

# Loops and Knots in a Long Rope: Scenes from the Equivocation Theme in Early Modern England



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*Think thou not that I come to send peace on earth:*

*I came not to send peace, but a sword.*

1. Matthew 11. 34<sup>1</sup>

I

Tradition, especially in times of doubt and trouble, calls for objects of popular cherishing and homage, and commemoration is supposed to revive the common ground of memory and national identity, and exorcize ghosts of scepticism and decline. Britain has always been culturally multiform, the field of permanent intercourse between natives and immigrants, settlers and travellers, conquerors and traders, and the attempt at spotting a *stratum* with solid qualifications to typify origins or genuine sources would certainly collapse. The conspicuousness of the living faces of the Empire, after all the visible witnesses of a very recent historical experience providing, however, marks of irreversible import, joins the reductive label of Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic cultural matrix. To conjure a sense of Commonwealth and the pride grounded on the royal throne of kings and earth of majesty has always seemed an appropriate gesture to pour new life into founding moments and to challenge the dissolving invasion of newcomers, hostile or indifferent to the respectful voices of the past and the most decent and basic feelings of the

present. Some years ago, many can certainly remember, a speech of queen Elizabeth, our contemporary, went hand in hand with the imposing and watchful image of another Elizabeth whose picture, framing the scene in the background, gave authority and legitimacy to the composed attitude of the Windsor monarch that urged her loyal subjects to renew the patriotic quest of the happy few of olden times (then the phrase 'Kill all the Argies', making the jesting headlines of the so-called quality press, replicated in more sinister reverberations in the jingoistic popular papers). The famous proclamation of Tyburn, on the eve of the episode of the Invincible Armada, returned like old wine poured into new bottles. Sometimes you don't even need to think, you just have to believe, even if a suitable refashioning, tinged with the wayward paths and crooked ways that once led Bolingbroke to power and greeted the victor of Agincourt, would not resist a more critical scrutiny. In our time the persuasive force of authorized versions reenacts its effects in a larger scale: bombing and invading a foreign country with the poor claim of a sheer supposition (the existence of hidden weapons of immense power of destruction) and the stronger one (an indefectible fidelity to allies and to essential values of Western civilization) may rig common sense and judgment on the nature of things, but such an adventure certainly returns to the little island a bracing scent of the power and glory of the good olden times.

Past and present in the web of paradox and controversy: celebrating the failure of those obscure conspirators that in 1605 set an audacious plot against King and Parliament is not a consensual reference in its historical meaning. Nor 1588 and the defeat of the Armada, 1660 and the Restoration, 1688 and the 'Glorious Revolution', facts of much higher import, are univocal sources of national inspiration: the plight of the Catholic subjects of the Virgin Queen, torn between political loyalty and religious convictions, the persecution of Catholics in England or the instability of the status granted to the old faith, the massacre of the Irish or the repression of Jacobean followers, not to mention the fierce crushing of Republicans and 'enthusiasts'.

Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot may evoke much more than an ancillary episode in the long rope of loops and knots that swerves deviously along Tudor and Stuart England, now food for merrymaking and bonfires, full of the sound and fury of Halloween and appropriately served by the same business panoply. An observer from abroad without inclination for mass enthusiasm or populist fervour can see in the national festivity just an unruly and boisterous commemoration at variance with a proper attitude of joyous celebration. A biased perspective and a simple matter of taste? Of bad taste anyway: let alone the ethnic conscience of minorities claiming to be the victims of an outrageous discrimination symbolically expressed in their erasure from the British Flag, or those living on the fringe of any official religious confession (independently of its relevance in a secular society), one can guess that Catholic writers – Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Burgess, Peter Ackroyd or David Lodge – would most probably not share what is no more a distinctive badge of national character.

In the Middle Ages subordination to the Crown was already an established practice of the Church of England. Consent was the rule even in delicate issues such as royal claims or decisions concerning the nomination of bishops, which so often had on the Continent a most drastic expression. Moreover, Church and universities supplied the increasing needs of state bureaucracy with the obedient expertise of their scholars. Such a functional unity of efforts in the preservation and reproduction of basic ideological and religious representations hardly discriminates *bellatores* and *oratores* – monasteries and landlords shared their role as sources of authority over villains and peasants. Kings and nobility lived according to old consensual bonds that granted both duties of loyalty to the monarch and respect of traditional rights to local potentates. Not that stability was not sometimes shaken, as the rise of Sir John Oldcastle in 1414 or, before that, in the late fourteenth century, the insurgency of John Ball and their followers, or the heresy of John Wycliff and

the Lollards generously document; but medieval political, economic and ideological structures were, broadly speaking, part of the even landscape of the feudal system.

Long before Reformation, clergymen and English humanists were well aware of the crucial organizational, moral, and even theological drawbacks that affected the venerable institution founded by Peter. Erasmus had already exposed pride and arrogance and a blind and obsolete attachment to dogma in Church and society; now simony and nepotism, pluralism and non-residence, theological ignorance and cultural deprivation, erotic incontinence or unjustifiable immunities and privileges of priests (*v. g. benefit of clergy*) made part of a wide range of vices that could not be ignored any more. John Colet, the dean of Saint Paul's, and Thomas More, Lawyer, and chancellor to be, were not sectarians and remained in the ranks of the universal *Ecclesia*, trying to reform it from inside (more audacious the former, more restrained the latter). Many faces has dissent and non-conformity, and the fortunes, good or bad, of iconoclasts, rebels with or without a cause, ambitious aristocrats or heterodox scholars and thinkers cannot unfortunately be here a target of rewarding scrutiny and debate. Catholics in England during the period under consideration will be entitled enough, I hope, to guide us through the knotty and tortuous design that crosses a long time of achievements and suffering, certainly fascinating in the distance (as fascinating are certain restored urban areas, that only residents do not find attractive in their typical and picturesque outlines) and under the voyeuristic eyes of those who have never lived in it. In this very short excursion Guy Fawkes will never be very too far. I suppose he can wait for a little while, and the case may be that he does not seek to be remembered at all and would rather rest in peace.

When Thomas More came to the world, most probably in 1478, under the encouraging prospects of those born in an affluent and influent family, an era

of social unrest was about to die; when he left it, in 1535, on the scaffold of Tower Hill, ironically erected near Milk Street, the place where he first had seen the light, free reign had been given to the fittest, the unscrupulous servants of a voluble King desperately engaged in the consolidation of a new dynasty still groping its way in the tricky web of home affairs and the precariousness of international alliances. However, everything seemed to be new under the sun when the lawyer, businessman and humanist scholar rejected the strenuous scepticism of Raphael Hythloday and responded to the challenge of a little concrete utopia in the service of Henry VIII, the acclaimed *defensor fidei* in times of discord and heresy. The just may live by faith, but faith can also kill: the dialogic quest for truth, inscribed in *Utopia*, gave way to repression and intolerance, and the ashes of William Tyndale, the English Luther, proclaimed the triumph of orthodoxy, the erasure of the generous openness of the philosophic *doxa* and the failure of the humanist rhetoric of persuasion. Toleration is nefarious and nonsensical when dissolving ideas and dangerous engagements are liable to jeopardize religious conformity and promote unruly factions in the kingdom – translating the Bible into vernacular languages is a malicious and treacherous move, understanding *Ecclesia* as the community of believers is a poisonous and odious proposition that degrades the mission and credentials of the visible Church, and denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation craves urgent annihilation of the heretic and his heresy. The austere Carthusian now extends his discipline and values to the Commonwealth and expels from the utopia of his lord and master the spots of dissidence and heterodoxy. ‘Heresies breed disorders, and fear of this have been the causes that princes and peoples have been constrained to punish heretics by terrible death, whereas more easy ways had been taken with them’<sup>2</sup>: collapse is promised to dialogue and compromise when faith and order are at the stake. And had not the wise thinker and reliable Chancellor of the realm, after all, joined the Tudor myth in the convenient depiction of the last York monarch, overthrown in the fields of Bosworth in the providential

year of 1485, as a deformed monster and bloodthirsty tyrant (was not the *The History of King Richard III*, with purpose and meaning, written in Latin, the *lingua franca* of humanistic intellectual communication, but in the language of the loyal subjects of His Majesty)?<sup>3</sup>

More sinned against than sinned? When Thomas More resigned, in 1532, the way was paved for Thomas Cromwell and his cronies: “*Are you threatening me, Cromwell*”, asks the enraged Lord in his reluctance to betray More and to respond to a dubious information that would force him to cooperate against the former Chancellor; *The King particularly wishes you to be active in the matter. My dear Norfolk...this is not Spain*”, replies in a cynical voice the new man in charge.<sup>4</sup> The reference exposes in the language of dramatic fiction both the pervasive atmosphere of intimidation and fear that goes along with the ruthless centralization of power and the new paradigm of compulsory involvement of members of the commonwealth in matters of state and politics. If intimate convictions cannot be touched and scrutinized by authority, at least strict observance of official rituals is a visible manifestation of loyalty. Is not worth while mentioning at this juncture that the impressive royal progresses and visits to distinguished Tudor Houses, or the Lord Mayor solemn annual excursion in the streets of London came to efface popular festivals and celebrations? One renounces liberating energy of folk culture and shared experience among equals and looks in awe and respect at the magic circle of his betters. The prisoner in the Tower took refuge and fortitude in the correspondence with his daughter, in the examination of his conscience in a context that transcends his individual fortune, and in the example of Christ, the way of suffering, not the way of violent resistance - “The general subject of his dialogue letter and *A Dialogue of Comfort* is the same: how should the Christian behave when persecutors test his strength to endure for what he believes, in his conscience, to be the true faith?”<sup>5</sup> His trial was basically a sordid hunt of a defenseless victim and a savage exercise in

sadism. The recent execution of John Fisher, his supposed accomplice in crime, projected its ominous shadow on what could be appropriately labeled the corridor of death. Before infuriated magistrates and an intimidated jury, More claimed his innocence and rejected the insidious allegations based on the principle *Qui tacet consentire videtur*. Individual conscience is a sacred garden that should be preserved from profanation, nothing had been specifically designed to produce any expressed opinion concerning the marriage of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, and recantation would be absurd. Silence does not therefore reverberate the sounds of treason. There was no equivocation or double-talk. But there was no escape either. Doctrinal controversy could not be avoided: the accused discarded *in limine* the legal status and authority of the court, and in the expansion of the argument came to surface the allegiance of the culprit to the See of Rome. Convicting is also convincing, but when execution followed, the grandiose pageant of Death had to cope with the dignified resistance of the actor against his preordained role and , therefore, did not fully respond to the expectations of its mentor and directors. The same would later happen, under Elizabeth and on the eve of the Armada episode, with the performance of Mary Stuart, the dearest hope of Catholic Europe, also willing to dictate her own terms to a ceremony of crime and punishment devised as an awe-striking example of the triumph of Truth over dangers of Error and devilish conspiracy. Thomas More is now also remembered as a saint and a martyr by the Church of Rome, the Queen of Scots is still celebrated by her defiant courage in tribulation. But Guy Fawkes, a minor character in the play of Treason, is bound to live a thousand deaths as a poor scarecrow in flames.

Dilemmas and quandaries of a religion of love were also to haunt inflexions in politics and faith dictated by the inheritors of Henry VIII. Repression and intolerance informed the aggressive initiatives of the new order during the brief rule of the young Edward, and the ambitions and opportunism of the

rival earls of Somerset and Northumberland, and afterwards the immolation of the naïve Lady Jane Gray, a mere scapegoat dragged into a suicidal adventure that she could not understand entirely, opened the gates to the restoration of old loyalties and allegiances. The bloody Mary, as the Protestant tradition with some success branded the daughter of Catherine of Aragon, knew well the anxieties of persecution, and her pious devotion to a sacred cause now urged her to take harsh and inflexible measures against heretics. The popular and spicy *Book of Martyrs, or Acts and Monuments*, published in 1563 and written by John Fox, a famous Marian exile, is a formidable arraignment of that female Anti-Christ, impious and cruel in the appalling sacrifice and death of the just and the humiliating recantation of the virtuous nation, forced to kneel down before the power of Rome, seditious and perverse in the calling to the country of the arch-enemy of England through her marriage to Philip of Spain. A reliable version? Or simply the populist emphasis given to the militant angry voice of resentment? Protestant agitators in their crude resilience played certainly a decisive role in the context – unrelenting provocation and abusive invective are liable to infuriate authorities and excite violence, and it is without saying that extreme violence was a pervasive way to crush enemies or eliminate differences.<sup>6</sup> Be as it may, not everyone would be prepared to sugar the pill and listen, let alone give full credit, to a milder perspective of the nature of that abhorred regime:

No one has made a detailed critical study of the Marian persecution. All the accounts of it we possess are heavy with the worst failings of the hagiographer and the apologist. And the distortions of the legend have done much to provoke exaggerated skepticism about the facts that are its foundation. There is, of course, no need to postulate any personal bloodthirstiness whether in the ecclesiastics who tried the accused or in the executive that initiated the policy and kept the ecclesiastics to their task. The terrible penalty of death was the usual

penalty for serious offences of every kind, and as for the death for burning, it was in England regularly inflicted on women, in lieu of a hanging, for two hundred years and more after Mary Tudor's reign, until wellnigh the close of the eighteenth century.

By the standards of any country and any time before the French Revolution, there was nothing unusual in the severity of the punishment. Those who enacted such a penalty cannot, historically, be regarded as monstrous for that alone, nor can they be said to have been anything other than typical of their time because the offense for which they decreed the penalty was the offense of heresy./.../.<sup>7</sup>

*Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves:  
Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.*

Matthew 10. 16

## II

The Age of Elizabeth is commonly seen as a redeeming time based on a prudent religious and political settlement. Catholic past had to be overcome by rupture and innovation, but the new faith could not simply be imposed by law or crude expediency upon old habits and traditional forms of worship and mental representations. Fresh memories of the widespread radicalism and unbearable insecurity of the two previous reigns were for sure an invaluable support to legitimacy and a precious caution to social transformation. Even among brethren of common persuasion controversy emerged with its new challenges and its potential eroding effects. The militant nation, aware of a providential role to play in times of tribulation - successful abroad in the brutal energy of merchant adventurers and pirates (one keeps in mind some

famous names, enthusiasts about discoveries and colonial expansion, like Richard Hakluyt, soldiers of fortune, like John Hawkins, Sir Francis Drake or Sir Martin Frobisher, even the courtier and poet Sir Walter Raleigh, all men of quality in the informal service of the Queen) – was nevertheless pervaded by a feeling of uneasiness that paved the way to the suppression, by cunning and violence, of real or imaginary plots. The strange case of Roderigo Lopez, the old physician of Queen Elizabeth, would illustrate the web of operations of secrecy, suspicion and extorted confessions that sacrificed any intruder that happened to step, no matter how innocently that might happen, on the nook where angels fear to tread – the Portuguese Jew, not the confirmed conspirator attempting at poisoning her sovereign or the silent link to the Spanish connection, was simply the victim of his imprudence and the tremendous risks his greed made him to run.<sup>8</sup> And that of Christopher Marlowe, the talented dramatist and spy in the service of the crown, ironically bound to the form and meaning of the myth in the popular emotions aroused by the both tragic and ludicrous *The Jew of Malta*, that savage farce that capitalized popular emotions in London – he had also to pay the reckoning and was promptly dispatched, almost certainly the prey of the voracious struggle between factions (the Earl of Essex and the Cecils) under the sinister eye of Sir Francis Walsingham, the pragmatic head of the secret service of Her Majesty.<sup>9</sup>

A vivid sense of urgency came to the surface when domestic politics and events abroad coalesced into a terrible shadow projected over the nation - old fears and anxieties revived. The rise to the throne of the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn in 1558 had affected the unstable web of confederacy of interests and power structures established among European countries. Reactions were soon to be felt: the Portuguese bishop and scholar D. Jerónimo Osório, just to refer to an example well known to us, responding to the appeal of the Cardinal D. Henrique, sends a letter to Elizabeth. He praises

the Queen, stresses her wisdom and culture, exhorts her to listen to the word of good counsel, exposes the impiety of Luther and their followers, and proclaims his allegiance to the lessons of famous doctors and divines.<sup>10</sup> The Irish had to be kept at bay, France was a permanent menace hovering ominously above the chosen people of England – the “Auld Alliance” of 1295 that associated traditional enemies of the kingdom, reenacted through the prospective marriage of Mary Stuart to the heir of the French throne (1548),<sup>11</sup> an overt manoeuvre to besiege the militant nation, while Spain threatened to crush the defenders of true religion in the Netherlands (where England was to be involved in an informal war). But this was the price to pay for a daring and unwavering choice. Time was ready for subversion.

The execution of Mary Queen of the Scots, the half-sister of Elizabeth and the most illustrious prisoner in the Tower, the continuous ravaging raids perpetrated by subjects of Her Majesty, supposedly acting on their own, in fact obeying the interests of the kingdom and the vital accumulation of capital in the early stages of English imperial expansion, against Spanish galleons that crossed the Atlantic with their round flanks full of rich spoils of colonial exploitation, the harassing intervention in the Netherlands, as cloaked and devious as the strokes of pirates, were provocations that could not be ignored. And later on, defeat on the seas and deadlock in the battlefield called for an insidious feedback. In some colleges on the Continent – Valladolid, Rheims, Rome, ... - scholars were taking orders and sent to England secretly: to give assistance to their brethren in faith or, in a different version, to fuel disobedience and, *Deo juvante*, to eliminate the English heretic queen by dagger or poison. Had not the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* (1590) excommunicated her and liberate her subjects from loyalty and submission? Followers of Ignatio de Loyola, the indefectible servants of Spanish policy according to a deliberate simplification, activated their powers of corruption and began to orchestrate a complex set of underground moves. Edmund

Campion (under excruciating torture and then executed, in 1581), Robert Southwell (also arrested, tormented and executed in 1595), Thomas Cotton (also crushed in agony and savagely executed in 1582), Robert Southwell (also quartered and disemboweled, in 1595), and the famous Robert Parsons (died in Rome, in 1610). Heroes, saints and martyrs, or malignant traitors and equivocators, according to the sides taken, are protagonists in an untangling sequence of plots and knots. Means and ends meet, truth cannot always be obeyed in forced confessions, above all when tenors of a sacred mission are in the fangs of Death. *Wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. /.../.*

But stability requires determination and obstinate search for compromise, a solid state machinery and strong administrative structures, and a careful and patient exercise of power. The divine rule of kings would depend above all on the qualities of the sovereign and on the public image she or he managed to create. The reduction of the ecclesiastical institution to an ideological department of the Crown – the Queen became the Supreme Governor of the Church of England by means of the Act of Supremacy (a significant modulation, her father had been Supreme Head of the Church of England) – was to be operative as a source of indoctrination. Elizabeth had to face the resistance of feudal potentates firmly attached to ancient privileges (see the rebellious lords of the North, those Percys and Northumberlands that Shakespeare summons to the dramatic action of the two parts of *Henry IV*), and the sense of urgency depicted in *An Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* (1570) is an impressive instance of that upsetting resilience of vested interests of the past. And the massive work of Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, documents a conspicuous feeling of restlessness in a tyranny by consent. Problems of another sort were also requiring instant and tactful examination.

In a visual and oral culture, images and speech are the flavor of daily routine. Pulpits were, at least before the triumph and institution of the austerity of the Reformed Church, scenes of histrionic and sensational homilies, and the vibrant exuberance and colour of pageants and popular rites and ceremonies gave to the invigorating sense of community a local habitation and a name. Now the cold nude walls of temples, deprived of their propitious icons, favoured anxieties of a piety that had expelled from churches those consolations once granted by the intercession of the Virgin, saints or angels or relief given by sacraments and consecrated formulae of devotion. Sins could once be pardoned, penitence and good works could purify the soul, and the believer used to join his prayers to the confident voices of the congregation. But now, poor orphan trembling before his God and His mysterious ways, he had to pray alone, and feverishly search in his conscience and in the ways of the world the visible signs of his unpredictable election. However, image, speech, movement and excitement were soon to be generously provided by popular and commercial theatre, and the Holy Virgin would return to the yearning imagination of believers in the form of another Virgin.

Elizabeth knew that in this field she and her Privy Council had to ponder and negotiate as well. Although doctrine was suggestively Calvinistic, the articles of faith were elusive enough to respond both to radical and moderate views, and liturgy kept some features of the more exuberant Catholic legacy. One the other hand, some patriarchal disquiet arising from the precarious female authority could be successfully appeased by the gentle veneration of the distant lady, the owner of everlasting youth and the object of dedicated and hopeless lovers. The Virgin Queen had no children, but she was above all that most singular woman that had the heart and resolution of a man and had married her nation, as she proclaimed in Tyburn in the providential year of 1588, among the enthusiastic applause of her subjects. And then unity of the kingdom had to be preserved at all costs, even if dynastic fortunes had to be

sacrificed, and so prospects of marriage were to be in succession postponed or rejected. Prominence awarded to one of the obdurate rival factions that struggled for power and influence would affect drastically the delicate balance sustained by a shrewd policy of allocation of titles and privileges and regulation of lobbies and alliances.

*Please to remember  
The Fifth of November,  
Gunpowder, treason and plot;  
I see no reason  
Why gunpowder treason  
Should ever be forgot.<sup>12</sup>*

#### IV

Fawkes, Fox, Fakes: names are fertile in connotations, mainly when they inhabit the world of allegorical insinuation and encoded presence: *Make –evil* was not only an innocent play on words but the branded mark of the Florentine counselor and diplomat, Niccolò Machiavelli, and of his secret practices, more common in early Jacobean politics than the virtuous nation would ever be prepared to admit. Spying or denigration, torture and barbarous execution, as piracy or plunder, were reasonable enough provided that the right target were hit to the benefit and glory of Her Majesty; even if abhorrence could in this frame of things not be easily discarded: unlike the praiseworthy knight-errands on the sea, those God’s instruments and ministers only called for despise, as one can read in Ben Jonson’s “On Spies”: “Spies, you are light in state, but of base stuffe, / Who, when you’have burnt yourself down to the snuffe, / Stinke, and are thrown away. End fair enough”.<sup>13</sup> What could be accepted from above had a perfect correspondence from below: the same approach was vindicated by the Catholic faction, and Philip of Spain himself only vacillated to approve of actions of *desperados* and

devastating plots, such as the one devised by Robert Catesby and his cronies in 1604, when considerations on their political impact were at stake. The human factor – the awful massacre of the royal family and a considerable numbers of members of Parliament, let alone the fate of brave conspirators, Guy (alias Guido)<sup>14</sup> Fawkes among them, would be just the collateral effects of a pious venture. Any unsuccessful Gunpowder Plot was liable to intensify repression against Catholics, confirming the exclusion of those great expectations to which promises made by the new King, himself a pacifist aiming at a definite peace settlement with the archenemy of England, had given some substance.

James Stuart was not a controversialist beyond endurance, but his claims to absolute authority would never deserve downright enforcement in spite of the insistent assertiveness of his demands. Succession, meticulously prepared by William Cecil (who, by the way, would extend dynastic titles of bureaucracy to his son, Robert Cecil) had been as consensual as possible, and the mythic matriarch figure of Elizabeth was not to generate at first any traumatic feelings of loss or painful nostalgia. The Scottish King himself had been victim of a tremendous chain of plots, which included kidnapping, attempted murder, with narrow escape in the middle; it would be only natural that he sought among his new subjects a new confidence. But reconciliation in doctrine could not be achieved – the Hampton Court Conference (1604) was to be a failure, at least in the eyes of his contemporaries,<sup>15</sup> mistrust between his English and Scottish subjects could not be overcome, and full institutional unity between the kingdoms of Scotland and England collapsed before the more realistic, but pale and somewhat unsubstantial, dual monarchy of Great Britain, a label never consecrated by use or general persuasion, and English Parliament, a stronghold of vested interests, would never warrant the Great Contract idealized by the monarch as the instrument to grant the Crown the financial resources needed to face growing expenses, growing opulence, and

the growing number of dependants and favourites (rude Scottish followers were supposedly a qualified part of that outrageous sharers of spoils, and a source of discrimination against English vassals). Titles were for sale, expenses in extravagant shows and performances at the Court were a permanent argument of dispute in the time when even lofty exhibition had a tinge of Catholicism in its nature and intention. Meanwhile repression of Catholics joined, in a disappointing policy of club and carrot, peace with Spain (actually there was in the treaty not a single article devoted to toleration of the old faith), which paved the way to the prominence of the former enemies in the making of political decisions: the fate of Sir Walter Raleigh, or the denial of armed assistance to the Protestant cause on the Continent when war broke out in 1618 would soon illustrate this inclination<sup>16</sup>, and an increasing feeling of unease heralded feats of regeneration, the strive of the chosen seed for another country, “Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new”, as John Milton would claim in 1637, in the last verses of *Lycidas*.<sup>17</sup> At this crossroads of violence and persecution, the militant nation would crush heretics and stifle their wiles – was not equivocation a cryptic denial of Christ, and the Gunpowder Plot its malicious activation?<sup>18</sup> And was not *A Treatise of Equivocation*, a *pièce de résistance* found among the papers of one of the conspirators, the insidious “guide to the dismantling of royal government in England”, its author, the abhorred Father Garnet, “a kind of priest of Satan”? A peculiar ontological territory supported the idea that perjury, irrespective of its context, was treason to the nature of words, and to deceive or equivocate in confession was a crime without remission:

“The view of language as natural, not artificial, was still held in the sixteenth century. God had *named* creatures as he made them. Either he named them himself (“And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night,” Genesis 1.5) or he delegated the naming to Adam (“and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was

the name thereof, “ Genesis 2.9). To give false names, to pervert language, was a sin against nature. Abusing words was abusing things – that was one source of the potency of abused language in magic and witchcraft. It explains why it was so easy for controversialists to equate Jesuits with witches.”<sup>19</sup>

“Please to remember the Fifth of November,  
Gunpowder Freedom and Plot.

We know no reason why Gunpowder

Freedom

Should ever be forgot”<sup>20</sup>

V

England at the time of the first Stuart was indeed pervaded by strange images of death, and symmetries in trickery and deviousness join absolute horror to make it difficult to take sides and commemorate along the lines of what is in fact an invented tradition, as Justian Champion suggests.<sup>21</sup> A vexed question, like the one that more than half a century later would divide supporters of the Restoration and the survivors of the good old cause, obstinate in their convictions in times of vileness and trouble, fit audience, but few, of Milton’s great argument<sup>22</sup>; or the controversy that puts apart revels exalting the great achievements of the Glorious Revolution and memories revisiting the misfortunes of Boyne and regretting it. And should one recall the biased attitude of the revered herald of the new establishment, John Locke, not so generous after all in the supposed universal significance generally attached to his purposes: religious freedom excludes non-believers, and the political liberty he advocates in his major work *Two Treatises of Government*

“...was a liberty for Protestants within the British state. There is no reason to believe that he would have been reluctant to extend it to the foreign Catholics in foreign Catholic States. What it emphatically was not intended to be was a liberty for Irish Catholics from the British Crown”.<sup>23</sup>

The past is a unquiet presence, the mansion of dissenting voices suffocated in their differences by the reductive consensus of a plain national identity. Scotland and Ireland give the tune to this intricate music of time.

The Act of Union (1707) and the definite collapse of the Old Pretender’s cause in Culloden (1746) may illustrate the triumph of Scottish expectations: a share in the spoils of imperial achievement, reconciliation with the powerful southern rival and, more at home, the suppression of the obsolete power of clans and traditional castrating values and structures of authority, seemed rewarding enough; development and progress were finally in view. Let alone populist revival of Bannockburn (1314), a preposterous manifestation of obsessive nostalgia,<sup>24</sup> the founding of the new age put an end to turbulent protests in Edinburgh and elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> and the facts and their meaning and import do not find a common reading.<sup>26</sup> Ireland in the past and the present has also been the field of dispute, and the temptation to make it simple has authorized the biased version that conflict opposed two established communities divided on a single issue. And, be as it may, even if the Belfast Agreement of 1998 has not yet achieved full enforcement,<sup>27</sup> the impossible moment when the Reverend Ian Paisley Gerry Adams finally shook hands should be more cherished than decades of violence interpreted by fervid claims to national affiliations and identities.

Guy Fox is not the bad guy for everyone, and if a first reason why the Gunpowder Plot still haunts British collective memory is to be found in the massive and indiscriminate violence it counted upon, a second one is more embarrassing in its resilience and reconfigurations:

“Perhaps the second reason why the commemoration survived was simply that the story was so chillingly dramatic. More recently it has come to speak to our ambiguous times. We are all too familiar with terrorism, and there is no doubt that, even though the word was not known in 1605, Protestant contemporaries (and many Catholics) regarded the plotters with all the horror reserved for murderous fanatics. Yet they were also tragic figures, remarkably brave and deeply religious men drawn into a doubtful cause. Led by the charismatic figure of Robert Catesby, they were driven by sustained state persecution to see themselves as heroes freeing their oppressed people. The final straw was the deliberately exploitative way in which King James first raised English Catholic hopes and then dashed them. To men like Robert Catesby, Thomas Percy, Guy Fawkes and Tom Wintour, by spring 1604 it was clear that they must either content themselves with idle talk, or take some action. The rest is history”.<sup>28</sup>

“Only we die in earnest, that’s no jest.”<sup>29</sup>: a single known truth, coming to light in the turmoil that ravaged great expectations and turned life into an elusive “play of passion”, was duly claimed by Sir Walter Raleigh, a victim of the elusive political calculations of his time. Guy Fawkes was hanged, drawn and quartered, and his body exposed like the remains of a devilish prey, then unburied by the madding crowd to be ritualistically burned in bonfires. It’s perhaps time we had left him alone. Let him rest in peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the Bible refer to the King James' Bible, also known as Authorized Version (1611).

<sup>2</sup> *Apud* Prescott 174. Similarities between the plight of reformers under Mary and the one Thomas More had in store for them is the context of the passage quoted.

<sup>3</sup> *The History of King Richard the Third*, first published in 1557, is significantly one of the main sources of Shakespeare's play. Extracts of More's text, in an adapted modernized version, join context materials in Thomas Cartelli's Norton edition of *Richard III* (Cartelli 117-149).

<sup>4</sup> Act Two, (Bolt 61).

<sup>5</sup> Martz 63. It is also this sympathetic author who mentions, when reading *De Tristitia – Last Address to the World and to the Self*, the "terrible irony" inscribed in Thomas More's course of life: "Then all the disciples abandoned him and fled, ..." , Martz 99.

<sup>6</sup> Prescott 371 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Hughes 101.

<sup>8</sup> The fascinating biography of this circumspect figure made sensational by a time in need of scapegoats can be found in the study of Green.

<sup>9</sup> Critical tradition generally stresses that Marlowe was eliminated in a plot engendered by the Elizabethan secret service, but one of the player's most recent biographers, Park Honan, is not so categorical when interpreting the fatal events that took place in Deptford at the very beginning of June 1593 :reasons for Marlowe's death are still blurred and inconclusive (Honan 321-360).

<sup>10</sup> Jerónimo Osório. In strict articulation with the doctrinal whole of the controversy, dismisses in this short religious and diplomatic treaty the rule *sola scriptura*, or the exclusive authority of the Holy Scriptures in matters of faith and doctrine, and urges the Queen to follow the examples of saints, the teachings of tradition, and to preserve unity in Church (Osório *passim* ).

<sup>11</sup> See Bonner, Elizabeth, "The Betrothal of Mary Queen of Scots." *history Scotland* Vol. 9 Nº 3 May/June (2009):19-22.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, reproduced *inter alia*, in Baker 158, and Buchanan *et alii* 1.

<sup>13</sup> See Ben Jonson's poem 'On Spies', in Thom Gunn, ed. , 65

<sup>14</sup> Fawkes took the name Guido while fighting in the service of Spain.

<sup>15</sup> The Authorised Version, 1611 was, with Shakespearean drama, one of the most decisive marks of the history of English language. King's James Bible is a name to which a flavour of irony is attached: 'The designation 'Authorized Version' is the first of many versions about it. Why King James did not give his name to the work he had so enthusiastically. fathered in 1604 is unknown: but he cannot have failed to notice its dependence on Geneva'. (David Daniell, "The Authorized Version of the Bible", in Ford, 49.

<sup>16</sup> On the troubled relationship between Raleigh and Gondomar, with the stress on the shrewd moves of the Spanish ambassador and foolhardiness and rashness that generally informed Raleigh's attitudes and disposition, see Fernández; idealism and courage of the English poet, courtesan and explorer are conspicuous in Nicholl's study.

<sup>17</sup> Milton 254.

<sup>18</sup> One can find in Willis a generous account of this demonization, especially aiming at the Jesuit connection, emphasizing dramatic references, with *Macbeth* in the centre ( the *porter scene* is a case in point). *King Lear* could be also summoned for discussion. A ludicrous example would certainly be found in Marlowe's *Edward II* – the sly textual configuration of the instructions given by Mortimer and disposing of the fate of the unfortunate king are ambivalent (the ambitious plotter, in a preventing manœuvre of possible charges against his deed, plays with the distortions and equivocal meanings of '*Edwardum occidere nolite timere, bonum est*' and '*Edwardum occidere nolite, timere bonum est*' (Act v. scene iv. vv. ). A broader context is explored by Cawthorne.

<sup>19</sup> Willis 95.

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<sup>20</sup> Antonia Fraser, subverting the popular verses quoted above in the text, and ironically exploring alternative historical developments (“The gunpowder Plot Succeeds”. Buchanan *et alii* 48).

<sup>21</sup> Anglican prejudice, that still today includes the exclusion of Catholics from the accession to the throne or forbids British monarchs to marry Catholics, explains the survival of old established conventions - “Contrary to popular belief, effigies of Guy Fawkes only started to be burned on bonfires in the eighteenth century.”, Champion, “Popes and Guys and Anti-Catholicism”, *idem* 89. In a famous book, many times reissued, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger examine a set of such national “truths” tending to confirm habits and values allegedly informing national identity but, as a matter of fact, depending on the political moment and on reasons of sheer convenience.

<sup>22</sup> Paradise Lost, Book VII, v. 31.

<sup>23</sup> John Dunn 22.

<sup>24</sup> Distortions in the Scottish school system are vigorously exposed by Helen E. Matthewes in *hiistory Scotland: Scotland & Australia*, Vol. 9 No. 4, July/August 2009, under the item *Letters:11*.

<sup>25</sup> This issue has deserved controversial judgment (see, for example, *history Scotland, Special issue: The Scottish Parliaments 1235-1707*, Vol. 8 Nº 3, Mary/June 2008: 52.

<sup>26</sup> An illuminating example among many of an alternative voice can be found in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, London, Methuen, 1991, an engaged play by John McGrath.

<sup>27</sup> Dualistic perspectives rule out a complex web of protagonists performing on the stage of the Irish Question, as Willey Maley, Chris Morash and Shaun Richards convincingly discuss “The Triple Play of Irish History”, in Kevin Barry, Tom Dunne, Edna Longley, and Brian Walker, eds., *The Irish Review. Ideas of Nationhood*, The Queen’s University of Belfast, The Institute of Irish Studies, Nº20, Winter/Spring 1997: 23-46.

<sup>28</sup> Pauline Croft, “The Gunpowder Plot fails”, in Buchanan *et alii*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Hammond, ed., 55.

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