

# Interpretation

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## Essays in Honor of Christopher Kelly

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# Interpretation

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## Burke and the Politics of the Sublime (and Beautiful)

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Burke's *Philosophic Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757, deserves special notice, both for its intrinsic philosophic interest and for its influence on Kant's later view of the sublime. Burke's title already signals its Lockean/Humean provenance: ideas have origins open to philosophic inquiry. What is new in Burke<sup>1</sup> is not his identification of these origins with simple and universal sensations of pleasure and pain, an identification that links him directly to these immediate intellectual forebears,<sup>2</sup> but the underlying pathos and openness to mystery that accompanies it.

When I say, I intend to enquire into the efficient cause of sublimity and beauty, I would not be understood to say that I can come to the ultimate cause. I do not pretend that I shall ever be able to explain, why certain affections of the body produce such a distinct emotion of mind, and other; or why the body is at all affected by the mind.... A little thought will show this to be impossible.... That great chain of causes, which linking one to another even to the throne of God himself, can never be unraveled by any industry of ours. When we go but

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<sup>1</sup> For a further comparison of Lockean and Burkean aesthetic principles, see Dabney Townsend, "Lockean Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 349–61.

<sup>2</sup> Montesquieu, on the other hand, registers an instructively mixed elegy for the premodern understanding of sublimity in his brief fragment "On Taste." See, for example, Montesquieu, "Mes pensées," *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949–1951), 1:1536–49. On Montesquieu and Burke, see also Christopher Kelly, "Rousseau and the Illustrious Montesquieu," in *The Challenge of Rousseau*, ed. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19. Burke, who admired Montesquieu's essay on taste, which appeared in published form in *l'Encyclopédie* (1757), would include a partial translation in his own review in the *Annual Register* (which Burke both founded and edited). Montesquieu's nostalgia is not for a philosophy of final causes (his disapproval of which rivals that of Locke), but for the imaginative identification of Divinity with particular emotions, an identification that he especially associates with ancient Judaism and Paganism.

one step beyond the immediately sensible quality of things, we go out of our depth.<sup>3</sup>

The ignorance of final causes that was, for Hume, a liberating insight is darkened in Burke by the realization of the limits of human industry:

All we do after is but a faint struggle that shows we are in an element which does not belong to us. So that when I speak of cause, and efficient cause, I only mean certain affections of the mind, that causes changes in the body (and conversely)... As if I were to explain the motion of a body falling to the ground, I would say it was caused by gravity... without attempting to shew why it operated in this manner. (*E* 130)

Given the ultimate inscrutability of final causes, Burke is especially at pains to show that the “real cause of beauty” is neither “proportion,” “fitness,” “perfection,” nor anything to do with reason, i.e., “use” (*E* 96–112). Perfection is, indeed, so far from being a cause of beauty, that this quality,

where it is highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection.<sup>4</sup> Women are very sensible of this for which reason, they learn to...counterfeit weakness.... Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty.... I know that it is in everybody’s mouth, that we ought to love perfection. This is to me a sufficient proof, that it is not the proper object of love. Who ever said, we *ought* to love a fine woman, or even any of (those) beautiful animals, which please us? (*E* 110)

Women may well know how to make use of beauty; for the men attracted to them, on the other hand, another explanation is required, which Burke finds both in immediate pleasure (in what serves or, at least, does not threaten us) and, where female beauty is “most affecting,” in a combination of pleasure (both direct and one arising from feelings of sympathy) and a sublime delight associated with the apprehension of someone else’s pain.

The more general statement of Burke’s thesis about the origins of the idea of the sublime and beautiful is this: all human passions originate in simple ideas of pleasure and pain, ideas subject to a misunderstanding Burke means to rectify. Against the common (Lockean) view that pain consists in the diminution or absence of pleasure, Burke maintains, conversely, that pleasure

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 129. Hereafter abbreviated *E*.

<sup>4</sup> But cf. Burke’s contemporaneous description in a private notebook of his own feminine ideal (actually his future wife, Mary Nugent). See Dixon Wecter, “The Missing Years in Edmund Burke’s Biography,” *PMLA* 53, no. 4 (1938): 1114. As Burke there makes clear, physical beauty is the least of such a woman’s attractions.

and pain are independent of each other, such that the sudden diminution of pain (a state Burke terms “delight”) is an affect qualitatively different from ordinary pleasure. With this energizing, potentially transporting “delight,” and that generally calmer (and more trivial) pleasure, Burke respectively identifies the experience of the sublime and of the beautiful.

Delight, the “strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling,” owes its peculiar power to its association with the natural drive to self-preservation, as distinguished from the more episodic, generative drive that mainly fuels the social passions (*E* 41–44).<sup>5</sup> Burke’s elevation of self-preservation on the basis of its power calls to mind Hobbes’s earlier replacement, as the focus of his political science, of the *summum bonum* of the ancients with the *summum malum* of violent death. Aesthetically, as well as metaphysically, man is to be guided, not by a spurious knowledge of human perfection, but by the felt imperatives of his individual corporeal nature.

In this bodily economy, the intermittent, and never genuinely urgent, pangs of sexual desire play a decidedly secondary role. The pleasures of generation may sometimes be “rapturous and violent,” and may even constitute “the highest pleasure of sense”; still, their absence “scarce amounts to an uneasiness,” and, for the most part, “hardly affects at all” (*E* 40). (One is here reminded of Kant’s insistence that no man would satisfy his lust at the price of being hanged immediately thereafter.)<sup>6</sup> Bereft lovers dwell upon their *loss* of pleasure; those stricken by true pain feel afflicted, not by the loss of health but by the pain itself. (The pain of debt is qualitatively different, one could say, from a decrease in the pleasure of consumption.)

Burke’s depreciation of positive pleasure is thus not without a certain teleological bite. The generation of mankind is “a great purpose,” to which men must be incited. Still, it is by no means designed “to be our constant business,” and hence “it is not fit that its absence should be attended by any considerable pain” (*E* 41). Man is directed “from below” by “providence,” which measures out his pains and pleasures with a view to maximizing his life interest. The “final cause” of the difference between the self-preserving and the social/sexual passions lies in the greater urgency of life and health, necessary as they are “for the performance of all duties.” Thus, whatever

<sup>5</sup> Burke also notes a further pleasure in society associated with the passions of “imitation,” “sympathy,” and “ambition,” that takes a variety of mixed forms (*E* 44), as well as a pleasure, whose purpose remains obscure to him, in our relation with animals (*E* 43).

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, AK 5:30. Kant’s elaboration of the moral implications of this fact (which sketches out the basic plot of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*) is discussed below.

threatens their destruction strongly affects us. And, since “we were not made to acquiesce” in either life or health, neither is “attended with any real pleasure, lest satisfied with that, we should give ourselves over to indolence and inaction” (E 41).<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to first impressions, it is not final causes as such that Burke’s “philosophic inquiry” eschews, but only those (like the idea of “perfection”) that derive their motive power from something other than the senses. That providence directs us “from below,”<sup>8</sup> for purposes of preservation and propagation, is, as it appears, self-evident. Nature seems a kinder place to Burke than it does to Lucretius.<sup>9</sup>

And yet each, in different ways, posts warnings against the snares of Venus.<sup>10</sup> Burke explicitly links pleasure (as distinguished from delight) with qualities of friendly and useful innocuousness that verge (e.g., in the case of dogs) on the contemptible (E 67).<sup>11</sup> The pleasures associated with beauty replace *rational* utility with use of a peculiarly infantile (and hence altogether

<sup>7</sup> Remarkably, Burke does not take the fact that we need not be bribed by the promise of extraordinary pleasure to elect life and health as a sign of their intrinsic goodness (as Aristotle and Rousseau differently maintain). Burke’s insistence that no positive pleasure attaches to our normal state is connected with his assumption (shared with Hobbes and Locke) that this state is one of inertia (rather than, as Aristotle and Rousseau differently have it, activity) from whose dangers we must be driven by discomfort. Too much well-being, on this view, is intrinsically unhealthy.

<sup>8</sup> See E 49: Providence has framed us to find pleasure or delight, according to the purposes of our being, “solely from our natural constitution,” that is to say, “without any intervention of the reasoning faculty”; and E 45: “the influence of reason in producing our passions is nothing near so extensive as is commonly believed.”

<sup>9</sup> Thus, Burke’s explicit rejection of the (Lucretian) account of why we take pleasure in (the representation of) suffering from which we are ourselves exempt. “It is a common observation, that objects which in the reality would shock...are the source of a very high species of pleasure... [This] satisfaction has been commonly attributed...to the contemplation of our own freedom from the evils which we see represented... It is a practice much too common in inquiries of this nature, to attribute the cause of feelings which merely arise from the mechanical structure of our bodies, or from the natural frame and constitution of our minds, to certain conclusions of the reasoning faculty” (E 44). Burke’s preferred account is a complex mixture (of delight and pleasure?) that has the providential purpose of pressing us to help our fellows (E 46).

<sup>10</sup> For a Freudian/Lacanian reading of Burke’s deprecation of beauty, see Linda M. G. Zerilli, “Text/ Woman as Spectacle: Edmund Burke’s ‘French Revolution,’” *The Eighteenth Century* 33, no. 1 (1992): 47–72, and *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). Zerilli’s main claim, namely, that Burke’s revulsion had the public role of women as its primary target, ignores the obviously “public” character of Marie Antoinette’s standing first as princess and then queen, not to speak of all feminine holders of high rank, whose nobility of status for many legal purposes overshadowed their subordinate status as daughters and wives.

<sup>11</sup> “Love approaches much nearer to contempt than is commonly imagined” (E 67). Burke, who here contrasts the useful amiability of dogs with the sublimity of untamed wolves, will later call dogs (i.e., greyhounds) beautiful (E 116). Burke’s distinction between pleasures associated with use and those associated with beauty is not a very stable one.

unreflective) kind. The “real cause of beauty,” says Burke, is a certain “quality” in bodies that acts “mechanically” upon the human mind “through the intervention of the senses.” That quality, which embraces “smallness,” “smoothness,” “delicacy,” and “gradual variation,” is nowhere more manifest than in womanly beauty, which presents “no sudden protuberance” on a surface that yet constantly changes. Observe, he says,

that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. (*E* 115)

Drawing back from that vertiginous maze (with a nod to Hogarth’s famous “line of beauty”) Burke immediately asks, “is not this a demonstration of that change of surface continual yet hardly perceptible at any point which forms one of the great constituents of beauty” (*E* 115). But if constant, imperceptible change is all (or mostly) what womanly beauty is about, whence the deceit and giddy loosening of vision? It is clear enough, in any case (to us, his readers, if not to the contemplated contemplator of beauty) where that vision is likely to be heading, and it is not a place in which abrupt “changes of surface” are lacking.

Perceptible or not, abruptly changing or not, the dangerous element (despite surface appearances) in beauty, to which Burke quickly alludes, recalls his earlier discussion of the enervating character of pleasure as distinguished from delight. Pleasure predisposes us to a potentially life-threatening languor. The delight attending pain and terror (when it does not press too closely), on the other hand, is associated with an activity-arousing and life-enhancing vigor. Paradoxically, the feeling of the sublime, stimulated by what seems to threaten us, is more benign, at least for us as individuals, than the feeling of the beautiful that is stimulated by what strikes us as innocuous. To the extent that we understand this fact, the beautiful and the sublime, as we shall see, trade places in fulfillment of the highest claims of human ambition.

Ambition is, like sympathy and imitation, a social passion; it is allied (from below) with the generative drive, and yet implanted in us (from above) for the sake of human progress. The idea of excellence, derived from the pleasure we take in contemplating our excelling in what others value, is so detached from any notion of intrinsic good as to press those who excel in nothing else to take pride in misery. Still, there is a peculiar good associated

with ambition, and that one might almost call intrinsic, which links the pleasure of ambition with the delight associated with sublimity.

Whatever...tends (for reasons good or bad) to raise a man in his own opinion, produces a sort of swelling and triumph that is extremely grateful to the human mind; and this swelling is never more perceived, nor operates with more force, then when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects, the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the thing which it contemplates. (E 50)

Hence the “sense of inward greatness” with which great rhetoricians, according to Longinus, fill the reader’s mind (E 51). In such swellings of rhetorical ambition—unlike the bosomy “swell” of the beautiful (E 115)—pleasure coexists with manly vigor, and this despite Burke’s later claim that the sublime and beautiful rarely join without diminishing each (E 124–25).<sup>12</sup>

But in what can such inner greatness consist, given Burke’s restriction of our knowledge to the province of the senses? The answer follows in a section devoted to providing justification for Burke’s own sort of philosophic inquiry:

The more accurately we search into the human mind, the stronger traces we everywhere find of his wisdom who made it.... A discourse... on the use of the passions...cannot be barren of praise to him, nor unproductive to ourselves of that noble and uncommon union of science and admiration, which a contemplation of the works of infinite wisdom alone can afford to a rational mind. (E 52)

Here, “nobly” caught between effectual knowledge and astonished incomprehension, one finds strength in weakness and experiences thereby an “elevation of mind” that “ought to be the principal end of all our studies.” But Burke does not leave matters here: in order, in addition, to erect one’s passions upon “sure principles,” one must pursue them “through all their variety of operations, and pierce into the inmost, and what might appear inaccessible parts of our nature, *Quod latet arcana non enarrabile fibre* (what lies obscure and beyond expression in its deepest fibres)” (E 52–53).<sup>13</sup>

In this reversal of the religion-destroying meaning of Lucretius’s own “horror” before a nature “laid open and uncovered in every part,” Burke evokes the rites of ancient soothsayers, even as he recommends violent penetration, on reason’s part, of nature’s “inmost.” Burke pursues knowledge,

<sup>12</sup> Although as he later adds, this is less the case when sublimity, rather than beauty, predominates.

<sup>13</sup> Persius, *Satires* 5.29. The context is an attack on superficial and bombastic rhetoric and accompanying praise of Stoicism.

one is tempted to conclude, not for its own sake, but for the double thrill of penetration to the point of self-annihilating mystery (cf. *E* 68). As Lucretian wonder (or “horror” in Latin) is interpreted by Burke as terror, so Horace’s vaunted philosophic “fearlessness” is understood as a last gasp of futile fortitude (*E* 69). It is, after all, “our ignorance of things,” not things themselves, “that causes all our admiration” (*E* 61).

Where Hobbes sought to dispel the “kingdom of darkness,” Burke looks to “obscurity” for a renewed source of corporeal and mental vigor and inspiration (*E* 58–59, 143ff.). Enlightenment, for all its manifold advantages, also tends, perversely, to give greater scope and weight to the desire for pleasure than is strictly natural. Sublime feeling (i.e., religion aestheticized, or terror without guilt) can serve as a preventative against organic enfeeblement resulting from a rationally induced inflation of the role of pleasure (especially the pleasures of consumption) in the economy of human life.

That invigorating effect is described in the fourth section of the essay, on “the efficient cause of the sublime and beautiful” (*E* 129ff.). The sublime, like terror, is produced by a certain violent and unnatural nervous tension originating from the mind (in contrast to the similar tension produced by bodily pain). In explaining how pain (or something like it) can be a source of positive delight, Burke once again appeals to “Providence”:

Providence has so ordered it, that a state of rest and inaction, however it may flatter our indolence, should be productive of many inconveniences; that it should generate such disorders, as may force us to have recourse to some labour, as a thing absolutely requisite to make us pass our lives in tolerable satisfaction; for the nature of rest is to suffer all the parts of our bodies to fall into a relaxation, that not only disables the members from performing its functions, but takes away the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the natural and necessary secretions....In this languid inactive state, the nerves are more liable to the most horrid convulsions, than when they are sufficiently braced and strengthened. Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder is the consequence...of this relaxed state of the body. (*E* 135)

Rest (along with pleasure, its immediate accompaniment) eventually gives rise, in short, to convulsions more “horrid” than those accompanying pain and fear (especially in “weaker subjects”) (*E* 132). Philosophic inquiry draws beneficent (if not altogether natural) attention both to the destructive consequences of a feeling that we naturally seek (and which is closely associated with sexual delight), and to its “best remedy,” that is, “labour” (*E* 135).

Labor (or the surmounting of *difficulties*) is not only an expenditure, in itself undesirable, of time and effort (as with Locke) but a necessary preservative of organs coarse and delicate. Just as muscles need exercise if they are not to grow languid and diseased, so our “finer parts” respond to a more rarified vibration of the fibers (associated with images of danger, vastness, darkness, and the like) whose clearing and invigorating force renders it delightful. Sublimity is to those finer parts what healthy labor is to muscle (*E* 135).<sup>14</sup>

As for love, and accompanying feelings of beauty, the effect is almost the reverse: one becomes “softened, relaxed, enervated, dissolved, melted away by pleasure.”<sup>15</sup> All the constituents of beauty (smoothness, sweetness, gradual variation, smallness, unmottled color) naturally tend toward a relaxation of the fibers (*E* 150). If any doubts remained as to the natural use of these constituents, Burke mentions the “gentle stroking with a smooth hand” that “allays violent pains and cramps...swellings, and obstructions” (*E* 151), the “milk” that constitutes “the first support of childhood” (*E* 154), and the distinct rocking motion employed by nurses (*E* 155)—effects, in short, that find unambiguously healthy scope only among babies and young children. Love without gallantry (and its bracing images of beauty in distress) is, for Burke, both infantilizing and potentially dangerous.

All the more reason to be struck, in his earlier discussion of the sublime, by the natural use of vertigo:

I have often experienced, and so have a thousand others; that on first inclination towards sleep, we have been suddenly awakened with a most violent start; and that this start was generally preceded by a sort of dream of our falling down a precipice: whence does this strange motion arise; but from the too sudden relaxation of the body, which by some mechanism in nature restores itself by as quick and vigorous an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles? (*E* 148)

As with the giddiness provoked by female beauty, vertigo is the body’s natural response to the too great relaxation to which pleasure tempts us.

In sum: despite first appearances, beauty is a source of genuine danger, and sublimity an avenue of self-preserving restoration. The genius of art (and

<sup>14</sup> Compare Longinus, for whom enjoyment of the sublime is effortless (*On the Sublime*, section 1, “Oeconomia”). On this point, see Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 103–4, cited in Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 298n.

<sup>15</sup> Kant’s later citation of this passage, in the *Critique of Judgment*, will add “dying away” to this already rather dismal list (AK 5:277n).

artful commentary) is to sublimate beauty (through its association with a variety of high-minded challenges) sufficiently to render it not only innocuous but also fortifying.

In Burke's later *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (about which Kant will have much to say), these themes reemerge with heightened poignancy. The sublime theater in which he had previously put stock has turned into the "real tragedy" of revolution, in which actors weigh "as it were in scales hung in a shop of horrors—so much actual crime against so much contingent advantage."<sup>16</sup> From the natural feelings inspired by this spectacle of the fragility of human greatness, Burke would have us, "purified by terror and pity," learn "great lessons" (R 70, 71).<sup>17</sup> In revolutionary France, the sublime has assumed an "unnatural" and "monstrously" feminized form.<sup>18</sup> The "effects" of wealth are worshiped as "first causes" (R 69). And the old economy made up of ancient opinions and rules of life, an economy whose loss "cannot possibly be estimated" (R 68), has been crushed into a "homogeneous mass" (R 162) and then "sublimed" and "(as it were) volatilized" (R 168)<sup>19</sup> into paper money by a false metaphysics of speculative gain.<sup>20</sup>

Against this volatizing of all natural difference, Burke famously appeals to a peculiar sort of chivalry:

I hear, and I rejoice to hear, that the great lady [Marie Antoinette]...  
has borne that day (one is interested that beings made for suffering

<sup>16</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 71. Hereafter abbreviated R.

<sup>17</sup> "When kings are hurled from their thrones by the Supreme Director of this great drama and become the objects of insult to the base and of pity to the good, we behold such disasters in the moral as we should behold a miracle in the physical order of things. We are alarmed into reflection; our minds (as it has long since been observed) are purified by terror and pity, our weak, unthinking pride is humbled under the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom" (R 70–71). Burke's allusion to Aristotle's famous description of the effect of tragedy alters its meaning; Aristotle speaks of being purged of, rather than by, fear and pity. Nor does the latter speak, as Burke does here, of reason thereby being "instruct[ed]" by "our passions" (R 70).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, his description (altogether fictional, as it proved) of the heads of the king's bodyguard, "stuck upon spears," while the royal captives followed "amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell in the abused shape of the vilest of women." These "Theban and Thracian orgies" are not likely to be greeted, Burke notes, by much "enthusiastic ejaculation" (R 63). See also his characterization of the "inverted" physiognomy of the new French Assembly, in which "women, lost to shame," and "according to their insolent fancies, direct, control, applaud, explode [the men]; domineering over them with a strange mixture of servile petulance and proud, presumptuous authority" (R 60).

<sup>19</sup> French volatility contrasting here with a healthier English "sluggish[ness]" (R 48).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Burke's preferred "speculation," which, rather than "exploding general prejudices," seeks out their latent wisdom and thus avails itself of the "general bank and capital of nations" (R 76).

should suffer well), and that she bears...the whole weight of her accumulated wrongs, with a serene patience...[and] with the dignity of a Roman matron; that in the last extremity she will save herself from the last disgrace; and that, if she must fall, she will fall by no ignoble hand.

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles, and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in...full of life and splendor and joy. Oh! what a revolution!...Little did I dream when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, and respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom. (R 66)

Beauty's bosomy maze, formerly described as lacking all "protuberances," now quite properly conceals its own sharp weapon (the queen's hidden means of self-extinction), given the refusal of the men of France to perform their own customary office:

I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience...which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defense of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment...is gone! (R 66–67)

Against the predations of the calculators, Burke recalls an old (idealized) economy of unbought grace and generous loyalty. The free gift of pleasure (whose infantilizing tendencies Burke once decried) can and must become, in revolutionary times, a "nurse" of manly feeling.

In short, suffering beauty (to whose affective power Burke's early essay already attested)<sup>21</sup> must replace the cult of terror, if the glory of Europe is not to be altogether extinguished. In the circumstance, *Reflections* reverses the supremacy of the sublime over the beautiful that Burke's *Enquiry* had urged.<sup>22</sup> Self-preservation (whose sublimization had proved all too volatile) is to be replaced by the principle, "origin[at]ing in the ancient chivalry," which feels a stain to feminine honor "like a wound," which has "produced a noble equality" without "confounding ranks," and which has given Europe a character

<sup>21</sup> See *E* 100.

<sup>22</sup> The true revolution, as Burke says, is one of the sentiments.

superior to all of Asia, and perhaps even to “those states which flourished in the most brilliant periods of the antique world” (R 67).

It is not the (formerly stressed) “dread” of majesty—not the sublime “power” of “institutions in kings and commanders” (E 62)—that Burke now speaks of, but the distressed loveliness of feudal monarchy and manners. For states, as for poems, “it is not enough to be beautiful; one must also be sweet.” “To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely” (R 68). In place of a “mechanic philosophy” according to which laws “are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern which each individual may find in them from his own private speculations or can spare to them from his own private interests,” Burke now urges, as a softening “aid” and “supplement” to law, political “embodiments” able to create “love,” “veneration,” “admiration,” and “attachment” (in that order) (R 68).

But is the object of that veneration real? Mechanic philosophy aims to dissolve the “pleasing illusions” that “made power gentle and obedience liberal,” that “harmonized the different shades of life.” It aims, in a word, to explode the “decent drapery” that “covers the defects of our naked, shivering nature” (R 67). Are we to conclude, then, that our imagined “dignity” is, in fact, only illusory? Burke is caught, it seems, on the horns of his own rhetorical construction: if afflicted modesty (or female beauty enhanced by its peculiar weakness) is to have maximum effect, the truth that modesty would hide must indeed be ugly. (Queens must actually be, as a mechanic philosophy insists, “animal[s]...not of the highest order” [R 67].) If that affect is not maximized, we are back in the coils of our own shivering and naked terror. Burke may still speak approvingly of the “natural entrails” of Englishmen, not yet “completely embowelled” and “stuffed” (like birds) with “blurred shreds of paper” (R 75). He may find comfort in the “cold sluggishness” of English nature, naked or not. He cannot bring himself to call its lingering principle true. We cherish our prejudices (he says), only “because they are prejudices” (R 76).

Burke’s difficulty, then, is not merely rhetorical. If beauty is enhanced by feigned *im*perfection, as he maintains, then the goodness of what attracts us is doubly illusory (or, alternatively, referable to an omnipotent God whose purposes are ultimately inscrutable to us). As we have seen, Burke tries to ground the philosophical sublime at the point at which advancing knowledge meets confusion, that is, in the “astonishment” that arises from a recognition of ignorance. Unlike the Socratic knowledge of ignorance that it superficially

resembles, however, Burke presses reason to its limits, not for the sake of wisdom, but to achieve a certain swelling feeling of astonished uplift.

#### THE POLITICS OF BEAUTY AND SUBLIMITY

In sum: beauty and sublimity have an ambiguous political valence for Burke, suitable for deployment in opposing ways as the occasion might demand. Initially a positive quality that invested fear of violent death—the fundamental passion of early modern political thought from Hobbes onward—with a noble elevation bordering on religious awe, it would later serve, in its monstrously feminized form, as an antipodal focus of political and moral revulsion. And beauty, originally associated with the imperfect and diminutive, would become the primary quality to which Burke appealed in shoring up attachment to traditional manners and institutions now under siege. As Mary Wollstonecraft immediately grasped,<sup>23</sup> motherhood, natural and unnatural, was the fulcrum around which Burke's own rhetoric hinged, revolving back and forth even as his principles remained, as he insisted, unchanged. Thus whereas in the *Philosophic Enquiry* Burke had linked obedience to admiration (we “submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance” [E 113]), in *Reflections* he associates it primarily with love: if men are to love their country they must find it lovely.

To be sure, *Reflections* does not entirely ignore the harsher virtues, which remain crucial, not only for the discipline of armies but also in framing reform in accordance with a general attachment to antiquity. We are to “fear God; we look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility” (R 76). Still the rhetorical emphasis has shifted, with repeated reassurances not only as to the “liberality” and “unbought grace” of the submission he means to encourage, but also as to the shared elevation of even the most humble, given a “mild majesty and sober pomp” in which even “the poorest man finds his own importance and dignity” (R 86).<sup>24</sup> And where he had earlier stressed the vital importance of industry and exertion to counter the ill effects of a “relaxation” associated with “beauty” and “luxury” (E 135, 149, 151), he now

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, was perhaps the earliest response to Burke's *Reflections* to appear in print.

<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, Burke praises the “mixed system of opinion and sentiment,” originating in “the ancient chivalry” and operating through the “soft collar of social esteem,” that “mitigated kings into companions and raised private men to be fellows with kings” (R 67). One would hardly know, given Burke's language, that the “hard collar” of the law was also necessary.

considers the “timid[ity]” and “sluggish[ness]” of landed wealth to be virtues justifying the continuing predominance of “great masses” to counterbalance the energy of the talented and ambitious few (*R* 44–45; see also 48, 75).<sup>25</sup>

English liberty for Burke rested upon three pillars: monarchy, nobility, and commons. The task of the prudent statesman, on such a view, lies in shoring up whichever pillar is most fragile, and weakening whichever is overbearing in the given moment: hence Burke’s opposition to George III during the time of the American crisis, and his opposition to his own Parliamentary Party when it leaned too closely toward revolutionary France. What Burke most feared, in 1790, was a democratic spirit run amok, without moderation or restraint. And what he thought most needed was a revived affection for the aristocracy, an affection to be elicited without provoking the indignation of those already influenced by egalitarian principles of natural right. In sum and speaking solely biographically: where he had earlier sought to open up a greater place among the intellectual and political establishment, including a powerful landed aristocracy, for talented individuals like himself, he now seeks to inspire the middle and lower ranks with a fondness for the established order based less on awe and reverence than on love and sympathy for imperiled beauty. Thus Burke does not here insist that those in possession of landed wealth, or who otherwise hold aristocratic or royal sway, are the natural superiors of those who are to cherish them. On the contrary, once stripped of the trappings of convention they are “naked and shivering” like all the rest of us.<sup>26</sup> Most of their superior abilities of reasoning and judgment are here attributed to education and manners, with talent and opportunities for exhibiting moral virtue evenly distributed, as we are led to assume, among the few and many.<sup>27</sup> One would hardly know, given Burke’s presentation of the English constitution in *Reflections*, that anyone “rules” or is “ruled” at all.<sup>28</sup> In short, Burke’s modified defense of aristocracy in *Reflections* is not the

<sup>25</sup> On the latter point, see Harvey Mansfield, “Burke and Machiavelli on Principles in Politics,” in *Machiavelli’s Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 81–97.

<sup>26</sup> Compare in this regard the rather different rhetorical emphasis (and aim) of Burke’s later “An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs” (1791), which speaks emphatically of government by a “natural aristocracy,” guided by reason and reflection, as the true “state of nature,” absent which a “people” is merely a mob (397–98). Still, even here, Burke stresses the beauty of this natural harmony (and hence by implication, the voluntary compliance of those less favored by fortune), rather than an imposing sublimity by which respect might be “forced.” It is rather the “common sort of men” who, bereft of their “proper chieftains,” are now called “terrible.” See “An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs,” in *Burke’s Politics*, ed. Ross J. S. Hoffman and Paul Levack (New York: Knopf, 1949), 398–99.

<sup>27</sup> As in Burke’s reference to “the happiness that is to be found by virtue in all conditions; in which consists the true moral equality of mankind” (*R* 32).

<sup>28</sup> “Rule” and its cognates usually appear in the sense of “a rule” or principle, and never in reference to

traditional “Aristotelian” argument for rule of the best but, in the face of what Burke saw as a new and menacing challenge, an effort to reconcile the new science of political economy with a cultivation of the manners—sexual and spiritual—necessary to sustain a stable and incrementally progressive social order mainly devoted to the protection of property.

That this is not Burke’s complete or final view is suggested by his later, more emphatic insistence on the rightful claims of the natural aristocracy that constitutes the true “state of nature,” and absent which a people is merely a mob.<sup>29</sup> For here, in response to Fox’s expressed admiration for France, and Burke’s own subsequent break with the Whigs—the party to which he had devoted twenty years of dedicated service—a different issue was uppermost: namely, defeating the view, apparently endorsed by Fox, that the Whig revolution of 1668 had envisioned ongoing popular sovereignty, which would allow a current majority to alter the laws however they pleased. In politics everything depends upon the circumstances.

Burke’s insight into how aristocratic manners and privileges might best be defended in a democratic age may owe something to his own experience, the significance of which as a source of political wisdom he never ceased to stress. Burke was born in Dublin to parents who were descended on both sides from the old Irish nobility<sup>30</sup> that had been displaced by the Protestant ascendancy. While his father, who practiced law, was a convert (probably very recent) to Anglicanism, and although Burke was raised in the Church of England, his mother remained a Catholic, and his sisters were both educated as Catholics and in turn married within the Roman Church, as was common in the case of daughters in such circumstances. Burke was raised, however, largely by his maternal uncle<sup>31</sup> (as was common practice among the

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the governance of England.

<sup>29</sup> Burke, *Burke’s Politics*, 395–96.

<sup>30</sup> Such is certainly the view advanced by O’Connor and O’Donnell; and while Bourke harbors doubts as to whether evidence to this effect is conclusive, he admits that this was certainly Burke’s strong belief (38), which for purposes of the present argument is what mainly matters. For an instructive account of Burke’s Irish family background and the surrounding political and historical context, see Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), chap. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Burke’s surviving encomium suggests him to have been a man of generous and upright character, who succored the needy in the manner that Burke later urged upon the wealthy generally in lieu of government support. See *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas W. Copeland et al., 10 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958–1978), 1:346, cited in Katherine O’Donnell, “Burke and the Aisling: Homage of a Nation,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 3 (2007): 406–7.

old aristocracy)<sup>32</sup> in County Cork, where the Nagel family retained a place of prominence among the local peasantry, despite the family's official loss of noble status.<sup>33</sup> County Cork remained an outpost of Gaelic Irish long after its official loss of status, and it seems likely that the young Burke both heard it spoken among his relatives and was himself familiar with the language. The old aristocratic civilization was, moreover, one of high literary refinement, in which spoken poetry played an especially prominent role; young Burke was likely exposed to the traditional "noble" gatherings combining poetic contests with lively political and philosophic discussion that continued to flourish there well into the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

The effect of this early experience on Burke's later rich use of language was likely considerable. I am more interested here, however, in how it may have helped inform his political understanding and its apparent ambivalences. Educated at "hedge" and Quaker schools close to his maternal family, he subsequently attended Trinity College in Dublin,<sup>35</sup> where he established a debating society along lines reminiscent of the gatherings he had experienced among his mother's aristocratic relatives.<sup>36</sup> He left for England at the age of twenty-two to study law on his father's urging. He subsequently established himself as an Englishman, albeit one whose Catholic wife and ongoing sympathy with the Irish cause burdened his political career throughout.

Burke's father was a difficult and demanding man, with whom Burke got along uneasily; and it is tempting to take personally the latter's claim in the *Enquiry* that children rarely love their fathers in the same unmixed fashion that they do their mothers. In short: Burke was aided by his own political and moral formation to appreciate the "softer" side of feudal aristocracy, and

<sup>32</sup> Katherine O'Donnell, "Aisling Gheár—A Terrible Beauty: The Gaelic Background to Burke's *Enquiry*," in *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke's "Philosophical Enquiry"*, ed. Koen Vermeer and Michael Funk Deckard (Springer: Dordrecht, 2012), 139–50.

<sup>33</sup> Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> According to O'Donnell, "Aisling Gheár," 142, a common theme of such Jacobite poetry depicted Ireland "as a beautiful maiden or suffering old woman defiled by boorish masters," one who "begged for...restitution" by a "lover over the seas," sometimes identified as a Stuart, "to her [former] state of bountiful beauty" (142).

<sup>35</sup> Its curriculum, according to Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 51, included Lucian, Sallust, Homer, Virgil, Theocritus, Ovid, Terence, Epictetus, Justinian, Horace, Juvenal, Velleius, Cicero's *De officiis*, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, Livy, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Sophocles, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Longinus on the sublime. Students also studied physics, astronomy, and some rudimentary mathematics: in short, the classic "humanist" curriculum, plus some attention to modern science.

<sup>36</sup> Katherine O'Donnell, "Edmund Burke's Political Poetics," in *Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality and Modern Irish Culture*, ed. N. Cronin, S. Crosson, and J. Eastlake (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 175–88.

to recognize the pathos of a lost world of gentility from which he himself descended and to which he by all ancient rights continued to belong. At the same time, he understood the need, precisely if the remnants of that order were to be saved, for a new sort of defense, based not on the deliverance by a foreign Catholic king of which the traditional Irish harpists sang, but on new men like his father who had made their peace with both the Anglican Church and a new economic order based largely upon commerce.<sup>37</sup>

Burke's curiously "feminized" presentation of the ancient regime,<sup>38</sup> as epitomized by Marie Antoinette both ascendant and under duress, was thus prepared by his own early life. Certainly the conditions of the Irish peasants had been more favorable under their own chieftains than they were in submission to absentee English landlords who bore them little religious or linguistic sympathy. And this consideration may help explain Burke's apparent coldness in his late essay regarding the question of scarcity suffered by English rural workers, who were surely better off than their Irish counterparts, and whose uprising might have called to mind the peasant disturbances from whom he had earlier endeavored to disassociate the old Catholic gentry during his earlier service in Ireland.

Similarly, Burke's virilized individual lends a chivalric cast to the "rational and industrious" as understood by Locke, that is, to the new commercial class that Burke sought to enlist in the seemingly unlikely task of "saving" the old landed order from the predations of the "radicals," some of them themselves vocal defenders of the rights of private property.<sup>39</sup> For Burke held that there is a natural harmony between that commercial class and the remnants of the old aristocratic order that the former, in his view, had a strong interest in preserving, even prior to the irruptions in France. Thus Burke's peculiar understanding of the manners and morals most apt to preserve a liberal commercial order, an understanding so different from that of Adam Smith and most of the American founders—including the need for an established church and the perpetuation of traditional laws of *couverture*. Drawing

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<sup>37</sup> On the "pragmatic" religious attitude of Burke's convert father, arising from a desire for "family advancement" and "material prosperity," see Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 31.

<sup>38</sup> On this point, see Stephen K. White, "Burke on Politics, Aesthetics, and the Dangers of Modernity," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 515–16, along with Linda Zerilli's "Lacanian" response, "No Thrust, No Swell, No Subject? A Critical Response to Stephen K. White," *Political Theory* 22, no. 2 (1994): 323–28.

<sup>39</sup> According to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), for example, the "end of all political associations" is the preservation of the "natural and imprescriptible rights" to "liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression."

partly, it seems likely, on the family romance of his own youth, Burke drapes the striving individual in the costume of the chivalric hero, reversing—so to speak quixotically—Cervantes’s famous trope.<sup>40</sup>

In any case, and whatever its affective sources, Burke’s ploy would resonate well beyond England, including Germany and elsewhere. Indeed, his peculiar attentiveness to the shared interests of commerce, landed wealth, and established religion, and his accompanying tolerance for high levels of formal social inequality, has made him especially attractive to American conservatives seeking to shore up the post–Civil War compromise between the industrial North and Southern pining for a “lost cause” of white “paternalism” along with chattel slavery. This is not by any means to say that all contemporary conservative appropriations of Burke are covert appeals to racism, or that Burke’s thought is not rich enough to encompass a variety of understandings of a healthy political order. Still, the peculiar genius of his rhetoric stems in no small measure from its substitution of the sublime aura of masculine power with which the aristocratic order was traditionally invested, with the softer, more beguiling garments of distressed feminine beauty. Far from threatening others with oppression, the “grandi” of Burke’s time must be protected from the predations of a savage liberty spearheaded by a deranged and atheistic philosophy.<sup>41</sup> It is thus a mistake to associate Burke’s cause primarily with that of the oppressed as such,<sup>42</sup> though he was unusually generous and charitable in his personal dealings. Instead, in his treatment of France and India, no less than of Ireland, that cause is better understood as one linked to the waning order of the Irish Catholic gentry, lovingly reimagined, to which he belonged by birth and blood. As Burke was

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<sup>40</sup> The same might be said of Burke’s innovative treatment of “prescription.” As Mansfield observes (*Machiavelli’s Virtue*, 103–5), Burke makes a term borrowed from Roman private law into “a fundamental part of public law.” On this innovation as the gist of Burke’s originality, see Paul Lucas, “On Edmund Burke’s Doctrine of Prescription; Or, an Appeal from the New to the Old Lawyers,” *Historical Journal* 11, no. 1 (1968): 35–63. For a very different (and in my view quite misguided) account of the lingering influence of Burke’s upbringing on his later politics, see Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). On the perils of this and other efforts at “psychobiography,” especially with a view to establishing that Burke was a “crypto-Catholic,” see Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 34–38. As Burke would have been the first to insist, one can admit the importance of experience, including early experience, in the formation of an individual’s political judgment, without succumbing to psychological reductionism.

<sup>41</sup> On “grandi” (members of the nobility) and princes in Machiavelli, see Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, 92–95.

<sup>42</sup> Cf., for example, Conor Cruise O’Brien, who stresses this point, and Gibbons, who treats him as a precursor of a later anticolonialism. See O’Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

perhaps the first to grasp, aristocracy must be softened and familiarized<sup>43</sup> to retain a place in an increasingly democratic age.

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<sup>43</sup> For the application of a similar insight under very different circumstances, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. with introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), part 2, chaps. 9 and 12; see also editors' introduction, xxxi.

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