The Pickering Masters

The Novels and Selected Plays of Thomas Holcroft

Edited by
Rick Incorvati

ROUTLEDGE

Sir Thomas Lawrence, *Thomas Holcroft and William Godwin at the Treason Trials at the Old Bailey* (1794). Private collection.

THE PICKERING MASTERS

THE NOVELS AND SELECTED PLAYS OF THOMAS HOLCROFT
VOLUME 1

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General Editor: W. M. Verhoeven

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VOLUME 1

General Introduction

Early Novels
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W. M. V.

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R. I.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Among the names most commonly associated with the 1790s movement for radical social and parliamentary reform, that of Thomas Holcroft is invoked less frequently than that of, say, William Godwin, Thomas Paine, John Thelwall, Thomas Hardy or John Horne Tooke. Although far from a forgotten figure, owing to the resurgence of critical interest in the Jacobin novel in the 1970s, Holcroft's reputation even today exists somewhat vicariously in the memories and memoirs of greater luminaries of radical reform. Godwin famously ranked him among the 'four principal oral instructors to whom [he felt] indebted for improvement',[1] yet Holcroft rarely got a positive press from the rest of the contemporary radical fraternity. Mary Shelley remembered him as 'a man of stern and irascible character', who 'from the moment that he espoused liberal principles ... carried them to excess'.[2] In a letter to Robert Southey, Coleridge observed that there was 'a fierceness and dogmatism in Holcroft', while in a letter to Thelwall – far from a stoic character himself – he described Holcroft as '[f]ierce, hot, petulant, the very high priest of atheism' and someone who hated 'God with all his heart, with all his mind, with all his soul, and with all his strength'.[3] When asked by Hazlitt whether he was much 'struck *with*' Holcroft, Coleridge reputedly replied that 'he thought himself in more danger of being struck *by* him'.[4] Hazlitt concurred: 'I complained that he would not let me get on at all, for he required a definition of even the commonest word, exclaiming, "What do you mean by a *sensation*, Sir? What do you mean by an *idea*?" This, Coleridge said, was barricading the road to truth; it was setting up a turnpike-gate at every step we took.' Nor has posterity been much kinder to Holcroft's memory. Thus, Elbridge Colby, the editor of Hazlitt's *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft*, declared that the dominant aim of Holcroft's 'career was to be a great individuality' and that his activity as a radical was 'the most important chapter in his life. By his doings at this time will his name eventually be remembered, not by his mediocre plays and tiresome novels.'[5] Finally, H. N. Brailsford noted in the *Nation* that Holcroft's 'principles were not exactly original ... We prefer to think of Holcroft as the man who incarnated the doctrine of Human Perfectibility and the Powers of the Mind. Others may have made that doctrine, but it made him. He grew by it from ostler

to metaphysician.'[6] The picture that emerges is that of a vain, dogmatic, irascible, opinionated, fanatical, freethinking dilettante, who had a knack for words, though he used them to express other people's ideas.

However, Peter Faulkner perhaps most aptly labelled Holcroft as belonging to 'that tenacious and independently minded species, the self-made man of letters'. Growing up in a lower-middle-class family deprived of money, a stable home and access to formal education, Holcroft was essentially a self-taught man who did not reach intellectual maturity till he was in his thirties. By then well acquainted with the progressive ideas of the age, he was determined to be the people's philosopher, making available to the disprivileged masses some of his hard-won insights into the workings of society through any popular literary form capable of containing his message of truth and political justice. Equipped with a stubborn independence of mind and principle characteristic of the self-taught intellectual, Holcroft was known as someone who had an opinion about everything and who launched into fierce political debates and philosophical speculations at all times and with people from all walks of life. Holcroft was indeed by no means a disciplined or original thinker, but then, most reformers at the time – including Godwin – were articulating ideas that were in fact part of 'the spirit of the age' rather than radically new proposals. It was ultimately not so much his lack of original or systematic thought as his reputation of being an irascible, peripatetic philosopher that caused him to be regarded with personal dislike by some of his contemporaries, and with suspicion by others – notably Henry Dundas's spies.

* * *

Most of what we know about Holcroft's life is recounted in his *Memoirs*, which were completed by William Hazlitt from diary notes and other papers supplied to him by Mrs Holcroft after her husband's death in 1809. The *Memoirs* relate the colourful details of Holcroft's chequered career. Born in 1745, the son of a London shoemaker, Holcroft grew up in utter destitution. After his father failed in business, the family were reduced to '*tramping* the villages',[7] hawking an assortment of wares across the whole of central and northern England. 'There was a single instance', Holcroft recalled, 'in which I travelled on foot thirty miles in one day'.[8] In subsequent years he worked as a stable boy at Newmarket (which gave him his life-long fondness for horses and riding) and as an apprentice shoemaker. At the age of twenty-five he decided to become an actor and served for a number of years as a strolling player with a variety of companies throughout England. Having educated himself in several foreign languages and literatures, he settled as a hack writer in London in 1777. In 1778 Holcroft was employed by Sheridan to play some minor roles at the Drury Lane Theatre, while he also began to venture into fiction-writing. His first play, *The Crisis; or, Love and Fear*, was produced (though only once) at Drury Lane and in the course of 1778–9 his

first novel, *Manthorn, the Enthusiast*, was serialized anonymously in *The Town and Country Magazine*. His second novel, *Alwyn; or, The Gentleman Comedian*, appeared in 1780, when he also published a pamphlet (under the pseudonym of 'William Vincent') on the Gordon Riots that had taken place earlier that year. In 1781 his comedy *Duplicity* achieved modest success at Covent Garden, but hack writing continued to be the mainstay of his literary activities. From 1782 to 1783 Holcroft was in Paris, where he gathered material for translations and met leading literary figures in the salons. In 1784 he was back in Paris to see Beaumarchais's extraordinarily successful *Mariage de Figaro*, which he wanted to bring to England. In the absence of any printed copies, he and his friend Bonneville memorized the play, which Holcroft later translated and adapted for the Covent Garden Theatre, where it was performed in December 1794 to great acclaim as *The Follies of the Day* – this play and *The Road to Ruin* (1792) were his most successful works for the theatre.

In the course of 1785–6 Holcroft became friendly with a large group of radicals, including Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Joel Barlow, David Williams and James Mackintosh. Holcroft first met Godwin in the course of 1786, but it was not until 1788 that Godwin writes of himself and Holcroft as being 'very intimate'.[9] Throughout the 1780s both men had entertained moderately progressive ideas – notably concerning the progress of the human mind – rooted in the dual tradition of English Dissent and the French Enlightenment. But it required the French Revolution, as Mary Shelley observed, 'to kindle that ardent love of Political Justice with which both were afterwards ... warmed'.[10] 'My mind became more and more impregnated with the principles afterwards developed in my Political justice', Godwin wrote in his Diary for the year 1790; 'they were the almost constant topic of conversation between Holcroft and myself; and he, who in his sceptic and other writings had displayed the sentiments of a courtier, speedily became no less a republican and a reformer than myself'.[11] From then on Godwin and Holcroft saw each other almost on a daily basis and their careers as radical thinkers and writers evolved in close symbiosis for a number of years. As Godwin notes in his Diary for the year 1792: 'Tea at Barlow's with Jardine, Stuart, Wollstonecraft, and Holcroft: talk of self-love, sympathy, and perfectibility, individual and general'.[12] Yet the impact Holcroft had on Godwin's thinking should not be exaggerated. When he began writing *Political Justice* in September 1791, Godwin was committing to paper what many people were thinking and discussing. Holcroft was more like an intellectual sparring partner to Godwin than an inspirational mentor. 'My mind', Godwin later recalled in an autobiographical fragment, 'though fraught with sensibility, and occasionally ardent and enthusiastic, is perhaps in its genuine habits too tranquil and unimpassioned for successful composition, and stands greatly in need of stimulus and excitement. I am deeply indebted in this point to Holcroft.'[13] On the other hand,

while Godwin was the thinker, Holcroft was the literary creator with a feeling for the dramatic and the sentimental, and an acute talent to touch the popular nerve. Godwin is now generally credited with having created that bête noire of conservative England, the 'political romance'. However, while *Caleb Williams* (1794) may be the most consummate political novel of the 1790s, the accolade for having first crossed the genre divide between fancy and philosophy, between romance and political treatise, must go to Holcroft. For it was Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives* (1792) that had shown Godwin how to present the principles of political justice to the popular masses in the captivating dress of romance.

While Godwin became the celebrated – and reviled – author of *Political Justice* (1793) and *Caleb Williams* (1794), Holcroft made his own claim to radical fame by producing in quick succession his two most memorable plays: *The School for Arrogance* (1791), an adaptation of Philippe Destouches's *Le Glorieux* (1732), and *The Road to Ruin* (1792), a critique of gambling and the corruptions of fashionable life. In the same time frame he also published his two much-acclaimed Jacobin novels, *Anna St. Ives* (1792) and *Hugh Trevor* (1794, 1797). Taking up the theme of merit versus pride and rank, *The School for Arrogance*, which Hazlitt considered to be his best play, was perhaps Holcroft's first work to have explicitly political overtones.[14] However, he had pursued a progressive social agenda long before. Thus, he set the action of his comic opera *The Noble Peasant* (1784) in Anglo-Saxon times – an era seen by many as the origin of English liberty and democracy – while he laced the dialogue with anti-aristocratic sentiments and contemporary political allusions. His adaptation of Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* took a similar critical stand against contemporary civil society. Holcroft's early progressive social agenda is also reflected in his translation hack work. Thus, his translation of the King of Prussia's works (1789) was to be the basis for a long-projected piece on 'the subject of the effects of war and despotism', of which Frederick II was to have been the hero.[15]

Convinced that the dawn of a new socio-political order was drawing near, Holcroft had started contributing to the radical *Monthly Magazine* in 1792, and in the same year had joined the Society for Constitutional Information. No doubt the high point in Holcroft's life in the public sphere came in October 1794, when he was indicted by a grand jury for high treason and kept for eight weeks in Newgate Prison, before being put on trial at the Old Bailey. To be persecuted by the henchmen of Pitt's repressive regime was a badge of honour for the true Jacobin radical and the episode contributed much to Holcroft's reputation among Jacobins as a frontline radical activist. Among anti-Jacobins, however, Holcroft's indictment and subsequent trial branded him as an enemy of the state and, if not that, a vainglorious and self-styled 'martyr to liberty'.[16]

* * *

The 1794 Treason Trials were perhaps the most defining event of the politically turbulent 1790s. The outbreak of the war with France and the radicalization of revolution in that country had made William Pitt's government increasingly nervous about the activities of reform societies and 'Jacobin clubs' (notably the London Corresponding Society and the Society for the Friends of the People), in response to which it had begun an aggressive campaign to repress the Jacobin community. Government-sponsored societies, such as the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, had sprung up all over the country, waging a bitter war against what they called 'seditious and treasonable Libels'; government spies were infiltrating reform society meetings, collecting potentially incriminating evidence against their leaders. In May 1792 the Pitt administration issued a proclamation against 'wicked and seditious writings', and soon after banned Paine's *Rights of Man* and summoned its author to appear in court for seditious libel – not least because cheap editions of the text had led to sensational sales figures, thus spreading its republican arguments in favour of the revolutions in American and France among large sections of the population.[17] Hysterical scenes of populist rage and bloodthirsty frenzy against Paine erupted all over the country, effectively forcing Paine into exile in September 1792. He was tried and convicted *in absentia* in December.

Having got rid of the architect of republicanism, it was now time to uproot the network of dissemination. The year 1793 had already seen the arrest, trial and transportation to Botany Bay of two Scottish reformers – Thomas Palmer and Thomas Muir – for their involvement in the Edinburgh Convention for constitutional change. In December of the same year, Joseph Gerrald, leading theorist of the London Corresponding Society and close friend of William Godwin, was arrested during a second Edinburgh Convention, along with other members of the Society. The LCS responded by calling for a British Convention in March 1794, but Pitt was quick to parry: in May 1794 he suspended habeas corpus, which meant that the government could arrest and hold suspected criminals indefinitely without bringing formal charges against them.[18] Within days, Godwin's friends Thomas Hardy, Horne Tooke and John Thelwall and eight other prominent members of the LCS were arrested on a charge of high treason and taken to the Tower and Newgate prisons.

Thomas Holcroft was not on the initial list of twelve reformers who had been indicted for high treason by the grand jury. Rumours had been circulating all through September and early October that Holcroft was about to be indicted for the same crime. Eventually, on 7 October, before the actual warrant for his arrest had been issued,[19] Holcroft surrendered himself voluntarily to the Common Court of Appeals, addressing himself to Lord Chief Justice Eyre with the self-confidence and defiance characteristic of his radical zealotry:

> I come to surrender myself to this court, and my country, to be put upon my trial, that, if I am a guilty man, the whole extent of my guilt may become notorious; and, if innocent, that the rectitude of my principles and conduct may be no less public. And I hope, my Lord, there is no appearance of vaunting your lordship, this court, and my country, that, after the misfortune of having been suspected as an enemy to the peace and happiness of mankind, there is nothing on earth, after which, as an individual, I more ardently aspire than a full, fair, and public examination.[20]

The actual trials started on 25 October, when Thomas Hardy was brought before the Old Bailey. Eight days later, when public interest in the case had reached fever pitch, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. After the subsequent trials against Tooke and Thelwall had also ended in acquittals, the prosecution dropped all charges against the remaining defendants and ordered their release from prison.[21] Holcroft requested to be allowed to address the court, but when he 'intimated that he should detain the court nearly half an hour', the Chief Justice summarily ordered him to withdraw.[22] Honourably acquitted on 1 December, Holcroft therefore never got his day in court after all. Sorely peeved at having been deprived of the chance to argue his innocence in front of the jury, Holcroft retaliated a year later with his contentious pamphlet, 'A Narrative of Facts, Relating to a Prosecution for High Treason; Including the Address to the Jury, Which the Court Refused to Hear, with Letters to the Attorney General, Lord Chief Justice Eyre, Mr. Sergent Adair, The Honorable Thomas Erskine, and Vicary Gibbs Esq. and the Defence the Author Had Prepared, if He Had Been Brought to Trial' (1795). Later that same year, after the Hon. William Wyndham had branded him in a speech in Parliament as 'an acquitted felon' (although acquitted without charge), Holcroft retorted in similarly pugnacious mode in 'A Letter to Right Honourable William Windham on the Intemperance and Dangerous Tendency of His Public Conduct' (1795). If the Treason Trials were essentially show trials put on by the Pitt administration to impress upon the nation that it would not tolerate any push for reform, at the same time they offered the champions of liberty a unique opportunity to leave an official record of their complaints against the establishment in the archives of the state, and to make a name for themselves in the process.

Ironically, however, the collapse of the prosecution's case against the twelve reformers spelled the beginning of the end of the reform movement in Britain. With their names dragged through the mud by the Church-and-King press, the spokesmen for reform were no longer able to connect to the very masses whose rights and liberties they were aspiring to vindicate. Holcroft postponed the completion of his novel *Hugh Trevor* (whose publication had been disrupted after the appearance of the first three volumes in 1794), in an attempt to regain his pre-trial reputation among the theatre-going public, but *The Deserted Daughter* (1795), *The Man of Ten Thousand* (1796) and *Knave or Not?* (1798) all met with

a hostile reception. Eventually, in 1799, Holcroft sold his library and pictures and went into self-exile in Hamburg, plagued by debt and public hostility to his work and person.

* * *

If the nation had given up on him, Holcroft had certainly not given up on the cause of reforming the nation. Friends and foes alike repeatedly commented on Holcroft's unshakeable faith in truth, reason and man, and on the vigour and tenacious zeal with which he ceaselessly endeavoured to convert others to the doctrine of perfectibility and the general good. Central to this doctrine was his belief in the omnipotent powers of the human mind. In a letter of 1792 to Ralph Griffith, Thomas Ogle gave the following rendering of a conversation he had had with Holcroft on the topic of the human mind:

> '*mind* could do anything', Holcroft maintained: 'if we really believed that we could walk twenty miles an hour, we should walk it ... But will mind make a lame man walk? – Certainly, but the man has no business to be lame, – No business! Can he avoid it then? Certainly, lameness is the effect of error. No one can calculate the operations of *mind*, when it comes to be cultivated: *mind* produces all diseases of the body, and will cure them all: Physic and drugs are only covers for ignorance, or succedaneum for knowledge ... The operations of the mind on the body ... are indeed surprising, and capable of producing wonderful effects where there is no violent change of structure in the body: Change of structure does not signify: mind will cure a cancer, or any other disorder: there is no necessity to die: it is unnatural to die: man's nature is to reproduce himself, and not to decay: it is nonsense to say that we must all die; in the present erroneous system I suppose I shall die, but why? because I am a fool! – Hurra! Said I: – but if a man chops your head off? – It will be impossible to chop your head off: chopping off heads is error, and error cannot exist. – But if a tree falls on you and crushes you? Men will know how to avoid falling trees: – but trees will not fall: falling of trees arises from error.'[23]

Holcroft's unconditional faith in the powers and progress of the mind was rooted in the materialist epistemology developed by some of the most prominent French *philosophes*, notably Helvétius, Condorcet and Holbach (copies of whose works, along with those of Voltaire and Rousseau, were found in Holcroft's personal library): the same authors from whom Holcroft had derived his rabid atheism, which he notoriously preached with belligerent zeal to all and sundry. Holbach and Condorcet may be described as belonging to the radical wing of the *philosophes*. If Rousseau was increasingly associated in the 1790s in Britain and the United States with the excessive celebration of sensibility in the French national character (often represented by conservatives such as T. J. Mathias as the 'Gallic frenzy' that erupted in the Reign of Terror), then Holbach and Condorcet were identified with its opposite, the excessive worship of reason, which had paved the way for the French Revolution in the first place. The metaphysically derived models for social and political behaviour proposed by Holbach and

Condorcet – commonly referred to by many contemporary conservatives in the 1790s as 'theory' or 'system' or 'new philosophy' – offended the sensitivities of moderates and conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic, who especially took umbrage at what they considered to be the *philosophes*' mathematical abstraction and their cold, and hence 'unnatural' and dehumanizing rationality. Holbach's ruthlessly mechanical defence of atheistic materialism and Condorcet's stark reduction of all knowledge to a single, mathematical system were among the most radical and, in the eyes of their opponents, most socially disruptive systems current in the 1780s and early 1790s. By comparison, the ideas expounded by these authors made a home-grown radical such as Robert Bage appear like a philanthropist and Godwin like a moralist.

Published in 1770 as though written by Jean Baptiste de Mirabaud, Holbach's best-known book, *La Système de la nature,* was reprinted, translated and retranslated extensively, both in Europe and in America, where it was well known in rationalist circles around Jefferson and Barlow. The opening statement of Holbach's lengthy discourse is at the heart of his overall system of thought – and, one might add, of Holcroft's as well:

> Man has always deceived himself when he abandoned experience to follow imaginary systems. – He is the work of nature. – He exists in Nature. – He is submitted to the laws of Nature. – He cannot deliver himself from them: – cannot step beyond them even in thought. It is in vain his mind would spring forward beyond the visible world: direful and imperious necessity ever compels his return – being formed by Nature, he is circumscribed by her laws; there exists nothing beyond the great whole of which he forms a part, of which he experiences the influence. The beings his fancy pictures as above nature, or distinguished from her, are always chimeras formed after that which he has already seen, but of which it is utterly impossible he should ever form any finished idea, either as to the place they occupy, or their manner of acting – for him there is not, there can be nothing out of that Nature which includes all beings.[24]

Denying even the soul an immaterial existence independent of the body (though granting it is 'concealed'), Holbach's materialist epistemology strictly limits man's existence to the 'physical laws' of Nature, of which there are but two kinds: those related to matter and those related to motion.[25] Seeing that any notion of the spirit or the supernatural is anathema in his system, Holbach regards all mythology as mere representations of Nature, which poets have handed down to us in earlier days in the shape of 'fables, allegories, enigmas' to enable us to *imagine* what we could not *comprehend*: 'Such was the origin of mythology: it may be said to be the daughter of natural philosophy, embellished by poetry; only destined to describe nature and its parts'.[26] Holbach's poets are literally the 'legislators of mankind'.[27] If for this reason Holbach tolerates mythology and its practitioners (poets and natural philosophers), he argues with all the more force against theology. Deriving its authority from powers beyond or outside

nature, theology, 'that supernatural science', has been 'an invincible obstacle to the progress of the natural sciences', according to Holbach, and to 'the progress of the human mind'.[28] Nor is there in Holbach's excessively materialist universe any room for free agency or choice: 'Choice by no means proves the free-agency of man; he only deliberates when he does not yet know which to choose of the many objects that move him ... [F]ree-agency is a chimera that must speedily be destroyed by experience.'[29]

Of the French materialist philosophers who influenced Holcroft's thought, none was considered more radical than Condorcet. Author of the (unsuccessful) 1793 Girondist constitution, the *philosophe*-turned-revolutionary Condorcet had died in a Jacobin cell in March 1794, hounded to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal's Jacobin henchmen. Yet his ideas continued to send shock waves through the established orders in Britain and beyond. Thus, in 1791 Burke described Condorcet as 'the most furious of the extravagant Republicans', as a 'fanatick Atheist, and furious democratick Republican', always 'ready to plunge the poignard in the heart of his pupil, or to whet the axe for his neck'.[30] The central tenet of Condorcet's most influential work, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (published posthumously in 1795), namely that the social world was perfectible through rational means, was shared by many Enlightenment thinkers and reformers. Yet what upset Burke was that Condorcet took perfectibility to such an extreme that ultimately no stone in society would be left unturned. In his own words, in his *Sketch* Condorcet set out to prove

> the important truth that social evils are the consequence not of the nature of man or the necessary relations of society but of the imperfection of social constitutions, which is to say the lack of enlightenment; that the vices and crimes that dishonor history and make its study so painful arise neither in man's heart nor from the needs that civilization creates in him but from the errors and prejudices that the ignorance and feebleness of the human mind have multiplied, and whose destruction reason has already begun and must one day complete.[31]

Of all British perfectibilitarians who had wholeheartedly embraced the sentiments of the French *philosophes*, Godwin perhaps most aptly summarized the doctrine's key principles in his *Political Justice*, thus:

> Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error: Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: Truth is omnipotent: The vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement.[32]

Like Hartley, Priestley, Price and Godwin, Condorcet was a Necessitarian: they all shared the conviction that human action was determined, or necessitated, by a reality located outside man, in external circumstances.[33] 'Necessitarianism',

as it was known, was very popular with young radicals in the early 1790s in Britain. Coleridge, for instance, was an ardent Necessitarian, and Wordsworth 'was even to Extravagance a Necessitarian'.[34] It is a mark of the radical quality of Condorcet's views on Necessitarianism that Coleridge, though initially having revered *Political Justice*, turned his back on Godwin in late 1794, when he found he could no longer associate himself with Godwin's openly acknowledged atheism. For the same reason, Coleridge concluded his scrutiny of Priestley's work by rejecting Priestley's version of Necessitarianism as well. It has been suggested that the reason Coleridge ultimately adopted Hartley's scheme was that his philosophy 'continued to fuse Necessitarianism with Christianity'.[35] Unlike Hartley, Condorcet had no need for an interfering Newtonian God. In his scheme of thought, there is a determined order in the physical universe, in which phenomena occur according to laws which are 'necessary' and 'constant'. Although for a hypothetical omniscient 'Intelligence' this determined order of the universe is 'but a single fact and one of great truth', such knowledge is forever beyond man's understanding.[36] At best man can attempt to reduce the phenomena he registers to their abstract expression in a set of mathematical formulae. One of the principal exponents of the mathematical method which Burke had rejected so vehemently, Condorcet advocated algebra for containing within it 'the principles of a universal instrument, applicable to all combinations of ideas'.[37] Perhaps the earliest user of the term 'social science', Condorcet ultimately sought to apply his mathematical method as a means for rational control of social behaviour, even though he accepted 'the impossibility of absolute certainty'.[38] There can be little doubt that Holcroft's conviction that universal benevolence depended on an individual's stoic self-restraint was derived from Condorcet's doctrine of Necessitarianism. For in the crucial struggle against ignorance and prejudice, personal feelings and private interests must be curbed so that truth, reason and public virtue may flourish.

Yet in order to discover truth, the individual first has to rid himself of all prejudice. Hence in his writings Holcroft is centrally concerned with the eradication of 'prejudice', which would pave the way for the diffusion of knowledge and universal truth. Like the *philosophes* and other perfectibilitarians, he held the deep conviction that truth is the ultimate of moral virtues, secrecy is sin and silence is falsehood. As Paine put it in *The Age of Reason* (1784, 1795): 'Mystery is the antagonist of truth. It is a fog of human invention that obscures truth and represents it in distortion. Truth never envelops *itself* in mystery; and the mystery in which it is enveloped is the work of the antagonist, and never of itself.'[39] This is the learning curve faced by many of Holcroft's heroes and heroines, most notably, perhaps, the eponymous heroine in his novel *Anna St. Ives*, who gradually frees herself from the delusions of prejudice and ignorance and eventually comes to the understanding that as a sovereign individual she owes no duty to a

parent, family or class, but solely to what is most beneficial to the greater good of society.

* * *

Despite imbibing some of the most radical sentiments of French materialist philosophy, Holcroft remained, in Hazlitt's words, 'a purely speculative politician'. Like Godwin, Holcroft

> constantly deprecated force, rashness, tumult, and popular violence. He was a friend to political and moral improvement, but he wished it to be gradual, calm, and rational, because he believed no other could be effectual. All sanguinary measures, all party virulence, all provocation and invective he deplored: all that he wished was the free and dispassionate discussion of the great principles relating to human happiness, trusting to the power of reason to make himself heard, and not doubting but that the result would be favourable to freedom and virtue.[40]

It was Holcroft's unlimited faith in the salutary effects of the enlightened mind and his unqualified trust in nature and man's 'moral' instinct always (or at least predominantly) to do the right thing when offered a choice between public good and self-interest, that led him to reject political violence as 'unnatural', being detrimental to the long-term social and political interests and progressive amelioration of mankind.[41] Reason and the 'right passions' would ultimately lead to the establishment of liberty and truth, political justice and equality.

But although Holcroft's agenda for political change was characterized by non-violence and gradualism, the changes he proposed were nonetheless drastic. Rather than providing a practical guideline for implementing a new form of government, Holcroft had as his ultimate objective a total reshaping of man's way of thinking. He believed that if one wanted to liberate the institutions of a people, one would have to liberate their political opinions first. Consequently, Holcroft put great emphasis on the education of the masses, and on what Godwin described as the 'illumination of the public understanding'.[42] Both men agreed that an enlightened people would have an enlightened system of government, although unlike Godwin, Holcroft never appears to have taken this to the ultimate conclusion, namely that the only enlightened form of government would be to have no government. Yet they both agreed that it was by definition contrary to sound reason and true political justice to surrender one's private judgement and the authority of the individual, or to obey another man simply because he was of higher status or – in Godwin's words – 'because a concurrence of circumstances [had] procured him a share in the legislative or executive government of our country'.[43] For a utopian anarchist like Godwin the only way to ensure absolute independence and self-determination of the individual is to abolish all forms of government, even those that have been democratically elected: 'Each man should be wise enough to govern himself, without the intervention

of any compulsory restraint'.[44] Holcroft never developed a systematic critique of government, but in general terms he appears to have shared Rousseau's contention that governments, granted that they are based on pure reason, can promote virtue, while he never drifted far from Helvétius's proposition that true political justice is based on the greatest good for the greatest number.

What distinguished Holcroft from most contemporary French and British perfectibilitarians was that he did not envisage his utopia in some distant, mythical past, nor did he expect any immediate improvement of the condition of man in the here and now. Neither caring much for 'things as they were' (like Rousseau), nor for 'things as they are' (like Godwin), Holcroft firmly projected his golden age into the future – perhaps taking his cue from the dramatist Louis Sebastian Mercier, a supporter of the Revolution with whom he had become acquainted in the 1780s and whose *L'An 2440* (*The Year 2500* in English), a rendering of the ultimate Utopia for believers in perfectibility, had been published in 1772.[45] Constantly reminding his readers of 'things as they ought to be', Holcroft was hence essentially a millenarian, rather than an antiquarian or a political activist. Characteristically, it was as a millenarian that he hailed the publication of Paine's *The Rights of Man*, which he, Godwin and Brand Hollis had seen through the press in the spring of 1791 after its original publisher had abandoned the project. 'Hey for the New Jerusalem! The millennium! And peace and eternal beatitude be unto the soul of Thomas Paine', Holcroft wrote to Godwin, evidently ignoring the text's quite specific historical grounding and contemporary political relevance.[46]

Holcroft's notion of 'revolution', then, is that of the beginning of the New Jerusalem: not the tweaking of the existing socio-political order, but a fundamental reshaping, indeed, a rebirth of the human consciousness. And this is where, along with Godwin, Holcroft sees a potentially salutary effect of the Revolutionary spirit of the age. Both men believed that a revolution should not, in the first place, be an occasion for destroying old political structures, for denouncing social evils, and for taking revenge for years of exploitation and oppression: rather, revolutions are primarily periods when drastic ideological changes can be introduced in a relatively short period of time. That is, a revolution is first and foremost a time when far-reaching ontological and epistemological choices have to be made that will determine the future shape of a nation – political, social, moral, philosophical choices. At such moments in history, Godwin and Holcroft were convinced, the people should possess the right information for them to draw the right conclusions. Quoting from Helvétius's *De l'homme*, Godwin observed in *Political Justice*:

> In the history of every people ... there are moments in which, uncertain of the side they shall choose, and balanced between political good and evil, they feel a desire to be instructed; in which the soil ... is in some manner prepared, and may easily be

> penetrated by the dew of truth. At such a moment, the publication of a valuable book may give birth to the most auspicious reforms.[47]

The Revolution in France had prepared the minds of the British progressives for true political justice; it was Godwin's *Political Justice* that was to be the spark of inspiration, the seed of truth for which they were waiting. In strikingly similar terms, Holcroft revealed in February 1790 in a letter to a friend what the driving force in his life was:

> The great object I have in view, is not the obtaining of riches, but the power of employing my time according to the bent of my genius, in the performance of some works which shall remain when I am no more – works that will promote the general good. This is a purpose I have so strongly at heart, that I would with pleasure sacrifice ease, peace, health, and life for its accomplishment.[48]

Behind this seemingly charitable activity of 'promoting the general good' lies an ambitious levelling agenda aimed at removing all social, political and economic inequalities and restrictions from society. In fact, Holcroft's utopian manifesto of 'promoting the general good' constitutes nothing less than a proto-Marxist revolution aimed at founding a society that reflects the interests and the full human potential of each of its citizens in equal measure. For Holcroft, a society built on the principle of the general good would be the ultimate expression in the material world of human nature and of man's universal natural rights: it would be an inclusive, egalitarian society that guaranteed a person life and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and property. Holcroft's progressive social agenda focused especially on the political emancipation of women and the labouring classes. All his life aspiring to be the people's playwright, Holcroft had discovered early on that the romance drama was the most effective narrative form to simultaneously entertain and enlighten the disprivileged and disempowered classes. 'The theatre', he wrote in the Preface to *Seduction*,

> has a most powerful and good influence on morals, which increases with industry, and as the means of gaining admission among the lower class increase. Much time is there spent to the best, the noblest, of purposes; the body's fatigues are forgotten, the mind is beguiled of its cares, the sad heart is made merry, fictitious sorrow obliterates real, and the soul, imbibing virtuous and heroic principles, is roused and impelled to actions that honour not only individuals but nations, and give a dignity to human nature. Those who can doubt this are to be pitied. And it is piteous, most piteous, that, not only the learned, but, the political world should treat the stage with neglect; nay, with contempt: that they do not combine, and employ the high powers they possess to the encouragement and perfection of an art which, being, in its own nature, so delightful, so fascinating, is capable of contributing, so infinitely, to the happiness, as well as to the pleasure, of mankind.[49]

It remains hard to assess the lasting legacy of Thomas Holcroft's life and work. As a political activist he was less than efficient, with his fanaticism, dogmatism and fiery zeal alienating some, and his uncompromising atheism and unworldly utopianism disenchanting others. Nor can he lay claim to having made any original contribution to the era's repertoire of radical thought. Clearly lacking Godwin's philosophic talent and Paine's political instinct, Holcroft was above all a visionary social critic, who was deeply committed to serving the public good and bolstering the welfare of the nation. Yet displaying his Brechtian talent to render political and philosophical issues relevant and accessible to a largely uneducated lower middle class of grocers, tailors, printers and journeymen, Holcroft articulated in his plays and fictional prose many of Godwin's and Paine's arguments for political and social reform in a narrative format. Ultimately, Holcroft's legacy is that of the entire generation of radical reformers in the post-Bastille era: it was their reform agenda and their 'modern philosophy' that made them, and that subsequently unmade them. It is therefore by Hazlitt's final assessment that Holcroft will be remembered most: 'Mr. Holcroft was among the foremost and most ardent of those who indulged their imaginations, in contemplating such an Utopia, or ideal state of society, and in reasoning on the manner in which the great leading principle of morality would then be reduced to practice'.[50]

W. M. V.

Notes

1. C. Kegan Paul, *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries*, 2 vols (London: H.S. King & Co., 1876), vol. 1, p. 17.
2. Ibid., p. 25.
3. Samuel Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–9), vol. 1, p. 114.
4. William Hazlitt, 'My First acquaintance with Poets', in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe after the edition of A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 21 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1933), vol. 17, p. 112.
5. Elbridge Colby, 'Editor's Preface', in William Hazlitt (ed.), *The Life of Thomas Holcroft, Written by Himself, Continued to the Time of his Death from His Diary Notes & Other Papers by William Hazlitt and Now Newly Edited with an Introduction and Notes*, ed. Elbridge Colby, 2 vols (London: Constable & Co., 1925), vol. 1, p. ix (hereafter cited as Hazlitt (ed.), *The Life of Thomas Holcroft*).
6. Quoted in Colby, 'Introduction', in Hazlitt (ed.), *The Life of Thomas Holcroft*, vol. 1, p. xvi.
7. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 17.
8. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 36.
9. Kegan Paul, *William Godwin*, vol. 1, p. 25.
10. Quoted in Kegan Paul, *William Godwin*, vol. 1, p. 26.
11. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 64–5.
12. William Godwin, *Diary*, quoted in Kegan Paul, *William Godwin*, vol. 1, p. 71.
13. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 361.