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IMAGES OF OLIVER CROMWELL
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE



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**IMAGES OF OLIVER CROMWELL
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE**

Inaugural Lecture

**Delivered at the College
on 28 February 1994**

by

**MICHAEL J CARDY
Professor and Head of Department of
French**

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UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA
1994



IMAGES OF OLIVER CROMWELL IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE*

I accepted the appointment to the Chair of French at Swansea in full knowledge that a splendid tradition of French Studies existed at the College.¹ In delivering this inaugural lecture, therefore, I am very conscious of treading a hallowed path. The founding chair of French in this institution was occupied by Professor Mary Williams who, in 1921, became the first woman to be appointed to a professorial chair in a British university. Professor Williams was a medievalist of note - there exists an unbroken line of medieval French studies at the College, a situation that will not change as long as I am here - and her editions of the continuation of the Perceval story by Gerbert de Montreuil are still standard, while her writings on the Celtic elements in the French romances have not been superseded. Professor Williams retired from the chair at Swansea in 1948 and died in 1977. Her name is kept alive not only by her contributions as a scholar but also by the hall of residence named after her and the travelling scholarships she endowed under the terms of her will. Her three successors - Professor Roy Knight, who occupied the Chair from 1950 till 1974, Armel Diverres, Professor from 1975 to 1981, and Valerie Minogue, Professor from 1981 to 1987, to my intense emotion, mainly unalloyed pleasure, are present in this hall as I speak. The scholarly record of all three is quite outstanding. Professor Knight's studies of French theatre of the seventeenth century enjoy world-wide renown, his *Racine et la Grèce* of 1950 in particular being as near to a definitive work as has been produced by a British scholar of French Studies in the period since 1945. He has continued to be productive throughout his retirement and his fine book on Corneille was published as recently as 1991 by the University of Wales Press. Professor Diverres is a medievalist of great distinction. His work on the chronicler and poet, Jean Froissart, who flourished in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, has not been superseded, while his studies of the French Arthurian romances, especially of

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Chrétien de Troyes, have stood the test of time. As with Professor Knight, the scholarly commitment and productivity of Professor Diverres have continued unabated since his retirement. Professor Minogue, now Research Professor in the Department of French, has published distinguished books on Proust, Zola and Nathalie Sarraute and is at present involved in the Pléiade edition of Sarraute's complete works. She is one of the most eminent scholars of modern French fiction currently active in the United Kingdom. In addition to the distinguished work produced by my predecessors in the Chair, I could also cite the scholarly achievements of former students of the Department, of the present academic staff, and of a number of colleagues who were appointed elsewhere after working here. Among the latter group, it would doubtless be invidious to single out anyone by name, but I must make one exception. I refer to the late and much-lamented Vivienne Mylne, Lecturer at Swansea from 1955 to 1966, whose notable career was crowned by appointment to a personal chair at the University of Kent. Her work on the eighteenth-century French novel is justly renowned and will certainly prove durable. The tradition of French Studies at Swansea initiated by Professor Mary Williams is one of which the College is entitled to be very proud indeed.

Now, were my own scholarly field one of those so admirably enhanced by my predecessors in the chair, I should indeed fear to tread on the pastures in question. However, throughout my academic career, my intellectual space of predilection has been eighteenth-century France, or more generally, the European Enlightenment. The period has not just been an object of study, which I have taught and to which I have devoted most of my writing. It also embodies for me certain ideals - of justice, of tolerance, of freedom of expression, of commitment to the view that problems are amenable to solution through a combination of reason and compassion - ideals which constitute both an antidote to the cynicism and death-wish that

seem to characterise so much of the thought of our own century, and also a secular faith by which I have tried to live. The topic I have chosen for this evening's lecture is an Enlightenment one and explores the reactions of a number of significant French writers and intellectuals to Oliver Cromwell. The implicit theoretical sub-text of the lecture may be found in those 'criteria of influence, reception and posthumous fame' proposed by Hans Robert Jauss,² except that I have applied his reception theory not to literary texts, but to the real historical personage of Cromwell. As I shall hope to show, the writers and intellectuals in question found him a puzzling and challenging figure.

Around 1805, evoking the extraordinary epoch of the French Revolution which Europe, and he himself, had recently experienced, the comte d'Angiviller noted in his *Mémoires*: 'Depuis plus de cent cinquante ans nous vivions dans l'horreur du crime qui avait fait tomber la tête de Charles 1er sur un échafaud'.³ The count referred thus to an event that was certainly considered to be among the most shocking on the international political scene of 17th-century Europe. The execution of Charles I in 1649 seemed a direct challenge to the then current ideology of the divine right of kings and provoked renewed debate over a fundamental problem of political theory: what were - indeed are, since the question has not gone away since - the rights of citizens in their relationship to a sovereign power with which they were dissatisfied. In many ways, the unhappy English king and the leader of the Puritans, Oliver Cromwell, who had deposed and then executed him, lie at the source of modern political theory. After his death, Cromwell was of course the victim of much obloquy in his own country, symbolised by the disinterment and desecration of his corpse. In Anglican England and Catholic Europe, venomous writings were published with the sole aim of defiling his memory. But discourse could be much more oblique and occur in surprising places. It might

take the form of a justification of the divine right of kings, hence denial of the right of subjects to rise up in revolt against their monarch. The père Bouhours wrote as follows in 1684:

A la vérité les peuples ne sont jamais en droit de se soulever contre leur prince: la rébellion est de la nature de ces choses que nulle raison n'autorise, que nul prétexte ne justifie. De quelque manière qu'en usent les rois, ils sont toujours rois, ils sont toujours nos souverains et nos maîtres. Mais on a sujet de tout craindre des peuples quand ils sont persuadés que leur prince les persécute, et qu'ils ne doivent non plus lui obéir qu'à l'anté-Christ. ⁴

There can be little doubt that the example of Cromwell was casting a shadow over the mind of Bouhours as he penned those words. Two French texts in which Cromwell was discussed at length appeared in the last decade or so of the seventeenth century. Both texts are by scholarly clerics of the Catholic Church. The first is père Pierre-Joseph d'Orléans' *Histoire des révolutions d'Angleterre* which appeared in 1689, although I have read it in the edition of 1723,⁵ the second the abbé François Ragueneau's *Histoire d'Olivier Cromwell* of 1691.⁶ Both writers have pretensions to be considered serious historians. They both list their sources and even occasionally make direct references to them in the body of the text. In addition, Ragueneau illustrates his work with some of the commemorative medals struck during Cromwell's lifetime and explicates their symbolism. He also prints French translations of some of the original documents he had consulted, including the edict abolishing the monarchy

of 17 March 1649 and the edict appointing Cromwell Lord Protector. As to their respective historical approach, d'Orléans admits to partisanship in the *Avertissement* to his third volume, but points out that 'je n'ai pas refusé à Cromwell, que son parricide a rendu le plus odieux tyran qui fût jamais, l'honneur d'avoir été un grand génie, un grand politique, un grand guerrier'.⁷ The tyrannical nature of Cromwell is a theme upon which he constantly harps, however. Ragueneau professed a more objective approach, claiming in his *Avertissement* that 'il est aisé de discerner la vérité à travers les préjugés et les passions des autres, pourvu qu'on ne soit point soi-même ni passionné, ni prévenu'.⁸ His own objectivity, though, may be gauged by his comment, in the conclusion to the book, on the disinterment and exposure on a public gallows of Cromwell's corpse, which he characterises as a 'juste punition de cet ambitieux qui, ayant voulu s'élever au comble de la gloire et de la grandeur pendant sa vie, fut traité, après sa mort, avec toute l'infamie du plus scélérat de tous les hommes'.⁹ The word *scélérat* is also used by d'Orléans in his conclusion, where he calls Cromwell an 'habile scélérat'.¹⁰ It will be obvious that historical objectivity over Cromwell was simply not possible in the France of Louis XIV. In England in the late seventeenth century, people enjoyed more rights as a consequence of the political compromise that the restoration of the monarchy represented and among those rights was far greater freedom of expression than existed in any other European country. In the France of the Sun King, apologists of the régime and of the political assumptions upon which it was based were welcome; opposing views were suppressed. Those assumptions did not change in the eighteenth century, however inefficient the *ancien régime* may have become after Louis XIV's death in 1715. The writers of the eighteenth century had to tread gingerly in dealing with a potentially explosive subject like Cromwell. In any case, conservative apologists of the régime continued to echo the conventional wisdom concerning Cromwell until well into the eighteenth century. One might

well take as prototypical of this static attitude the following passage from the *Essai sur le beau* of 1741 by the père André:

Le malheur des états qui tombent dans l'anarchie par le mépris de l'ordre établi par les lois? Quelle confusion! Quelle tyrannie sous le nom de protection des peuples! Quelle servitude sous le nom de liberté! Il n'y pas bien longtemps que nous en avions à nos portes un exemple qui a fait frémir l'Europe.¹¹

The reference, while clear, is muted and Cromwell's name is not even mentioned, as though André could not bear to write it. The word *protection*, however, provides the clue to his real intention, since the title Cromwell took upon assuming power was, of course, Lord Protector; and the terrifying example to which André alludes could hardly be any other than that of Cromwell.

In the late seventeenth century, the nations of western Europe were involved in an international power struggle. The attempt on the part of France to assert its hegemony led to a defensive alliance that culminated in a series of French defeats in the closing years of Louis XIV's reign. An apologist of French aspirations like the great writer, Robert Challe, was anxious to underline the ruthless nature of the leaders of France's principal antagonist, England. Thus, in his *Journal d'un voyage fait aux Indes orientales*, written in 1690-1691 - it is, by the way, the greatest travel book I have ever read - Challe noted:

Que le lecteur compare l'histoire de Henry VIII, de Marie et d'Elizabeth ses filles, et de Cromwell, qui y ont tous quatre fait couler des ruisseaux de sang.

Il verra qu'ils en ont fait tout ce qu'ils ont voulu, ayant trouvé, dans leur sévérité, le secret de se faire craindre et obéir; au lieu que la douceur et la bonté des Stuarts n'ont servi qu'à conduire Charles I à l'échafaud et détrôner Jacques II.¹²

For Challe, the only way to counteract this English ruthlessness was to respond in kind. In another work and in a quite different context, Challe again evoked the example of Cromwell. In the course of a critique of the Old Testament in his *Difficultés sur la religion*, Challe noted the inspiration the sacred books had provided to Oliver Cromwell: 'C'est sur ces livres que Cromwell s'appuyait pour colorer sa tyrannie et couvrait de leurs décisions et de leur autorité toutes ses injustices'.¹³ Despite his plea for ruthlessness noted above, Challe in fact hated both political tyranny and spiritual terrorism. When one seemed to sustain the other, as in the case of Cromwell, outright condemnation was the only possible attitude.

French perspectives on Cromwell began to change at the very end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Admiration of his forthrightness, even of his highhandedness, began to creep into discourse about him and into comparisons involving his name. In his *Nouveaux voyages en Amérique Septentrionale* of 1703, the baron de Lahontan remarked upon the manner in which the Sovereign Council of New France in Quebec City had been dominated by the Governor of the colony, the marquis de Frontenac: 'Lorsque Frontenac était au Canada, il se moquait de la prétendue préséance des intendants. Il traitait les membres de ce Parlement comme Cromwell ceux d'Angleterre'.¹⁴ Even allowing for the very different senses of the words *parlement* and *parliament* in French and English at the time, Cromwell's dominance of the English assembly, his sometimes very rough public

persona, were increasingly to interest French writers of the eighteenth century. The discussion of Cromwell's character could sometimes lead to surprising conclusions, however. Thus, the abbé Dubos, in his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* of 1719, suggested that Cromwell's principal talent was that of a great actor. Unusually among Frenchmen of his time, Dubos knew English and was well acquainted with English culture. He may well have been influenced by the charge levelled by many English commentators hostile to Cromwell that he was the 'great dissembler'.¹⁵ As a possible consequence of such accusations, Dubos claimed that those Englishmen who were best informed about their nation's history tended to admire Cromwell less than the common run of his compatriots:

...ils lui refusent ce génie étendu, pénétrant et supérieur que lui donnent bien des gens, et ils lui accordent pour tout mérite la valeur de simple soldat, et le talent d'avoir su paraître pénétré des sentiment qu'il voulait feindre, et aussi ému des passions qu'il voulait inspirer aux autres, que s'il les avait senties véritablement.¹⁶

Dubos fails to explain how such calculated shamming and hypocrisy were compatible with the qualities of a simple soldier. It is a feature of discourse about Cromwell in France in the seventy years or so after his death that rational discussion seemed to fall into abeyance and both logic and justice suffered in consequence. It is significant, though, that Cromwell's name should have appeared in a text devoted to aesthetic matters. The word *génie*, a quality that Dubos applied to Cromwell but which had already been used by the père d'Orléans to characterise the Lord Protector, should be kept in mind in the light of subsequent debates.

It can come as no surprise that in *L'Esprit des lois*, one of the greatest works of political theory published in the eighteenth century, Montesquieu too had views to express about the political experiment tried in England in the previous century. Cromwell's régime was of interest to Montesquieu because it represented a modern attempt at a form of democracy, though citizens of a twentieth-century democracy would doubtless be hard pressed to discern democratic features in Cromwell's government. For Montesquieu, the English experiment was demonstrably a failure. Thus, for example, in Book III, chapter 3 of his great work, he remarked:

Ce fut un assez beau spectacle, dans le siècle passé, de voir les efforts impuissants des Anglais pour établir parmi eux la démocratie. Comme ceux qui avaient part aux affaires n'avaient point de vertu, que leur ambition était irritée par le succès de celui qui avait le plus osé, que l'esprit d'une faction n'était réprimé que par l'esprit d'une autre, le gouvernement changeait sans cesse; le peuple étonné cherchait la démocratie et ne la trouvait nulle part. Enfin, après bien des mouvements, des chocs et des secousses, il fallut se reposer dans le gouvernement même qu'on avait proscrit.¹⁷

The passage tells the reader more about Montesquieu than about 'celui qui avait le plus osé', that is to say Cromwell, and the Commonwealth he led. For Montesquieu, rebellions were just tolerable if they were led by the aristocracy, of which he was a member. For all his liberalism, Montesquieu was wholly unable to conceive of a democratic régime in the modern sense, and in that he resembled the vast majority of his contemporaries. Moreover, although he was well informed about England and well read in English history and ideas, he clearly

makes an unhistorical claim at the end of that extract. There was no real turning back of the clock in the period of the Restoration and by 1688, the year in which James II was deposed, a régime utterly different from that of Charles I prevailed in England. It was a constitutional monarchy which, with variations and an enormous growth in parliamentary and above all governmental power, is the régime still in place. Without Cromwell, however, the constitutional compromise would have been inconceivable. Montesquieu sought to demonstrate the impossibility of a modern democratic régime; hence the 'assez beau spectacle' to which he alludes must be interpreted with even more ironic resonance than he intended it to have.

No one familiar with eighteenth-century France will be surprised to learn that Voltaire had opinions to express on the subject of Cromwell. We should recall that Voltaire was one of the greatest historians of the age and that for him historical discourse constituted a *literary* genre of such a noble character that only the epic poem and tragedy surpassed it on the scale of literary values. The general tenor of Voltaire's comments on Cromwell was one of condemnation, though his discourse on the topic was a good deal more complex than the mindless castigation that characterises some of his predecessors and contemporaries. In a letter about his epic poem, *La Henriade*, to the *Journal de Trévoux* of June 1731, Voltaire notes that all rebels believe that the people have a right to dethrone their king and cites the English as having held that conviction in the middle of the seventeenth century, that is 'lorsque par une barbarie qui fera éternellement l'opprobre de leur nation, ils firent mourir Charles I'.¹⁸ The reasons for this position emerge from Voltaire's correspondence during the 1730s. In the first place, the execution of Charles I was, in his view, an act triggered in the main by religious fanaticism, which he abhorred above all else. In a letter of April 1732 to

his friend Thieriot, Voltaire suggested an emendation of the words *Anglais de Cromwell to fanatiques de Cromwell* in the errata to the current edition of his *Histoire de Charles XII*, the correction to be incorporated into all subsequent editions.¹⁹ Moreover, his reading of history in the light of his detestation of religious fanaticism led him to conceive a certain sympathy for Charles I as a man. Thus, writing to Frederick, then Crown Prince of Prussia, in July 1737, he commented: 'Ne sont-ce pas les presbytériens d'Ecosse qui ont commencé cette malheureuse guerre civile qui a coûté la vie à Charles I, à un roi qui était honnête homme?'²⁰ While no-one - and least of all Voltaire who, for most of his life tried to exert *personal* influence on the high and mighty of his age - is likely to write to a royal personage to suggest that it is a good thing to cut off the heads of kings, Voltaire's characterisation of Charles I as an *honnête homme* is significant. The term, meaning something like a gentleman with cultivated leanings, was a social ideal in France for the best part of a century and Voltaire himself subscribed to all the implications of the ideal throughout his life. When one discusses Voltaire, it is unwise to discount the component of social and cultural nostalgia in his psychological make-up. Any public accusation that he might be an apologist of the execution of the English king at once made him reach for his pen. Thus, in a letter written in August 1738 to the abbé Prévost's journal, *Le Pour et le Contre* to rebut just such an accusation, he calls the execution an 'injustice exécrable' and an 'assassinat...affreux' and indignantly condemns his accuser.²¹ Cromwell as a zealot, Charles as a deeply-wronged gentleman, such is the polarity that Voltaire seeks to establish in all his public pronouncements on the historical episode. Two decades later, referring to a sixteenth-century execution motivated by religious fanaticism, he reiterates the contrast in a letter to his Swiss pastor friend, Jacob Vernes: 'Vous avez raison de dire que Calvin joue le rôle de Cromwell dans l'affaire de l'assassinat de Servet'.²² Of course, Voltaire always to some degree tailored his letters to suit

the nature and convictions of his correspondents. There can be little doubt, though, that he was fascinated by Cromwell as a historical figure, more especially as he believed that history could be written in terms of the decisive intervention of great men. Thus, in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, he observed of Cromwell that 'du caractère d'un seul homme dépend souvent la destinée de l'Etat'.²³ Cromwell, in other words, was a far more interesting and far more significant historical personage than Charles I. Voltaire's final judgement on Cromwell is to be found in chapter 181 of the *Essai sur les moeurs*, simply entitled "De Cromwell". There he noted Cromwell's highhandedness, his 'valeur secondée de son hypocrisie'²⁴ and the fact that he 'régna, sans être roi, avec plus de pouvoir et plus de bonheur qu'aucun roi'.²⁵ Later in the chapter, as part of a more sustained appraisal of Cromwell's character, Voltaire claimed that:

Ses moeurs furent toujours austères; il était sobre, tempérant, économe sans être avide du bien d'autrui, laborieux, et exact dans toutes les affaires. Sa dextérité ménageait toutes les sectes, ne persécutant ni les catholiques ni les anglicans...il avait des chapelains de tous les partis.²⁶

As so often, Voltaire's undoubted conservatism turns out to be remarkably radical, though, as in his singularly equivocal judgment of Cromwell, such a statement may be no more than a means of resolving the contradictions and dichotomies that are everywhere to be found in his writings.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the conservative apologists have ceased to be in any way typical of French discourse about Cromwell. A reflective and judicious writer like

Vauvenargues could never have swallowed whole intemperate and prejudiced views of a figure who, with all his faults (or those warts of which Cromwell himself spoke), seemed nonetheless to have changed the course of history. Vauvenargues attempted to penetrate the enigma of a man who, lacking any advantages of birth or fortune, had done both great and terrible things. Thus, in his *Premier discours sur la gloire* from the *Réflexions et maximes*, Vauvenargues wrote:

Si Cromwell n'eût pas été prudent, ferme, laborieux, libéral autant qu'il était ambitieux et remuant, ni la gloire ni la fortune n'auraient couronné ses projets; car ce n'est pas à ses défauts que les hommes se sont rendus, mais à la supériorité de son génie et à la force inévitable de ses précautions. Dénués de ces avantages, ses crimes n'auraient pas seulement enseveli sa gloire, mais sa grandeur même.²⁷

The monster thus possessed significant redeeming features which counterbalanced his blemishes and accounted for his greatness. Doubtless the most important word in that remark of Vauvenargues is, once again, *génie*, especially when the views expressed in the passage are placed into the context of contemporary discourse other than the strictly historiographical.

The eighteenth century was not an age of specialisation. Thus discourse in the period partook of fields that have become compartmentalised and separate, even disparate, in our own time. A botanist might digress into moral philosophy, a novelist into anthropology - this may help us to understand, by the way, the apparent discontinuity of so much 18th-century fiction²⁸ - nor would such digressions have been considered out of place, since knowledge of the world,

at a time when great efforts were being made to categorise and classify it, escaped the lethal clutch of specialisation and was envisaged as a whole. This may be illustrated by reference to a passage from the *De l'esprit* of Helvétius:

Qu'un général ignorant gagne trois batailles sur un général plus ignorant que lui, il sera du moins pendant sa vie revêtu d'une gloire qu'on n'accordera pas au plus grand peintre du monde. Ce dernier n'a cependant mérité le titre de grand peintre que par une grande supériorité sur des hommes habiles et qu'en excellant dans un art, sans doute moins nécessaire mais peut-être plus difficile que celui de la guerre. Je dis plus difficile, parce qu'à l'ouverture de l'histoire, on vit une infinité d'hommes tels que...les Alexandre, les Mahomet...les Cromwell...obtenir la réputation de grands capitaines le jour même qu'ils ont commandé et battu des armées; et qu'aucun peintre, quelque heureuse disposition qu'il ait reçu de la nature, n'est cité entre les peintres illustres, s'il n'a du moins consommé dix ou douze ans de sa vie en études préliminaires de cet art. Pourquoi donc accorder plus d'estime au général ignorant qu'au peintre habile?²⁹

The comparison between the arts of war and painting may seem curious, but it illustrates the manner in which apparently unconnected topics were used to shed light on one another and to generate discussion of basic preoccupations. In the text of Helvétius, the fundamental subject under study is that of genius, a topic that increasingly fascinated some of the most distinguished minds of the century, whatever the field in which the attribute of genius manifested itself. As a consequence of the analysis of genius in the period, aesthetics were

envisaged as transcending the limits of the literary, plastic and musical arts. Thus, according to this view, great historical figures, impelled by a towering ambition might well be envisaged as possessing genius by future generations, despite criminal actions. Helvétius believed that history filtered out the crimes and left the residue of greatness. He developed the idea later in the work and once again he used Cromwell to epitomise the point:

Ce n'est pas qu'on ne puisse à beaucoup d'intrigues unir beaucoup d'élévation d'âme. Qu'à l'exemple de Cromwell, un homme veuille monter au trône: la puissance, l'éclat de la couronne, et les plaisirs attachés à l'empire, peuvent sans doute à ses yeux ennoblir la bassesse de ses menées, puisqu'ils effacent déjà l'horreur de ses crimes aux yeux de la postérité qui le place au rang des plus grands hommes.³⁰

It is no coincidence that Diderot was making a very similar point at around the same period, since he and Helvétius were meeting frequently at the latter's house and above all at the house of the baron d'Holbach and conversation often turned to the definition and nature of genius.³¹ Diderot came to close intellectual quarters with Helvétius, or with his shade, in the early 1770s when he reacted to the latter's posthumously published text, *De l'homme*. In the course of the *Réfutation suivie...d'Helvétius*, a dialogue with a dead man, the subject of the uniqueness of the man of genius arose. In *De l'homme*, Helvétius had seemed to deny said uniqueness by claiming that chance and circumstance were principally responsible for the emergence and expression of genius. He would have subscribed to Gray's view that full many a flower is born to blush unseen. For Diderot, biological structure was far more important as a means of accounting for genius. The man of genius was endowed with a

physical make-up that rendered him superior to the common run of humanity. In that sense, genius was preordained:

Parmi un assez grand nombre d'hommes mieux organisés et mieux élevés qu'on ne l'est communément, pourquoi celui qui lève le voile de la vérité par quelque coin important obtient-il tant de célébrité? Pourquoi s'épuiser en admiration et en éloges sur ce que tous auraient été capables de faire, si l'intérêt et le hasard l'avaient permis? Vous vous calomniez vous-même; allez, mon cher philosophe, vous n'êtes l'enfant d'aucune de ces causes vulgaires. Hercule au berceau étouffa des serpents, et le jeune Cromwell, en jaquette, dans la brasserie de son père, tenait à la main la hache dont il devait faire tomber la tête de Charles 1^{er}. Ramenez par la pensée les mêmes circonstances' multipliez-les de toutes celles qu'il vous plaira d'imaginer, combinez-les à votre volonté, et peut-être réussirez-vous à reproduire l'assassin d'un roi; mais cet assassin ne sera pas Cromwell.³²

Modern theories of genetics seem to confirm the views of Diderot. The comparison of the two thinkers in the context of discourse on genius reveals how much more perceptive is Diderot's thought than that of Helvétius.

There was in 18th-century France a growing liberalisation of the literary arts, a realisation that, in the theatre for example, commoners were not necessarily confined to playing rôles in comedy and farce but might also, in certain circumstances, feature as the protagonists of tragedy or the serious drama. The theatre, in parallel with the novel, became increasingly a

mirror of the age. This insistence upon contemporaneity spilled over onto less obviously social genres and even affected theorising about the most literary genre of all, the epic poem. Epic heroes, like the heroes of tragedy, had traditionally been conceived as belonging to the world of kings and princes and dukes simply because, it was thought, only personages of such exalted rank were in a position to alter the course of human destiny through their sublime and decisive participation in historical events. The heroes of Homer, Virgil and *La Chanson de Roland* are not obscure scions of the *hoi poloi*; they are aristocrats of the highest status. But different times trigger different customs and perspectives. Since the beginning of the Age of Discovery, many noble exploits had been performed by persons of lower rank. More than any other literary genre in France, the epic poem was seen to be in need of conceptual renewal, especially as an epic masterpiece in some sense consecrated a national literature as a great one, a view first forcibly expressed by Du Bellay in his *Défense et illustration de la langue française* of 1549. The great modern French epic was never written, despite many attempts; in the absence of great texts, however, theorising about the genre flourished. It was suggested that the epic poem might well incorporate heroes of plebeian origin provided that their actions achieved epic dignity by virtue of their far-reaching historical consequences. To take just one example, in his article "Epopée", contributed to the fifth volume of the *Encyclopédie*, Jean-Francois Marmontel noted that 'il n'est pas besoin que les personnages [épiques] soient d'un rang élevé, pourvu que l'action soit grande en elle-même'.³³ Marmontel cited two names as examples of historical personages who might justifiably feature as heroes of an epic poem: they were Cortés and Cromwell. No budding epic poet rose to the challenge. However in the early nineteenth century, Victor Hugo wrote a play of epic proportions on Cromwell, the preface of which stands as the greatest manifesto of the French Romantic drama and an act of overt rebellion against the stultifying conventions of the

national theatre. The historical personage of Cromwell does not feature to any great extent in the preface. Hugo does call Cromwell 'ce bizarre et colossal prototype de la réforme religieuse, de la révolution politique d'Angleterre'.³⁴ Hugo was also, to my knowledge, the first French writer to have begun to appreciate the power of Cromwell's oratory when he called him an 'orateur lourd, diffus, obscur, mais habile à parler le langage de tous ceux qu'il voulait séduire'.³⁵ Cromwell's long speech refusing the crown in Act V, scene xii of the play illustrates Hugo's understanding of the power of Cromwell's gruff eloquence.

It might be appropriate now to pause and take stock. The French writers and intellectuals who attempted an assessment of Cromwell in the eighteenth century almost all condemned his regicide. Whatever their private opinions, public condemnation was their only option in an autocracy like the *ancien régime*. They were deeply impressed, though, by his undeniable military exploits. In war, as in North-American sports, winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. They had difficulty in reconciling his soldierly profile with what they conceived of as his hypocrisy; most of them assumed that Cromwell's ultimate aim was indeed to be king. In a country with a rather different social stratification, none of the writers had any appreciation of the class of earnest English rural gentry with which Cromwell most closely identified himself throughout his life, though the fact that, in the eyes of the French writers, he was a plebeian or commoner - a *roturier* - rendered his achievements all the more unlikely and amazing to them. They had no understanding, either, of a central aspiration of Cromwell's life, his desire for godliness, in himself, in those around him and in the population as a whole; *God's Englishman*, the title of Christopher Hill's admirable book on Cromwell,³⁶ would have seemed like an oxymoron to most French intellectuals of the time. Only Voltaire, of the writers I have mentioned, had any inkling at all of Cromwell's religious

tolerance, especially by the standards of a thoroughly intolerant century. On a number of occasions, we have heard the word *génie* applied to Cromwell in the discourse of the writers under review. It is worth noting that, in the period in question, the word extended its semantic range, meaning initially certain very special qualities, subsequently the person possessing those qualities.³⁷ As I must have made clear already, I would regard aesthetic questions - debates over such concepts as beauty, genius and taste - as central to an understanding of the Enlightenment in France. The word *génie* is used at first in the context of genuine attempts to appraise Cromwell's historical contribution but increasingly, as of the middle of the century, we have witnessed the *appropriation* of his name for discourse of rather different purposes together with a tendency to mythologise him. I shall return to the point in my conclusion. Before I reach that consummation, which I am sure you have begun devoutly to wish, there being no generic rules for an inaugural lecture, I should like to embark upon an extended coda, or perhaps more exactly a delayed *excursus*.

When one compares French intellectuals of the eighteenth century with their British counterparts, one is surprised to discover how different is their attitude towards universities and university teachers. Most of the major French figures of the period had some pretty harsh things to say about academics. Thus, in a passage of the *Lettres persanes* that, in the light of issues currently under debate on the contemporary university scene in the United Kingdom - modularisation, teaching audits and so forth - one might be tempted to envisage as a remarkable case of art anticipating life, Montesquieu made the following comment about the University of Paris of his time:

Il semble...que les têtes des plus grands hommes s'étrécissent lorsqu'elles sont

assemblées, et que là où il y a plus de sages, il y ait aussi moins de sagesse.
Les grands corps s'attachent toujours si fort aux minuties, aux vains usages,
que l'essentiel ne va jamais qu'après.³⁸

Readers of Voltaire's *Candide*, too, will recall that when Candide submitted to the Academy of Bordeaux the last remaining specimen of the red sheep that had transported him and Cacambo out of the privileged, but alas utopic, land of El Dorado, the Academy offered a prize for the best essay explaining why the sheep was red. The winner, *a scholar from the north*, 'démontra par A plus B, moins C, divisé par Z que le mouton devait être rouge, et mourir de la clavelée'.³⁹ The paradigmatic image of the academic is to be found in the portrait of Pangloss in Voltaire's great *conte*: pig-headed, quarrelsome, impractical, contemptuous both of the views of other people and of the multiple lessons of experience; above all, like every other character in the text except for the hero himself, incapable of purging his *idées fixes* and creating the intellectual space in which change and development might be possible. In short, academics did not constitute part of the intelligentsia, rather they were considered as the antithesis of it. That is not to say that French writers and thinkers of the time did not regret the lack of a privileged space in which to pursue intellectual activities. The converse is true and could easily be documented.⁴⁰ What, then, might we now envisage as the salient characteristics of that space? Perhaps two references, which are neither French nor of the eighteenth century, may help us to understand them better. In the bibliography of a work entitled *The Making of the Middle Ages*, the eminent medieval historian, Richard Southern, commenting on one of his principal sources, the Benedictine monk, Dom Mabillon, whose *Acta Sanctorum Sancti Ordinis Benedicti* were published in a number of volumes over the period 1668-1701, noted that Mabillon's work 'contains a series of biographies edited with

calm and assured learning by the greatest of all scholars in the field of medieval studies'.⁴¹ Two centuries after Mabillon the young Oscar Wilde, already celebrated but not yet notorious, wrote thus of his undergraduate days to a very senior celebrity, John Ruskin:

The dearest memories of my Oxford days are my walks and talks with you,
and from you I learned nothing but what was good. How else could it be?
There is in you something of prophet, of priest, and of poet, and to you the
gods gave eloquence such as they have given to none other, so that your
message might come to us with the fire of passion, and the marvel of music,
making the deaf to hear, and the blind to see.⁴²

I deduce from those two quotations that the first principle of a university is certainly not the administration of the institution itself, but the learning that takes place there, that calm and assured learning which Richard Southern identified in the work of Mabillon. The first responsibility of a place of learning is thus to the international world of scholarship and science. It follows that academic staff do not work at a university primarily to teach and students do not attend a university primarily to be taught. Both staff and students are there primarily to learn. They partake of the same process, that is they learn separately and together, though when they learn together, it is heartily to be wished that students will receive at least a scintilla of the same inspiration to learn that was instilled in the young Oscar Wilde by Ruskin and also, one would like to think, just a little of Wilde's eloquence. Such learning, quite rightly, assumes a multiplicity of forms, can range over every aspect of human history and our planet and extend beyond our planet far into the cosmos.



I have chosen this evening to tackle a subject that might seem marginal to contemporary concerns, images of the enigmatic historical figure of Oliver Cromwell as filtered through the consciousness of a number of 18th-century writers belonging to the European culture that, taking all in all, has had the greatest impact upon our collective mentality. That French discourse, which starts with the incorporation of Cromwell into the national demonology, adds nuances to the long shadow his personality cast over an age that could not fail to be both horrified and fascinated by the crime of which the comte d'Angiviller spoke in such appalled tones more than 150 years after the event, though, of course, not much more than a decade after France had followed England's example by cutting off the head of its own king. In that discourse, the increasing tendency towards mythologisation, towards appropriation of Cromwell's personality into other discursive contexts, should not surprise us, though the contexts in question do sometimes have an unpredictable and random nature. The reception theory of Jauss which I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture needs to be read within the broader conceptual horizons of the idea of *disponibilité* as propounded by Roland Barthes, according to which the value of a given literary text may be measured by the variety of new forms of discourse that text continues to beget in the generations following its publication.⁴³ The application of the combined ideas of Barthes and Jauss to Cromwell surely illustrates that what seems a viable approach to literary texts holds true for historical personages also. Nearly 350 years after the execution of Charles I, Cromwell seems to puzzle and divide British historians as much as he baffled the French writers and intellectuals who lived in the century after his own: reference to the long list of questions that remain to be answered about Cromwell and his age enumerated by Barry Coward in the *introduction* to his 1991 book on the Lord Protector will amply illustrate the point.⁴⁴ In short, Cromwell constantly generates new forms of discourse, a fact which would seem to act as a significant measure of his

greatness as a historical figure. Perhaps this leads us back to the axiomatic statement that in the Humanities the last word is never said and *disputatio* is the name of the game. An evident corollary, though, is that the ways in which debate is conducted constitute part of the game too, the rules within which it is played. As Serge Doubrovsky noted in 1966: 'Tous seuls; tous les uns contre les autres; et tous ensemble: telle est, dans le domaine de la pensée, la condition même du progrès'.⁴⁵ Whether we disagree about Plato or Petrarch, about Byron or Bismarck, about Cervantes or Cromwell, we are constrained, I believe, to respect certain conventions of civility and urbanity. Three years of experience here have convinced me that University College, Swansea, at its best, provides the kind of privileged space in which such civilised debate may take place and where academic staff and students can nurture those essential links with the international community of scholarship and science of which we are all, at one and the same time, the heirs and the servants.

Notes

- * An early version of this lecture was delivered as a brief paper at the 18th Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes held at Novi Sad in the then Yugoslavia in August 1990. I am grateful to Professor Pierre Danchin, of the Université de Nancy II, for sending me valuable bibliographical information after the Congress. I am also indebted to my former student, Mrs Denise Rackus, for supplying me with several useful references. On the public occasion of the lecture, all French quotations were read in my own English translation; I have restored the original French in this published version. The spelling of all quotations has been modernised, and the punctuation has been emended where the sense seemed to require it.
- 1 I have learned much about the history of the University College from David Dykes, *The University College of Swansea: An Illustrated History* (Stroud, 1992).
- 2 Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Brighton, 1982), p.5.
- 3 C C Flahaut, comte de la Billarderie d'Angiviller, *Mémoires*, ed. Louis Bobé (Copenhague, 1933), p.174.
- 4 D. Bouhours, *Opuscules sur divers sujets* (Paris, 1684), pp.167-168.
- 5 Pierre-Joseph d'Orléans, SJ, *Histoire des révolutions d'Angleterre, depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu'au règne de Guillaume III*, nouvelle édition (La Haye, 1723), 3 vols.
- 6 François Ragueneau, *Histoire d'Olivier Cromwell* (Paris, 1691).
- 7 *Histoire des révolutions d'Angleterre III*, n.p.
- 8 *Histoire d'Olivier Cromwell* n.p.
- 9 *Histoire d'Olivier Cromwell*, p. 304.
- 10 *Histoire des révolutions d'Angleterre*, III, 258.
- 11 Y. André, *Essai sur le beau*, nouvelle édition (Paris, 1810), p.75.
- 12 Robert Challe, *Journal d'un voyage fait aux Indes orientales (1690-1691)*, ed. F. Deloffre et M. Menemencioglu (Paris, 1979), p. 482.
- 13 Robert Challe, *Difficultés sur la religion proposées au père Malebranche*, ed. F. Deloffre et M. Menemencioglu (Paris/Oxford, 1983), p.152.
- 14 Lahontan, *Nouveaux voyages en Amérique Septentrionale*, ed. Jacques Collin

- (Montréal, 1983), p.75.
- 15 The charge is discussed by John Morrill in his introduction to John Morrill (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London, 1990). I have derived great benefit and stimulus from this book of essays by various hands.
- 16 J.-B. Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, 7e édition (Paris, 1770), I, 42.
- 17 Montesquieu, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1949-1951), II, 252.
- 18 Voltaire, *Correspondence and Related Documents*, definitive edition edited by Theodore Besterman [hereafter Best. D followed by the number of the letter], in *The Complete Works of Voltaire 85-135* (Genève/Banbury/Oxford 1968-1977), Best. D410.
- 19 Best. D488.
- 20 Best. D1359.
- 21 Best. D1571.
- 22 Best. D7437.
- 23 Quoted by J.H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian* (Oxford, 1958), p.106.
- 24 Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs...*, ed. René Pomeau (Paris, 1963), II, 681.
- 25 *Essai sur les moeurs...*, II, 682.
- 26 *Essai sur les moeurs...*, II, 682-683.
- 27 Vauvenargues, *Oeuvres Complètes*, nouvelle édition (Paris, 1821), II, 143-144.
- 28 For an interesting discussion of the presence of this feature in the most famous of Voltaire's works, see Jean Sareil, 'La Discontinuité dans *Candide*' in Christiane Mervaud et Sylvain Menant (eds.), *Le Siècle de Voltaire: Hommage à René Pomeau* (Oxford, 1987), II, 823-830.
- 29 Helvétius, *De l'esprit* (Paris, 1845), pp. 76-77.
- 30 *De l'esprit*, p.387.
- 31 See Diderot's letter of 11 August 1759 to his mistress, Sophie Volland: 'Vous le savez, vous ma Sophie... Un tout est beau lorsqu'il est un. En ce sens, Cromwell est beau, et Scipion aussi, et Médée, et Aria, et César, et Brutus'. (Diderot, *Correspondance* ed. G. Roth et J. Varloot [Paris 1955-1970], II, 208).

- 32 Diderot, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris, 1964), pp. 596-597. Diderot was not alone in objecting to the views of genius as propounded by Helvétius in *De l'homme*. See the strong sense of moral outrage expressed by Turgot in a letter to Condorcet of December 1773:

...ils s'étend avec complaisance sur les débauches des grands hommes, comme si ces grands hommes devaient l'être pour un philosophe...Qui a jamais douté que leur espèce de grandeur ne fût compatible avec tous les vices imaginables? Sans doute un débauché, un escroc, un meurtrier, peut être...un Cromwell, un cardinal de Richelieu, mais est-ce la destination de l'homme? Est-il désirable qu'il y ait de pareils hommes? Partout Helvétius ne trouve de grand que les actions éclatantes; ce n'est assurément point de cette façon de voir qu'on arrive à de justes idées sur la morale et le bonheur. (Helvétius, *Correspondance générale*, ed. David Smith *et. al.* [Toronto/Oxford, 1981 -], III, 464).

- 33 Jean-François Marmontel, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1818-1820), XIII, 354.
- 34 Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres Complètes [Drame]* (Paris: Hetzel & Quantin, 1881), I, 60.
- 35 Hugo, *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, 61.
- 36 Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London, 1970).
- 37 On this point, see the following article which, after more than 50 years, has still not been superseded: Herbert Dieckmann, 'Diderot's Conception of Genius', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1941), 151-182.
- 38 Montesquieu, *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, 293.
- 39 Voltaire, *Candide*, ed. René Pomeau in *The Complete Works of Voltaire* 48, p. 208.
- 40 See, for example, the following passage of a letter written in May 1732 by Voltaire to his Rouen friend, Pierre Cideville (Best. D493): 'Mon dieu, mon cher Cideville, que ce serait une vie délicieuse de se trouver logés ensemble trois ou quatre gens de lettres avec des talents et point de jalousie, de s'aimer, de vivre doucement, de cultiver son art, d'en parler, de s'éclairer mutuellement!'
- 41 R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London, 1953), p.246.
- 42 Cited by Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1987), p.48.

- 43 The views of Barthes may best be seen in an applied form in his *Sur Racine* (Paris, 1963).
- 44 Barry Coward, *Oliver Cromwell* (London, 1991), pp. 1-5.
- 45 Serge Doubrovsky, *Pourquoi la nouvelle critique* (Paris, 1966), p. xx.

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