



# Dave Black & Ben Watson: Helen Macfarlane

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Talking of the destructive nature of egoistic desire, its satisfaction that the other is nothing, Hegel made room for further development, an empirical moment which might surprise those who think German Idealism only ever allowed for abstraction: “*In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it [the simple ‘I’] aware that the object has its own independence*”.<sup>1</sup> History is such an independent object, and provided it is researched by genuine desire, it can jolt self-satisfaction out of its destructive circuits. Since Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s fumbling initiation, German philosophy has provided the Anglophone world with ample opportunity for both desirous egoism and destructive self-satisfaction, but historical research has recently unearthed an independent object to reshape our ideas, not just of the reception of Hegel in English, but of what we actually think about Everything.

This ‘independent object’ is the Chartist journalism of Helen Macfarlane in 1850, admired by Karl Marx as the work of a ‘*rara avis*’ with truly ‘original ideas’, but forgotten by everyone since, including all the official ‘Marxists.’ We are convinced enough of the power of her words—and their timeliness today—that we shall rely on extensive quotation from her articles in the *Democratic Review*, *Red Republican* and *Friend of the People*. In *Radical Philosophy* #186, David Charlston used graphs of statisti-

cal density to demonstrate how the ‘objective’ treatment of Hegel by translators like Terry Pinkard has served to ‘secularise and depoliticise Hegel.’ We found Charlston’s coupling an encouragement, since it implies a radical break with today’s consensus that rational politics can only start once religious passions have been replaced by secular logic. Macfarlane was addressing working-class radicals whose thinking was made possible by religious categories; her ‘Hegelianism’ meant that she had no time for the Benthamite programme of First Rationalism, then Improvement; she interpreted Hegel as an application of the revolutionary humanism preached by Jesus and betrayed by the established Church. This may be why, outflanking ‘radical poets’ like Shelley and Byron, Macfarlane’s polemics have the orotund, unanswerable ring of Shakespeare, Milton and Blake. These texts were written to be read aloud, in taverns where illiterate politicians would seize a newspaper and cry, “*Who’s here can read? I want to know what Feargus O’Connor is saying about Julian Harney, has the man gone mad?*” The Macfarlane revival—she was not only the first translator of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (38 years before Samuel Moore’s standard one), but the first translator of Hegel’s philosophical writings into English—is not simply an independent object to dent the armour of know-it-all Hegelians, it also breaks into the realm of English Literature and its pecking orders.

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1) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller, #175.

*The golden age, sung by the poets and prophets of all times and nations, from Hesiod and*

*Isaiah, to Cervantes and Shelley; the Paradise... was never lost, for it lives... this spirit, I say, has descended now upon the multitudes, and has consecrated them to the service of the new—and yet old—religion of Socialist Democracy.*<sup>2</sup>

George Eliot, another nineteenth-century woman (Marian Evans) who adopted a male soubriquet in print (Macfarlane's was 'Howard Morton'), is revered as a novelist, but if you explore Eliot's critical relationship to Christianity (translator of David Strauss's scandalous *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*) parallels with Macfarlane foam forth. Macfarlane's commitment to the Chartist cause has a clarity, a conviction and historical grasp which can make a bid for George Eliot's place at the moral centre of Victorian letters. As the novel form is laid waste by the Booker Prize contingent, reduced to a tawdry opportunity for middle-class confession, moralism and limp satire, Helen Macfarlane's example steps forward; she was already there.

So much for the why-and-who. But philosophy? Macfarlane's Hegel has none of the anxious complexities of Alexandre Kojève's famous lectures—unfortunate template for the French (and now Anglophone) reception of Hegel—which resemble nothing so much as someone tensely and lengthily diffusing a bomb...

## \*Dialektik\*

sprayed on the side in Gothic scrip

For Macfarlane, Hegel is quite simply a translation of Jesus's revolutionary, egalitarian humanism into a world without mystery or gods.

Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion* (1827) sees the religious 'form of representation' as having been an historical necessity for making Christian doctrine universally accessible to the masses through the medium of the Church. But since the domain of this representation is the world of the past, its spiritual being is only implicit; it lacks the 'absolute singularity of presence to self'. In Hegel's view, Biblical and Church

history must not be allowed to rule over the present or determine the future. It is this revolutionary idea—not the gigantic books, not the jargon, not the late reconciliation with the 'reality' of the Prussian state—that Macfarlane takes from Hegel. These were the questions posed by the young Left Hegelian, David Strauss, who sought to answer them by taking Hegel's insights further. Just as for Hegel the given immediacy grasped through sense-certainty was only the first moment of dialectical philosophy, so for Strauss (as for Reimarus and Lessing before him), the immediacy of religious consciousness through dogma or sacred history had to undergo the negative mediation of free historical criticism.

For Strauss, the Christian absolute of the incarnation was contradictory because, restricted as it was to one individual (Jesus), it lacked the inclusivity of a real absolute. Strauss's *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835–36) argues: "It is humanity that dies, rises and ascends to heaven, for from the negation of its phenomenal life there ever proceeds a higher spiritual life. The legacy of the Christian mythos of resurrection is that: from the kindling within him of the idea of humanity the individual man participates in the divine life of the species". For Strauss, the rational subject and historical substance are united in the cause of progress.

Helen Macfarlane's writings of 1850 show a debt to David Strauss. For her, such unity means recognising that 'the days of orthodox Protestantism are numbered'. These are arguments which a Benthamite, rationalist, Stalinised Left never learned—a truly historical-materialist understanding of the splits in Christianity—which is why their words about 'class struggle' as a solution to the Catholic-Protestant division in Northern Ireland (and Glasgow, and Liverpool) never connected to anyone involved in the conflicts. Unlike those adopting the Whig view of history (Protestantism as 'progress' beyond Catholicism), Macfarlane was decisive and illuminating.

Socialism without Pantheism is a dead letter, just another string in the bow of the capitalist reordering. Ten years earlier, in 1839, the young Friedrich Engels (still not yet a socialist or atheist) had, in breaking with Protestantism, declared his conversion to Strauss's Hegelian pantheism:

2) Macfarlane, 'Chartism in 1850', *Red Republican*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1850.

*Through Strauss I have now entered on the straight road to Hegelianism. Of course, I shall not become such an inveterate Hegelian, but I must nevertheless absorb important things from this colossal system. The Hegelian idea of God has already become mine, and thus I am joining the ranks of the 'modern pantheists' knowing well that even the word pantheism arouses such colossal revulsion on the part of pastors who don't think. Modern pantheism, i.e., Hegel, apart from the fact that it is already found among the Chinese and Parsees, is perfectly expressed in the sect of the Libertines, which was attacked by Calvin. This discovery is really rather too original. But still more original is its development.*<sup>3</sup>

Strauss follows Hegel in showing that, implicitly, the thought content of religion had an objective, theoretical drive. The difference is that for Hegel, the importance of the gospels was their symbolic content rather than their historicity, whereas for Strauss the gospel narratives were myths, which had preserved and translated the Messianic desires of the early Christian communities.

Helen Macfarlane did not approach working-class radicalism through what Friedrich Engels called "*the weird and dismal hell*" of Feuerbachian atheism; rather, she got there by radicalising Strauss's critical Hegelianism. When Strauss's *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* was translated into English in 1846 by Marian Evans (George Eliot), it was described as "*the most pestilential book ever vomited out of the jaws of hell*" by Lord Ashley, Earl of Shaftesbury, a leading Anglican Evangelical whose speeches in the House of Lords were much ridiculed by Macfarlane. Like many others of the Hegelian Left, Strauss did not embrace socialism. But for Macfarlane, what Strauss called the 'divine life of the species' could hardly be anything else.



Turning to Macfarlane's oeuvre, the first issue to be addressed (since is it what she is '(in)famous' for in Left historiography) is the hobgoblin.

3) Friedrich Engels, 'Letter to Friedrich Graeber in Berlin' (9<sup>th</sup> December 1839), in Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 2, p. 487.

*Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa—das Gespenst des Kommunismus.*<sup>4</sup>

*A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism.*<sup>5</sup>

*A frightful hobgoblin stalks throughout Europe. We are haunted by a ghost, the ghost of Communism.*<sup>6</sup>

Why a Hobgoblin? Many of today's leftist cognoscenti see Macfarlane's use of the 'frightful Hobgoblin' as somewhat comical. In 1850, however, it would have been taken as sound literary currency. 'Hobgoblin' occurs in a famous essay by the American Transcendentalist philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was evidently one of Macfarlane's favourite writers. Emerson writes in *Self-Reliance*:

*The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word... Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.*

Another possible source, suggested by Louise Yeoman, is Jeremy Bentham's chapter in the *Book of Fallacies* (1824), entitled 'The Hobgoblin Argument, or, No Innovation'.

*The, hobgoblin, the eventual appearance of which is denounced by this argument, is anarchy which tremendous spectre has for its forerunner innovation... 'Here it comes!' exclaims the barbarous and unthinking servant in the hearing of the afrighted child, when to rid herself of the burthen of attendance... the effects of which may continue during life... Of a similar nature and productive of similar effects is the political device here exposed to view... Whatever is now established, was once innovation... he condemns the Revolution, the Reformation the assumption made by the House of Commons of a part in the penning of the law... All these he bids us regard as forerunners of the monster anarchy.*

4) *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, 1848.

5) *Communist Manifesto* as translated by Samuel Moore in cooperation with Engels, 1888.

6) *Manifesto of the German Communist Party*, tr. Helen Macfarlane, 1850. Serialised in the *Red Republican* November 9<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 30, 1850.

Macfarlane, however, as she sees democratic communism as the very essence of the required 'change' Bentham's opponents are arguing against, is evoking a real hobgoblin to terrify the established order.

It has been noted that in modern music, 'bands grow into their names'. Similarly do concepts in revolutionary literature. Manuel Yang, in his writings on the Japanese poet and philosopher, Taka'aki Yoshimoto (who, like E.P. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, refused to dissolve the masses' lived actions and consciousness into sociological 'structures' prescribed by intellectuals) rethinks Marx through the perspective of struggles over the 'commons'. In doing so, Yang refers to the first effort in Macfarlane studies, *Helen Macfarlane: A Feminist, Revolutionary Journalist, and Philosopher in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (2004):

*Macfarlane, translating the Communist Manifesto, tries to give 'Ein Gespenst' a double meaning. It is not just the ghostly apparition that haunts the castles of Shakespeare's Macbeth and Hamlet, foretelling doom and retribution for the incumbents. It is also the scary sprite that country folks tell their children lurks in the woods, in order to discourage them from wandering off on their own.<sup>7</sup>*

Yang comments:

*Indeed hobgoblins, which belong to the historical imaginary of the Scottish fairyland, are creatures that inhabit the daily world of peasant communing. This world had ready access to demotic curses, often expressed in such fairytales and premised on customary laws that were intended to protect traditional popular rights from the cupidity of self-interest, the central tenet of bourgeois rationality, whose bloody acts of exorcism took the form of enclosures, privatization, imperialism.<sup>8</sup>*

7) David Black, *Helen Macfarlane: A Feminist, Revolutionary Journalist, and Philosopher in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, Lexington Books, Lanham MD, 2004, p. 94.

8) Manuel Yang, Yoshimoto Taka'aki, *Communal Illusion, and the Japanese New Left*, MA dissertation, University of Toledo, 2005, [www.ohiolink.edu/etd/send-pdf.cgi?toledo1122656731](http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd/send-pdf.cgi?toledo1122656731).

Yang quotes from Henderson and Cowan's *Scottish Fairy Belief* (2001):

*Fairies were firmly connected to the landscape and deeply rooted in the soil. The importance of respecting the land which they frequented was widely recognized. It was bad luck to interfere with, or try to remove, trees, bushes, stones, ancient buildings or anything else believed to have fairy associations. Misfortune, illness, or even death might result from tampering with fairy property.*

In a similar vein, Peter Linebaugh writes:

*'Hob' was the name of a country labourer, 'goblin' a mischievous sprite. Thus communism manifested itself in the Manifesto in the discourse of the agrarian commons. The substrate of the language revealing the imprint of the clouted shoon in the sixteenth century who fought to have all things in common. The trajectory from commons to communism can be cast as passage from past to future. For Marx personally it corresponded to his intellectual progress. The criminalization of the woodland of the Mosselle Valley peasantry provided him with his first experience with economic questions...<sup>9</sup>*

Although historical evidence to connect Scottish fairy belief with any actual struggles against bourgeois encroachment on common land would seem to be lacking, Yang's recognition of historical objectivity in Hegel's 'idealist' concepts is Macfarlane-like:

*If 'spectre' is a more philosophically mediated, reified form, divorced from the earthly spirits that directly haunt the peasant imagination, its Hegelian origin nonetheless lay in the commons, as Marx recognized with genuine surprise twenty years after composing the Manifesto [in his *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, p 142]: 'But what would old Hegel say in the next world if he heard that the general, [Allgemeine], in German and Norse means but the common land [Gemeinland], and the particular, [Sundre, Besondere], nothing but the separate property divided off from the common land?'*

9) Peter Linebaugh, 'Karl Marx, the Theft of Wood, Working Class Composition', *Crime and Social Justice* 6, Autumn–Winter 1976.



Helen Macfarlane's first published piece of writing, which appeared in three parts in the *Democratic Review* (April, May and June 1850), was a 9,000-word essay, entitled 'Democracy—Remarks on the Times Apropos of Certain Passages in no. 1 of Thomas Carlyle's "latter-day" pamphlet'. Macfarlane's sense of historical mission is clear and fierce.

*If the governors express the Idea of their age, there is no need of coercion, everything goes on smoothly, in obedience to a natural law. Society follows its chiefs as gladly as the Crusaders did Baldwin or Peter the Hermit. But if the governors stand in direct opposition to the spirit of their age—i. e., to the thing which the soul of the world, the universal reason incarnate in man, is tending to do at a given historical epoch—society refuses to follow its governors, and we have an epoch of disorganisation and revolution. An epoch where coercion is the necessary condition for the existence of these 'sham governors'—who are not the exponents of any truth, but the representatives of the ghosts of old, dead, formulas; not the legitimate leaders of society, but charlatans and humbugs, who ought to be kicked indefinitely into infinite space—beyond creation, if that were practicable.*

*The present epoch is such a one of disorganisation and revolution. Society is pulling one way, its pretended chiefs another way. I am free to confess that, for me, the most joyful of all spectacles, possible in these times is the one over which Mr. Carlyle laments; one which I enjoyed extremely in Vienna, in March 1848, i.e. "an universal tumbling of impostors and impostures into the street." For it just amounts to this, that men are determined to live no longer in lies, but to abolish them at whatever cost. Ca ira! And how do men come to perceive that the old social forms are worn out and useless? By the advent of a new Idea. At such an epoch the universal reason has reached so high a degree of development in individual man, that, when the thought, the fact, of the epoch, is presented to society, it is seen to be true. As for the adherents of the old system, they attempt to enforce order by means of coercion, they crucify or shoot men; but the Idea is a subtle thing and eludes their grasp. We*

*may safely predict that the Democratic Idea will survive the butcheries of a Haynau, as it has survived the spears of the Roman legions. For, on all sides, spring up, as if by magic, "the enemies of order, the Anarchists, Socialists, Chartist vagabonds"—men, who now, as in the olden time, refuse tribute to Cæsar, denounce the Scribes and Pharisees, and preach the gospel to the poor; men who are "followed by great multitudes, and gladly heard by the common people." The new epoch has no lack of soldiers to fight its battles. Mr. Carlyle qualifies Red Republicanism—i.e. the Democracy, which he admits is the fact of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by the epithet—"mere inarticulate bellowing". This reminds me of the old saying—"he that hath ears, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches." Red Republicanism is just about one of the most articulate, plain-speaking voices, in the whole of Universal History. I opine, it is not very difficult to reach the true meaning of this fact, but we must study it by the light of eighteen centuries of Christianity, or what has hitherto passed for such.*

*Let us see what this frightful bugbear of a "Democracy, the fact of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" really is. I am aware it is the nightmare and 'old boggy' of all respectable formalists—of all decent money-loving, rate-paying, church-going persons, who defer to the opinions of society, and ask of a thing—"what will people say of it?" Not, is it true? Is it right? Persons, in short, who are well affected towards the "glorious British Constitution", and think it cheap at the trifling price of some fifty millions a year. But to another class of people, those unfortunates who have lost all respect for "hereditary and constituted authority"—who consider the lawn sleeves of consecrated bishops and the wigs of learned judges, to be so many rags, so much horsehair—diverted from their legitimate and more useful ends—to all such persons, "Democracy, the Idea of the 19<sup>th</sup> century", is a great and most welcome fact. This idea has revealed itself at different times, and in different ways. I find it has assumed four forms, which, at first sight, are very unlike each other, yet they are only different ways of expressing the same thing, or, to speak strictly, they are the necessary moments in the development, or unfolding, of the idea: and the last of these forms presupposes the*

foregoing ones—as the fruit presupposes the flower, and that again, the bud. These forms are, the religion taught by the divine Galilean Republican—the reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century—the German philosophy from Emmanuel Kant to Hegel—and the Democracy of our own times.

....

Upon the doctrine of man's divinity, rests the distinction between a person and a thing. It is the reason why the most heinous crime I can perpetrate, is invading the personality of my brother man; using him up in any way, from murder and slavery downwards. Red Republicanism, or "Democracy the fact of the 19th century" is a protest against this using up of man by man. It is the endeavour to reduce the golden rule of the Syrian master to practice. Modern democracy is a Christianity manifested in a form adapted to the wants of the present age; it is Christianity divested of its mythological envelope; it is the idea appearing as pure thought, independent of history and tradition. In order to arrive at this form, the idea had to pass through the two forms of Protestantism and Philosophy. Protestantism was the re-assertion of the rights of the personality. The right of the individual judgment was placed in opposition to the authority of the church. A limitation to the progress of the human intellect was done away with, man became free of the kingdom of thought, and could henceforward range it at will. This great work had been begun by the Lollards and other heretics of the middle ages, but its accomplishment was reserved for Luther and his contemporaries. They prepared the way for the German philosophy; for that unique and profound investigation into the nature of man—which, conducted by a phalanx of great thinkers, was terminated by Hegel, the last and greatest of modern philosophers. The result of this investigation was the democratic idea, but as thought, not in the inadequate form of a history or saga. As Hegel expresses it, "Freedom is a necessary element in the conception, man." The German thinkers, from Kant to Hegel, were the apostles and pioneers of the democratic movement, at present shaking society to its foundation, throughout the German empire. The next step in the history of this idea, will be its practical realization, i. e., the reconstruction of society in accordance

with the democratic idea. Is it for a moment to be supposed that this idea—having, despite all opposition, passed through so many phases, or moments, of its development—will stop short of the next and final one? Certainly not. [Democratic Review, May 1850]

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Helen Macfarlane was evidently the first British 'Hegelian-Marxist'. Was she also the first British Hegelian? According to J.H. Muirhead:

*It was not until 1855, when an English translation of part of the Logic was published that any word of his was available to students ignorant of German.*

In the same essay Muirhead claims:

*Up to the middle of the [eighteen] fifties it may be said that no intelligible word had been spoken by British writers as to the place and significance of Hegel's work.<sup>10</sup>*

Muirhead is wrong on all counts. The "translation of part of the Logic" was, as Peter Nicholson points out, merely a "translation of a French paraphrase and compilation of Hegel's ideas, not a real translation of Hegel at all". The first published translation of any of Hegel's books into English was *The Philosophy of History*, translated in 1857 by John Sibree, an associate of George Eliot. We would add that George Henry Lewes's essay, 'Hegel's Aesthetics', in the *British and Foreign Review* #13 (1842), featured several paragraphs of his own translation from Hegel's aesthetical criticism, as well as many 'intelligible' words on its 'significance.' The first published English translation of any of Hegel's strictly 'philosophical' writings was by Helen Macfarlane. It appeared in June 1850 in the *Democratic Review*, the Chartist monthly edited by George Julian Harney. It was preceded by a commentary by Macfarlane, which was the first clear statement of Hegelian-Marxism in the English-speaking world:

*I HAVE said that Red Republicanism, or the democracy which is the 'fact of the 19<sup>th</sup> century', is not 'mere inarticulate bellowing'. We democrats know extremely well why we*

10) J.H. Muirhead, 'How Hegel Came to England', *Mind*, Vol. 36, No. 144, October 1927, pp. 423–47.

demand the abolition of existing social forms. It is because they are altogether opposed to the democratic, or Christian idea. They do not express this idea at all. They are fragments of an earlier world, a confused jumble of Jewish, Teutonic, and Roman laws, usages, and superstitions; in which the idea of our epoch has found a very narrow and uncomfortable habitation. In these old ruins it has—for many centuries—been ‘cribbed, cabined, and confined’, till it has grown strong enough now to break through the walls of its dungeons. Society, as at present constituted, throughout the civilised world—in America as well as in Europe—does not express the Christian idea of equality and fraternity, but the totally opposite pagan principle of inequality and selfishness. In the antique world, the position of a man was determined by the accident of birth. As a citizen of Athens, or of Rome, he was free. But these Athenian and Roman citizens denied the same rights to men belonging to all other nations, whom they contemptuously styled barbarians. They enslaved these other men, or used them up as chattels—in a variety of ways, according as it was found profitable or convenient; precisely as the ‘free and enlightened citizens of America’ do coloured men at the present day. This conduct was excusable enough in the nations of antiquity. The wisest among them could, in fact, act in no other way. For the true nature of man was not then understood. Neither in the religion, nor in the philosophy, of the ancient world, do we find the divinity of human nature expressed. Among all the rich variety of forms assumed by the antique civilisation, there is not one which expresses this fundamental idea of Christianity or democracy, either in a mythical or speculative form. The ancient philosophers left many questions untouched which now occupy a great space in the territory of speculation. For example, [Macfarlane then quotes the following extract from Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy, translated by her and footnoted as ‘Hegel XE’ “Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich”, vol 13, p93. Sammt Werke. Berlin. Edit. by Professors Marheineke, Michelet, Hotho, and others.”]

“the enquiries into the faculty of cognition, into the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity, were unknown in Plato’s time. The absolute

independence of the personality, its existence for and through itself, were quite unknown to Plato. Man had not then returned—so to speak—into himself, had not thoroughly investigated his own nature. This individual subject was indeed independent, free—but was conscious of this only as an isolated fact. The Athenian, the Roman, knew he was free. But that man, as such, is free—as a human being, is born free—was unknown to Plato and to Aristotle, to Cicero and to the Roman jurists, although this conception alone is the source of all jurisprudence. In Christianity we find, for the first time, the individual personal soul depicted as possessing an infinite, absolute value. God wills the salvation of all men. In this religion we find the doctrine that the whole human race is equal in the sight of God, redeemed from bondage, and introduced into a state of Christian freedom by Jesus XE Jesus Christ’. These modes of representation make freedom independent of rank, birth, cultivation and the like; and the progress which has been made by this means is immense. Yet this mode of viewing the matter is somewhat different from the fact that freedom is an indispensable element in the conception—man. The undefined feeling of this fact has worked for centuries in the dark; the instinct for freedom had produced the most terrible revolutions, but the idea of the innate freedom of man—this knowledge of his own nature—is not old.”

The new knowledge of man’s own nature and innate freedom is the philosophic expression of the Democratic Idea which had always been implicit in Christianity. Macfarlane writes:

These two modes of viewing the matter are the necessary compliments of each other. The one mode is imaginative, the other intellectual; the one is religious, the other philosophical. The first mode presents the democratic idea in the form of a myth; the second presents it in the more appropriate and developed form of a conception—as a product of pure reason. But they both belong to the modern world. In the whole civilization of the human race, there is not a trace of the democratic idea to be found, until the appearance of the Nazarean. This being the case, might we not reasonably expect that the forms assumed by modern civilisation would be essentially different from



*those assumed by the antique culture? Vain expectation!* “The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and majesty of the soul”, says an American writer. We are haunted by the ghosts of the old dead nations and cultures<sup>11</sup>

The ‘American writer’ is Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is frequently quoted in Macfarlane’s writing, though never named. Emerson’s appeal for a Hegelian like Macfarlane is captured in Lewis Mumford’s *The Golden Day*: “For Emerson matter and spirit were not enemies in conflict: they were phases of man’s experience: spirit passed into

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matter and gave it a form; and symbols and forms were essences through which man lived and fulfilled his proper being”.<sup>12</sup> Following the publication of this three-part essay in the *Democratic Review*, Helen Macfarlane adopted the nom de plume ‘Howard Morton.’ She did so when she also began to write for Harney’s weekly, the *Red Republican*. One obvious reason for Macfarlane ‘keeping her head down’ behind a male pseudonym must have been the daunting prejudice that would face any woman who openly expressed radical political opinions. When two generations earlier, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and went off to Paris to support the French Revolution, she had been attacked by Horace Walpole as a “hyena in petticoats”. But even in 1850, British society, in Helen Macfarlane’s judgement, condemned itself in “the position of women, who are regarded by law not as persons but as things, and placed in the same category as children and the insane”. Just as the storming of the Bastille in 1789 had introduced the *sans culotte* into

the demonology of English opinion, so the June Days of 1848 in Paris provided the equally terrifying figure of the ‘Red Cap’ Republican, now armed not only with the rifle and the pike but also with the ‘damnable doctrines’ of socialism and communism. In early Victorian England, a female ‘Red Republican’ who openly proved that she could wield the pen as a revolutionary weapon better than most men would have been scourged as a danger to public order and decency.

Whilst Harney’s *Democratic Review of British Politics, History and Literature* (to give it its full title) was pitched at an ‘educated’, ‘intellectual’ readership, his new weekly, the *Red Republican* (the name was changed to the Marat-inspired *Friend of the People* in late 1850) was strictly a paper written for, and by, the working class supporters of the Chartists. But, to all intents and purposes, there is little difference in style and content between what Macfarlane wrote for the *Review* and what she wrote for the *Red*; except that, although she hid her gender, she was entirely open about her ‘intellectual’ status. In opposing the ‘designs’ of bourgeois reformers who failed to recognise that “property is a Social, not an Individual, Right”, and identifying the common ground “on which it appears that all real reformers can meet” as “the emancipation of the Wages-Slaves [and] the abolition of the proletariat”, she adds, with startling humility,

*Perhaps, my proletarian brothers, you will think I have spoken dogmatically upon this topic. It is earnestness in the good cause, and no desire of thrusting my private opinions upon others, that has induced me to write as above. I know that the opinions, on practical subjects of one whose training has chiefly been among books and literature, are of little value compared with the opinions of men amongst you, whose education has been continuous battle with the stern realities of life. If, therefore, my judgment of these things be mistaken, let my heartfelt devotion to your cause, plead with you on my behalf.*<sup>13</sup>

In another *Red Republican* article, Macfarlane attacks Charles Dickens:

11) Macfarlane, *Democratic Review*, June 1850.

12) Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day*, New York, 1927, p. 104.

13) Macfarlane, ‘Democratic Organisation’, *Red Republican*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1850.

Your lessons in morality will do much for men who must either starve or steal, for women who must go on the streets and drive a hideous traffic in their own bodies, to get a meal for their starving children! Rose-coloured political sentimentalists! All this is atrocious, inhuman humbug—and you know it. You boast much of the ‘Charitable Institutions of England’—I tell you the word charity is an insult, and your vaunted institutions are a mockery. Supposing you had the right—which you have not—of monopolizing the land, enslaving the producers, then giving them the bread which is their birthright as human beings, as a charity—God save the mark!—supposing you had the right of doing all this, I say, yet your ‘Institutions’ are quite inadequate to relieve the tenth part of the hideous misery created and fostered by your vicious system of society.<sup>14</sup>

In the same article, Macfarlane turns to another ‘school’ who had attacked the Red Republicans, represented by the *Leader*, a Christian socialist weekly paper founded in 1850 by Thornton Leigh Hunt and George Henry Lewes. At the time Helen Macfarlane was writing for the *Red Republican*, Lewes’s lover, George Eliot (Marian Evans), was working with him at the *Westminster Review* and contributing to the *Leader* under a pseudonym.

*It has lately been said by the Leader that the writers in the Red Republican are “violent, audacious and wrathfully earnest.” Ah my dear Leader, do you perceive that it is quite impossible for a Red Republican—that is a sworn foe of existing social arrangements—to be anything else than “violent and audacious”? Though he were to “roar as gently as any sucking dove”, he would still be found ‘violent’ by those who uphold the existing social system. For my part I am proud of the epithet—violent, and wrap myself in audacity, as in a mantle. Wrathfully earnest! I should think we are. Just about as much in earnest as our precursor, “the Sansculotte Jesus” was when He scourged the usurers and money-lenders, and thimble-rigging stockbrokers of Jerusalem out of that temple they “had made a den of THIEVES.” About as ear-*

*nest as our Nazarean brother was, when—denouncing those who laid heavy burdens of the poor, whom they used up for their own profit, refusing to touch these burdens of their fainting oppressed brethren, with “one of their little fingers”, he exclaimed, “Ye serpents! ye generation of vipers! how shall ye escape the damnation of Hell?” Yes, we are tolerably in earnest, in demanding that the Gospel of Christ shall no longer remain a dead letter; that the noble idea of Fraternity and Equality, first promulgated by the Galilean carpenter, shall at length be realized; that “the ideal of justice and love, which we have long seen glittering above us should descend” into the furrows where the toiling peasant stoops—into the workshops and mills where the pale artisan drags out the twelve and fourteen hours a day, that have made him so stunted, so deformed, and sickly a sample of humanity.*

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*The idea of perfect Liberty, of Equality and Fraternity—the divine idea of love, incarnate in the gentle Nazarean, is the idea we earnestly worship. It freed itself from the dead weight of a lifeless Past in the days of Luther, bursting forth from under the accumulated rubbish of ages, like waters of life—like a fountain to refresh the wanderer fainting in desert places: it found an expression free from all symbols, sagas, and historical forms, in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, by Maximilien Robespierre, and in the immortal pages of [Rousseau’s] Contrat Social and Émile. The next step in the development of this divine idea will be its practical realization: the Ethico-political regeneration of society, which our early oriental brothers, the proletarian suffers under the Roman despots, pictured as the second coming of that thorn-crowned Martyr, on Calvary; the reign of God’s saints on earth. Sedition! Imprisonment! Transportation to penal settlements! Suppression of the Red Republican! Let them suppress it if they dare. We, the writers therein, will find other and quite as effectual modes of expressing our thought. We will go forth on the highways and byeways—by the roadside—in every mill and workshop we will preach the Rights and Wrongs of labour, from that text of Paul’s—“If any man be not willing to work, neither shall he eat.” And should we be imprisoned or sent beyond seas,*

14) Macfarlane, ‘Fine Words (Household or otherwise) Butter No Parsnips’, *Red Republican*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1850.

*we will console ourselves by the reflection that the spirit of the age has no lack of fit organs to express its thought—that the work will not stand still, because a few workmen have been removed; we will rejoice that we have been found worthy to suffer for this divinest idea of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—to be joined to its Martyrs and Apostles, that glorious band, gathered from all ages and nations—a peculiar people, a sacred priesthood”—the best and noblest of the human race.*<sup>15</sup>



In September 1850, Pope Pius IX decided to re-establish a full Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales for the first time since the reign of Mary Tudor, and appointed Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman as Archbishop of Westminster. Following Wiseman's statement that "Catholic England has been restored to its orbit in the ecclesiastical firmament, from which its light had long vanished", Prime Minister Lord John Russell railed against 'papal aggression'. At the time, the Church of England was still reeling from the defections to Catholicism of the eminent Anglican theologian, John Henry Newman, and his followers. In the article 'Signs of the Times, Red Stockings versus Lawn-Sleeves' (red stockings were the costume of Catholic cardinals; linen—or 'lawn'—shirts were favoured by Church of England bishops), Macfarlane notes that "Old Mother Church is all in a twitter at the bare idea of certain naughty Popish attempts to poach on her sacred manor. A fearful shriek of clerical woe has been raised from one end of England to the other, while faithful Protestants have duly responded to the call of the 'pulpit drum ecclesiastic' by frantic 'No Poper' battle shouts, and the sacrifice of innumerable Guys". Neither the Catholics, led by "the imbecile old man, who at present so unworthily occupies the chair of Gregory the Great", nor the Anglican establishment, had "the remotest glimpse of the idea agitating the minds of those they aspire to govern—not the faintest notion of the social problem of the age they pretend to direct and represent". In the second part of this article Macfarlane turns to the philosophical / spiritual / political 'alternative':

*MY Proletarian Brothers, this case of Red-stockings versus Lawn-sleeves, wherein the Lawn-sleeves have openly assumed a most illogical and absurd position, is among the most important and cheering signs of the times. Because it shows that the world of Ideas is taking the same direction as the world of Facts. The inward world is obeying the same law as the outward world. The modern middle-class system of production and distribution is constantly tending towards the destruction of the small capitalist, the master tradesman, the retail shopkeeper, the small manufacturer, &c., tending towards the division of society into the two great classes of rich and poor, capitalist and wages slaves, privileged and unprivileged, financial aristocrat, and proletarian.*

*When this division is accomplished, a servile war will be the inevitable result. The two hostile armies must fight out the last of the innumerable class-battles, and the victory will be to the strongest class—to the revolutionary proletariat. They are the Men of the Future, and the task entrusted to them is the re-organization of society, the creation of a new heavens and a new earth, when the old shall have been 'rolled up like a scroll', and utterly abolished. I have said the inward world is obeying the same law. The world of thought is rapidly breaking up into two camps; the one containing the partizans of despotic authority; the other, the champions of unlimited free thought; of unlimited, unchecked, intellectual, and moral development. Now, one effect of this spiritual movement will be, that the partizans of intellectual despotism, (who are also invariably the upholders of secular despotism) will no longer get leave to masquerade among the defenders of liberty.*

*Protestantism must now accept the reformation of the nineteenth century, or enter the Camp of the Past. The present weak and contemptible aspect of Protestantism is the result of the miserable compromise between truth and falsehood—the halting between two opinions—which has been going on ever since the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The more logical and sincere class of minds, in England as well as in Germany, has come to similar conclusions. On all sides, thinking men are either re-entering the pale of Rome, or throwing off the whole superstructure of scholastic theology as a dead weight, which impedes*

15) Macfarlane, *Red Republican*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1850.

the healthy action of their minds, as something which is worse than useless. Here then, we see the dawn of the new reformation; we have the tendencies of the present age developed in the form of two frightful bugbears; on the one hand, appearing as the Catholicism; on the other, as the "Rationalism with infidelity and Pantheism in it train"—which are now exciting a flutter of holy fervour among the Lawn-sleeves, and causing every hair on venerable episcopal wigs to become instinct with pious indignation, and stand on end—"like quills upon the fretful porcupine".

But the days of orthodox Protestantism are now numbered. The human mind has not been standing still for the last 300 years. Men are beginning to perceive that this system satisfies neither the heart nor the head; neither the imagination nor the intellect. For it swept away all the poetry of the Christian Mythos, and gave a death blow to the art of the Middle Ages. It left us nothing but a set of abstract creeds and dogmas, professedly based upon another set of questionable sagas and hearsays. Nothing save a museum of old dried up scholastic formulas; which, however they might express the convictions, or reflect back the consciousness of man in the sixteenth century, have been outgrown by him in the nineteenth, and are now so many impediments to his spiritual development.

Yet, as every historical appearance, every manifestation of a thought, is (in its place) both useful and inevitable—or, in other words, as every fact has a meaning, you will naturally ask, what is the meaning of Protestantism? It is a state of transition. It is the necessary stepping-stone for the human mind in its progress from deism to pantheism—that is, from the belief in the holiness of some things, in the divinity of one being or of one man, to a belief in the divinity of All beings, of All men—in the holiness of All things.

The reformation of the sixteenth century having remained stationary between spiritual despotism and spiritual freedom, found its befitting complement, its secular mode of expression, in the form of government called constitutional. The inward or spiritual compromise between these principles of the past and the future, resulted in the outward or temporal compromise between the same. A stunted, crippled idea could produce nothing better than a

miserable ghastly abortion of balance of powers, king, lords, and commons, constitutional factions, whig prime ministers—and the like. All history bears witness to the truth of an old saying—"as a man is, so are his gods"; or conversely, that the actions of man—the laws, forms of government, art, literature, manners, and customs, in a word, the phases of civilization, prevalent amongst any people, are directly derived from its theology. If we know the fundamental principle of any given theology, we can at once predict the amount of secular freedom, or the degree of political and social development—which is compatible with a belief in that theology. Thus, we find feudal despotism the prevailing form of government in Catholic countries. It is the secular expression for that principle of absolute spiritual authority of which Catholicism is the only logical, consequent, and satisfactory development.

In the regions of spiritual compromise, of doubt and fluctuation, of unrest, of weariness and vexation of the soul—in the regions of Protestantism, (protesting against error, yet stopping short of truth) we find in secular things, a like system of unsatisfactory compromise, of incessant fluctuation. There is no fundamental principle, upon which a reasonable creature could find a firm footing—concerning which he could say, "I see what this is, I accept or reject it with all its consequences". I find, not only in the Anglican Church, but as the fatal absurdity which pervades the whole Protestant system—I find that an infallible Book is assumed as the basis of religious faith, yet without having any professedly infallible interpreter. Covertly every sect assumes its own articles, confession, or creed, to be the infallible interpreter; and if any one dare to read the Bible, which is the religion of Protestants' otherwise than through a pair of sectarian spectacles, he is immediately denounced as "an infidel scoffer", and held up to public execration. Is not this incredible logic? I infinitely prefer the logic of the Romish Cardinal, who says—"Do not read this infallible book, for the Church is the only authorised interpreter". If a religion based upon historic evidences—upon matters of critical research and antiquarian learning, things—that is—beyond the reach of any but the most highly educated portion of society—if an Historical religion is to be religion for the

masses, a universal religion, then it must have a perpetually inspired (or infallible) witness for its truth. That witness is the Church! Is not a man who puts a book into the hands of Tom, Dick, and Harry, telling them to read it diligently—and then denounces them for having different opinions about it from those he himself entertains, is he not a donkey of the first magnitude?

....

But the new religion, that of unlimited spritual freedom—whose dawn is now visible, whose banner bears the sacred inscription, Equality, Liberty, Fraternity—will also find a befitting secular mode of expression. It will bring in its train corresponding institutions and social forms. It will assume the outward form of a republic such as the world has never yet seen. “A republic without helots”; without poor; without classes; without hereditary hewers of wood and drawers of water; without slaves, whether chattel or wages slaves. “For if I treat all men as divine, how can there be for me such a thing as a slave?” A society, such indeed as the world has never yet seen—not only of free men, but of free women; a society of equally holy, equally blessed gods.<sup>16</sup>

The phrase, ‘Republic without Helots’, comes from August Blanqui’s speech to the French court in 1849, translated and published in Harney’s *Friend of the People*, 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1851:

*Alexander, in the desert of Gedrosia, scattered on the sand some water that was brought to him in a helmet, exclaiming, “Every one, or no one!”... When the people are starving, no one ought to eat. This is my utopia, my dream in the February Days... Yet the question was not that of a Republic of Spartans, but of a Republic without Helots. Perhaps my utopia*

16) Macfarlane, ‘Signs of the Times, Red Stockings versus Lawn-Sleeves’, *Friend of the People*, December 21 and 26, 1850.

*will appear the most absurd and the most impossible of all. Then may God have mercy on France!*

This phrase “A society, such indeed as the world has never seen—not only of free men, but of free women; a society of equally, holy, equally blessed gods” borrows from Heinrich Heine’s essay ‘The New Pantheism’ (1835):

*The political revolution which is based on the principles of French materialism will find no enemies in the pantheists, but rather allies who derive their convictions from a deeper source, from a religious synthesis... [The] divinity of man manifests itself also in his body. Human misery destroys or abases the body, which is the image of God... We do not wish to be sans-culottes, or frugal citizens, or economical presidents. We establish a democracy of equally glorious, equally holy and equally happy gods. You ask for simple dress, austere manners and unseasoned joys. We, on the other hand, demand nectar and ambrosia, purple raiments, costly perfumes, luxury and splendor, dances of [laughing nymphs, music and comedy. Oh, do not be angry, virtuous republicans! To your censorious reproaches, we say with the fool in Shakespeare, “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?”... We have, in fact outgrown deism. We are free and do not need a tyrant with thunder. We have come of age and do not need paternal supervision. We are not the bungled handiwork of a great mechanic. Deism is a religion for slaves, children, Genevans and watchmakers.*

Macfarlane harnessed the energies of poetry, religion and philosophy to the Chartist cause, energies without which political radicalism, however intellectually stringent—or academically endorsed—is doomed to fail.