The Commonalities of *Common Sense*

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HISTORIANS always note the great impact of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in 1776, and critics generally agree in calling it "one of the most brilliant pamphlets ever written in the English language." Yet, despite the frequency of these claims, scholars rarely bring them together as mutually informing insights or controlling premises.[1] On the one side, the twin appeals of the pamphlet—the historical assertion of immediate impact and the literary assessment of timeless merit—make it an extraordinary source for gauging how Americans think about themselves and their country, then and now. On the other side, the same unique combination of instant effect and lasting influence welcomes rhetorical analysis, turning *Common Sense* into a seminal text for thinking about "the art of persuasion" in American life.[2] One can go further. Precisely how the pamphlet persuades its readers is an object lesson in the workings of modern democratic culture, and the way Americans have absorbed it into collective or national memory remains an untold story in ideological formations.

There is, in fact, no other written production in American culture quite like *Common Sense*. No other text by a single author can claim to

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[1] The divorce between historical claim and literary assessment is an interesting feature in the criticism of *Common Sense.* Historians emphasize its power as event, paraphrasing the language instead of analyzing it and tracing the presumed influences on Paine. Literary critics tend to ignore the implications and immediacy of a lost genre like the political pamphlet. Not surprisingly, then, the quoted literary assessment in the text comes from an historian who has studied the pamphlet tradition. See Bernard Bailyn, "Common Sense," *Fundamental Testaments of the American Revolution* (Washington, D. C., 1973), 7, and, more generally, Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

[2] Rhetoric, defined broadly, is "the art of persuasion." Rhetorical analysis involves the study of the deliberate stylistic and narrative devices for persuading a reader or listener to believe or to do something. In classical terms, the emphasis is upon the formal strategies that try to teach, to please, or to move—an emphasis that sometimes distinguishes rhetoric from mere logic and that, in consequence, has given rise to pejorative connotations. A more modern definition, one that seeks to avoid negative implications, refers to rhetoric as "the science of human attention structures." See Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms: A Guide for Students of English Literature,* 2d ed. (Berkeley, 1991), 131–35.

have so instantly captured and then so permanently held the national imagination.[3] At a time when the largest colonial newspapers and most important pamphlets had circulations under 2,000, *Common Sense* reached between 120,000 and 150,000 copies in its first year alone. It was the first American best-seller. Hundreds of thousands of Americans, perhaps a fifth of the adult population in all, either read Common Sense or had it read to them during the course of the Revolution. Paine could credibly boast that his work had achieved "the greatest sale that any performance ever had since the use of letters."[4]

Other leaders of the Revolution were almost as extravagant in their own praise, and their comments convey another quality, the innate vitality in Paine's words. George Washington called *Common Sense* "unanswerable" and found it to be "working a wonderful change . . . in the minds of many men." Benjamin Franklin thought its effect "prodigious." Benjamin Rush wrote that "it burst from the press with an effect which has rarely been produced by types and papers in any age or country."[5] When modern scholars test these earlier assessments, they tend to agree that Paine "transformed the terms of political debate" and "forged a new political language."[6] Moreover, there are good reasons for such glowing appraisals. Much of the terminology of national discourse, including the

[3] Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (1776), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851–1852), and Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (1863) are other obvious candidates. But the Declaration, a composite document, and Lincoln's "remarks" at Gettysburg were not instantly recognized as controlling expressions in their own times. Uncle Tom's Cabin did have a similar immediate impact, and it is still avidly read, but central aspects of its message have been rejected by later Americans. Compare, for example, favorable contemporary usage of a phrase like "common sense" to pejorative evocations of "uncle tom."

[4] In the scholarly disputes over numbers of copies printed, I accept the guarded assessment of Paine's most thorough, recent biographer. See John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (New York, 1995), 108–11, and also A. J. Ayer, *Thomas Paine* (New York, 1988), 35, and Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976), 79. Some scholars have followed the claim of up to half a million copies in 1776, or one for every four Americans then living. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britian 1764–1776* (New York, 1958), 253. For Paine's own comment, see Paine to Henry Laurens, January 14, 1779, in Philip S. Foner, ed. *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine,* 2 vols. (New York, 1945), 2:1162–63 (hereinafter cited as *Complete Writings of Paine*). For a recent more conservative estimate of circulation, see Patricia Loughran, "Virtual Nation: Local and National Cultures of Print, 1776–1850" (Ph. D. diss., University of Chicago, 1999).

[5] For Washington's evaluation of *Common Sense,* see his letters to Col. Joseph Reed in January and March of 1776 quoted in *Complete Writings of Paine,* 1:2. For the quotations from Franklin and Rush, as well as a good, balanced summary of the overall impact of *Common Sense,* see Isaac Kramnick, "Editor's Introduction," *Common Sense* (New York, 1976), 7–10 (all further references to *Common Sense,* unless otherwise noted, are to this readily available Penguin edition), and Keane, *Tom Paine,* 108–14.

[6] Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America,* 74, xvi.

very term "United States of America," can be traced to Paine's Revolutionary writings.[7] The rhetorical patterns initiated in *Common Sense* have become intrinsic to American political speech, and they are now permanently embedded in the expressions of identity on which the culture depends.

The originary powers of *Common Sense* remain crucial rhetorical ingredients for another reason: they have made the pamphlet all things to all people. Every brand of American politics seems to find some justification in its pages, and the glass that Paine so beguilingly offers can, in consequence, be either half empty or half full as each occasion or cause commands. The bold hardihood of a continental union and the utter fragility of that union both receive first expression here: "now is the seed time of continental union," but also, "the least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak."[8] Here, as well for the first time, is the daring prediction of a legitimating national constitutional convention, but this optimism appears against a deliberately gloomy backdrop, "the precariousness of human affairs." *Common Sense* inaugurates both sides of a never-ending debate in American federalism. It demands a stronger union ("The Continental belt is too loosely buckled") while also recognizing the hold of local identities ("the force of local prejudice").[9]

Time and again, *Common Sense* succeeds in having it both ways on debates that will consume the later body politic. The pamphlet famously resists government and authority, making them necessary evils, but it simultaneously lauds both in its new plan ("the glorious union of all things") and in its exaltation of a proper order ("in America THE LAW IS KING").[10] Revolutionary Americans learn that, like Noah, "we have it in our power to begin the world over again," but they also receive the first in a whole series of stock political warnings: their house, when divided against itself, will not stand; their virtue, because not cultivated, will surely disappear; their common sense, as it becomes less vigilant, will tumble before "the mind of the multitude," and so on.[11] Not least, Paine's confident assertions of strength in unity must be read against a counter proposition: danger lurks everywhere from a hidden enemy within.[12]

A certain manic-depressive quality governs such prose—a quality that has become standard fare in American politics.[13] Paine, the pamphleteer,

[7] Manfred Pütz and Jon-K Adams, "Preface," *A Concordance to Thomas Paine's* Common Sense *and The American Crisis* (New York and London, 1989), vii.

[8] *Common Sense,* 82, 94.

[9] Ibid., 95–98, 118, 85.

[10] Ibid., 65, 100, 98

[11] Ibid., 118–20, 70.

[12] Ibid., 100, 109–10, 88–89.

[13] William L. Hedges was the first to document this tendency in early republican thought, in "Toward a Theory of American Literature, 1765–1800," *Early American*

instinctively knew what the more philosophical thinkers of his day failed to grasp. He saw that material success in the secular state might be boring instead of dramatic, that the result might prove hollow or even comic rather than enlightened. In celebrating the unprecedented promise of America, he realized that communal well-being might best be appreciated in a context of crisis. Therefore, the presumed glory of America could be made to matter more if the country itself seemed to teeter on the edge of ruin and chaos. Danger, properly conveyed and then overcome, would carry mere prosperity toward the realms of higher accomplishment.[14]

These and other ambiguities shape the rhetorical stances as well as the themes of later generations. *Common Sense* insists that "the cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind," but it also orders Americans to protect themselves from the rest of the world.[15] Paine blithely punctuates his claims of reasonableness and disinterestedness with other, disconcerting demands for revenge.[16] Sometimes a lofty civic virtue appears as the necessary linchpin of American endeavors; at other times, though, the practical world of commerce appears to dominate the writer's expectations; and at still others, market forces are definitely the enemy. Greater wealth will help to defend the new republic, but Paine also warns that it will encourage "the trembling duplicity of a spaniel" in leaders who will have more to lose.[17]

The conflict of alternatives in *Common Sense* can be quite direct. Paine congratulates Americans for their "spirit of good order and obedience" on one page and condemns them for their dangerous lawlessness on another.[18] Even as he castigates his opponents for "mingling religion with politics," his own narrative constantly conflates biblical and secular imagery and explanations.[19] Thematically, the stakes on the table always seem to be at their highest when Paine pauses to claim that he writes to avoid exaggeration and hyperbole.[20]

Literature, 4 (1970), 5–14, and "The Old World Yet: Writers and Writing in Post-Revolutionary America," ibid., 16 (1981), 3–18.

[14] *Common Sense,* 88, 117–18.

[15] Ibid., 63, 82, 86

[16] Ibid., 81, 64, 90, 99, 113.

[17] Ibid., 104–07, 120, 115, 86. For extended analyses of Paine's integrations of the ideals of civic virtue and material prosperity, see David Wootton, ed., "Introduction," *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649–1776* (Stanford, Calif., 1994), 32–41, and Peter C. Messer, "Stories of Independence: Eighteenth-Century Narratives" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University—New Brunswick, 1997).

[18] *Common Sense,* 95, 117–18.

[19] Ibid., 128. We see this conflation most famously in the long opening section that uses the First Book of Samuel to demonstrate that "original sin and hereditary succession are parallels"; ibid., 71–82.

[20] For example, while insisting that he is "not inflaming or exaggerating matters," Paine also writes "the present winter is worth an age if rightly employed, but if lost or neglected the whole continent will partake of the misfortune"; ibid., 89.

Such extremes in theme and tone are everywhere in the pamphlet, and they are important beyond themselves. They help to explain how the widest range of readers could be pulled into Paine's orbit, and they identify the birth of a distinctively American voice in politics. But more immediately, they need to be incorporated into a larger philosophical and rhetorical frame of reference, for when they are not, they seem to be contradictions in terms, blocking awareness of the underlying consistencies and overall aesthetic integrity of *Common Sense*. J.G.A. Pocock conveys the frustrations that many readers experience when he claims that *Common Sense* "does not consistently echo any established radical vocabulary" and that Paine himself "remains difficult to fit into any kind of category."[21] Indeed, seeming inconsistencies in the work are often traced and verified through more apparent irregularities in the life.

Paine has been called a raucous haranguer (too embittered to think about style), a journalist shopping the ideas of others, a propagandist rather than an original thinker, and an opportunist of expression instead of a philosopher of thought. Even his most careful defenders tend to speak disparagingly of his weakness in argument and his deficiencies in intellectual originality.[22] But whereas many of these criticisms apply to the man, they divert attention from the actual text, and they tend to disregard the overarching craft of the writer. The impressive things about *Common Sense* are intrinsic to the rhetorical structure and narrative pace of the pamphlet. Paine orchestrated ideological unities out of fragments, and he knew how to wrap his readers in the sincerity of his claims.

The strength of the work can also be seen in an oddly compelling historical fact from 1776. Paine is the only figure in the pantheon of Revolutionary leaders who achieved his place entirely through authorship. Whatever they wrote, the other republican founders all owed something to their original station, their prowess in the field, their political

[21] Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History . . .* (Cambridge, 1985), 276.

[22] For the most popular version of the embroiled and thoughtless haranger, see Howard Fast, *Citizen Tom Paine* (New York, 1943), 18–19, 26–27, 47–48, 92–95. Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America,* 79–80, among others, notes that Paine's originality lies not in his ideas, but in his innovative combination of others' ideas in an American context. More recently, Ayer, *Thomas Paine,* 36, finds that Paine achieved his results "more by rhetoric, of which he was a master, than by force of argument"; David A. Wilson, *Paine and Cobbett: The Transatlantic Connection* (Kingston and Montreal, 1988), 48, 25, suggests that "there was nothing particularly original about Paine's views" in placing him somewhere between philosopher and polemicist; and Jack T. Fruchtman, Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (New York, 1994), 4, argues that "Paine's life as a journalist, which was something he came to quite by accident in 1775, imparted to him much of his character and style."

accomplishments, their subsequent positions, their good fortune in events, their families, their regional affiliations, their wealth, their political alliances, or their location in some other grouping. Paine stood alone in this regard. Now a citizen of the world, he was then an isolated, impoverished immigrant who gained attention wholly through his writings. An embarrassment in every political position that he later filled, he possessed powers of expression that were clearer and bolder than those of his contemporaries, and, to their credit, they realized as much. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, "no writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language."[23]

There is another level of complexity to be dealt with in the acknowledged power of this writer. Gifted beyond other Revolutionary propagandists, Paine nonetheless created far better than even he knew, and the language that he used quickly took on a life of its own. Significantly, the story that Americans have received is far more potent than the one Paine originally tried to tell, and here, once again, the embattled personality of the writer has gotten in the way of a deeper understanding. The political maverick who wrote can be deciphered readily enough, but that individual does not begin to explain the received written product that shattered the traditional Anglo-American mold for pamphleteering in 1776.

Paine gave many commonly available stories a new form and energy. The man who added the final "e" to his name only as he reached America wanted to see himself—and everything else—afresh. He strained to marshal affinities that he could only intuit, and he raised still vaguer proclivities toward the surface of conscious articulation. It is easy to suggest that the strengths, frustrations, and eccentricities of the writer tallied with the felt necessities of his times. But in another sense, Paine stimulated previously unforeseen possibilities, changing the very nature of the political reality that he saw around him. The uncanny aspect of Paine's creativity occurred in this area. He grasped, in recognizable literary form, the emerging ingenuities that the new politics would require.

To study all of these spheres of implication at once presents inevitable problems in analysis. How does one measure the overlapping but still concentric circles of production that have made *Common Sense* a seminal text? Separating the pamphleteer who knew what he was doing from the author of heightened magnitudes is to make an artificial distinction, but it reveals the craft in Paine's writing, and it clarifies the relation of ephemeral political pamphlet to timeless literary work. Accordingly, the following three sections adopt a tiered approach but

[23] *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. H. A. Washington, 12 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1853), 7:198.

with two synchronous aims always in mind. These twin aims might best be expressed as questions. How does *Common Sense* galvanize an enormous audience so quickly and so permanently? How do the different and often conflicting components in colonial understanding and imperial design generate a new form of communal understanding in consensual nationhood?

The first section explores the historical Paine, the disaffected member of the Anglo-American empire who knew many things about his various eighteenth-century audiences and who possessed a broad but explicable range of devices for persuading them of his own purposes and desires. In a famous comment from his Rhetoric, Aristotle observed "it is not hard to praise Athenians among Athenians." Paine comparably knew how to praise Americans in America and, thereby, to establish popular identifications with his arguments.[24] But more was at work for the disenchanted emigrant who carefully kept the identity of "an Englishman" in the first edition of *Common Sense.* In 1776, he was peculiarly situated to make the most of his disaffections, but he was able to do so without sacrificing either the identity or the rhetorical platform available to him as an Englishman with an Englishman's rights.[25] There is real genius in his manipulation of these combinations—a genius born of conscious risk and dislocation, the very elements that he had to convince British Americans to adopt.

A second section scrutinizes the pamphlet itself for its literary elements of tone, style, symbol, form, and metaphor and for the relation of literary import to political content. These factors, often referred to but rarely examined in detail, give *Common Sense* much of its practical punch with audiences of all periods. They explain why the pamphlet is such a complex performance despite the simplest of dictions and organizations. In their combined effect, these literary elements also force a dramatic reconsideration of a central debate in rhetorical theory. For manifestly, Paine finds his innermost power in his manipulation of an ancient rhetorical conundrum or uncertainty.

Classical and modern rhetoricians alike have always argued over the proper dimensions of their art. Is successful language, they want to know, about encouraging the recipients of that language to feel a given way or must that language necessarily go further and persuade an audience to act a certain way in order to be considered effective?[26] Paine solves this

[24] Kenneth Burke uses the Aristotle quotation in his discussion of the process of identification in rhetoric. See Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley, Calif., 1969), 55–59.

[25] Paine acknowledged as much in 1780 when he wrote Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene that "it was in great measure owing to my bringing a knowledge of England with me to America that I was enabled to enter deeper into politics, and with more success, than other people"; *Complete Writings of Paine,* 2:1189.

[26] Lanham, *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms,* 2d ed., 131–35, and Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives,* 49–50.

conundrum by stepping into the continuum of response between feeling and action. Feeling, properly claimed, becomes action in *Common Sense.* The pamphlet celebrates an orchestrated solidarity of the right-minded in a new type of participatory republic. This idea of the right-minded rests on its own excitement, sufficient unto the moment, but the potential discrepancy between political expediency and philosophical explanation remains great. Paine's account presents a troubling first image of the citizen en masse in the modern nation state.

A third section of the essay then carries the historical figure of the first section and the literary analysis of the second into another dimension, into the imaginative domain of storytelling. Paine seems to have deliberately sought a place and, hence, a rhetorical stance at the farthest edges of the Anglo-American empire, a world in which he had failed miserably until emigrating to America. Somehow, after a scant twelve months in colonial Philadelphia, the so-named city of brotherly love, he taught himself to write a previously unimagined story about a better and decidedly new world. The positive appeal of that story is clear enough to all—"we have it in our power to begin the world over again"—but much of its force comes from more unsettling and darker factors. Paine re-fashions a conventional, hackneyed political account into an electrifying tale of basic affections and even more primal hatreds. Americans easily forget that their republic began in feelings of fear, betrayal, anger, and self-righteousness—the feelings that the Revolution required of its participants. Half of a single sentence from *Common Sense* parades all four emotions at work: "there is no punishment which that man will not deserve, be he who, or what, or where he will, that may be the means of sacrificing a season so precious and useful."[27] Paine learned to wield these negative sentiments to stunning collective effect, and current Americans have been left with the patterns of his success.

Every culture has five or six stories that it tells itself over and over again as part of a pattern in self-recognition and sought-after cohesion. *Common Sense* clearly provides one of those stories in the United States of America. Recent theories of nationalism, with their recognition of the power of language in the ritualistic reiteration of national formations, permit an additional claim.[28] Paine's story of love and hatred constitutes an inexhaustible source in the reservoir of national energies, and when that story is used or repeated in all or in part, it demands of its partici-

[27] *Common Sense,* 120, 89.

[28] Benedict Anderson discounts the notion of philosophical coherence as a basis of national thinking in favor of language repetition in a print culture that encourages "a deep, horizontal comradeship." A community is "imagined" in this process of reiteration. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983), 13–16, 38–40.

pants some acceptance of its implications in the ritual performance of national consciousness. Is it an accident that succeeding generations of Americans always reach so promptly for the language of crisis that Paine helped to instill in their forebears? Should the search for internal enemies in times of trouble, whether those enemies are real or imagined, surprise anyone? Here, as well, are the commonalities in *Common Sense.*

I

Controversies about *Common Sense* abound in part because the facts about its author are tantalizingly scant.[29] Thomas Paine was born in 1737 at Thetford, a Whig stronghold in Norfolk, England. He grew up as the son of a Quaker father, a staymaker for the corset industry, and an Anglican mother, the daughter of a local attorney. Paine was raised in both faiths but confirmed in the Anglican church, though he rejected, by the age of eight, the basic tenet of Christianity, the sacrifice of the Son by the Father. As he would later summarize his youthful conclusions, "any system of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system." An early freethinker, he was still raised in a solid denominational setting; he knew the Bible well, better by far than any other writing.[30]

Into middle age Paine experienced "almost unrelenting failure."[31] The corset trade of his father, a life at sea, teaching, possibly the Methodist ministry, shopkeeping, and government service all attracted Paine, but he floundered in each vocation more than once. These experiences took him from town to town, including Dover, Sandwich, Lewes, and London as well as Thetford. By 1774, the year that he left for America at the age of thirty-seven, Paine had descended into bankruptcy with two dismissals for cause from government service and two failed marriages behind him. The separation settlement from his second wife paid for his voyage to America, during which he nearly died of typhoid

[29] Because of the controversies surrounding them, the biographical facts in the next 5 paragraphs are winnowed from a consensus in 5 basic sources, all of which tend to repeat the same information in slightly different ways: Philip Foner, "Introduction," *Complete Writings of Paine,* 1:ix-xii; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America,* 1–17; Ayer, *Thomas Paine,* 1–13; George Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (Boston, 1989), 20–24; and Keane, *Tom Paine,* 3–71.

[30] For Paine's account of his education, including his Christian upbringing, in *The Age of Reason,* see *Complete Writings of Paine,* 1:496–98. Keane, *Tom Paine,* 18–19, suggests that the tension between Quakerism and Anglicanism in Paine's upbringing not only led to early toleration of all religion but freed him rhetorically "by establishing nonreligious spaces of compromise." Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature* (Baltimore, 1993), 172–75, argues alternatively that the combination turned Paine into a secular preacher of sorts.

[31] Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America,* 3.

fever. Notably, his first ambitions on arriving in America were neither political nor daring in scope. He hoped to open a school, and yet within thirteen months he had written *Common Sense* and emerged as the personage whom John Adams and other Revolutionary founders would marvel over, a man with "genius in his eyes."[32]

The intellectual background of these early events is just as vague and unprepossessing. Paine received a limited education from grammar school between the ages of eight and thirteen but no formal schooling thereafter. Newtonian science interested him more than politics as a young man, and he attended public lectures in London on the subject, meeting, among others, the writer and poet Oliver Goldsmith and making scientific connections that led him eventually to Benjamin Franklin.[33]

Even so, some formal political sentiments can be traced as early as 1772, when Paine wrote against administrative abuses in his earliest known composition, "Case of the Officers of Excise."[34] Between 1768 and 1774, Paine also learned something of the "Wilkes and Liberty" campaign when John Wilkes, a popular political figure who fled England after being convicted of seditious libel in 1763, returned to create new controversies by regaining his lost seat in Parliament. The Wilkes campaign focused on freedom of the press, ministerial corruption, and Parliamentary reform—all favorite subjects of the later writer—and it drew from the rapidly evolving public sphere of radical coffee houses that materialized in eighteenth-century England. Paine would have had some access to these institutions in the towns where he lived, especially in London and Lewes, but the extent of his involvement remains uncertain, and his poverty would have kept him a peripheral figure in their controversies.

Paine's personal readings from the period remain largely a mystery; they were certainly unsystematic and often superficial, with the possible exception of close newspaper reading. The deeper parallels that scholars like to draw among John Locke, other political theorists, and *Common Sense* falter in the face of Paine's admissions. "I have never read Locke nor

[32] Maj. Gen. Charles Lee, second in command of the Revolutionary army, described Paine as one who "has genius in his eyes"; Lee to Benjamin Rush, Feb. 25, 1776, in *The Lee Papers,* 4 vols., *Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1871* (New York, 1872), 1:325, 312. Adams, who introduced Paine to Lee in the first place as "a Citizen of the World," picked up and used Lee's phrase in his letters; Adams to Abigail Adams, Apr. 28, 1776, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife Abigail Adams during the Revolution* (Freeport, N. Y., 1970; orig. pub. 1875), 167. In each instance, the words and related commentary imply the sudden appearance of a prodigy.

[33] For accounts of these meetings and the scientific circles that Paine entered, see Keane, *Tom Paine,* 42–43, 61, 75, 79, 111.

[34] Philip Foner, *Complete Writings of Paine,* 2:3–15.

even had the work in my hand," he wrote in 1807, "and by what I heard of it . . . I had no inducement to read it."[35] At the same time, Paine could brag of a perfect memory for everything he did read, and he frequently claimed prodigious intellectual capacities. "I seldom passed five minutes of my life, however circumstanced, in which I did not acquire some knowledge," ran a typical assertion.[36]

This mixture of dreary biographical fact and personal bombast has encouraged scholarly license when dealing with the intractable but endlessly fascinating problem of influence. If the boasts of the self-made man are allowed to dominate the paucity of actual data, the possibilities quickly become open-ended and conflicting. Historians in search of handy correlations have turned Paine into the consummate intellectual blotter. Whatever he touched, he can be seen to have absorbed; whomever he mentioned, he can be said to have mastered.

Virtually every fact just noted has been magnified to secure some interpretation of *Common Sense.* The Whig political orientations of towns like Thetford and Lewes and Paine's Quaker background have been variously tied to the writer's oppositional politics, antiestablishment courage, and moral fervor.[37] Just as the religious split between the Quaker father, whom Paine admired, and the Anglican mother, whom he never mentioned, has been offered to justify his later animosity toward an Anglican "mother country," so Paine's failures in marriage have been raised to explain the writer's frequent familial metaphors.[38] Predictably, the negative experiences of the excise officer have provided an especially convenient handle for interpreting the later Revolutionary's zeal in a righteous cause.[39]

The puzzle of Paine's sudden triumph in America has made such speculation unavoidable. Do the unhappy experiences of the corset maker and shopkeeper refine artisanal angers and class affiliations in the

[35] Paine to James Cheetham, Aug. 21, 1807, quoted in Fruchtman, "Nature and Revolution in Paine's *Common Sense,*" *History of Political Thought,* 10 (1989), 427 n. 28. Scholars typically try to escape the dilemma of direct influence by arguing that "Paine was, consciously or unconsciously, in agreement with Locke"; Ayer, *Thomas Paine,* 41; see also Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom,* 64–70.

[36] Quoted in Philip Foner, "Introduction," *Complete Writings of Paine,* 1:ix.

[37] For Paine's Whig origins, see Claeys, *Thomas Paine,* 20, and Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America,* 4–13. For different versions of the Quaker influence, see Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine,* 2 vols. (New York, 1892), and Harry Hayden Clark, "Introduction," *Thomas Paine: Representative Selections* (New York, 1944), xii-xv.

[38] For arguments that use Paine's parents and marriages to "stretch Paine out on the couch," see Winthrop D. Jordan, "Familial Politics: Thomas Paine and the Killing of the King, 1776," *Journal of American History,* 60 (1973), 302–03.

[39] See Kramnick, "Editor's Introduction," *Common Sense,* 27.

pamphleteer?[40] Can the young Englishman's interests in Newtonian science explain and justify his later optimism about human nature and natural rights?[41] Either way, the radicalism of the coffeehouses and Paine's presumed newspaper reading have emerged as favorite repositories for whatever philosophy one wants to find in *Common Sense,* from Whig "country" or party rhetoric, to the Scottish moral sense school, to the social compact of Locke, to the denominational agenda of deism, to utilitarian notions of happiness and prosperity.[42] In the absence of hard evidence, any one of these distinct frames of reference can be found "in the air" of Paine's England.

But none of the particulars of influence—nor, for that matter, the sum total of them—produces the author who stunned the world. Even if the reductionism of a single or paramount claim is avoided, the alternative, a collation of relevant influences, still leaves us with the unoriginal thinker rather than the creative writer. Indeed, the distinction itself is worth a pause in rhetorical analysis. Rhetoric trades on the memorable utterance to achieve a peculiar kind of originality. The speaker or writer takes what is plausible to an immediate audience and turns that recognition into something unforgettable. The Massachusetts Whig, Joseph Hawley, captured the essence of this quality when describing his own reading experience of *Common Sense.* "Every sentiment," he wrote in 1776, "has sunk into my well prepared heart."[43] An anonymous contributor to the *New York Journal* found himself galvanized in the same way, explaining "you can scarce put your finger to a single page, but you are pleased, though it may be, startled, with the sparks of original genius. . . . It treats of the most important subjects to America . . . exciting and calling forth to public view, the thoughts of others."[44]

Put another way, rendition provides the potency in thought. Platonic ideas may epitomize the highest form of knowledge, but they are disembodied in their abstractness, and they lack two central ingredients for securing themselves in collective memory. They lack "the timing" that place or context supplies and "the agency" that individual people give to

[40] For the formative interpretation of Paine's involvement in 18th-century artisanal culture, see Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America,* xvii, 28–29, 32–43.

[41] Joseph V. Metzgar, "The Cosmology of Thomas Paine," *Illinois Quarterly,* 37 (Sept. 1974), 47–63. See also Wilson's analysis that Paine's plain style can be traced directly to his interest in the scientific revolution in *Paine and Cobbett,* 20–29.

[42] See, in order, Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America,* 4–13; Fruchtman, "Nature and Revolution in Paine's *Common Sense,*" 424–25; Ayer, *Thomas Paine,* 17–23; J.C.D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (New York, 1994), 30–38, 244, 329–38; and Wootton, "Introduction," *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society,* 32–39.

[43] Quoted in Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America,* 86.

[44] "Independent Whig" to "The Printer," *New York Journal,* Feb. 22, 1776.

observable experience. Ideas, in short, require concrete expression, and the set of records that we hold about ourselves comes through the timing and agency that stories grant—"stories of all kinds, true, embellished, invented."[45] To tell such a story in 1776, Paine had to know how to comprehend and manipulate the milieu of his audience, and so the issue comes back again to the basic puzzle. How did Paine understand the hearts of his new and still inchoate American auditors so quickly and what gave him the ability to express their sentiments so well?

For part of the answer, the admittedly scant record of biographical facts can be used but with more literary purposes in mind. There are patterns in the early life of Paine that clarify the transition of the transplanted Englishman. Note, for example, the degree of mobility that Paine enjoyed along a number of fronts—geographical, religious, vocational, and social. While his movements from town to town, from denominational affiliation to affiliation, from job to job, from oral protest to published dissent, and even from one familial context to another were all part of a record of failure, they also distinguished him from the earlier, more restricted world of an eighteenth-century Englishman of his class, and they gave him comparative frames of reference with which to work. Note, as well, that the obscure Paine managed to meet and mingle with such acknowledged great men as Oliver Goldsmith and Benjamin Franklin.

Paine in his mobility illustrated something fresh afoot.[46] The Anglo-American world of the eighteenth century did not discourage unlikely figures with "genius in their eyes." In fact, it expected them as part of its peculiar quest for knowledge, and its leaders, figures like Goldsmith and Franklin, kept themselves on the lookout. The Enlightenment motto—"*Sapere aude!!*"—"Have the courage to use your own understanding!"—meant that fresh knowledge might come from anywhere and anyone.[47] Meanwhile, the rapid spread of print technology in England and America dictated the logical avenues of communication for the dissemination of that knowledge. The linked result, any good writer with access to a printing press, made these innovations tangible and exhilarating. From the

[45] I paraphrase and quote from Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York, 1996), 9.

[46] Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom,* 4, also draws attention, though with different implications, to how Paine's political and social ideas "developed in ways that mirrored a wandering lifestyle."

[47] The phrase came originally from the Latin poet Horace, but it was popularized by Immanuel Kant and other late 18th-century thinkers as the essential precondition in the spread of new knowledge or enlightenment. See, for example, Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'" in Hans Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings,* trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1970), 54. See, as well, Robert A. Ferguson, "'What Is Enlightenment?' Some American Answers," *American Literary History,* 1 (1989), 245–72.

moment that Paine wrote his first essay, "Case of the Officers of Excise," in 1772, he became a member in good standing of what became "the republic of letters."[48]

The eighteenth-century version of the republic of letters gave Paine his basic stance in *Common Sense.* Its membership consisted of self-consciously equal or "classless," "world-historical men of letters." Its message involved a critique of Church and State, both of which it challenged by assuming an "autonomous order of mind" that could be liberated from custom, superstition, locality, and unwarranted hierarchy. Its medium was print, the very source of its existence, and its mode was the occasional essay or pamphlet, through which it took on "specific historical situations," often questioning the exercises of authority within them. Inasmuch as Paine reached maturity as the republic of letters became a "third realm" alongside the two more established realms of Church and State, his optimism and success become that much easier to see and explain. He wrote as a leading pamphleteer in the age of pamphleteering.

The self-confidence with which Paine rode the crest of this historical wave sustained *Common Sense*—a source of vitality easily overlooked because the same concatenation of historical ideas and events allowed Paine to ignore the ocean of history beneath him. The rising third realm of the republic of letters was a historical phenomenon that questioned previous interpretations of history and assumed that history itself might be made over or changed. Thus, the mantra of *Common Sense,* repeated in some form on almost every page, advised everyone to ignore the past by accepting the present. In its sharpest expression, it read: "a new æra for politics is struck; a new method of thinking hath arisen. All plans, proposals, &c. prior to the nineteenth of April, *i. e.* to the commencement of hostilities, are like the almanacks of the last year; which, though proper then, are superceded and useless now."[49]

Paine's ingenuity in refashioning already established or conventional themes took a similar form. He refurbished stories by removing, dismissing, or at least disarming the domineering pasts that controlled narrative development. Most political pamphlets of the period began with a tedious review of the history of government, and *Common Sense* followed the model in its own introduction, "Of the Origin and Design of

[48] For the best analysis of the historical and literary ramifications of the republic of letters, one on which both the quoted terminology and the ideas of the following paragraph depend, see Lewis P. Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America* (Baton Rouge, 1980), 3–24. For the impact of the printing press on 18th-century Anglo-American culture, see Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), and Larzer Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (New Haven, 1991).

[49] *Common Sense,* 82.

Government in General."[50] Paine, however, recast the whole discussion by boldly challenging the legitimating histories of governments, all of which he pronounced to be false and bloody. His convenient tool of entry was a more optimistic prehistory in social contract theory. "Society in every state is a blessing," he began, "but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil."[51]

While Paine also brought the biblical story of the Fall into this introduction, he did so to rob it of its customary constraining inflections. Governments did not protect the race from its own fallen nature, as the realms of Church and State would have it; instead, they represented the fall itself, and they actively repressed the human good that would otherwise flourish in social interaction. "Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence;" Paine warned, "the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise."[52] The implications for Americans choosing between their king and their independence were mesmerizing. You could be fallen and naturally depraved and, thereby, subject to the crown under previous historical conceptions of identity, or you could find yourself to be socially integrated in your natural goodness and, therefore, deserving of ever greater dimensions of freedom. These new dimensions of freedom could be disconcerting in scope but not if you accepted your place in the new order.

Consider, for a moment, the alternative rhetorical predicament of the American loyalists, who necessarily tied themselves to a more familiar but increasingly problematic old order. "When a Reconciliation is effected, and things return into the old channel," wrote the Episcopalian minister Charles Inglis, in direct response to *Common Sense,* "a few years of peace will restore everything to its pristine state." *Everything? What* pristine state? Were Inglis's conditional hopes for the past any easier to believe than Paine's aggressive predictions about the future?[53] In a master stroke,

[50] For a generic explanation of the standard rehearsals of legal philosophy and social contract theory in the introductions of Revolutionary pamphleteering, see Ferguson, "Writing the Revolution," in *The American Enlightenment, 1750–1820* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 80–123.

[51] *Common Sense,* 65.

[52] Ibid., 65. The analogy of tyranny in government to original sin in humanity is kept afloat throughout the long section, "Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession," where Paine concludes, "it unanswerably follows that original sin and hereditary succession are parallels" (p. 78).

[53] Charles Inglis, "An American, The True Interest of America Impartially Stated" (1776), in Leslie F. S. Upton, ed., *Revolutionary Versus Loyalist: The First American Civil War, 1774–1784* (Waltham, Mass., 1968), 73. In a direct comparison of Paine and Inglis, Stephen Newman, "A Note on *Common Sense* and Christian Eschatology," *Political Theory,* 6 (1978), 101–08, argues that Paine's predictions were indeed considerably easier to believe for many Americans because they tallied with the eschatological framework of New World Calvinism.

Paine grasped that Americans must be forced to choose between a brilliant future and a manifestly duller past, and for that choice to be made absolute, he saw that all of history had to be refigured and collapsed into a fresh sense of the present.

Paine accepted that assignment with unflagging energy and ingenuity in *Common Sense.* For while he clearly sanctioned the conventional Whig Theory of History, affirming a struggle for human rights since the Norman Conquest, he also rejected its backward-looking assumption of an ancient Anglo-Saxon golden age.[54] There must be no pristine past to reach for! The present and the future had to be the only keys to an effective understanding. True, William the Conqueror had been singular—"a very paltry rascally original," "a French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives"—but every other king in history, no matter how benevolent, helped the Conqueror to put "the world in blood and ashes." Exalting monarchy in any of its forms contributed to false history and an equally dangerous psychological confusion about liberty.[55]

Paine, the disenchanted Englishman, knew what American colonials could never quite admit to themselves as imperial subjects in need of a usable past. He saw that a belief in monarchy was the mortal enemy of common sense in representative government and that it had to be answered directly. This insight turned the whole long second section of *Common Sense,* "Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession," into a battle over the true nature of sovereignty, and it put basic ideas about history up for grabs in the process. When Paine attacked the accepted notion of "an honorable origin" for kingliness, he reduced all of the intricacies of Anglo-American debate about the king and his ministers to a more elemental level. Contention was no longer about failures in policy but rather "the natural disease of monarchy."[56]

To be sure, the world was still absolutely geared to royal sway. To break this orientation, *Common Sense* had to show not just that monar-

[54] The Whig Theory of History assumed that all of English history could be interpreted as a struggle to recover the lost rights of Anglo-Saxon times after they had been swept away by the Norman Conquest in 1066. Magna Carta, the legal reforms of Edward the First, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 became so many stepping-stones along that path of recovery. For the most complete 18th-century version of this theory, one with which Americans were thoroughly familiar, see William Blackstone, "Chapter 33: Of the Rise, Progress, and Gradual Improvements, of the Laws of England," *Commentaries on the Laws of England,* 4 vols. (Oxford, 1765–1769), 4:400–36.

[55] *Common Sense,* 69, 72, 78, 80. "It is the pride of kings," wrote Paine, "which throw mankind into confusion."

[56] Ibid., 77, 80–81, 69. "Why is the constitution of E——d sickly," Paine concluded the section, "but because monarchy hath poisoned the republic, the crown hath engrossed the commons?"

chy had grown evil, but that it had always been so: "it is more than probable, that could we take off the dark covering of antiquity, and trace them to their first rise, that we should find the first of them nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless gang, whose savage manners or pre-eminence in subtilty obtained him the title of chief among plunderers." Here, in a nutshell, was a conversion experience for the enlightened citizen. Only with such a bold claim could Paine turn his readers away from the familiar past and toward an uncomfortable but promising present. Paine's conclusion to the section drove the point home. "Of more worth is one honest man to society, and in the sight of God," he declared, "than all the crowned ruffians who ever lived."[57]

Paine employed similar revisionist strategies to guide the remaining sections of *Common Sense,* "Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs" and "Of the present ability of America, with some miscellaneous Reflexions." Everywhere the message was the same: the past could not be allowed to determine the present. If Paine could argue that "the nearer any government approaches to a republic the less business there is for a king," he could also add "there is something very absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island. . . . They belong to different systems: England to Europe, America to itself." Geography and the force of gravity were no different from republican politics when it came to transforming the past. "In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet," Paine contended. Why, then, should America revolve around England? Something had to be terribly wrong when the course of history "reverses the common order of nature."[58]

These arguments may seem merely glib today, but they were trumps in an integrated pattern of rhetorical play in 1776. With the formal discourses of eighteenth-century political science, cartography, Newtonian physics, and natural law in place, Paine inserted a separate but unifying flourish, one that domesticated all of knowledge in the blink of an eye. Permeating everything, in a trope that appeared with ever increasing frequency in *Common Sense,* was the eighteenth-century paradigm of the household, and once again, the pamphleteer wrote transgressively. Rooted patriarchal authority was a dangerous symbol for Paine with its obvious, traditional parallels to absolute monarchy. Since he could hardly leave these familiar associations in place, he attacked head-on with a narrative based on the increasingly popular ideas of sentiment and nurture. What, after all, was authority without love? Loyalty without a reciprocat-

[57] Paine's criticism of monarchy, with this point as his probe, is his longest sustained discussion in the pamphlet. See ibid., 69–81.

[58] Ibid., 77, 80–81, 91.

ing consideration? The traditional sway of the parent meant nothing when, instead of "tender embraces," one encountered "the cruelty of the monster." England was an "unnatural," even a "false" progenitor. In Paine's elaboration, "the phrase parent or mother country hath been jesuitically adopted," and anyone who still so approached England stood condemned, "unworthy the name of husband, father, friend, or lover."[59]

The relationships so named—husband, father, friend, and lover—forged a new family. Sequentially, the term "husband" led Paine's catalogue precisely because it subsumed and codified the succeeding roles. Husband led to father, friend to lover, or all in one, and all four categories bespoke the paramount goal of parenting and nurturing a new republic. Not the distant and disinterested parent in Europe but the American child in a united family was Paine's preeminent subject—so much so that childhood, and especially the vulnerability of childhood, operates as a constitutive metaphor in *Common Sense*.[60] Repeatedly, Paine forced his reader back on "the intimacy which is contracted in infancy" but always with a twist.[61] For if the truest reader was still at least symbolically the child of a European, the act of reading was calculated to resolve the dependency of that child in an acceptance of adult responsibility, and that new accountability could mean only one thing in context: parenting in a logically independent America.

Rhetorically, every theme held in common the erasure of a previous history. A government without kings, the timeless sanction of nature, the cruelty of forebears, the separate nuclear family, the innocent child—none of the images in question welcomed a return to the past. Of course, Paine was temperamentally suited and historically poised for just such a rejection. The successful immigrant kept only those elements of the past that were of immediate use to the present, calmly dismissing even his own former self. As he would later describe the attitude of 1776:

> Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used. We can look back on our own prejudices, as if they had been the prejudices of other people.[62]

[59] Ibid., 84, 89.

[60] For the best reading of late 18th-century obsessions with childhood and childrearing, one that sees a Lockean transformation from nature toward nurture, see Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (Cambridge, 1982).

[61] *Common Sense,* 108, but also 87, 89, 99–100, 109, 114–15.

[62] "Letter to the Abbé Raynal" (1782), in *Complete Writings of Paine,* 2:243. This pamphlet gives Paine's most detailed account of the American Revolution.

It is impossible to underestimate the psychological importance of "see[ing] with other eyes" as a project in *Common Sense.* Without this ideological jump, without dismissing conventional history altogether, no revolution could have been accomplished by the colonial mind in America. Ordinary wisdom, realpolitik, and the undergirding philosophy of the times all confirmed colonial attachment, loyalty, and imperial design in 1776. The greatest pamphleteer from the English side of the controversy proves the point nicely. Just a year before *Common Sense,* in 1775, Samuel Johnson had torn all the arguments for independence to shreds, and he had managed the feat by keeping his own eyes carefully on received history.

Johnson's memorable jibe—"how is that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"—was only an aside in *Taxation No Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress* (1775). His more telling maneuver separated natural law from the standard history of English rights. In Johnson's devastating account, either the Americans were "naked sons of Nature," in which case their particular historical claims on the crown as Englishmen became nonsense, or, in claiming English rights, they accepted the time-bound legal obligations that went with those rights, including the premises of taxation. The choice was theirs, but by resorting to the history of English rights in the first place, "these lords of themselves, these kings of Me, these demigods of independence, sink down to colonists, governed by a charter." Assertions to the contrary were "airy boasts of malevolence"; to claim them meant either "interested faction" or, in a more withering thrust, "honest stupidity."[63]

The sting in Johnson's words was unavoidable unless the recipient learned "to see with other eyes," "hear with other ears," and "think with other thoughts." To answer *Taxation No Tyranny* and other writings like it, a very different conception of the basic issues had to be found, and Paine showed his recognition of the problem with a series of opening instructions in *Common Sense.* Through "preliminaries to settle with the reader," he demanded that the latter "generously enlarge his views beyond the present day"; nothing less than the removal of all "prepossession" was required, a stipulation that clearly asked for more than the stock suspension of "prejudice."[64] These "preliminaries" reach for another level of aesthetic coherence. They show that Paine understood better than anyone else in America that "style and manner of thinking" might dictate the difficult shift from loyalty to rebellion.

[63] Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress,* in Donald J. Greene, ed. *Samuel Johnson: Political Writings* (New Haven, 1977), 411–55, esp. 454, 428–29, 443, 417–18.

[64] *Common Sense,* 81–82.

II

Three constitutive or controlling metaphors dominate the writing of *Common Sense*. The first, already encountered, is "childhood," with the accompanying idea of maturation. The second and third involve more elemental abstractions, ones that allow Paine to manipulate the parameters of childhood for political effect. The second metaphor emphasizes "time present," and it emerges most frequently in Paine's reiterated use of the temporal adverb "now." The third dwells on the virtue that can be assigned to "simplicity." These stylistic devices ride the surfaces of Paine's prose, but they reinforce each other at deeper levels and in much more subtle ways.

Taken together, the metaphors in question enact a dramatic coordination of status, context, and aesthetic form in the overall narrative of *Common Sense*. Youthfulness (status) becomes dramatic in the myriad urgencies of "now" (context), and that basic drama, in turn, is sharpened in a redaction of the plain, the new, the common, the innocent, the fundamental, the direct, the simple, the peremptory—an aesthetic form that dominates both style and substance. Separately, the metaphors are devices on the page. Jointly, they produce "a strategy of intimacy" or identification between author and reader, a near prerequisite for communication in the print medium of a rapidly evolving democratic culture.[65]

The essential dynamic at work appears in a single sentence. Deploring the failure of "repeated petitioning" for peace with England, Paine fastens his reader with a simple imperative: "Wherefore since nothing but blows will do, for God's sake, let us come to a final separation, and not leave the next generation to be cutting throats, under the violated unmeaning names of parent and child." Political negotiation, he continues, has become "too weighty, and intricate," and further attempts "will in a few years be looked upon as folly and childishness," literally a regression in adult thinking.[66] Timeliness, simplicity, and proper domestic nurture all require separation. Anything else, anything but the stark urgency of physical retaliation—"nothing but blows will do"—ruptures the American family, leaving it to cope with "the violated unmeaning names of parent and child." A proper conception of the parent's role commands action now by reading the future in the name of the still innocent child. "In order to discover the line of our duty," Paine writes, "we should take our children in our hand, and fix our station a few years

[65] Both the quoted phrase and the premise that "in the Age of Print a successful style involves a strategy of intimacy" are from Simpson, *Brazen Face of History*, 10–11.

[66] *Common Sense*, 90.

farther into life; that eminence will present a prospect, which a few present fears and prejudices conceal from our sight."[67]

Insistence on the present moment in *Common Sense* compels interest and drama by demanding that the reader make a choice immediately. Paine, in fact, reserves a special wrath for "men of passive tempers" and anyone else who hesitates through "ill-judged deliberation."[68] To grant the urgency in Paine's claims is to enter a sequence. If "now is the seed time of continental union," it follows that "Britain, being now an open enemy, extinguishes every other name and title." The proposition that "Reconciliation is *now* a falacious dream" translates easily into "reconciliation *now* is a dangerous doctrine," into "it is *now* the interest of America to provide for herself," into "We ought not now to be debating whether we shall be independant or not."[69] Each successive formulation binds the reader to a firmer acceptance of separation "now." Thus, "the present winter is worth an age if rightly employed" becomes "the present time is preferable to all others," becomes "the *present time* is the *true time,*" becomes "the present time, likewise, is that peculiar time, which never happens to a nation but once." In this hectoring fashion, Paine turns the reader's choices into group decisions. We read "to find out the *very* time," but we soon learn "the *time hath found us.*"[70]

The vital importance of time present also contains an open threat for the reader. If history begins "now," then the reader of the moment is responsible for it. "'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age," Paine asserts; "posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now."[71] This definition of history through current event has fundamental psychological consequences. Although the past is dead, a sentient future watches over the living present. In effect, the future becomes a censorious audience of the present, and any American who tries to wait out the crisis of 1776 will figure as an enemy in this impending view of history. "Should a thought so fatal and unmanly possess the colonies in the present contest," Paine admonishes, "the name of ancestors will be remembered by future generations with detestation."[72]

The rhetorical creativity of *Common Sense* becomes apparent in the endlessly rich and varied tones of these threats. When all of history

[67] Ibid., 87–88.

[68] Ibid., 88–89. See, as well, 82.

[69] Ibid., 82, 85, 90, 93, 114, 121. All of the emphases on the word "now" in the quotations in the text are Paine's.

[70] Ibid., 89, 107, 108, 100. The emphases in these quotations are Paine's.

[71] Ibid., 82.

[72] Ibid., 82, 120–21. Paine makes this point both early and late for those who think they can "neglect the present favorable and inviting period."

appears at risk, all of its registers can be brought to bear in a cautionary tale. Typically, in making a shift from "the present state" to "the present ability" of America, Paine inserts a remarkable gloss on present inability. Those readers who cannot act against England become the soldiers who crucified Christ. "Ye that oppose independence now," Paine intones, "ye know not what ye do."[73] Earlier colonials would have found blasphemy in this appropriation of the voice of Jesus, and today the association seems a bizarre one, but eighteenth-century Americans were steeped in a bible culture even as they were concurrently obsessed with their place on the cutting edge of the Enlightenment. Caught up in secular-religious associations, they were neither surprised nor intimidated to find their independence presented as part of God's plan. Few Americans in 1776 questioned a comparable parallel in *Common Sense:* "The reformation was preceded by the discovery of America, as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years."[74]

Paine knew that a country of radical reform Protestants would be willing to pay a price for an acknowledgment of its centrality in history; also that this price might transcend the raging debate over colonies versus nation. *Common Sense* cleverly manipulates the political dispute without running afoul of religious or philosophical differences. There is a warning for every ear in the following passage:

> Ye that tell us of harmony and reconciliation, can ye restore to us the time that is past? Can you give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can you reconcile Britain and America. . . . There are injuries which nature cannot forgive; she would cease to be nature if she did. As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the continent forgive the murderers of Britain. The Almighty hath implanted in us these unextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes. They are the guardians of his image in our hearts.[75]

The Almighty of this text is both more and less than the angry, inscrutable God of Puritan theology.[76] Paine retains the emotion but reverses the flow of anger and, hence, the direction of revealed design. Without losing sight of divine wrath altogether, he concentrates on a justifiable, collective anger in the human world (also figured as "popular

[73] Ibid., 99. The biblical allusion is to Jesus speaking as he is crucified, Luke 23:34. "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

[74] *Common Sense,* 87.

[75] Ibid., 99–100.

[76] For an extended treatment of Paine's conflation of revealed and natural religion, see Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature,* 8ff.

rage").[77] History and nature are the mediate forms of Paine's deity, and they dictate a coherent or continental resentment in response to British abuses. Those abuses anger everyone because, as Paine's questions indicate, they violate everything, the domestic sphere as well as historical time: "can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress?" intensifies "can ye restore us to the time that is past?"

Orthodox colonial readers could still reach their Calvinist God through Paine's construct, but just as available were a Quaker God (an image in the human heart), a deistic God (at work in nature's design), and a Scottish moral-sense God (instilling inextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes). The Supreme Being remains scrupulously abstract in the pages of *Common Sense*. No denominational flags fly, and Paine's inner conception grows out of one basic, reiterated, external premise, "above all things the free exercise of religion."[78] This elemental trait guarantees the acceptability of Paine's multifaceted deity. Simplicity of design invites alternative approaches to the divine, allowing each worshiper to fill in the relevant blanks.

This virtue in simplicity is Paine's third constitutive metaphor, and it shapes his writing in decisive and volatile ways. "I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense," Paine avers.[79] The claim is disarmingly rudimentary, deliberately so in its thematic and rhetorical thrusts, but despite the disavowal ("I offer nothing more"), it contains an underlying complexity of purpose and effect that is all the harder to grasp in a text that turns complexity into the symbol of evil. Stylistically, Paine's insistence on simplicity is as unambiguous as it is daring for the time. Eighteenth-century pamphleteering thrived on self-conscious erudition, incorporating constant asides to previous thinkers and a profusion of references to other works. Paine, by way of contrast, gives just three short sentences in fifty pages to the words of other writers (choosing to recognize only Milton and Dragonetti), and he alludes to just one other book in all of *Common Sense,* the Bible.[80]

As Paine's avoidance of other sources implies, his use of "the plain style" has as much to do with ideology as it does with diction. *Common Sense* eschews arch circumlocutions, latinates, elevated tones, and sophis-

[77] *Common Sense,* 121. In the second section, "Of Monarchy And Hereditary Succession," Paine provides an interesting prefiguration of originating anger in the people. Even here, in the biblical context, Paine's emphasis remains a human one. When the misguided Israelites ask the prophet Samuel to place a king over them in Paine's version, God's reluctant and benevolent response to Samuel consists mostly of the refrain "*Hearken unto the voice of the people*"; ibid., 72–76.

[78] Ibid., 97, but also 84, 108–09.

[79] Ibid., 81.

[80] Pütz and Adams, eds., *Concordance to Thomas Paine's* Common Sense, 159, 331.

ticated nuances. The alternatives are common language, easy alliteration, balanced phraseology, and verbal antitheses in short, memorable sentences.[81] The rationale for these choices is apparent: closer association with the common people. Paine believed that anyone who understood basic English should comprehend his argument and, in one of his great optimistic leaps, that the goal of writing was to make everyone eager to do so. When his opponents complained of a "vulgar style," they had this appeal to the lowest common denominator in mind, and their pejorative use changed the meaning of the term. For Paine, "vulgar" meant "common," "of the people." For his opponents, it suggested that which was boorish or debased. [82]

We are on the brink of a great ideological divide with Paine's seemingly guileless but actually manipulative simplicity in style. Writing to enlist universal involvement in politics frightened Paine's contemporaries. It led a figure like John Adams to deplore *Common Sense* as "so democratical, without any restraint or even an Attempt at any Equilibrium or Counterpoise, that it must produce confusion and every Evil Work." The debate between Paine and Adams raised a fundamental philosophical question. Would general participation in government introduce greater clarity or only confusion in the body politic? Answers to this query could only be conjectural in 1776. Adams published his own pamphlet, *Thoughts on Government,* in quick response to *Common Sense,* and he wrote to insure that government be left "to a few of the most wise and good."[83]

Years later, knowing that he had lost the battle over participatory democracy, Adams vented his frustrations in a splenetic summary:

> I know not whether any Man in the World has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine. There can be no severer Satyr on the Age. For such a mongrel between Pigg and Puppy, begotten by a wild Boar on a Bitch Wolf, never before in any Age of the World was suffered by the Poltroonery of mankind, to run through such a Career of Mischief. Call it then the Age of Paine.[84]

[81] For the best detailed discussion of Paine's "plain style" in *Common Sense,* see Elaine K. Ginsberg, "Style and Identification in *Common Sense,*" *Philological Papers: West Virginia University Bulletin,* 23 (1977), 26–36.

[82] For a discussion of this distinction, see James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London, 1963), 138–39.

[83] L. H. Butterfield, ed., *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams,* 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 3:333, and Adams, *Thoughts on Government,* in Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1784–1822,* 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1983), 1:403.

[84] Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, Oct. 29, 1805, in Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Statesman and Friend: Correspondence of John Adams with Benjamin Waterhouse, 1784–1822* (Boston, 1927), 31.

How promiscuous should the role of the people be in a people's government? Despite his rage, Adams saw clearly that the spontaneous vitality of the mongrel came from below. The monstrous lineage that he ascribed to Paine evoked the grotesque, but his fusion of wildness, youth, and transgressive procreation contained an admission. Paine's writings were the catalyst for something new in the world.

Common Sense fosters "the Age of Paine" by insisting on an alliance between common expression and the common in politics. Americans in 1776 were alarmed and many were confused by a world that seemed to be changing out from under them.[85] Paine cut through that alarm and confusion for anyone who was willing to reduce the world to common principle. There is, he claims, "a principle in nature which no art can overturn." Yes, "our eyes may be dazzled with show, or our ears deceived by sound," "prejudice may warp our wills, or interest darken our understanding," but everything becomes clear again when we return to a primary source: "the simple voice of nature and reason." And what did nature have to tell Americans in their mounting political crisis? In a formula that encompasses every argument in *Common Sense,* nature advises "the more simple any thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered."[86]

If you imbibe the plain style, you are susceptible to every subsequent declaration of "plain truth."[87] In a remarkable series of rhetorical strokes, Paine uses "the simple voice of nature and reason" to reverse the familiar and the strange in Anglo-American culture. He replaces the comfort of the historically commonplace with what would be a blatant oxymoron except for his management of the unfolding reading process. The willing reader must accept a *new familiarity,* everyday reason, from a friendly and colloquial but progressively importunate narrator: "I offer *nothing more* than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense."[88] The qualification "*nothing more*" represents a stock exercise in humility, but it also strips away a whole series of other intellectual dimensions.

[85] All sides in the American controversy foresaw a cultural collapse if the wrong choices were made in 1776. The one thing that Charles Inglis shared with Paine in his attack on *Common Sense* was his acceptance of a presumed threat to all of posterity: "But if [the sons of] America should now mistake her real interest. . . . They will dismember this happy country—make it a scene of blood and slaughter and entail wretchedness and misery on millions yet unborn"; quoted in Upton, ed., *Revolutionary versus Loyalist,* 83.

[86] *Common Sense,* 68.

[87] Ibid., 71, 79. Similar phraseology, also at crucial moments in Paine's argument, abounds: "in plain terms," "plain arguments," "a plain method of argument," and the like. See ibid., 78, 81, 87.

[88] Ibid., 81. Emphasis added for the following discussion in the text.

Conventional associations of continuing loyalty to England turn into complicating disorders; the originally more frightening prospects of treason and separation become, instead, the easy manifestations of a simpler order.

The force of this transformation can only be fully appreciated in the movement of Paine's narrative. *Common Sense* opens with the plainest version of social contract theory imaginable: "let us suppose a small number of persons settled in some sequestered part of the earth, unconnected with the rest, they will then represent the first peopling of any country." This group, "four or five united," raise "a tolerable dwelling in the midst of a wilderness." The necessity of cooperation among them operates "like a gravitating power," and its influence moves "our newly arrived emigrants into society, the reciprocal blessing of which, would supercede, and render the obligations of law and government unnecessary while they remained perfectly just to each other." For an undetermined period of time, "the first difficulties of emigration" keep this "colony" together "in a common cause," but soon the complexity of their undertaking undermines "their duty and attachment to each other," and government, "the badge of lost innocence," must be accepted as "a necessary evil" and "punisher." Notably, this first attempt at government includes everyone. "In this first parliament every man, by natural right will have a seat."[89]

In the technical literary sense, Paine has written a parable. The extended metaphor of an original and happy social simplicity awakens Americans to the moral of their own imaginary founding; everyone is involved but with *the least* government.[90] The story works at several levels. Most obviously, its phraseology evokes a presumed narrative about new world beginnings. Americans in 1776 would have recognized their own ancestors in these "newly arrived emigrants" who settle in a "sequestered part of the earth," who build homes "in the midst of a wilderness," and who overcome "the difficulties of emigration" to form a "colony." But Paine also uses these recognitions to create a philosophical counter narrative to Samuel Johnson's sharp division between natural law and the history of English common law. *Common Sense* demonstrates that "natural right" and English legality ("this first parliament") met in colonial origins and that, in coming together, they created a unique felicity in early America.

Like other parables, this one compels additional reflection through a concluding twist of the metaphor. The appearance of political complexity, figured also as original sin, pollutes the happy origins of the social

[89] Ibid., 65–67.

[90] In rhetorical terms, a parable involves "teaching a moral by means of an extended metaphor." See Lanham, *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms,* 2d ed., 106–07.

contract in America, and the reader must muse over both the religious analogy and the historical contrast. An available simplicity in society, which "promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections," must be balanced against a tangled and unhappy political present, in which Americans feel disenfranchised. And the cause of this confusion and unhappiness? "The constitution of England is so exceedingly complex, that the nation may suffer for years together without being able to discover in which part the fault lies."[91]

Paine employs the bifurcation between happy origins and the present crisis to introduce his long dissection of the British constitution and monarchical government; both are historically debased and intricate sources of evil. Not surprisingly, these first two historical sections of the pamphlet conclude with a rhetorical question that is its own answer. "Why is the constitution of E[nglan]d sickly," Paine wonders, "but because monarchy hath poisoned the republic, the crown hath engrossed the commons?" Again, it is the complication of the combination that is important. Constitutional divisions and monarchical brutality compound each other; together, they portend a spreading corruption that must be stopped. Rhetorically, Paine has moved more than halfway to his central premise: "reconciliation and ruin are nearly related."[92]

"RECONCILIATION OR INDEPENDANCE?" screams the headlined final version of the recurring inquiry. The narrator has replied many times by this stage of the argument, but his last answer provides an aesthetic resolution beyond politics. The shift is from Europe to America and from the complexity and sin of history to the simplicity and virtue of nature as the controlling frame of reference. Paine is especially blunt about the importance of this philosophical change in perspective. Only "he who takes nature for his guide" can hope to see the crisis of 1776 with sufficient clarity to reach intellectual certainty. Through nature, the reader enters a more systematic and mediate universe, one that will sustain "*the answer without doubt.*" To express his appreciation of this certainty in design, Paine gives his own version of the answer in geometric terms. "INDEPENDANCE" forms "*a* SINGLE SIMPLE LINE, *contained within ourselves,*" leaving "*reconciliation, a matter exceedingly perplexed and complicated.*"[93] Reconciliation has become so perplexing and complicated that it cannot even be rendered in a discernible geometric form. Only independence can be made visible in meaningful action. Proving the point in his

[91] *Common Sense,* 65–68.

[92] Ibid., 68–80, 81, 94.

[93] Ibid., 115, 117. Paine falls back on the geometric device again in "The American Crisis, No. V," when he claims "what we have now to do is as clear as light, and the way to do it is as straight as a line"; *Complete Writings of Paine,* 1:125.

peroration, Paine beseeches all Americans to "unite in drawing a line, which, like an act of oblivion, shall bury in forgetfulness every former dissension."[94]

There are problems with Paine's strategy of virtue in simplicity, and some of them are implied when his simile of separation requires "an act of oblivion." To the extent that independence dictates the removal of previous intellectual affinities, it can leave the reader of *Common Sense* feeling terribly alone.[95] In an unguarded moment of the opening parable, Paine reveals that "the strength of one man is so unequal to his wants, and his mind so unfitted for perpetual solitude, that he is soon obliged to seek assistance and relief of another, who in his turn requires the same."[96] This identified human craving for social relief and comfort does not necessarily welcome a revolution. Paine's separating Americans can achieve the enlarged view of their national situation only by divesting themselves of all of the previous connections, loyalties, and thoughts on which their colonial society has been based. Then, too, Paine's alternative of continental attachment is painfully abstract, antilocal, nonexperiential even artificial in 1776.[97] To become newly sufficient unto themselves, Paine's first readers must turn away from everything they know and face the void.

The final component in Paine's argument is his manipulation of these fears. American forebodings must be turned into something more empowering, and Paine's solution involves a singular conversion. In *Common Sense,* anxious thought becomes righteous feeling. Anger provides the cohesive social force that mere misgivings cannot. Methodologically, the reader is asked to "examine the passions and feelings of mankind," always remembering that this exercise will require an explanation "by those feelings and affections which nature justifies." To perform this examination in the colonial context—to "bring the doctrine of reconciliation to the touchstone of nature"—means to arouse hatred instead of love. Paine is quite clear on the point: "'never can true reconcilement grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep.'"[98]

[94] *Common Sense,* 122.

[95] For an excellent analysis of the significance of loneliness in *Common Sense,* one on which this paragraph depends, see Martin Roth, "Tom Paine and American Loneliness," *EAL,* 22 (1987), 175–82.

[96] *Common Sense, 66.*

[97] "It is pleasant to observe," Paine writes in a typical passage, "by what regular gradations we surmount the force of local prejudice, as we enlarge our acquaintance with the world." The particular gradations in the ensuing passage carry us from street, to town, to county, to country, to continent—each bringing a desirable change in perspective away from loyalty to England—but it remains unclear what Paine's "continental minds" are to use for an identity that connects with actual experience. See ibid., 85.

[98] Ibid., 88–90. Paine quotes from Milton without revealing that it is Satan who is speaking in this passage from *Paradise Lost.* Roth, "Tom Paine and American Loneliness,"

Anger supplies the emotional force to bring Americans together in a formative act of self-recognition. "Men read by way of revenge," Paine declares.[99] *Common Sense* is that reading. It fuels itself with images of blood, ashes, suffering, cruelty, corruption, monstrosity, hellishness, and villainy. When critics of *Common Sense* called its author "furious," Paine welcomed the accusation. "There are men too," he responded, "who have not virtue enough to be angry."[100] This conjunction of anger and simplicity, under the rubric of virtue, was hardly accidental. Among other things, it supplied the perfect counter to a loyalist rhetoric that asked Americans to rest in the familiar calm of complex colonial associations.[101]

Paine used the combination of anger and simplicity as a funneling device. Of all of the emotions, anger is the most difficult to control, and Paine's triumph in this regard is the great master stroke in his rhetorical plan. His "uncanny ability to articulate the emotions of the mob" allowed him to objectify colonial unrest as patriotism.[102] Only Paine really harnessed these forces in 1776. He alone, of all the writers of the Revolution, fathomed the depths of "popular rage" in America, and he plied that resentment to construct a vital identification between narrator and reader. It is this perception, more than any other, that carries *Common Sense* from story toward spell-binding myth.

III

A distinction must be drawn between the anger of colonial Americans in 1776 and their ability to express that anger in formal prose. Modern scholarship on the Revolution has puzzled over this paradox: pre-Revolutionary Americans were more fearful and angry than their circumstances warranted, but their "literature of revolution" appeared more decorous and less angry than English literary productions of the same

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179, summarizes the importance of anger to *Common Sense* in general: "Despite the surface optimism of Paine's program of Americanization, his images and plots are always angry and ultimately bitter, whether they depict a heroic or a slavish America."

[99] *Common Sense*, 113.

[100] "The Forester's Letters: No. III," Apr. 22, 1776, in *Complete Writings of Paine*, 2:74.

[101] Daniel Leonard, Adams's leading opponent as "Massachusettensis" in 1775, supplies perhaps the best example of this call for calm in loyalist rhetoric: "Be calm, my friends," was his litany in "To The Inhabitants of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay," as part of a complex description of "the bands of society cut asunder" and "civil government dissolved." His emphasis, as well as those of other loyalists, was on the circumspection that was required to appreciate the advantages in the many, still sustaining ties between England and America. See Upton, ed. *Revolutionary Versus Loyalist*, 36–38, 42, 46–48.

[102] For an analysis of these qualities in Paine and for the quotation in this sentence, see Evelyn J. Hinz, "Thomas Paine," in Everett Emerson, ed., *American Literature, 1764–1789: The Revolutionary Years* (Madison, 1977), 48, 55–56.

period. *Common Sense* represented the exception that proves the rule. Written by a transplanted Englishman who brought his "daring impudence" with him, it rejected the "everyday, business-like sanity" of most colonial writings on politics.[103]

Anger, as such, surfaces most visibly in the frequency of popular uprisings throughout colonial America. Mob behavior was an intrinsic part of colonial life as well as an extralegal arm in important communal decisions. At different moments, rioting paralyzed each of the major colonial cities, and violent uprisings in the countryside periodically destroyed property and brought government to a halt—sometimes pitting whole regions against each other, as in the Paxton Boys riot of Western Pennsylvania in 1763.[104] Moreover, mob violence increased exponentially after 1765, the year in which rioting throughout the colonies nullified the Stamp Act, and recognition of this change has led historians to assign "mass violence a dominant role at every significant turning point of the events leading up to the War for Independence."[105]

Even so, there is little commentary about mob behavior in the formal literature of the period, and when it does appear it is to maintain restraints on that behavior. The second most popular propaganda piece of the Revolutionary era, John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1768), offers a good case in point. Dickinson began his long pamphlet by distinguishing between "inflammatory measures," which he "detests," and "a firm, modest exertion of a free spirit," which alone gave the proper tone to public protest. "The cause of liberty," he wrote, "is a cause of too much dignity, to be sullied by turbulence and tumult." On the face of it, unrest in America was almost as great a concern in colonial pamphleteering as British intransigence.[106] Rhetorical restraint and elevation were not just ploys to demonstrate rationality and accountability while petitioning the king; they were essential strategies for keeping the lower orders in line.

[103] Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 25, 94–143, 17–19. Bailyn speculates that Paine brought his "daring impudence" and "uncommon frenzy" with him from England.

[104] For treatments of the prevalence and general unruliness of mob behavior in 18th-century America, see Gordon S. Wood, "A Note on Mobs in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3d Ser., 23 (1966), 635–42; Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," ibid., 25 (1968), 371–407; Pauline Meier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," ibid., 27 (1970), 3–35; and Merrill Jensen, "The American People and the American Revolution," *JAH,* 57 (1970), 5–35.

[105] Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Political Mobs and the American Revolution, 1765–1776," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* 99 (1955), 244.

[106] John Dickinson, "Letter I," "Letter III," *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (New York, 1903), 11, 29–30. See also Marc Egnal, *A Mighty Empire: The Origins of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 213–14.

The many differences between Dickinson and Paine as pamphleteers flowed from as many historical factors, but the rhetorical contrast in their writing styles came down to an agenda of calm restraint against a program of deliberate emotional excess, cautionary balance versus fervent assertion. Psychologically, Paine was closer to the mob than Dickinson ever could be, and he knew how to manipulate its spiritual proclivities.[107] The artistry of *Common Sense,* like the animus of the mob, builds solidarity out of hatred. Paine engages his readers by promising them a final metamorphosis from anger to "the hearty hand of friendship," setting aside the question of whether rabble-rousing can ever achieve such a transformation.[108]

But if the ultimate price of fanning hatred remains unplumbed in *Common Sense,* the rhetorical pay-off was great in 1776. Paine's substitution of assertion and excess for Dickinsonian prudence and reserve worked in his favor. Held back for years by the restraining influence and decorum of leaders such as Dickinson and Adams, radical segments of the reading public welcomed the release of psychic energy that *Common Sense* offered.[109] Paine managed this release by discarding the historical colonial self-image of decorous self-restraint and by replacing it with an abstract process of reasoning that made anger compelling. His chain of postulates ran like this: anger is the natural and appropriate emotional reaction to an intensifying pattern of British tyranny; it is politically necessary to express this natural and appropriate feeling; communal health (often expressed as "manliness") also depends on it; therefore, anger is the legitimate precursor of virtuous civic action.

This chain of logic is reinforced by a parallel sequence of identifications that either saves or damns the reader, depending on that reader's reaction to *Common Sense.* The psychological movement of the narrative is from general outrage over British attacks, to an explicit anger against the person of the king, to a demonstration that such anger must foster an irreconcilable hatred against the mother country, to the conclusion that individuals who remain loyal to England must share the reception of that

[107] Paine's affinity with the mob can be expressed in either temperamental or class terms. By 1771, close to 30% of the adult male population in cities like Boston and Philadelphia were neither property owners nor the dependents of tax-paying members of the community. This large propertyless group of itinerant laborers, seamen, and artisans—men more-or-less in Paine's own first situation as an immigrant—constituted the rampaging mobs of the 1770s. Obviously, the corset maker from Thetford would have had more ties to these elements than Dickinson, the Philadelphia lawyer. For the class implications, see James Henretta, *The Evolution of American Society, 1700–1815* (Lexington, Mass., 1973), 96–97.

[108] *Common Sense,* 122.

[109] As Jensen has claimed, "the popular upheaval after 1773 demonstrated that some of the ordinary people in every colony were far ahead of their leaders in opposition to Britain"; Jensen, "American People and the American Revolution," 23.

hatred as traitors "against the natural rights of all Mankind."[110] This final level of hatred knows no real limits. It encompasses "all those who espouse the doctrine of reconciliation," but it also extends to "moderate men, who think better of the European world than it deserves." Anyone who remains unreceptive to immediate independence should be despised. In saying so, Paine espouses what will later become a central recognition in crowd theory: you are either for the mob or it is against you.[111]

The most impressive dimension in this spiral of hatred is the rhetorical administration of its growth. Paine begins simply enough by claiming "the Power of feeling" against those who have attacked America. Feeling, in this sense, moves in one continuum from a distaste for kingliness, to anger at the British monarchy, to "an universal hatred" of George III. Paine understood—as his colonial counterparts did not—that it would be easier to loathe an identifiable person, King George, than any abstract collectivity, whether of Parliament, the ministry, or the people of England. As he puts this realization, "it is scarcely worth our while to fight against a contemptible ministry only."[112] Significantly, there is a second and far nastier continuum of abhorrence in *Common Sense.* Paine reserves his ultimate vituperation for the unworthy American. It is not enough to expose those "who are not to be trusted" or even "prejudiced men who *will not* see." Paine, at the outset, says "I would carefully avoid giving unnecessary offense." By the end, however, the American who sympathizes with England in any way has devolved into something considerably less than human. This American has fallen farther than even "the royal brute of Great Britain." He has "sunk himself beneath the rank of animals" and must "contemptibly crawl through the world like a worm."[113]

It would be hard to imagine a more devastating loneliness than the state Paine reserves for his American opponents. What natural rights, if

[110] *Common Sense,* 63–64, 72–81, 88–89, 99–100, 114–15.

[111] Ibid., 88. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power,* trans. Carol Stewart (New York, 1984; orig. pub. 1962), 19–20.

[112] *Common Sense,* 72, 81, 114, 91, 93. Unlike Paine, colonial American pamphleteers remained squeamish about assailing their king, preferring to blame British abuses on his ministers. As late as 1774, Thomas Jefferson, who goes further than other Americans, still kept his *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* "an humble and dutiful address to be presented to his Majesty." The *Summary View* is an extraordinary challenge of the king for a colonial thinker, but it still calls George III "chief officer of the people," whereas Paine, two years later in *Common Sense,* 93, makes him "the greatest enemy this continent hath." Jefferson attacked the king directly only after learning the value of this lesson from *Common Sense.* By July 4, 1776, the explicit accusations of the Declaration of Independence are all leveled against George III in order to demonstrate "every act which may define a tyrant." See Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1944), 22–26, 293.

[113] *Common Sense,* 88, 98, 114. See also *Complete Writings of Paine,* 1:29.

any, remain to those placed below even a subhuman category, "beneath the rank of animals"? Since the closest emotion to anger is revenge, Paine is unstinting in his exercise of it.[114] There will be no forgiveness for those who dare to deviate from the republican norm. Paine's parting shot at any "Tories" who remain in America takes the form of a threat. If they fail to support a republican form of government, they should expect to lose the security that has previously "protected them from popular rage." Paine is vehemently part of that rage. As he has already noted, "there is no punishment which that man will not deserve, be he who, or what, or where he will."[115]

The anger in these words is important because it is responsible for a political solidarity that would otherwise be lacking. After all, the corollary to Paine's isolation of unworthy Americans is an unsettling one: "Independance is the only BOND that can tye and keep us together."[116] The *only* bond? But if so, why should it work? Why should the untested prospect of independence guarantee the political fabric of a vast and heterogeneous continental republic? How are the separate liberties of each and every citizen going to accomplish "the glorious union of all things" that Paine so confidently predicts for the American strand?[117]

Realizing that there are no philosophical or political solutions to such questions, Paine responds on a series of distinct rhetorical levels. First, he creates a cohesive or corporate American self out of first-person, plural, pronominal forms. The ever-present "we" of *Common Sense* comprises neither colonies, nor voting citizens, nor leaderships of any kind. This ubiquitous "we" is literally everyone—every reading self who has been arranged by the acceptance of Paine's language into a collective but equal audience capable of receiving and (through identification) of giving speech.

Both the collective and the egalitarian flavors of this American audience are calculated effects. Collectivity carries the presumption of truth within it. "Could the straggling thoughts of individuals be collected," writes Paine, "they would frequently form materials for wise and able men to improve to useful matter."[118] Equality, in turn, provides a comparable safeguard; it joins "the equal rights of nature" and benevolent social origins ("all men being originally equal") with plans for the new government ("a large and equal representation"). Equality and collectivity thus

[114] In the first of the "American Crisis" pamphlets, also written in 1776, Paine justifies revenge and the right to exercise it as "the soft resentment of a suffering people"; *Complete Writings of Paine*, 1:55.

[115] *Common Sense*, 89, 99, 121, 89.

[116] Ibid., 121.

[117] Ibid., 100.

[118] Ibid., 96.

become the sources of all social agreement. "Where there are no distinctions there can be no superiority, perfect equality affords no temptation," Paine observes in claiming that equal states will always retain "a spirit of good order."[119] "Perfect equality" in the union of states is, in this sense, the political equivalent of the rhetorical "we" in *Common Sense.*

But Paine's language holds another meaning and a second rhetorical device for bringing separate Americans together. The absence of hierarchy in "perfect equality" marks an intended audience, the mob. Paine uses anger, the natural emotion of the mob, to urge the people as mob to express the general will of a republican citizenry. Noting that "the mind of the multitude is left at random," he writes to give it direction through the act of independence, and his facilitating tool is the "unexampled concurrence of sentiment" in an angry people. There are two steps in this process: the admittedly temporary emotion of the people must be recognized and celebrated; and next, the people's anger must be harnessed to the more permanent political end of independence.[120]

Common Sense then identifies three ways for gaining that independence: "by the legal voice of the people in Congress; by a military power; or by a mob." Paine's hope for an amalgamation of these compelling forces leads to his greatest expressions of urgency. He begs for immediate action because he believes that Congress, the soldiery, and the mob have a rare opportunity to act as one in 1776. In this moment, and perhaps in no other, "our soldiers are citizens, and the multitude a body of reasonable men." Poignantly, this moment also provides the context for Paine's most famous claim, "we have it in our power to begin the world over again."[121]

Popular acceptance of this appeal emanates from the mob's discovery of its own assigned purpose and dignity. After a decade of pamphleteering on the rationality of moderate opposition, Paine's different, freewheeling endorsement of the people's emotions converts the mob from shameful by-product into a legitimate vehicle of colonial identity and cultural salvation. This shift, while superficial, is not without its subtleties. The mob responds initially to the narrator's buoyant inclusiveness ("we have it in our power"), but it remains engaged through an intricate arrangement of psychological ingredients. Unmistakably, there is real acumen in Paine's comprehension of these ingredients and a master's craft in his applications.

Contemporary theories of crowd psychology suggest that the mob feeds on five qualities: it wants to grow; it seeks equality within itself; it

[119] Ibid., 72, 76, 109, 95.
[120] Ibid., 117–18.
[121] Ibid., 120.

loves density, it needs direction, and its most conspicuous activity lies in its destructiveness.[122] The rhetoric of *Common Sense* plays itself out along these axes: first, in its attacks on monarchy and its call to arms, which seek to destroy all linkage with Britain, next in its language of equality, then in its plans for solidarity or density through union, and last in its explicit insistence upon the continental growth of the republic.[123]

After strengthening the character of the mob in this manner, Paine cunningly leaves it with a preordained choice, one that will either confirm or rob it of all identity. The mob can either declare for independence, with the life-giving violence that this will require of it, or it can hesitate, dwindle, and forever forfeit independence, leaving itself "continually haunted with the thoughts of its necessity."[124] That the mob easily imbibes the careful structures that we have identified—hatred of authority, outrage against wronged innocence, sympathy for domestic distress, identification with simplicity of design, and the acceptance of natural reason over historical experience—is a given. More arresting are the hidden patterns of deep threat that guarantee these investments. In the end, neither the thoughtful individual nor the emotionally driven mob have choices to make if they are to survive on anything like their own terms as willing readers. The wrath that Paine has raised has been primed to turn inward if it fails to reach designated external targets.

The potential viciousness in this trajectory gives one more proof of Paine's rhetorical power in 1776; his language convinced an unprecedented number of Americans to accept his arguments on his terms, and the result was a revolution against colonial rule. But seeing this rhetoric for what it is, in all of its angry impetuses and accusatory denouement, makes *Common Sense* a disquieting text in national formations. Only a zealous convert can ignore the ugly impulses in Paine's pamphlet. The unleashing and manipulation of group hatreds do not make for a pretty sight, and the success of *Common Sense* depends on them. What is to be done with such levels of hatred and how susceptible do present Americans remain to their influence? These questions are especially relevant for a people that can no longer embrace the intellectual safety valve of natural reason—the source that made common sense such a comfort for Paine and his first readers.

[122] Canetti, *Crowds and Power,* 19–20, 29–30. See also J. S. McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob: From Plato to Canetti* (Boston, 1989), 1–33, 327–35.

[123] For a parallel description of the same phenomenon with a different vocabulary, see Jack P. Greene's understanding of Paine's contribution to "the *modernization* of political consciousness" through "two crucial developments: the mobilization of large segments of society theretofore politically inert, and the desacralization of the traditional political order," in *Understanding the American Revolution: Issues and Actors* (Charlottesville, 1995), 285–86.

[124] *Common Sense,* 112.

Conclusion

If the angers of *Common Sense* are recognized for what they have become, national angers, they can be arranged and perhaps even curbed to serve a modern understanding. Nationalism in general thrives on two basic emotions, satisfaction raised by fulfillment and anger provoked by violation.[125] Paine is the first modern writer to grapple knowingly with these contrasting impulses in a revolutionary-minded state. What is more, his inspired exploitation of these satisfactions and angers contains the beginnings of a solution to the problems he has raised.

In contemporary theory, nations are not so much natural creations as they are invented constructs; nationalisms in such an understanding are not intrinsic ideas but cultural artifacts best recognized in the way language is used. National communities, in consequence, are known less by fixed or concrete conceptions and more by the flexible mode in which they are imagined.[126] Similarly, in most cultures an ethnocentric view of the nation as a natural, prepolitical entity made up of the folk with an inherited form of life competes with a more modern, more cosmopolitan conception of the nation as a legal entity made up of citizens with constitutionally defined rights.[127] Thomas Paine, as an eighteenth-century figure steeped in natural law, would not have agreed with these assessments, but ironically, he began to make them conceivable for others when he articulated a design for the American nation in 1776. In fact, *Common Sense* marks the divide between the two understandings of the nation as folk entity and legal entity. It privileges the first in the notion of an originally happy society without government, but it constructs the latter. For it is only through the nation as legal entity that republicanism receives a guarantee of its operations, and Paine is dedicated first and foremost to a republican ideal based on law.

The narrator of *Common Sense* assumes that everything will collapse without the swift implementation of a republic of laws. When he argues that "the Continental belt is too loosely buckled," he means that America is "without law" and must rectify the situation immediately.[128]

[125] This bipolar anatomy of nationalist sentiment is the first premise in Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1983), 1.

[126] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 140, 12–15. See also E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), 1–45.

[127] For the terminology in this paragraph and a discussion of the ethnocentric against the cosmopolitan view of nationhood, see Jürgen Habermas, "The European Nation-State—Its Achievements and Its Limits: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship," in Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation* (London, 1986), 281–82, 286–88.

[128] *Common Sense,* 118.

As Paine would later write of 1776, "we had no other law than a kind of moderated passion; no other civil power than an honest mob," and he also saw that if these conditions had been allowed to continue "this continent would have been plunged into irrecoverable confusion." The situation is saved, in his understanding, by the introduction of republican institutions for "a regular people," but it is Paine's admission of an alternative danger that should catch our attention. Without law, he warns, no passion stays moderate, and no mob remains honest.[129]

Paine clearly believes in the control that republican institutions will engender. Under their influence, the mob somehow turns itself into "a regular people." Unfortunately, the underlying theoretical basis of this transmutation is never fully articulated in *Common Sense;* as its author was the first to admit, he merely "threw out a few thoughts . . . for I only presume to offer hints, not plans."[130] Nonetheless, even if there is no mature plan, there is definitely a process in the "few thoughts" that are given.[131] Paine offers a story to register the transition from the mob to a regular people, and that story characteristically contains a multitude of complexities in the simplest of narratives. For all of these reasons, it is worth quoting in full:

> But where says some is the King of America? I'll tell you Friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havock of mankind like the Royal [Brute] of Britain. Yet that we may not appear to be defective even in earthly honors, let a day be solemnly set apart for proclaiming the charter; let it be brought forth placed on the divine law, the word of God; let a crown be placed thereon, by which the world may know, that so far as we approve of monarchy, that in America THE LAW IS KING. For as in absolute government the King is law, so in free countries the law *ought* to be King; and there ought to be no other. But lest any ill use should afterwards arise, let the crown at the conclusion of the ceremony be demolished, and scattered among the people whose right it is.[132]

[129] "The American Crisis III," *Complete Writings of Paine,* 1:81.

[130] *Common Sense,* 109.

[131] Wilson, *Paine and Cobbett,* 52–53, goes further when he argues that "it was characteristic of Paine not to leave things hanging; where there was room for concrete proposals, he would supply them," though the result might look like "a trail of contradictions."

[132] *Common Sense,* 98. The Kramnick edition of *Common Sense* leaves a blank space with a dash after the word "Royal" to indicate an unspoken pejorative noun for "King" in the quotation. I have substituted "Brute" for that dash, placing the word in brackets, relying on the use of that term in the Philip Foner edition of *Common Sense* in *Complete Writings of Paine,* 1:29.

The calculated indirections in this curious tale blend Paine's rhetorical methods with his political solutions. There can be no better concluding demonstration of his appeal as a writer, and the story itself gives an uncanny glimpse of the future, the republic as modern nation state.

Many of the standard rhetorical devices of *Common Sense* are present in this passage: exhortation, repetition, hyperbole, inversion, anaphora (using the same word at the beginning of successive clauses), hypophora (asking questions and immediately answering them), and frequent hectoring of the obedient reader ("I'll tell you friend"). Also familiar, thematically, are the conflations of divine and secular frames of reference, the contrasts between England and America, the parallel distinction between monarchical and republican forms of government, the display of villainy ("the Royal Brute"), the avowals of freedom found ("so in free countries"), and the casual assumption of an enormous, expectant audience ("by which the world may know"). And yet the story that Paine gives here is so much greater in the telling than the sum of its parts and devices might indicate.

Although a king is killed and metaphorically cannibalized in this passage, the violence involved has been stylized. Neither blood nor anguish ripples the surfaces of what has been "demolished." All "havock" has been relegated to the other side. God reigns more benevolently in America because unmediated by intervening kings. The people, like any pious tribe left to its own social devices, seek that benevolence by courting divine favor through "earthly honors." Above all, there is a saving sense of ceremony that is half biblical saga (a crown is placed on "the word of God") and half colonial politics ("proclaiming the charter"). Here Paine uses the decorum of ritual to subsume revolutionary angers. A day has been "solemnly set aside" to make the law king, and the people are justified and dignified in their actions by partaking of that authority, which is then "scattered" in their midst. The obvious parallel is to the Christian sacrament of communion in a parataxis that points toward civil religion in the modern nation state.[133]

More is at stake for the citizen than meets the eye in this ceremony of legal proclamation. Ritual in general promotes participation over contest. It welcomes performers instead of designating winners over losers, and it tries to bring everyone into the fold through an exercise in consent. To participate is to belong, and the participant usually engages with cooperation in mind.[134] Notably, there is little room for anger in such a

[133] See Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus,* 96 (1967), 1–21, and *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial,* 2d ed. (Chicago, 1992).

[134] These distinctions between ritual and contest are elucidated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966; orig. pub. 1962), 32.

ceremony, particularly when it assumes the form of a national celebration. The other or twin emotion of national sentiment—not anger from violation but satisfaction in fulfillment—tends to rule in this situation. So when Paine follows the configuration of ritual in his fanciful version of national ceremony, it represents an important variation. *Common Sense* is a text given over largely to American resentments, but anger suddenly becomes unseemly in this one ceremonial context, "solemnly set apart." The final scattering of a symbolic crown enacts a legal shift in empowerment and understanding rather than another act of rage. It is tellingly designed to avoid further "ill use."

A whimsical, even jocular, celebration of the law as king may seem no more than that. Even a profound day "set apart" is but one day, and Paine's rather offhand account of national ceremony reads a little like a minimalist's attempt to quell the Furies that he has aroused. Even so, if there is a saving difference, it lies in the controlling prescriptive language of the passage: "so in free countries the law *ought* to be King; and there ought to be no other." A national readership is being told that appropriate action should always take place through a recognition and acceptance of law, and the many deferrals in this aspiration do not make it any less real or compelling. Here, in effect, is an early rendition of the modern rule of law. In Paine's understanding, given in the last two sections of *Common Sense,* the process of law represents the stabilizing backbone for every other communal virtue in an advanced society, including free elections, a constitutional convention, an annual Congress, the security of property, the efficient use of bountiful resources, a strong navy, the growth of commerce, and the management of a national debt.

This rule of law is modern because accepted by all rather than imposed from above. Law always contains an element of imposition, but the modern rule of law, by definition, turns hierarchical intrusiveness into a penetrating force at work on every level of society, thus providing a structure accessible to the ruled as well as the ruler. As both typological superstructure and social infrastructure, this rule of law merges with the underlying basis of all productive relations. It becomes an unavoidable consideration for all concerned, whether in thought or in action. Rulers must turn to the logic of the rule of law to understand their own behavior; the ruled learn to keep power within constitutional limits and to insist on its applications. For everyone, the language of the rule of law stands for a cultural achievement of universal significance.[135]

Thomas Paine brings all of these elements to bear in *Common Sense.* He then welds the aspiration of the rule of law to the act of revolution.

[135] For a balanced definition of the rule of law, one on which this paragraph depends, see E. P. Thompson, "The Rule of Law," *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Acts* (New York, 1975), 258–69.

Using a typically reductionist tactic, he announces that "independancy means no more, than, whether we shall make our own laws." The quiet corollary to noisy independence is legality. As Paine tells his newly forming national readership, independence must be brought about by "the legal voice of the people in Congress"; only in this manner can "we have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth."[136] *Common Sense* insists that a legal revolution will cap the angers that made independence possible. The crown of law will be scattered among the people, "whose right it is," and the exercise of that right will restore calm.

The optimism in such language functions as an intrinsic necessity in a rule of law. A people have to believe in the logic and the criteria of the law for it to work. The language and acts of the law must establish an expectation of justice in a receptive community.[137] Paine aims all of the solidarity that he has created in *Common Sense* in this direction. He is the first to predict that "the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth" will be made on a continental scale. Independence is the first step in such a legal framework. "We shall then see our object," Paine concludes in his last paragraph, "and our ears will be legally shut against the schemes of an intriguing, as well as a cruel enemy."[138] Seeing the object clearly stages an overriding enlightenment norm, the restoration of calm through proper sight. No other sense is allowed to disrupt this primal and prescriptive clarity of light. With their ears "legally shut against . . . a cruel enemy," Paine's readers use the law positively to channel their understanding. To the extent that they see clearly, they exchange the shouts of the mob for the more measured voice of a people.

The peculiar juxtaposition of aroused anger and law-giving calm means that *Common Sense* resists a simple reading. The pamphlet is there for the revolutionary mind; it is also there for the transcendent lawgiver. But rhetorically the writer has turned the combination into a vital sequence, and this affirmation is the key to a national text worth permanent scrutiny. Over and over again, Thomas Paine insists that a procedurally minded republic will find the forms that it needs in his pages and that a knowing people must use those forms to participate intelligently in their own governance. These words and others like them come out of crisis but succeed in the solution rendered. They reach for the common reader as useful citizen. They say *Common Sense* is a source book for a deserving people—if, or when, things go badly wrong.

[136] *Common Sense*, 93, 120.
[137] Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, 263.
[138] *Common Sense*, 121.