

ranked that ever I read of in my daies . . . who though he be commonly condemned . . . by all great state politicians . . . yet by me his books are esteemed for real usefulness in my streits to help me clearly to see through all the disguised deceits of my potent, politick . . . adversaries . . . He was also deeply impressed with the classical authors, and compared England's military rulers 'with what I have read with a great deal of observation (in those most excellent and famous Roman and Greek Historians Titus Livius and Plutark) of the Triumvery of Rome' who totally subdued the people's liberties.

As an incentive to the government to allow his return from banishment, Lilburne promised to put forward proposals that he said would increase his country's population, win commercial supremacy over Holland, raise the price of land, and help the 'poor Husband-men' and the 'middle sort of people'. He seems to have had in mind the settlement of lands incapable of alienation upon the soldiery and the poor, comparable with 'the Law Agraria amongst the Romans'. He very probably conceived this scheme under the influence of Plutarch's lives of the Gracchi. Despite the fact that he never developed it, it was a sign of his mind's capacity for growth that amidst exile and other difficulties, his new reading in the classics should have suggested such schemes to him.

This was almost his last word. Upon his unauthorized return from exile, he was placed on trial for his life, and though his courageous defence won him acquittal, he was sent to the final imprisonment during which he died. His career spanned the rise and decline of the movement whose greatest leader he was. At his death in 1657, the royal restoration, which doomed all hopes was near. Yet Lilburne's ideas had many a long day to live, and his objectives were espoused by a generation of radicals one hundred and fifty years later. His lodestar was the principle of popular rights and the subjection of government to reason. To the question, who shall judge of reason, he answered, ' . . . Reason is demonstrable by its innate glory . . . and man being a reasonable creature, is Judge for himself . . . But because a man may be partial in his own case, Reason tells him, Commissioners chosen out and tyed to such rational Instructions as the Chusers give them, are the most proper . . . judges . . . Yet, he concludes, ' . . . a Commission given unto them against the Rules of common Reason is Voyde In It Self . . .'

And on this last - the sovereign individual conscience judging the rationality of all commands, enfranchized to do so by the law of Christ, which is itself reason - he took his ultimate stand.

## 2 RICHARD OVERTON

Almost nothing is known of Richard Overton's life. From obscure antecedents, he comes before us for a few brief years during the 1640s to fade into the shadows after 1649, and into total darkness after the Restoration. This is a pity, because Overton was an exceedingly able theorist about whom we should like to know more. He began his career by publishing inferior verse satires against the bishops, but attracted

attention only with the anonymous appearance in 1643 of his work, *Mans Mortalitie*, which contended that the soul is mortal and perishes with the body to rise only at the resurrection. This book has provoked some discussion centring on whether or not Overton was a materialist whose assertion of a resurrection was merely an insincere concession to contemporary prejudice. The point is of some importance, I think, as indicating the extent to which a seventeenth-century democrat united a naturalistic philosophy to his left-wing politics.

Overton's seems to have been a mind which harboured notions basically incompatible. I see no reason to doubt his belief in a resurrection. Yet he was also, it will be seen, materialistic. The coexistence of these positions, however, apparently created no serious problem for him, because from all evidences, the non-materialistic elements lacked the vitality to evoke serious tension.

The real significance of *Mans Mortalitie* lay less in its assertion that the soul perishes than in its conception of the nature of the soul. He conceived of it, it is quite clear, not as a distinct entity temporarily united with body, but as the sum total of the operation of man's faculties resting indispensably on a basis entirely physical. 'Soul' for him was, in effect, nothing but a metaphor for designating man's higher powers, without any intention of regarding them as supernatural.

After defining the soul as 'the internall and external Faculties . . . joyfully considered', he goes on to urge that as 'All the Faculties of Man . . . are all, and each of them mortall . . . and if all those, with his corpulent matter compleating Man . . . be mortall; Then the invention of the Soule upon that ground vanisheth . . . As heat, he says, is the property of fire and 'cannot be, if fire cease: nor fire be, if it cease . . . as well may we say the heat of the fire continueth after the fire is dead out, as those Faculties when their Body is dead . . . The soul must be matter because 'that which is not material, is nothing'. And as all matter, he continues, is compounded of the four elements, 'whole man being matter created, is elemental, finite, and mortal; and so ceaseth from the time of the grave, till the time of the Resurrection'.

Why he believed the soul was raised then we have no way of knowing. It is clear that his reasoning gave him no basis for admitting this without a miracle. Nor can we tell on what grounds he thought there were a heaven and hell after the resurrection, though he does say that such a doctrine is an aid to virtue. But it is obvious that Overton was a great physician, Ambroise Paré, and had apparently studied chemistry. Interests of this sort account for his materialistic arguments. He was, without doubt, a rationalist over whom dogma had all but lost its hold.

From the first, Overton was an enemy of religious persecution. He had attacked the intolerance of the bishops, and in 1645, following his bold excursion into philosophy, he joined the fight against Presbyterian bigotry. He held views remarkably broad for his time, and far beyond those of most men, for he would have extended liberty of conscience to Jews and Roman Catholics, and lamented the latter's persecution by

Protestants as much as the Protestants' persecution by them. But these afflictions were unaccompanied by any large formulation of his political thought. And strange to say, his tone towards Parliament in his known pamphlets was, on the whole, mild, despite Commons' treatment of John Lilburne to a term of imprisonment in the summer and fall of 1645.

Only in the next year, when Lilburne was made a prisoner by command of the peers, did Overton turn to the expression of his political ideas. First he took up his pen on Lilburne's behalf, then on his own, because in August, he was himself imprisoned by the peers for refusing to acknowledge their jurisdiction over him. Now he began to state his position in writings astonishingly bold. In plain terms, he denied the Lords any standing. They are, he wrote, 'but painted properties . . . that our superstition and ignorance, their own craft and impudence, have erected: no naturall issues of lawes, but the exuberance and mushrooms of Prerogative, the Wens of just government . . . Sons of conquest they are and usurpation, not of choice and election, intruded upon us by power, not constituted by consent, not made by the people from whom all power, place, and office that is just in this kingdome ought only to arise.'

He also laid down the essence of his political theory in a statement that presented nature as a norm and as the origin of right. Quite in accord with his rationalistic temper, he set aside all received arrangements, acquiescing in nothing but what nature itself holds forth. Overton's thought, as he here expressed it, was almost detached from the Christian context which was its ultimate source. Where Lilburne in a similar declaration had spoken of Adam, the fall, and Christ's law, Overton spoke of God and nature, and the latter as the agent of the former. His words could almost have been those of a deist.

By natural birth, he said, 'all men are equally born to like propriety, liberty and freedome, and as we are delivered of God by the hand of nature into this world, every one with a naturall, innate freedome . . . even so are we to live, every one equally alike to enjoy his Birthright and privileged; even all whereof God by nature hath made him free'. As men are born free, the only just origin of power is in a grant from every individual, ' . . . and no more may be communicated then stands for [their] better being, weale, or safety . . . and this is mans prerogative . . . he that gives more, sins against his owne flesh; and he that takes more, is a Theife and Robber to his kind; Every man by nature being a King, Priest and Prophet in his own naturall circuite . . . whereof no second may partake, but by deputation, commission, and free consent from him, whose naturall right and freedome it is'.

These conceptions were linked with a definite programme in Overton's great pamphlet, *A Remonstrance Of Many Thousand Citizens . . . To their owne House of Commons* (1646), one of the most brilliant of revolutionary manifestos. The imperious tones in which this work addressed the Commons had never been equalled by any monarch, but they were only such as befitted the majesty of the people in whose name

(Overton spoke. Ever since the Norman conquest, he said, the people have been kept bondsmen by force and craft. At last they would endure it no longer, 'and then yee,' he told the Commons, 'were chosen to work our deliverance... for whatever our Fore-fathers were; or whatever they did or suffered, or were enforced to yeeld unto; we are the men of the present age, and ought to be free...'. But instead of fulfilling its proper task, the Commons still temporize with the royal tyrant and maintain his doctrines. Let the House abolish monarchial government, he demanded, along with the negative voice of the Lords, for 'Yee only are chosen by Us... and therefore in you onely is the Power of binding the whole Nation...').

The Commons have also been acting despotically in claiming unlimited privileges for their members and in aiding the Presbyterians, 'as if also ye had discovered... That without a... compulsive Presbytry in the Church, a compulsive mastership, or Aristocraticall Government over the People in the State could never long be maintained'. They permit heavy grievances to continue, and unjust laws, including Magna Carta, which is itself 'but a beggarly thing, containing many marks of intollerable bondage...'. A change must be made, Overton declared. Let the House but trust the people, and do what is just, and 'Wee will therein assist you to the last drop of our bloods... Forsake... all craftie and subtrill intentions; hide not your thoughts from Us, and give us encouragement to be open-breasted unto you'; and '... let the imprisoned Presse at liberty, that all mens understandings may be more conveniently informed, and convinced by the equity of your Proceedings'.

Overton's pamphlet was a demand for a democratic republic. His rationalistic philosophy would have no truck with tradition. It would brook only what reason found justifiable, and claimed for the present generation what Englishmen's forefathers had been tyrannically denied. His fearless language made perfectly clear that he and those supporting him would not be satisfied with half a loaf. But certainly no House of Commons like that he addressed would ever trust the people or carry out the programme he proposed.

Overton soon realized this. Imprisoned in August 1646, all his efforts to have the Commons liberate him failed. Together with his fellow-prisoner, Lilburne, he determined to appeal above the Commons to the sovereign people. Like Lilburne, he believed that their failure to obtain justice proved the country had relapsed into a state of nature. Why then may they not tread in Parliament's steps by appealing to the people against the Houses as the latter did against the king? Overton's appeal came forth in July 1647 in *An Appeale From the degenerate Representative Body The Commons... To the Body Represented The free people in general... and in especial... to all the Officers and Soldiers*. This is his last great pamphlet. It is nothing less than a call for a new revolution. Had its demands been carried out, the events which began in 1640 would have achieved ends which not even two hundred and fifty years of subsequent English development were able to gain fully.

Overton admits that history gives no precedent for his appeal to the people. But he is warranted, he says, by right reason which, though all forms of law and government fall, endures forever, 'the fountain of all justice and mercy to the creature...'. Among the principles of right reason are that men should preserve themselves, that necessity is the highest law, that equity is superior to the letter of law, and that all entrusted power, if forfeited, returns to those who had entrusted it. 'These justify him, he insists. Henceforth, he will hold invalid any order of Parliament. By their tyranny, the Houses have lost their capacity. Their acts should be fought to the death, and the promoters of them judged and condemned as traitors to the safety of the people.'

To preserve themselves, the people may exercise their inherent sovereignty and depute or create persons for the removal of tyrants. If it be objected, Overton says, that by reason of the prevailing confusions, such a deputation cannot be formally effected, I answer, that the Body naturall must never be without a mean to save it selfe, and therefore by the foresaid permanent unalterable rule of Necessity and safety, any person or persons... may warrantably rise up in the... behalf of the people, to preserve them from imminent ruine...'. It is the army, he declares, which now has this duty, for it is 'the only formall and visible Head that is left unto the people for protection and deliverance'. He summons the soldiers' elected agents 'to preserve that power and trust reposed in... you by the body of the Army intire and absolute and trust no man... how religious soever appearing, further than hee acts apparently for the good of the Army and Kingdome...'.  
The *Appeale* closes with an appendix of proposals presented for the army's consideration. These include a free and popularly chosen Parliament with provision for the recall and punishment of unworthy members; the reform of law and the abolition of imprisonment for debt; the banning of all compulsion in religion and the removal of tithes and trade monopolies; the establishment of free schools throughout the country; organized care for the sick, poor, and aged; and the restoration of lands which lay in common for the poor's use and were wrongfully enclosed.

Such was the revolutionary programme Overton sketched out. He had appealed to the masses; he had not merely justified the right of revolution abstractly, but had urged the people and the soldiers to act outside all legal channels in defiance of every traditional authority. His appraisal of contemporary institutions had issued in demands which he believed were coined in the very mint of reason itself. And the conception of reason he employed was one almost secularized and dissociated from its roots and commitments in Christian tradition. Short of communism, Overton's was as extreme a vision as English radicalism attained to during the revolution.

### 3 WILLIAM WALWYN

William Walwyn was the son of a country gentleman and the grandson of a bishop. He was, in addition, a member of the Merchant Adventurers.