the same meaning. Love is the principle of the perfect universal government, which will bring humankind into a post-religious golden age of fraternity and common property of land and goods. “En effet, quel autre but se propose ou doit se proposer le gouvernement, que d’unir les homes par les liens de la fraternité?” reads the French version of his pamphlet:

Et comment atteindre ce but, si ce n’est par des assemblées fréquentes où ils délibèrent ? Le meilleur gouvernement sera donc celui qui donnera toute la publicité possible aux actions des individus : et il n’y a que ce moyen d’établir le règne de la volonté, de la liberté, de la loi, de l’amour, expressions qui, dans la sagesse primitive des langues, dérivent de la même racine et signifient la même chose¹.

Oswald’s just government will be the product of the execution of people’s will, which is also their liberty and law. The people will have no representatives, because a man can no more think and deliberate by proxy, Oswald says, than he can urinate by proxy.



Court de Gébelin had said that every word has a reason, and he had looked for it in an original divine relationship between sound and object, where the real energy of words resides, in spite of all the variations of all languages. Gébelin reduced original words to a minimum number, seeking the few really significant roots and tracing the chain of words at the origin of men’s ideas. He thus traced the mutual ties between all peoples, regardless of the way their specific language modified primitive language, that is, regardless of their historical nationality. In Gébelin’s *Dictionnaire étymologique et raisonné des racines latines*, we find among the significant monosyllabic sounds ‘LI’ or ‘LU’: the monosyllable of pleasure and will at the root of *Liber* (defined as doing one’s own will,

¹ J. Oswald, *Le Gouvernement du peuple ou Plan de constitution pour la République universelle* (Paris: Les éditions de la passion, 1996) 63.

being free, not a slave), as well as *Libertas*, *Libido* and the word *Licet* (meaning *it is legitimate to...*)¹. This association of *Liber* and *Libido* makes us think once again in terms of another possible influence on Barlow's argument in *The Conspiracy of Kings*.

The parallel between Gêbelin's and Oswald's etymologies could even be a coincidence—we have seen that direct reading of likely authors must never be taken for granted—but it would be nonetheless a significant one. Again, in the simplified version of a revolutionary and self-educated writer we find the militant political echo of the Enlightenment search for a universal language, where fact is related to sign; a language free from local prejudice, the rationalist common idiom Diderot wished for in the *Encyclopédie*, in his article of the same title, an idiom which would be the vehicle for the restoration of rational truth in the world².

One last word on a third, not often remembered, Briton: Joseph Ritson, the son of a modest farmer born in 1752 and an indentured clerk with a lawyer at the age of 17. He taught himself egalitarianism through Rousseau's *Discourse on inequality*, and materialist ideas through what was then considered a subversive book, Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, embracing ethical vegetarianism thanks to *Remark P* of this same book³. He later became an antiquarian and literary critic, and, significantly, we owe to him the figure of Robin Hood as a romantic revolutionary icon, put to successful literary use by Walter Scott. He visited revolutionary Paris for only a short period, in 1791, and came back enthused about the culture of the common people, who were now Equals.

From that moment he considered himself a sans-culotte and adopted in En-

¹ A. Court de Gêbelin, *Histoire naturelle de la parole, ou Précis de l'Origine du Langage et de la grammaire universelle. Extrait du Monde primitif* (Paris: 1776); *Id.*, *Dictionnaire étymologique et raisonné des racines latines, Extrait du Monde primitif et à l'usage des jeunes gens* (Paris: 1780), 100-124. To understand the interchangeability of vowels in these monosyllables, see S. Auroux, *La sémiotique des encyclopédistes*, 251-259; and M. de Certeau, "Théorie et fiction (1760-1780): De Brosses et Court de Gêbelin", in M. de Certeau et al., *Une politique de la langue*, 95-97.

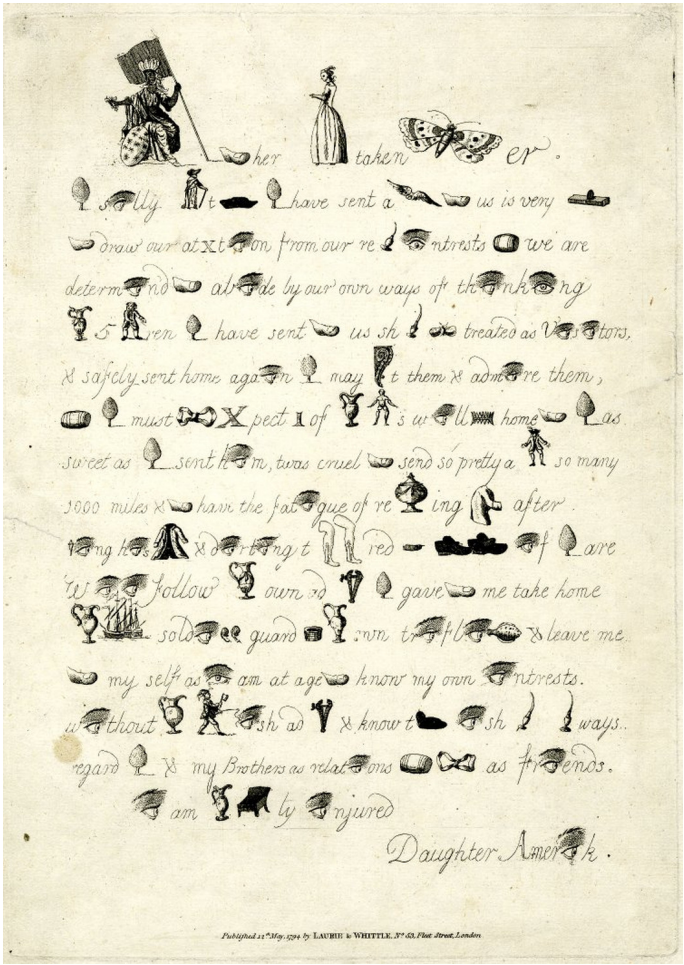
² See R. Pellerey, *Le lingue perfette nel secolo dell'utopia*, Preface by U. Eco (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1992); U. Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); about the articles on language in the *Encyclopédie*, S. Auroux, *La sémiotique des encyclopédistes*.

³ See J. Ritson, *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty* (London: 1802), published by Phillips, Thomas Paine's publisher, who was also a vegetarian. On Ritson, see Bertrand H. Bronson, *Joseph Ritson, Scholar-at-Arms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1938).

glish a phonetic spelling which he considered a purified language, the expression of the new revolutionary era. He used this language in print, in 1802, shortly before his death, in his book *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty*, a substantial collection of materialist arguments for a humane reform of Western men and societies, with many positive moral examples taken from the Orient. This was not a polemical and journalistic *parler peuple*, but a literary experiment, which nonetheless did not spare him the vehement political attacks of contemporary critics. In a sense, Ritson tried to reverse the theoretical primacy of written language over orality, and officialize the way an uneducated man of the people would put into writing the high ideas of the ancient and modern rationalist and cosmopolitan tradition.

Thus, with this alternative spelling feat, the 18th century radical word had described its whole arc. There is an expression in French, *prise de parole*, which does not exist in English. Paine, Oswald, Ritson were living examples of the *prise de parole* of a new political subject in those revolutionary times: they were intellectuals of a new kind, non-philosophical critics. They simply *thought* for themselves, appropriating texts and words, etymologies and spelling. *Enfin le peuple pense*, and they will not need God anymore, the above-mentioned Sylvain Maréchal had prophesized in 1781. Ten years later, Paine had written the same in *Rights of Man*, though with a more precise attention to real people—or peoples—in their national diversity, and to their future unification: “The insulted German and the enslaved Spaniard, the Russ and the Pole are beginning to *think* (...) the present generation will appear to the future as the Adam of a new world”¹.

¹ P. Foner (ed.), *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine, Rights of Man*, Part 2nd, 449.



“(America) (toe) her (miss)taken (moth)er”, hieroglyphic letter, London 1778 © The Trustees of the British Museum, <http://collection.britishmuseum.org/id/object/PPA70385>).