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**DEBATING INSURRECTION IN GALT'S
*RINGAN GILHAIZE***

Padma Rangarajan

Anarchists, federalists, cantonalists, covenanters, terrorists, all who are unanimous in a desire to sweep away the present order, are grouped under the ensign of nihil. The frenzy which thus moves a whole people to tear their hair and rend their garments is at bottom an element of passionate melancholy born of just and noble aspirations crushed by fatal circumstances.

—E.P. Bazán, *Russia, Its People and Its Literature*¹

Throughout *Ringan Gilhaize* (1823), John Galt's fictional recounting of the history of the Presbyterian establishment in Scotland, the novel attempts to maintain a delicate dialectic that constantly threatens to collapse into itself. Its narratological innovation—three generations of filial and social history filtered through the perspective of a single, idiosyncratic narrative voice—was mistakenly read by many of Galt's critics as an act of imitative homage, rather than of winking ventriloquism.²

The novel—which Galt, in an attempt to escape the overpowering authorial shadow of Walter Scott, elusively identified as a “theoretical history” rather than a novel—evinces a series of often-conflicting impulses, dominated by the desire to disavow the actual violence of Scots-Presbyterian insurrection while insisting on the vitality of its principle. In turning to theoretical history as a genre of probability and reason that rejects the romance of plot emblemized in Scott's novelisations of history, Galt ironically created a narrator who identifies as an “impartial historian” while simultaneously describing historical writing as a tool of vengeance, the metonymic reflection of a troubled mind. The novel's

¹ Emilia Pardo Bazán, *Russia: Its People and Its Literature*, translated by Fanny Hale Gardner (Chicago: McClurg, 1890), 115.

² A caustic contemporary review of the novel identifies Galt as the Covenanters' “avowed advocate and eulogist”: “Scottish Novels of the Second Class,” *The Museum of Foreign Literature*, 4 (1824): 108-119 (112), reprinted from the *Edinburgh Magazine*.

enactment of the impossibility of impartial, annalistic historiography is accomplished structurally, as Ian Duncan has argued, through its demonstration of the fatal consequences of prophetic emplotment, but it is also indebted to a series of conversational and interrogative fissures wherein the monovocal narrative shivers apart.³ As the story moves from Ringan's ancestral history to his own life, from Reformation to Restoration, and tracks Ringan's devolution from resolute Covenanter into murderous fanatic—a transformation both tragically fated and actively willed—the reader is invited to critique Ringan's logic of insurrection, one which fatally substitutes apocalyptic prediction and equivocation for reasoned dissent.

One of the most significant of these narrative fissures occurs after the disastrous failure of the Covenanting troops at Pentland Hills, when Ringan's brother and a companion wander through west Scotland seeking refuge. Stopping in Paisley, they fall into conversation with a sympathetic but critical deacon, who identifies himself as a Covenanter, but of the old school. The deacon, who reads very much as a surrogate for the author, views the current Covenanting movement as more traumatic and less heroic than its earlier incarnation, characterizing the “donsie business” of the Pentland hills as nothing more than a “splurt,” a spontaneous reaction guided by instinct rather than logic or reasoned devotion.⁴ It is not a justified uprising, but a rebellion, he argues, because Ringan's generation has inverted the theopolitical basis of the “auld covenanting” by taking up arms prior to the signing of the Covenant. This preemptive violence makes the covenant into a threat, not a contract, and the Covenanters into rebels.⁵ In response, the Covenanters protest the delegitimizing label of “rebel” on the grounds that they are being punished for “thoughts and conscience,” which are unregulatable and *a priori* justifiable. Insurrectionary praxis here rests on the indivisibility of thought and deed, echoing the Covenanters' theological rejection of the figurative. The implied argument, that conscience may abrogate responsibility for acts, is an inset example of Ringan's fanatical ethos, whereby he defines himself

³ Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 253-258.

⁴ John Galt, *Ringan Gilhaize*, ed. Patricia J. Wilson (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1984), 233; quotations and references to this edition are cited below in text.

⁵ In Scottish law obligations undertaken “by force and fear” were “utterly void”: see James Dalrymple, Viscount Stair, *The Institutions of the Law of Scotland*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: 1759), 78 (I.ix.8). In English common law, contracts induced by “extremely vicious threats” invoke the doctrine of duress, rendering the contract invalid: see R.J. Sutton, “Duress by Threatened Breach of Contract,” *McGill Law Journal*, 20 (1974): 554-86 (557).

as an emptied vessel to be filled with God's actions.⁶ Such language of displaced activity occurs throughout the text, but perhaps most crucially when Ringan describes his first attack on a soldier—a non-military action that precipitates the larger insurrection—in language that substitutes for his own action the personification of the weapon itself: “my grandfather’s sword flew out at the blow, and the insulter lay wounded and bleeding at my feet” (183). The deacon, in contrast, refutes the implied antinomianism that would collapse action and intention—“surely actions are neither thoughts nor consciences”—and empty deeds of any metaphysical consequence.⁷

The novel’s roundabout critique of insurrectionary logic is repeated after the Covenanters’ decisive defeat at Bothwell Brig. Arrested and taken before a circuit court, the Covenanters (now including Ringan himself) reject the label of “rebellion” on the grounds that the uprising’s motives are spiritual and not “carnal.” When the judge observes that intent has no place in the definition of rebellion, Ringan replies that laws made by a terrestrial monarch in opposition to God’s will should not be submitted to, because they are, in fact, laws made in rebellion, making his uprising a rebellion against rebellion (258). This tautological argument is tested when Ringan is questioned about his feelings on the assassination of James Sharp, the archbishop of St. Andrews. Earlier, Ringan had disapprovingly described the execution of Charles I as evidence of the Puritans’ “speculative spirit of political innovation.” But now he insists that Sharp’s killing does not constitute murder because, above all, “he was so strong in his legalities, that he could not be brought to punishment by those to whom he caused the greatest wrong,” seamlessly transposing personal revenge into an argument that undercuts the legitimacy of the legal system (260). Although the proximate cause of Ringan’s later descent into terrorism is the brutal murder of his family that will shortly follow this tribunal, the trial scene exposes the seams of a “presbyterian casuistry” that, as much as any trauma (a subject we will return to), is responsible for his seemingly inevitable transition from insurrection to terror.⁸

⁶ Ross Lerner defines the fanatic as one who “comes into the scene when character—self—has itself been annihilated. The fanatic’s will is ... emptied, overtaken, and inspired as an instrument of inscrutable divine force”:see Lerner, *Unknowing Fanaticism: Reformation Literatures of Self Annihilation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 14.

⁷ I say “implied” because unlike Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Galt’s novel avoids any explicit interrogation of Covenanter theology; Ringan’s antinomianism is implied but never explicated.

⁸ Colin Kidd defines “presbyterian casuistry” as “anxious and embarrassed Presbyterians [seeking] simultaneously to exculpate their confession as a whole from the principles and practice of assassination, yet also to justify particular

Crucially, these interrogative textual moments I've noted are particular to Ringan's personal history. The earlier Covenanting movement, for which the picaresque adventures of Ringan's grandfather serve as a proxy, is depicted as enjoying strong public support at all levels of society, while the episcopate is a small, beleaguered minority. By the time we reach Ringan's present, the roles are reversed: the Covenanters are now a beleaguered faction who presume to fight on behalf of a "commonalty" who have acquiesced in oppression (197). Galt's novel models a schism noted by historians between the early and late (Reformist and Restoration) Covenanting movements in which the Reformists' commonwealth perspective was gradually abandoned in favor of a "schismatic martyrdom." Forgoing the more cautious models of insurrection favored by John Calvin and even John Knox—in which rebellion was the purview of the nobility or a coterie of upper-class magistrates—Ringan's rebellion is conspicuously subaltern and radical, as Galt recasts the "popular" resistance movement as an extremist micro-sect.⁹

But Galt's interrogative critique of the Covenanting movement's implosive later phase is contextualized by the novel's careful delineation of Ringan's fanatical self-possession as a direct consequence of his dispossession. His familial and social bonds are frayed through violence, notably as a result of troop quartering, which echoes tropes of colonial violence in the hostile takeover of food, lands, and, crucially, female bodies. It is this physical and social unhoming that is responsible for the "mental madness" that grips him in the novel's concluding chapters. Note that while two of the most crucial battles of the insurrection, Drumclog and Bothwell Brig, are mentioned only in passing, Ringan and his companions' flights through western Scotland following the Pentland Uprising comprise several chapters. More than warfare, dispossession is the novel's affective preoccupation: shortly before the battle of Drumclog Ringan's son

assassinations as the working of providence": see Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c. 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 272, and cf. Kidd, "Enlightenment and Ecclesiastical Satire Before Burns," in *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, ed. Ronnie Young, Ralph McLean, and Kenneth Simpson (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016), 95-114 (102-103).

⁹ Ringan's opinions on insurrection echo James Steuart and Alexander Shields. Caroline Erskine tracks the difference between Reformist and late Covenanting models of insurrection, noting that both Steuart and Shields "extended the right of resistance [from the nobility] to the people, and even individuals acting alone": see Erskine, "The Political Thought of the Restoration Covenanters," in *Scotland in the Age of Two Revolutions*, ed. Sharon Adams and Julian Goodare (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2014), 155-172 (159).

describes a feeling of “going to a foreign land, there is sic a farewell sadness upon me,” an uncanny sensation that is realized when the boat carrying Ringan’s brother (exiled for his part in the rebellion) sinks among the Orkneys, Scotland’s uttermost end (247). Galt may have been a “happy colonizer” and a pragmatic champion of Scottish migration to the Americas, but he was deeply cognizant of the emigrants’ melancholy.¹⁰ As Ringan is successively unhomed, he makes the decisive turn from insurrectionary to terrorist: notably, the right to violence, which insurrection temporarily wrests from the state, is belatedly claimed by Ringan—after William I’s ascension, the *telos* of Presbyterian triumph—in his vengeful murder of Graham of Claverhouse, using terms that echo the justification of Sharp’s assassination.

Ringan Gilhaize’s interrogation of the nature of insurrection reflects the transhistorical dimensions of the revolutionary crisis in the Romantic imagination. The French Revolution was both a catalyst to reflect on past harbingers of its ideological extremism as well as the *casus belli* of a new era of revolutionary violence writ large. Denouncing the entropic nature of revolution, Francis Pagès’ *Secret History of the French Revolution* observes that, in the course of such upheaval, “it is natural that terrorists, Jacobins, Cromwellists, and Robespierrists should be succeeded by other terrorists and men of blood,” identifying (illegitimate) political violence as a methodology that erases ideological and temporal differences.¹¹ In Britain, conservative hysteria over the Revolution necessitated an uneasy reckoning with the country’s own history of terror. In the opening pages of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke’s comparison of Richard Price’s 1789 sermon, “Discourse on the Love of Our Country,” to the general rhetoric of the “days of our Solemn League and Covenant” evinces the uneasy shadow that the Killing Times cast on an otherwise glorious revolution.¹² Burke must cauterize the necrotic history of Covenanter fanaticism lest it infect the triumphal narrative of exceptional, Protestant, political transition. *Ringan Gilhaize* is similarly a novel out of time, one whose historical embeddedness reveals its anxiety about modernity’s perversion of piety into fanaticism, and dissent into terror.¹³

¹⁰ See Jeffrey Cass’s analysis of Galt as a colonist in “John Galt, Happy Colonist: the Case of *The Apostate, or Atlantis Destroyed*,” *Wordsworth Circle*, 41 (2010): 167-70.

¹¹ Francis Pagès, *Secret History of the French Revolution ... translated from the French*, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1797), II: 319.

¹² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Dodsley, 1790), 13

¹³ See Ian Duncan’s analysis of fanaticism’s modernity, particularly in relation to Covenanter fanaticism, in his “Fanaticism and Enlightenment in *Confessions of a*

One hundred years after the publication of *Ringan Gilhaize*, Mao would identify terrorist activities as merely an early phase of political insurrection prior to the onset of conventional warfare.¹⁴ Galt's novel inverts this model. After William of Orange's ascension, Ringan abandons even the radical Cameronians to pursue his own vengeance. Ringan's murder of Claverhouse after the seeming moment of millenial achievement—the Glorious Revolution—[displaces] the moment of apocalyptic fulfillment and replaces the collective history of Presbyterian triumph with his individual action. Just prior to the Battle of Killcrankie, at the close of which Ringan shoots Claverhouse, the assassin describes a sublime scene in which the natural, religious, and political cohere:

On the right hand, hills and rocks ... rose like the ruins of the ramparts of some ancient world; and I thought of the epochs when the days of the children of men were a thousand years, and when giants were on the earth, and all were swept away by the flood; and I felt as if I beheld the hand of the Lord in the cloud weighing the things of time in His scales, to see if the sins of the world were indeed becomes again so great, as that the cause of Claverhouse should be suffered to prevail (317).

Considering history on an antediluvian timescale, Ringan witnesses the possibility of the ultimate contractual breach: the Noachic covenant may be voided if the “cause of Claverhouse” prevails. Justifying assassination on the basis of patriarchal tradition, the Noachic covenant is an ironic choice, considering that God's assurance of the Flood's exceptionality is less contract than gift, and premised solely on God's grace, not human action.

Ringan's messianic triumph is the novel's last word, except that it isn't. Galt further complicates the narrative's monovocality with a postscript wherein the author affixes a translation of the 14th-century Declaration of Arbroath, the foundational document of contractual kingship based on Scotland's unique mythogenesis.¹⁵ It is as if Galt, chastened by his critical portrayal of fanatical terrorism, finds efficacy in

Justified Sinner,” in *James Hogg and the Literary Marketplace* ed. Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 57-69.

¹⁴ Mao identifies guerilla operations as political, not merely militaristic, and a necessary first step in anti-imperial warfare: see Mao Zedong, *On Guerilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith II (New York: Praeger, 1963).

¹⁵ The Declaration claims that Scottish people are descended from Scythians who fought their way through Europe to the British Isles. Further proof of Scottish nobility is that they were the first to be called to the faith by Christ and his first apostle, St. Andrew. Notably, Colin Kidd ties the 18th-century Whig appropriation of the Declaration to a “Buchanite version of Scottish identity” revitalized by the 1689 Rebellion. Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past* (28). George Buchanan's *De Jure Regni* (1579) famously permits tyrannicide.

neither readerly sympathy nor in Ringan's frenzied "iron pen," but in irrefutable historical fact. With this combination of metafictional, metatextual and intratextual historical writing, Galt warns his readers about the insurrectionary potential at the heart of modern civil society, joining a clutch of other Scottish Romantic novels (notably Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and *The Brownie of Bodsbeck*) that question the assumed primacy of empiricism in tandem with an insistence on fanaticism's essential modernity. Ringan is not only a product of the modern British state as it comes into being, but arguably its epistemological center.

The text to which these novels are all responding, Walter Scott's *Old Mortality* (1816), assumes Covenanting history to be a closed historical issue. The embedded frames in *Old Mortality* serve as a series of caskets for the violence they contain, much as the coffins that *Old Mortality* tends to are static monuments for the crumbling remains they shelter. For Scott, the spirited backlash to his novel's representations of Covenanting history must have seemed like corpses suddenly popping up from a long interment. Certainly, Galt's first-person autobiographic narrative obliterates the protective distance from the violent past that Scott's nesting frames enable.¹⁶ Covenanting history certainly proved a persistently unruly corpse in the British national imaginary. Marching in favor of the franchise in 1884, weavers from Strathaven carried Covenanting banners and weaponry along with memorabilia from the 1820 Radical War, an example of Scotland's braided histories of insurrection, and their evolving signification.¹⁷

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¹⁶ *Old Mortality*'s frame narratives are the subject of lively critical discussion. See, for example, John Humma, "The Narrative Framing Apparatus of Scott's 'Old Mortality'" *Studies in the Novel*. 12:4 (Winter 1980), 301-315.

¹⁷ Mark Nixon, "Material Gladstones," in *William Gladstone: New Studies and Perspectives* ed. Roland Quinault, Roger Swift, Ruth Clayton Windscheffel (Routledge, 2012), 122-123.