

A MODEL OF ORDER: Ian Hamilton Finlay and the French Revolution¹

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The French Revolution may seem like an odd choice of topic for a late 20th century Scottish experimental poet. Yet Ian Hamilton Finlay, one of the leading figures in the international movement called Concrete Poetry, was for many years fascinated by the events of 1789 to 1794 in France. He found in the Revolution—in its iconography and its ideology—an exemplary test case for ideas about contemporary politics and aesthetics, and the flexibility of Concrete Poetry’s visual idioms provided the ideal medium for exploring these ideas.

Most of the works in this exhibit date from around 1989, which was the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. Finlay indeed proposed works for the official celebration of the Bicentenary that were rejected by French authorities, amidst fierce and undignified controversy. His evident admiration for such extreme Revolutionary leaders as Maximilien Robespierre and Antoine Saint-Just² was misinterpreted as a simple-minded endorsement of the Terror.³ Nevertheless, Finlay remained

fascinated by the French Revolution, and continued to produce many works relating to it, before and after 1989. This exhibition is devoted to a selection of these works.

The iconography of the official celebration was itself more than a little ambivalent. Images of the liberated Bastille prison were everywhere; the tricolor abounded; and postcards offered endless risqué variations on the theme of “sans-culottes.”⁴ Conspicuously absent, however, was any evidence of what is, arguably, the Revolution’s most potent visual symbol: the guillotine.

The guillotine is the dark shadow of the Revolution. It’s fine to proclaim Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, but no one in Paris in 1989 wanted to celebrate the Terror. In the orthodox historical interpretation, the French Revolution is exemplary among revolutions in showing how the fervor of high ideals degenerates into factional bloodlust: how, in the famous words of the Girondin (moderate) politician Pierre Vergniaud, “it must be feared that the Revolution, like Saturn, successively devouring its children, will engender, finally, only despotism.”⁵ The guillotine is the emblem of this degeneration, the visual image of the Terror. As an image, the guillotine still has the power to terrify, to disturb, and to disrupt the complacency of any “politically correct” celebration.

Finlay, however (and this was a large part of the objections to his proposals), never ignored the guillotine. Take, for example, an

1 This essay is adapted from a chapter in my book *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry* (University of Toronto Press, 1997).

2 Robespierre and Saint-Just are the Revolutionary leaders most often cited in Finlay’s work. He seems to have had little interest in Danton, and there are only a few references to Marat—though one print does deliciously insert “L’Ami du Peuple” (the title of Marat’s ferocious and scurrilous magazine) as part of a typical front cover for “People’s Friend” (a cozy and conservative Scottish magazine devoted to family, crafts, and domesticity).

3 By “the Terror,” I refer not only to the extreme violence practiced by the ruling faction around Robespierre in 1794, but also to the ideology of Terror, which I will discuss further in this essay.

4 The costume of laborers, adopted as the name of the working class. Literally, “without pants”—hence the ribald jokes.

5 Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989): 714.

emblem created by him in 1991: a drawing of the guillotine accompanied by the caption “A model of order even if set in a space filled with doubt.”⁶ As with so many of Finlay’s works, the point lies in the interaction between the visual and the verbal, the image and its accompanying text. In this case, the text is also a quotation, and thus brings with it all the implications of its original context. But before I discuss that source, I would like to consider the words as they stand. That the French Revolution was “a space filled with doubt” is obvious enough; but in what sense, then, was the guillotine “a model of order”?

Certainly, it was as a “model of order” that the machine was first proposed to the National Assembly, in 1789, by Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin (who later bitterly resented the fact that his name had become attached to the instrument of his idea). It was part of a typical Enlightenment proposal for the rational reform of the criminal laws; the guillotine would be the most efficient, humane, and egalitarian method of execution. It did away with the variety of different methods—most of them long drawn-out exercises in torture, or else liable to hideous botching by incompetent executioners—that were applied in *ancien régime* France. Henceforth, no one would be broken on the wheel or hung, drawn, and quartered; the quick death of beheading, once the “privilege” of the nobility, would now be the common lot of lord and peasant. Engravings presented by Dr. Guillotin show the executions taking place in private, rural settings; they suggest, as Simon Schama says, “dignified serenity rather than macabre retribution.”⁷ By the time the

guillotine was officially adopted in 1792, it had also become important for the state to reclaim the legal monopoly of violence. The guillotine replaced not only more barbaric methods of official execution but also mob lynchings, the kind of indiscriminate massacre that took place in the Paris prisons in September 1792.

In all these senses, then, the guillotine can be seen as “a model of order.” It stood for the values of rationality, humanity, and control that formed the Revolution’s ideology (though not always, by any means, its practice). Many of the revolutionary politicians, including Robespierre and Saint-Just, had gone through a school system that included intensive study of the oratory of the Roman Republic. The stern Roman ideals of civic duty, memorably presented in David’s painting of Brutus and his dead sons, were at the center of the Revolution’s idea of Virtue. It is all too easy for a modern audience to scoff at the protestations of Robespierre and Saint-Just, and to see their “virtue” stained by the blood spilled by Dr. Guillotin’s humane device. But they themselves saw no contradiction.

In a folder of cards entitled *4 Blades* (1986), Ian Hamilton Finlay presents four linked quotations, each one printed on a drawing (again by Gary Hincks) of a guillotine blade:

Frighten me, if you will, but let the terror which you inspire in me be tempered by some grand moral idea.

The form of each thing is distinguished by its function or purpose; some are intended to arouse laughter, others terror, and these are their forms.

The government of the Revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny. Terror is an emanation of virtue.

Terror is the piety of the Revolution.

The first quotation is from the 18th century writer and encyclopedist Denis Diderot; the

⁶ The drawing is by Gary Hincks, based on an engraving in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris.

⁷ Schama, 621.

second from the 17th century painter Nicolas Poussin; the third from Maximilien Robespierre; the fourth is by Finlay himself. To read the interaction of these quotations is a complex matter—and is, indeed, an exemplary exercise in the “reading” of Finlay’s poetry. Diderot’s reputation is that of a moderate, reasonable man, the epitome of the Enlightenment; Robespierre is commonly dismissed as a totalitarian fanatic. Yet both insist on the moral function of terror. Poussin’s description of form as determined by function relates not only to the aesthetics of neo-Classical painting but also to the single-minded efficiency of the blade on which it is here inscribed; and his evocation of terror as one of the purposes of art echoes back to Aristotle and the classical doctrine of catharsis. Finlay’s dictum hinges on the very equivocal reaction that a contemporary secular audience is liable to have to the word “piety.” The visual format presents each quotation in an equivalent way—these are four *blades*, all of them aphorisms with a cutting edge—but also balances them against each other—these are *four* blades.⁸ None of this is to argue that Finlay is, in any simple way, endorsing terror (the Terror; terror-ism); it is to suggest that the issues are nowhere as simple (or, as it were, clear-cut) as the conventional historiography of the French Revolution has come to imply.

4 Blades is balanced, in Finlay’s work, by a lethally simple booklet entitled *4 Baskets* (1990). Each page features a drawing, by Kathleen Lindsley, of a wicker basket; the drawings are detailed, realistic, and charming. Each drawing has as a title a single word, an adjective drawn from the cultural vocabulary of the Enlightenment. The first basket is entitled

“Domestic,” and it contains three French loaves and a bottle of wine; the second is entitled “Pastoral,” and it contains a fishing net and an abundant sheaf of corn; the third is entitled “Parnassian,” and it contains a wreath of laurel leaves, the poet’s crown; the fourth is entitled “Sublime,” and it contains two severed heads.

The alliance of Terror and the Sublime was a central aspect of Enlightenment aesthetics, notably proclaimed (ironically, since he was a bitter opponent of the French Revolution) by Edmund Burke:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.... I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power.... That power derives all its sublimity from the terror with which it is generally accompanied.... Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime.⁹

Finlay follows through on this association on numerous occasions: for instance, in the print *Two Landscapes of the Sublime* (1989), which juxtaposes the guillotine with the most traditional “natural” instance of the Romantic Sublime, a waterfall. The same point is also made in a folding card entitled “SUBLIME,” which takes a sentence from “FH” (Friedrich Hegel) and adds to it a sentence by “IHF”:

Where the eagles circle in
darkness, the sons of the
Alps cross from precipice
to precipice, fearlessly,
on the flimsiest rope
bridges.

In the Place de la Révolution
the man-made mountain
torrent clatters
and clatters.

⁸ Elsewhere, Finlay puns on the meaning of “blade” as “a dashing young man,” presenting an image of Saint-Just as “a young blade.”

⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Ed. J.T. Boulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958): 39, 64–5, 58.

(The “man-made mountain” is an allusion to the fact that the extreme Jacobin faction in the Constituent Assembly was popularly known as “The Mountain.”)

For Finlay, then, the association of Terror and the Sublime is brought firmly into the political arena (in ways of which Burke would have utterly disapproved). A modest folding card from 1989 bears the title “A Proposal for the Celebration of the Bicentenary of the French Revolution”; inside, in large red letters, one reads simply: “A REVOLUTION.” In 1984, he designed a medal (struck in bronze by Nicolas Sloan), one side of which shows two Classical columns flanked by the word “Virtue,” while the other side shows the two vertical columns of the guillotine, flanked by the word “Terror.” Virtue and Terror become, quite literally, the two sides of the same coin. In Finlay’s work, this conjoined evocation of Virtue, Terror, and the Sublime, within a political setting, is not simply an exercise in 18th century antiquarianism, but a direct challenge to the political values of contemporary liberal, secular society.

Finlay in no way diminishes or ignores the violence, the destructive power of Terror. Indeed, he faces it head on, in ways which (he believes) modern secular society does not. “Democracies,” he writes, “are not at ease with their weaponry, or with their art,”¹⁰ because both depend on ideas of the Absolute which, in Finlay’s view, secular society cannot accommodate and prefers to ignore. “Classicism was at home with power,” he continues; “the modern democracies (whose secularism has produced extraordinary power) are not.” By its reinsertion of the Sublime (as Virtue, as

Terror) into a society that finds such an equation unacceptable, Finlay’s poetry underlines the *distance* that separates our society from one that could, authentically, long for the Classical past.

Stephen Bann writes that Finlay’s Classicism is “intimately linked to a sense of estrangement from the Classical, and, for that reason, it has its most clear affinities with the art of those epochs when estrangement from the past was the dominant tone.”¹¹ There is, in fact, a *double* distancing here. The Jacobin idealists longed for a Roman past from which they felt separated; Finlay, as it were, longs for that longing. “The world has been silent since the Romans left,” wrote Saint-Just elegiacally. For Finlay, one might say, the world has been silent since Saint-Just left—guillotined, along with Robespierre, in the month of Thermidor, Year II of the Revolution. But his words remain, inscribed in stone at the base of a classical column, set in the wildest, loneliest section of Finlay’s garden at Little Sparta.

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Let me now return to where I started, the image of a guillotine captioned “A model of order even if set in a space filled with doubt.” Let me take all I have said about the guillotine, Terror, and Virtue, and invite the viewer of this small exhibition to re-apply it in a new context—or rather, in an old context, namely, the original source of that phrase. It comes from a letter Finlay wrote to the French poet Pierre Garnier in September of 1963. This passage has been

10 Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (London: Reaktion Books, 1985): 155.

11 Stephen Bann, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: An Illustrated Essay* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 1972): 11.

widely reproduced¹² as one of the founding manifestos of Concrete Poetry. I think it is still worth reprinting again, at some length:

For myself I cannot derive from the poems I have written any 'method' which can be applied to the writing of the next poem; it comes back, after each poem, to a level of 'being,' to an almost physical intuition of the form... to which I try, with huge uncertainty, to be 'true.' Just so, 'concrete' began for me with the extraordinary (since wholly unexpected) sense that the syntax I had been using, *the movement* of language in me, at a physical level, was no longer there—so it had to be replaced with something else, with a syntax and movement which would be true of the new feeling (which existed in only the vaguest way, since I had, then, no form for it...). So that I see the theory as a very essential (because we are people, and people think, or should think, or should TRY to think) part of our life and art; and yet I also feel that it is a construction, very haphazard, uncertain, and by no means as yet to be taken as definitive.... I approve of Malevich's statement, 'Man distinguished himself as a thinking being and removed himself from the perfection of God's creation. Having left the non-thinking state, he strives by means of his perfected objects, to be again embodied in the perfection of absolute, non-thinking life... 'That is, this seems to me, to describe, approximately, my own need to make poems... though I don't know what is meant by 'God.' And it also raises the question that, though the objects might 'make it,' possibly, into a state of perfection, the poet and painter will not. I think any pilot-plan should distinguish, in its optimism, between what man can construct and what he actually *is*. I mean, new thought does not make a new man; in any photograph of an aircrash one can see how terribly far man stretches—from angel to animal; and one does not want a *glittering* perfection which forgets that the world is, after all, also to be made by man into his *home*. I should say—however hard I would find it to justify this in theory—that 'concrete' by its very limitations offers a tangible image of goodness and sanity; it is very far from the now-fashionable poetry of anguish and doubt.... It is a model, of order, even if set in a space which is full of doubt....¹³ I would like, if I could, to bring into this, somewhere the unfashionable notion of 'Beauty,' which I find compelling and immediate, however theoretically inadequate. I mean this in the simplest way—that if I was asked, 'Why do you like concrete poetry?' I could truthfully answer 'Because it is beautiful.'

This passage invites extensive commentary, some of which I have attempted to provide elsewhere.¹⁴ For now, let me make only

12 It appeared first in the British magazine *Image*. Its most influential reprint was in Mary Ellen Solt's anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970): 84.

13 This is how the phrase appears in the letter as reprinted by Solt. As to why the later work alters the punctuation, and changes "of" to "with," I haven't the faintest idea.

14 See footnote 1, above, especially for the connection between Concrete Poetry and Cubism.

a few preliminary suggestions for further consideration.

— "Concrete" poetry depends upon a reworking of syntax in language, in a way closely analogous to the reworking of perspective in Cubism. (Finlay himself was deeply indebted to the Cubist painters, especially Juan Gris.)

— Finlay's work, both as a poet and as a visual artist, is deeply traditional, in that it depends upon elements drawn from the whole history of Western culture; at the same time, it is deeply experimental, in that the deployment of these elements takes place in ways that are new, unexpected, and demanding. The method of reading each poem is not explained in advance by poetic conventions: it has to be *intuited* from the form presented by each individual poem.

— The "beautiful" is not merely an intensification of the pretty: it is a high and stern ideal, in which the Sublime meets and acknowledges Terror. It is in this sense that even the guillotine, at the moment when the blade falls, is beautiful.

Further Reading

Hilary Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety*. New York: Picador, 1992.

David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution*. London: Abacus, 2006.