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SENSIBILITY AND THE SUBLIME AND BEAUTIFUL IN EDMUND BURKE'S "REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE"

The University of Arizona

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SENSIBILITY AND THE SUBLIME AND BEAUTIFUL
IN EDMUND BURKE'S
"REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE"

by

James Steven Sheets

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1986
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

WILLIAM H. SEWELL, JR.
Professor of History
This thesis proposes to investigate the cross current between political ideology and culture. More specifically, it examines the use of aesthetics within Edmund Burke's political rhetoric. Although in this case, culture may be spelled with a "K", and Burke was but one voice in the millions that accompanied the storm of the French Revolution, this effort will elucidate the constant interaction between ideology and culture and the creative process which fires the imagination of both politician and artist.

As an ideologue, Burke's fame is equaled only by a few; however, in his day, Burke was not a successful politician. More often than not, he fought on the losing side of the battle. His efforts to curb the growing influence of the English crown in 1770, his plea for reconciliation with the colonists in the American Revolution, and his prosecution of Warren Hastings for bribery and extortion in the management of the British East Indies Company did not win the approval of Parliament. Even his most earnest crusade, that against the French Revolution, did little to affect the direction of that insurgency at home.

Despite these failed endeavors, Burke did receive considerable attention in his day for his oratory. Since then, this man of letters and politics has been the subject of more than one biography heralding
not only his political savvy, but his elocution. His mesmerizing oratory and splendid ornaments of speech were by no means an unstudied acquisition. As a youngster, Burke spent uncounted hours in the study of poetry and rhetoric. In addition, he had a connoisseur's knowledge of art and painting. While a student in college, he developed a theory of aesthetics which won great popularity during the later half of the eighteenth century. What will be demonstrated here is that Burke utilized this knowledge of literature and aesthetics within his political rhetoric as part and parcel of his overall method of persuasion. This can be seen with particular clarity in his most celebrated work, the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Such a study is long overdue. It is surprising that the relation of Burke's views on art, literature and the theater to his political ideology has not already been investigated in recent historiography. Most Burke scholars have noted in passing Burke's interest in art or pointed out his references to the theater in his speeches, yet little research has been done exploring the sophisticated aesthetic theory Burke used in his political analysis. To do so represents this thesis' most novel contribution to the existing Burkean literature.

There is another aspect to this thesis, revisionist in nature, which is of note. Within the intellectual milieu of the eighteenth century, there is no consensus among scholars on how to interpret Burke. To conservatives, Burke's overall social and political philosophy represents a continuation of the classical, rational tradition established in antiquity. To them, Burke's historical conservatism and
denunciation of the principles of the French Enlightenment contains the essentials of the perennial philosophy of Aristotle, the early Church Fathers, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Yet, in recent years, this view has suffered. In discrediting his political conservatism, scholars have focused on his inconsistencies, thereby undermining the supposed theories of natural law within Burke's social thought. By emphasizing the pragmatic aspects of Burke's views on the American and French Revolutions and domestic reform, recent work has evinced the anti-rational, sensual aspect of Burke's psychology and political theory. Burke is an enigmatic figure whose apparent contradictions may give credence to both schools of thought. However, whatever the inconsistencies, this thesis will argue that the latter of these interpretations is more accurate. He belongs more in the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment than in our classical heritage. Excavating Burke's aesthetic critique within the Reflections, and his indebtedness to John Locke and Francis Hutcheson, demonstrates that Burke in fact belongs to this pre-Romantic era of the late eighteenth century.

This thesis arose out of a seminar on the French and American Revolutions in the Spring of 1984. The idea for this paper was, in part, provided by a reading of Garry Wills' Inventing America. In this work, Wills unearths the conditions surrounding the composition of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, and through careful etymology, traces much of its genesis to the Scottish Enlightenment. By reexamining material once thought the brain-child of a more rational French

Enlightenment, Wills has put forth a novel exegesis of this historical document. Likewise, the attempt here is to reconsider Burke's Reflections, a work often considered a milestone in Natural Law political theory, within the moral sense tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Over a year has passed since I selected this topic for a thesis. The fall of 1984 was dedicated to the research and the spring of 1985 to the writing. Despite the effort put into this work, it is fair to say that the subject has not been exhausted. Although I have excavated Burke's aesthetic critique of the Ancien Regime, a further examination of his treatment of the National Assembly and use of gender and medical analogies within his later political writings is still needed. These topics may be explored later if this thesis should be developed into a Ph. D. dissertation.

I would like to thank Dr. Paul A. Carter and Dr. Richard A. Cosgrove for reviewing this thesis and sitting on my oral examination committee. Their suggestions on style, exposition, and etymologies have been incorporated into this final draft. A special thanks to Dr. William H. Sewell, Jr., who has followed this project from the beginning. I have profited highly from his advice on exposition and argumentation and have appreciated his enthusiasm for the topic.

This thesis is dedicated to Dr. Linda Carney, my high school English teacher, whose insistence on reading Homer introduced me to the field of history and literary criticism, and to Mom and Dad, who still encourage my studies in history despite the economic disincentives for doing so.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the relevance of Edmund Burke's aesthetic theory to his analysis of the French Revolution. While a student, Burke wrote an aesthetic treatise exploring the ideas of the sublime and beautiful. Later, as a social theorist, he utilized these ideas within his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* to construct imagery of a chivalric ideal. The inadequacies of both the Ancien Regime and the National Assembly become salient when they are contrasted with this ideal.

Burke's aesthetic theory is also helpful in understanding the *Reflections* as a work of literature, for he utilized the ideas of sublime and beautiful within this work to persuade his reader. Interpreted within a moral sense philosophy, these two aesthetic ideas are a didactic device designed to solicit feelings of admiration and affection for the Ancien Regime while arousing disgust and outrage at the Jacobins.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Reflections on the Revolution in France is undoubtedly Edmund Burke's most widely read work. Written a year after the onset of the revolution, this treatise, which vigorously condemned the new republic in France, quickly sparked a controversy within British public opinion. The response to the Reflections was tremendous. Penned at the twilight of Burke's political career, the work brought the author instant notoriety. Five thousand five hundred copies sold within the first seventeen days of publication. Two years later, over thirty thousand volumes had been published in England alone. Oxford University awarded the aged Whig an honorary doctorate for his effort. Members of the House of Lords submitted a petition to make Burke a peer. Nobility throughout Europe praised Burke for his pamphlet. Even the king of England, George III, recommended the Reflections as a book every gentleman should read.

Yet others found much to criticize in his work.(1) Reformers censured Burke for his reactionary stance. Revolutionary Thomas

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1
Paine, as a response to the Reflections, composed the highly acclaimed Rights of Man. British Jacobin societies burned copies of the Reflections in public as well as effigies of Burke himself.

In the Reflections, Burke condemned the French radicals for what he believed to be their reckless abolition of existing political institutions and mistaken philosophical theories of human nature. In opposition to the Philosophes' advocacy of government by a social contract and proclamation of man's rational nature, Burke argued in the Reflections for the state's divine conception and anticipated the Romanticism of the nineteenth century by redefining man's essence as sensibility.

Today Burke is considered a patriarch of modern conservatism and the Reflections is a milestone in conservative ideology. The Cold Warriors in the 1950's and opponents of the Great Society in the 1960's, reapplied Burke's criticism of the French Revolution in the fight against "godless communism" abroad and against the introduction of the welfare state into twentieth-century American society. Yet, Burke's conservative reputation is a posthumous phenomenon. Throughout most of his career, he was best known for his aesthetic treatise A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Begun in Burke's third year of studies at Trinity College and published ten years later in 1757, the Enquiry is Burke's first effort at a literary career and is important because it posits his theories of

psychology and our aesthetic response to art. In this treatise, Burke articulates the most influential definitions of the sublime and beautiful in eighteenth century art. The sublime is that which overwhelms our senses, startles our imagination, thereby incapacitating our reason and leaving us awe-struck. Conversely, the beautiful is that which seduces our senses and lulls our imagination, relaxing us into a state of pleasure. These two aesthetic ideas, the sublime and beautiful, are important to an understanding of Burke's critique of the French Revolution.(3)

Previous scholarship has focused on Burke's political career and has failed to investigate fully the relevance of his early literary endeavors to his political ideology. This thesis will examine Burke's use of aesthetic theory in his political writings, focusing specifically on his treatment of the French Revolution in the Reflections. At one level, the Reflections is an analytical critique of the principles of statecraft, but it also utilizes eighteenth century aesthetic and psychological theories to create a powerful emotional appeal reinforcing its political analysis. In this polemic, Burke constructs a chivalric ideal to which he ascribes aesthetic qualities of the sublime and beautiful which are meant to evoke within his readers feelings of awe and love, two sensations which, for Burke, form the basic bonds of

3. Although Burke abandoned his literary career and entered political life two years after the Enquiry's publication, he continued his interest in art and literature as demonstrated by his membership in the London Literary Club. For a treatment of Burke's continuing interest in art and literature and his relations with the various members of the London Literary Club see Donald Cross Bryant, Edmund Burke and his Literary Friends (St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University Studies, 1939).
society. Once having established this ideal, Burke contrasts it with the Ancien Regime under Louis XVI and the newly created National Assembly, two polities to which he also attributes certain aesthetic qualities.

A comparison of Burke's chivalric ideal with his iconography of the Ancien Regime and the National Assembly will reveal what factors he believed precipitated the demise of the Ancien Regime and the alleged misgovernment of France by the National Assembly. Finally, it will be shown that the Reflections is, in addition to an analytical critique of statecraft, a cathartic polemic constructed upon the precepts of the moral sense philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment, in which the ideas of the sublime and beautiful instruct the reader in how to feel about the revolution.
CHAPTER 2

STUDIES AT TRINITY COLLEGE

Edmund Burke was born in 1729 in Dublin, Ireland, the second son of Richard Burke and Mary Nagle. Edmund, being a delicate child, was sent at the age of six to live with his mother's relatives for the next five years in hopes that his pneumatic disorder would find a remedy in the warmer, drier climate of southern Ireland. After he regained his health, it was the hope of Richard Burke, a barrister by profession, that young Ned, as he was referred to by family and friends, would also enter the legal profession. At the age of fifteen, Edmund returned to Dublin and, at his father's behest, entered Trinity College. Burke's entry into the university at such an early age was not considered unusual at the time—one must recall the poor quality of secondary education and the informal character of college instruction in the eighteenth century.

His arrival at Trinity on 14 April, 1744, marks the beginning of his lifelong, private correspondences which are today a valuable source of knowledge about Burke's personal life. It seems Burke's relocation to Dublin caused him considerable inner turmoil. Consequently, he displayed little interest in his studies during his first year. Instead, most of Burke's letters reflect his growing homesickness for southern Ireland, dismay over his severed friendship with childhood
companion Richard Shackleton, and adolescent search for self-identity. Indeed, young Burke's struggle with the more doleful passions permeated his correspondence. For example, in a letter to Shackleton, written three months after his arrival at Trinity, Burke reflects upon a colleague's suicide over an estranged love affair, noting how man's passions, virtuous in themselves, become deleterious through unbridled excesses:

This accident has altered my Sentiments concerning Love, so that I am not only convinced that there is such a thing as love, but it may very probably be the source of as many misfortunes as are usually ascribed to it. This may, I think, be a sufficient example to shew to what Lengths an unrestrained Passion, tho virtuous in itself, may carry a man and with how much craft and suetley our great Enemy endeavours by all means to work our Destruction, how he lays a bait in everything, and how much need we have to care Lest he make too sure of us, as is the case of that unfortunate youth. {1}

Burke's regard for the passions and their primacy in the psyche is a recurring concern throughout his college years. Emotional in temperament, he upheld the primacy of the passions over the rational faculty, acknowledging their efficacious impact upon the psyche and their verity as a means of insight.

Against his father's wishes, Burke spent most of his time studying belles lettres rather than law. So much so that he received only average marks during his first year. In a letter to Shackleton explaining his literary pursuits, Burke noted:

This day I have shook off idleness and began to buckle to—I wish I could have said this to you with truth a month ago, 'twould have been of great advantage to me, my time was other-

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wise employed, Poetry, Sir, nothing but Poetry could go down with me—tho' I have read more than wrote—so you see I am far gone in the poetics of madness, which I can hardly master, as indeed all my Studies have rather proceeded from Sallies of passion, than from the preference of sound reason, and like the nature of all other natural appetites have been very violent for a Season and very soon cooled and quite absorb'd in the succeeding.(2)

The above quote not only testifies to Burke's enrapture with poetry but reveals a central theme within his later political philosophy. With all the rage of an Irishman, his later speeches often focus on the "Sallies of passion," emphasizing their role in arriving at sound political principles. Any political system, Burke would maintain, must take into account man's passionate nature. Desire, according to Burke, catalyzed world history. As a religious animal, man often must forego the conclusions of reason and find direction and consolation in his faith and feelings.

Belles Lettres would continue to occupy much of Burke's time during his years at Trinity. His poetry, characteristically written in the Restoration's traditional heroic couplet, fills his correspondences and once again attests to his continued struggle with the passions. For example, while parodying the classical poet's invocation to the Muse, Burke wrote this verse to Shackleton warning of the evils of lust, which Burke routinely equated to selflove:

Almighty Selflove and her Power I sing
Of all we do first mover and first Spring
By her commands I undertake this Song
Be it her care its labour to prolong.
Let me my friend arrest thine ear a while
Deign on this work propitiously to smile
As your Epistle and well write Essay

2. Ibid, pp. 88-89.
Serve as a torch to light me on my way
While I explore wild Selfloves mazy course
And trace the Passions to this common source.(3)

This stanza, written just three months after his arrival at Trinity, prefigures Burke's first formal literary effort. The desire to explore "wild Selfloves mazy course," back to "their common source," will ultimately provide the motive behind the Enquiry, an epistemological treatise which systematically analyzes the passions back to their "first mover."

Finally, during the spring semester of his third year, Burke's literary endeavors found expression in the formation of a debating society. Young Ned, in conjunction with seven classmates, created what was informally known as "The Club" and officially chartered as the Academy of Belles Lettres. The Club, which later evolved into the famous Historical Society of Trinity College, met once a week for the promulgation of letters and the improvement of taste. The preamble to the laws of the society, which Burke, as one of the founding members undoubtedly helped pen, stated:

The improvement of the mind being the proper employment of a reasonable creature (especially while the mind is capable of improvement) everything conducive to this should be regarded in the light in which the instrument of so good a work deserves to be considered....Thoughts of this nature gave birth to the Academy of Belle Lettres, a weekly club instituted for the improvement of its members in the more refined, elegant, and usefull parts of Literature, these seeming the most likely means for attaining the great end in view.(4)

3. Ibid, p. 29.

The Club led an orderly, but short existence, falling by the wayside with the approach of summer examinations. Every Tuesday evening two members would debate upon a foreassigned issue of historical, philosophical, or literary importance, after which the "harangue" was opened up to the entire club. The minutes of the meetings, usually in Burke's handwriting, testify to the club's interest in literary criticism, history, and international affairs.

Of particular note is the meeting of 26 May, 1747, for which the Academy assigned Burke to make a declaration on the relationship of philosophy to poetry. His opponent in this debate, William Dennis, initiated the discussion by proclaiming the use of philosophy, considered here a rational appeal to the understanding, as an instrument in creating an aesthetic response. To this Burke replied that philosophy, though of benefit in establishing the didactic end of art, in no way enhanced the emotional or aesthetic response experienced in art. Burke's analysis of this reaction is indicative of the eighteenth century's growing tendency toward sentimentality and depreciation of the rational faculty. While likening the role of the imagination in the aesthetic response to the flight of Pegasus, Burke reaffirmed the more immediate and powerful efficacy of the emotional appeal:

That the provinces of Phill: & Poetry are so different that they can never coincide, that Phill: to gain its end addresses to the understanding, poetry to the imagination w(hich) by pleasing it finds a nearer Way to the heart, that the coldness of Philosophy hurts the imagination & taking away as much of its power must consequently lessen its effect, & so prejudice it. That such is the consequence of putting a Rider on Pegasus that will prune his wings & incapacitate him from rising from the ground. (5)

5. Ibid, p. 249.
Burke's analysis of the imagination in literature undoubtedly occupied much of the young student's attention at Trinity. In a letter to Shackleton written two days after the above debate, Burke mentions that, "I have myself almost finished a piece -- an odd one, but you should not see it until it comes out, if ever."(6) At the end of the epistle, William Dennis added this postscript, "Ned thought it preposterous to be thrashing his brains for you when he is writing for the public: Pray, laugh heartily now lest you should split when you see the subject he has chosen and the manner he has treated it; but I will not anticipate your pleasure by acquainting you any more."(7)

Burke's mention of an odd piece has generally been construed as a reference to his treatise, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Although Burke did not publish the Enquiry, a work of considerable length, until 1757, "The subject," according to one of his parliamentary colleagues "had been rolling in his thoughts before he wrote his book, he having been used from the time he was in college to speculate on the topics which form the subjects of it."(8) It seems then that the Enquiry was a continuous effort. Burke initiated the project in 1747, sometime previous to the debate on 26 May, yet the treatise underwent periodic revision until 1757.

Aside from The Club, in his third year at Trinity Burke also took an interest in the theater. The theater was enormously popular in

6. Burke, Correspondence, vol 1, p. 92.
8. Ibid.
eighteenth century Dublin. The Smock Alley Theatre, which was particularly enjoyed by Trinity students, gave Burke his first real exposure to Restoration drama and perhaps provided him his first meeting with actor David Garrick who later joined the now famous Literary Club of London. Burke so thoroughly relished the stage that Arthur P.I. Samuels, in what is probably the best biography of Burke's early years, speculates that young Edmund went so far as to write a play of unknown title, which, though never aired publicly, did receive at least one rehearsal at Smock Alley.(9)

Whether or not Burke made an attempt at play writing, his interest in drama did bring him into close friendship with Thomas Sheridan, the club's manager and alumnus of Trinity College. Prior to Sheridan's supervision, Smock Alley had been, in the eyes of some, an unhealthy influence on the taste of Dublin Society. The supposedly lewd and bawdy plays of Farquhar, Vanbrugh, and Congreve were performed regularly and usually incited riotous behavior.(10) The public's drinking and harassment of actors aroused Sheridan's concern and that of at least a few Trinity students. In an effort to domesticate his audience, Sheridan routinely addressed his clients, under threat of expulsion, to maintain some semblance of genteel etiquette. Not surprisingly, such appeals usually served to antagonize further the  


10. Collectively these authors produced such works as Love's Last Shift, Virtue in Danger, Love for Love, and The Old Bachelor, theatricals which, according to one critic, reflect the Restoration's, "libertine world of amourous intrigues, fashionable dress, and stylish manners."
vociferous mob. Finally on 19 January, 1747, Sheridan ejected one patron who had obscenely abused an actress backstage. Soon after, a riot broke out between the students supporting Sheridan’s measure and the ousted client’s ruffians seeking reprisals against the manager. Although there were no serious injuries in the melee, the students by no means considered the matter ended and decided that a show of support for Sheridan was in order. The following morning they immediately formed themselves into a vigilance committee named "The Scholars," and through the use of armed intimidation, bullied each of their opponents of the previous evening into a public apology. Though Burke himself was not a party of the Scholars, he was much engrossed with this incident, which provided the impetus for his next literary production.

As part of this crusade to raise the theater above its current alleged depravity, Burke launched the Reformer. Written entirely by Burke and published anonymously, this tabloid continued for thirteen consecutive weeks polemicizing against what young Burke called "the Depravation of Taste." With all the vehemence of a student radical, Burke inaugurated his underground flyer on 20 January, 1747, freely indulging in the aesthetic criticisms which characterize his later speeches. In his first weekly, while criticizing Dublin’s cultural milieu, Burke declared:

There is a certain Period when Dullness being arrived to its full Growth, and spreading over a Nation becomes so insolent that it forces men of Genius and Spirit to rise up, in Spite of their natural Modesty, and work that Destruction it is ripe for.
If we may judge of the Empire of Dullness by the great ones, whose Unwieldiness brought on their Ruin, this is certainly its time.(11)

As a person of genius and spirit, Burke took his vigilantism with the greatest seriousness. Good art, in this instance the theater, involved not only aesthetic, but moral considerations. The Dublin student evaluated art didactically, ever conscious of its moral import. Any discussion of taste necessarily predicated itself upon considerations of virtue and vice. After declaring his further intolerance to the vulgar plots of Restoration drama, Burke proclaimed:

The Depravation of Taste is as great as that of Morals, and tho' the correcting of the latter may seem a more laudable Design, and more consistent with public-spirit; yet there is so strong a Connection between them, and the morals of a Nation have so great Dependence on their Taste and Writings, that the fixing the latter, seems the first and surest Method of establishing the former.(12)

Burke continued his indictment much in the manner of Pope's Dunciad, finishing Reformer No. 1 with a poetic polemic in which he denounced Restoration playwrights as "quacks", its actors as "parrots", and even some of his more apathetic fellow students as "blockheads".(13)

The Reformer did attract attention in Dublin society. Nearly one thousand copies sold the first week. In a letter to Shackleton, written in the midst of preparing the next issue, Burke noted:

12. Ibid.
13. Burke's repeated use of the word "Dulness," in the Reformer is undoubtedly a reference taken from Alexander Pope's Dunciad, where pedants and poetasters are said to worship this goddess.
We have nothing to complain of the sale of the Reformer, few things have sold better, but we will be soon able to judge whether it was not the novelty that sold it by the reception of the Town gives our next, we talk in a manner that surprises some and you see by the enclosed that the scriblers do us the honor to take notice of us.(14)

Burke opened his second issue of the Reformer by praising the new-enacted policies of Thomas Sheridan. Then, as part of his continued effort to educate the taste of Dublin society, Burke set forth his criticisms for comedy and tragedy. First, he noted, humor, wit, judgment in composition, and propriety in character must be present in comedy if it is to be at least middling. More importantly, Burke maintained, any dramatic piece must serve one great moral end. Although the plays of Farquhar may contain continuity in plot, and the works of Vanburgh wit, Burke believed both were "deficient inMorals." Only Ben Johnson, with his sound morals and attacks on vice and folly, "united all the Graces of true Comedy without the monstrous Blemishes that stain and disfigure the Merit of others."(15)

Next Burke briefly discusses the idea of tragedy. Like his criticisms on comedy, Burke faulted most Restoration writers for their obscenity. Even Shakespeare did not escape unscathed. Finally, in concluding Reformer No. 2, Burke promised:

But this we promise, as long as Providence gives us ability, and the Publick Contenance, we will go on to do all the good in our Power, to reprehend vice and folly in general, and to establish a Spirit of Benevolence, good Sense and Religion in this City; which if we after all our labours find to be the least


effected; we will be set down contented with this Thought, that we have not been the worst of Patriots. (16)

Burke's attempts to reprehend vice and folly again testifies to the didactic function he bestowed upon art, and foreshadows his later political criticisms. The vulgar plays staged at Smock Alley, like the ideas of the French Revolution, jeopardized society. Corrupted taste, like the adulterated metaphysics of the French Enlightenment, undermined the customs and manners of a people. Collectively, these manners were of the utmost importance to Burke because, for him, they constituted the basic fabric of holding society. Hence, the socio-political function of art necessitated its propriety.

Burke habitually called these theatrical criticisms, "Reflexions." In essence, they were moral precepts gleaned from his reactions to the local cultural milieu and designed to elevate the taste and awaken the sensibilities of Dublin society.

On 21 April, 1747, Burke penned the last Reformer. For the most part, each weekly restated the general manifesto announced in No. 1 and then discussed specific problems associated with the Smock Alley Theater. No. 3, for example, discusses the proper etiquette for an audience watching a play, while No. 7 advises the local gentry on their responsibility in patronizing artists. With the approach of summer, Dublin thinned, obliging Burke to discontinue his efforts until the fall.

16. Ibid., p. 302.
Summary

Burke displayed an unusual interest in the aesthetics of literature and the theater while a student at Trinity College. As demonstrated by his early correspondence, he recognized the primacy of the passions within human nature and the efficacy of the emotional appeal in the arts. With this in mind, Burke created the Academy of Belles Lettres, a debate club, and a tabloid entitled the Reforme, to improve the local cultural milieu. Burke, who bestowed upon art a didactic function, hoped that his criticisms, or "Reflexions" voiced in the Reforme would dissipate the moral malaise pervading Dublin.
CHAPTER 3

BURKE'S THEORY OF
AESTHETICS

The period from 1750 through 1756 has been called by one of Burke's most recent biographers, Thomas W. Copeland, Burke's "missing years."(1) After graduating from Trinity College with a Bachelor in Arts, Burke moved to London in the spring of 1750. Little is known of Burke's activities during this time. While in London, he lost contact with most of his Dublin associates. Only about a dozen of his letters from this period have survived. It is known that Burke spent these six years in the study of law and literature, concentrating particularly on the latter. In doing so, he became estranged from his father because of his slow progress in becoming a barrister. Although law was not a promising profession for one of Burke's sensibilities, the alternative of Grub Street, home of the struggling writer, was far bleaker. Nevertheless, Burke gradually leaned this way.

In 1756 Burke achieved his first publication entitled A Vindication of Natural Society. In this satire, Burke sarcastically employed the same skeptical argumentation in the subversion of government, that Lord Henry Bolingbroke had previously used to undermine

1. Burke, Correspondence vol. 1, p. xvii.

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Christianity. By criticizing those institutions which Bolingbroke, being a peer, held dear to his heart, Burke reaffirmed the philosophical optimism of the age and demonstrated that reasoning, unaided by faith, degenerated into abject skepticism.

Burke's *Vindication* was an immediate success. He had so thoroughly assimilated not only Bolingbroke's method of disputation but style of writing that readers thought it one of Bolingbroke's own works published posthumously. The success of this satire encouraged Burke to publish the *Enquiry*. As has been mentioned, this treatise was a continuous effort originating out of the discussions held by the Academy of Belles Lettres. Although it was first published in 1757, Burke noted in the preface that he had, for all practical purposes, finished the *Enquiry* four years previous and had since found little reason to make any alterations.

2. Henry St. John Bolingbroke (1678-1759), a notorious libertine whose personal intrigues scandalized English society while his flamboyant political manoeuvres eventually got him ostracized from the ruling Whigs. Through the resurrection of history, Bolingbroke tried to remove many of the religious issues which bedeviled English politics. A man who put country before party, his "Idea of a Patriot King" sought to reconcile Tories to the Revolution of 1688 by underplaying its religious causes. In doing so, Bolingbroke adopted many deistic arguments proposed by Voltaire.

3. Isaac Kramnick notes that, "...the *Vindication* announces another persistent preoccupation of Burke's, his respect for the given ranks of God's creations. God has structured the universe in a hierarchy of descending orders, according to Burke. Against Bolingbroke's alleged leveling tendencies Burke revived the imagery of God's 'Chain of Being,' which has so fascinated the Elizabethan humanists and Augustan poets". Kramnick, *Burke*, p.21.

A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful was undoubtedly the most popular treatise on the sublime in the eighteenth century. When published, the book enjoyed great popularity, in part because it distilled and rationalized the Restoration's growing enrapture with the sullen and bizarre. Equally appealing was its inventive and thorough definition of the sublime. Even the most erudite praised the Enquiry. The ever captious Samuel Johnson called it, "an example of true criticism." (5) In painting, the treatise inspired Joshua Reynolds's Thirteenth Discourse, which, according to one art historian, put the seal on the Gothic revival while in architecture, Burke's sublime found expression in John Milner's Essays on Gothic Art. Burke scholar, James T. Boulton summerized the influence of the Enquiry during the reign of George III:

It was largely due to Burke's popular treatise that the second half of the eighteenth century was provided with the "sublime" consciously to express the type of emotion Dennis (i.e. an earlier aesthetic theorist) had experienced. The growing taste for ruins and melancholy terror, for graveyard poetry, for wild and desolate scenery, and indeed for many of the interests normally dubbed 'pre-Romantic,' combined to give Burke's Enquiry a (possibly inflated) significance as realizing and systematizing a change of aesthetic values. (6)

Fortunately for Burke, the treatise furnished him several introductions into the prominent circles of London society, including the


5. Burke, Enquiry, p. lxxxi. Boulton provides an excellent account of not only the Enquiry's reception, but its continued influence into the nineteenth century.

London Literary Club. Even Burke's first political appointment, that of secretary to William Gerald Hamilton, member of Parliament and Chief Secretary to Lord Halifax, came vis-a-vis Lord Charlemont, an admirer of the treatise. With that background in mind, this chapter will now examine the history of the sublime aesthetic previous to Burke's Enquiry, Burke's concept of the sensibility, and finally, his ideas of the sublime and beautiful.

The History of the Sublime Aesthetic

The idea of the sublime was by no means Burke's invention. Indeed, Burke's idea of the sublime culminates a nearly two hundred year evolution of the concept after its revival from antiquity. To appreciate fully Burke's aesthetic ideas and their usage in the Reflections, it is helpful to review the development of the sublime and beautiful previous to Burke's Enquiry.

The idea of the sublime is attributed to the third century A.D. Greek rhetorician Longinus. He belonged to the rhetorical tradition evolving during the Roman Empire in which form took precedence over substance and eloquence became an end in itself. In his treatise On the Sublime, considered by ancients to be a textbook in the art of persuasion, Longinus encouraged the student to develop, "a certain distinction and excellence in expression," which:

...not only persuades, but even throws an audience into transport....In most cases it is wholly in our power either to

7. William Gerald Hamilton (1729-1796) also known as "Single-Speech Hamilton" a man of "second-rate talent and first-rate pretentiousness," so nicknamed for his maiden and only notable speech delivered in the House of Commons in 1755.
resist or yield to persuasion. But the **Sublime**, endued with strength irresistible, strikes home, and triumphs over every hearer, .... For the mind is naturally elevated by the true **Sublime** and so sensibly affected with its lively strokes, that it swells in transport and an inward pride, as if what was only heard had been the product of its own invention.(8)

Sublime oratory, according to Longinus, dazzled the listener, uplifting the soul, reminding it of its own excellence. In short, the sublime produces within the soul a knowledge of its own good and is, to quote one essayist on Longinus, that which "knocks the reader out."(9)

Laid buried for centuries, the first modern edition of **On the Sublime** was translated into Latin in 1572. A century later it received its first English versification. At this time, the treatise came to prominence as part of a pedagogic dispute over the genesis of creativity. Because Longinus seemed to suggest that the sublime brought out qualities already present in the soul, a dissenting minority of essayists argued that introspection rather than imitation provided the surest method of developing creativity.(10) Hence, the perennial debate over acquired versus innate creativity prompted a renewed interest in the sublime.(11)

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10. Most vocal in their rebellion against the complex grammatical rules of the eighteenth century were Ben Johnson, Joseph Warton, and John Armstrong.

11. See Monk, *The Sublime*, pp. 10-28. For an account to those Restoration critics who used Longinus' treatise in support of the imitation of classical models see Elizabeth Nitchie, "Longinus and the
In 1694 Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux produced a French translation of *On the Sublime* with his own preface, which in effect redefined the idea of the sublime. Boileau, hoping to reaffirm the classicism of the age, maintained that the sublime was not so much an emotional affectation or even a style or rhetoric, but rather the idea behind the elevated language which suggested something of the marvelous, the extraordinary, or the surprising. Quite often, Boileau argued, simplicity rather than complexity most efficaciously communicated this idea. Through his insistence on simplicity, Boileau had begun to separate the idea of the sublime from rhetoric and in doing so initiated a barrage of literary criticism which continued into the eighteenth century and culminated in Burke's *Enquiry*. (12)

One response to Boileau was John Dennis' *Advancement and Reformation of Poetry* published in 1701. Dennis was the first Englishman to investigate not only the object, but the subject in art. Dennis allied himself with the nascent minority, noting that creativity is "Nothing but a very common passion, or a complication of common passions." (13) So pronounced is the pathetic in the true literary experience, that Dennis once exclaimed, "Poetry, unless it is transporting is abominable." (14) In his enrapture with feeling, Dennis elevated the sublime to the highest of all passions:


...(the sublime) does not so properly persuade us as it ravishes and transports us, and produces in us a certain Admiration, mingled with Astonishment and Surprize, which is quite another thing than the barely pleasing or the barely persuading; that it gives a noble Vigour to a Discourse, an invincible Force, which commits a pleasing Rape upon the very Soul of the Reader; that whatever it breaks out where it ought to do, like the Artillery of Jove, it thunders, blazes, and strikes at once....(15)

Far from the elevated and refined style which it originally denoted, the sublime had evolved into a subjective dynamic pathos. Also significant in Dennis' sublime is the added element of terror, in which:

...A Disturbance of Mind, proceeding from an Apprehension of an approaching Evil, threatening Destruction or very great Trouble either to us or ours. And when the Disturbance comes suddenly with the surprize, let us call it Terror, ...the greater it is, the more joined it is with Wonder, and the nearer it comes to Astonishment.(16)

Contemporary with Dennis's treatise was the work of journalist Joseph Addison. His tabloid, The Spectator, did much to popularize the idea of the sublime among English genteel society and to differentiate it from the idea of the beautiful. In a series of articles entitled The Pleasures of the Imagination, Addison explicated three ideas most striking to the imagination: the Great (also referred to as the Sublime), the Uncommon, and the Beautiful. This is important to Burke's work in three ways. First, Addison detached the idea of beauty from the sublime. The vastness and incomprehensibility of the Great to Addison implied a certain lack of that proportion which he held fundamental to the idea of beauty. Also of consequence is his application of the Great

15. Ibid, p. 53.

to nature. No longer an idea characteristic only of rhetoric and
poetry, the Great now became associated with the outdoors:

...Of all the Objects that I have ever seen, there is none
which affects my imagination so much as the Sea or Ocean. I
cannot see the Heavens of this prodigious Bulk of Waters, even
in a calm, with a very pleasing astonishment. But when it is
worked up in a Tempest, so that the Horizon on every side is
nothing but foaming Billows and floating Mountains, it is
impossible to describe the agreeable Horror that rises from such
a Prospect.(17)

Of final importance in Addison's series is his portrayal of the
imagination as an appetitive, restless principle anxious seizing upon
sense residue and combining it into haunting imagery. This treatment of
the imaginative faculty is indicative of the efficacious power with
which not only the eighteenth century, but Burke himself endowed this
faculty:

Our Imagination loves to be filled with an Object, or a grasp at
anything that is too big for its Capacity. We are flung into a
pleasing Astonishment at such unbounded Views, and feel a
delightful Stillness and Amazement in the Apprehension of them.
The Mind of Man naturally hates everything that looks like a
Restraint upon it, and is apt to fancy itself under a sort of
Confinement, when the Spirit is pent up in a narrow Compass, and
shortened on every side by the Neighborhood of Walls or
Mountains.(18)

The sublime, always a fluid concept, underwent continuous dis-
tillation and amplification during the course of the Restoration.
During the next forty years after Addison's Spectator, various essayists
continued to redefine the ideas of the sublime and beautiful, often
inventing novel applications of them in the fields of poetry and

17. Ibid, p. 58.
biblical exegesis. Yet none by themselves had any significant impact of the established theories of Boileau, Dennis and Addison. It remained to Burke's Enquiry, to dichotomize fully the ideas of the sublime and beautiful and support them with a current epistemological theory.

Sensibility

To understand Burke's overall aesthetic theory one must first make the distinction between the qualities residing in an object which makes it a work of art and the emotional responses occurring within the individual experiencing this work of art. The objective qualities, which Burke classified under the ideas of the sublime and beautiful, will be discussed later. The subjective experience, to which Burke devoted the first part of the Enquiry, now warrants closer examination.

In analyzing the subjective response to art, Burke differentiated between the initial emotional responses we have when listening to a piece of music and the rational judgement we later form about this work. The former Burke called the aesthetic response. The latter he termed the aesthetic judgement.

The aesthetic response, according to Burke, is itself a composite of two mental processes: sensation and imagination. Sensation, Burke noted, is the process by which external data first enters the senses. For example, while viewing a work of art or

listening to music, light rays strike the optic nerve or sound waves reverberate in the ear drum. After channeling through the senses, the datum is deposited into the imagination, the second process in the aesthetic response, which Burke defined in a manner similar to John Locke:

...A sort of creative power of its own; either in representing at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they are received by the senses, or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order. This power is called Imagination; and to this belongs whatever is called wit, fancy, invention, and the like. (20)

For Burke, the imagination was a receptacle for our senses and was not, strictly speaking, a creative faculty. Its chief function consisted in the recombination of sense residua into new shapes. It is also, according to Burke, the greatest province of pain and pleasure for as these impressions enter our fancy, we are usually pleased or agitated.

Both sensation and imagination operate uniformly, according to Burke, in all individuals. What strikes one as cold or sharp affects all in the same manner. Likewise, what is painful in the imagination of one, is generally so in the minds of others. As one’s idiosyncratic experiences and superior attentive capabilities develop the imagination’s potential for recombination and invention, the individual’s sensibility is enhanced. Collectively sensation and imagination form

sensibility, a natural disposition resident in each individual, the possession of which is the first requisite in the development of good taste.

After outlining this sensibility, Burke explored the aesthetic judgement. Judgement, which Burke again defines in the Lockean manner as that ability to make contrasts and comparisons, is as crucial as sensibility in the development of good taste. Although a work of art may seduce or shock our senses, our reason must determine its didactic end. In establishing this, Burke believed nature provided the surest guide. Never one to advocate art for art's sake, he contended that:

...Art can never give the rules that make an art. This is, I believe, the reason why artists in general, and poets principally, have been confined in so narrow a circle; they have been imitators of one another than of nature; and this with so faithful an uniformity, and to so remote an antiquity, that it is hard to say who gave the first model....I can judge but poor of anything whilst I measure it by no other standard than itself. The true standard of the arts is in every man's power; and an easy observation of the most common, sometimes of the meanest things in nature, will give the truest lights, where the greatest sagacity and industry that slights such observation, must leave us in the dark, or what is worse, amuse and mislead us by false lights.(21)

Two years prior to the Enquiry, Scottish philosopher David Hume had argued that taste, being solely a question of individual sentiment, lacked any objective criteria. Now, having clarified the relation of sensibility and judgement in the subjective, Burke countered that good taste, far from being mere sentiment, was a composite of sensibility (i.e. sensation and imagination) and judgement:

On the whole it appears to me, that what is called Taste, in its most general acceptation, is not a simple idea, but is partly made

up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusion of the reasoning faculty,...for sensibility and judgement...are the qualities that compose what we commonly call a...Taste....(22)

In the development of good taste, two possible deficiencies presented themselves. First, one's sensibility, having been deformed from birth or dulled by a caustic or gross environment, was incapable of perceiving the aesthetic qualities intrinsic to art. This atrophied sensibility, Burke calls a want of taste. In accounting for this indurate disposition, Burke noted:

There are some men formed with feelings so blunt, with tempers so cold and phlegmatic, that they can hardly be said to be awake during the whole course of their lives. Upon such persons, the most striking objects make but a faint and obscure impression. There are others so continually in the agitation of gross and mere sensual pleasures, or so occupied in the low druggery of avarice, or so heated in the chase of honours and distinction, that their minds, which had been used continually to the storms of these violent and tempestuous passions, can hardly be put in motion by the delicate and refined play of the imagination. These men,..., become as stupid and insensible as the former.(23)

A second hindrance to the development of good taste, Burke declared, was the inability to judge art's moral end. Burke termed this disposition bad taste. Together, a lack of sensibility and bad taste constitute a state of depravation similar to that criticized in the Reformer.

After differentiating between the aesthetic response and the aesthetic judgments, Burke devoted the next two chapters of the Enquiry

22. Ibid, p. 23.
to an exhaustive exploration of sensibility and our response to the sublime and beautiful.

Sensibility and our Response to the Sublime and Beautiful

As has been mentioned, Burke's analysis of the aesthetic response was, in part responsible for the Enquiry's popularity. Few before him had dared to put forth such a systematic epistemology in support of an aesthetic theory. In doing this, Burke is indebted to the Scottish moral sense philosopher, Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson believed that man was a creature governed by the sensations of pain and pleasure. Man's virtue, which Hutcheson equated to happiness, depended upon his ability to calculate pleasure and avoid pain. Within this psychological dualism, ethical ideas, like the sensations of pain and pleasure, are realized intuitively. Hence, man is said to have an innate "moral sense" which allows him to understand ethical concepts. Likewise, Burke assumes much of this psychology. The basis of his sensibility is the avoidance of pain which finds its end in the self-preservation of the individual and the pursuit of pleasure, which finds its gratification in society:

Most of the ideas which are capable of making a powerful impression on the mind, whether simply of Pain or Pleasure, or of the modification of those, may be reduced very nearly to these two heads, self-preservation and society; to the ends of one or the other of which all our passions are calculated to answer.(24)

After positing the primacy of these two passions, Burke then separates the sensations of pain and pleasure. Unlike the philosophers

of the Scottish Enlightenment, Burke does not equate the alleviation of pain with pleasure, nor does he hold the lessening of pleasure to be pain. Both are separate sensations existing independently of one another. Burke then postulates that man's instinct for self-preservation is stronger than his drive for pleasure, "The passions therefore which are conversant about the preservation of the individual, turn chiefly on pain and danger, and are the most powerful of all passions."(25)

Burke has elevated the instinct for survival to the strongest of all passions. This modification of Hutcheson's moral sense psychological dualism should be noted for it is of significance in Burke's aesthetic theory and political analysis. The drive for pleasure is a subordinate one which achieves its fulfillment in society:

The second head to which the passions are referred with relation to their final cause, is society. There are two sorts of societies. The first is, the society of sex...The other is the great society with man and all the other animals. The passion subservient to this is called likewise love, but it has no mixture of lust and its object is beauty.(26)

The instinct for procreation, and more importantly, the association of society are, for Burke, sources of pleasure. The most unrefined manifestation of this drive is lust, whose object, according to Burke, is women and ends in the society of sex. The higher expression of this drive ends in society at large: the convivialities of conversation, the comforts of domestic life, and the appreciation of beauty.

For Burke, sensibility is a function of pain and pleasure. He predicates the aesthetic response and the ideas of the sublime and beautiful upon the drives for self-preservation and pleasure. The sublime originates out of our confrontation with pain and danger. Because this drive is the strongest in the species, our response to the sublime is the most powerful of all emotions, "The sublime...is the strongest emotion which is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure."(27)

Within the aesthetic response, our fight for survival is agitated by the idea of pain. When a work of art projects terror, our existence is threatened. For example, a tragedy, by virtue of our sympathy for a fallen hero, will envoke within the imagination vivid imagery of a perilous and precarious survival. We are thereby delighted by our heightened state and emotional intensity. Therefore, it is the terrible which evokes the sublime, "What is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of pain, and danger, that is to say whatever is any sort terrible or is conversant with terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime...."(28)

In our reaction to the sublime, the most powerful of all aesthetic responses, our imagination is dazzled, reason confounded, and soul sent into a state of astonishment. Because it is such an awesome phenomenon, we are incapacitated and tremble with fear and anticipation:

27. Ibid, p. 39.
The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.... The mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it can not entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.... that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.(29)

Our most intense reaction to the sublime is astonishment. To illustrate this, Burke calls attention to the sensation we experience while standing upon a high precipice overlooking a great distance. The seemingly infinite distance to the horizon confounds our mundane imagination. The depth below us incapacitates our reason, filling us with a sense of danger. Our knees weaken as the vastness and power of nature overwhels us. This astonishment is the most intense response to the sublime. Its lesser affects are admiration, reverence, and respect.

Opposed to the instinct for self-preservation and our responses of astonishment and admiration, is the drive for pleasure and our reaction to the idea of the beautiful. As has been noted, Burke maintained this desire found its end in sex or society at large. Our reaction to sex is lust. We experience a qualitatively different response to those objects of beauty in society, one of love:

By beauty, I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it.... I likewise distinguish love, by which I mean that satisfaction which arises to the mind upon the contemplating anything beautiful, or whatsoever nature it maybe, from desire or lust....(30)

29. Ibid, p. 57.

30. Ibid, p. 91.
Like astonishment, the sensation of love admits of inferior
gradations, "for where women and men, and not only they, but when other
animals give us a sense of...pleasure in beholding them," we feel the
concomitant pleasures of joy, tenderness, pity in their misfortune, and
grief in their loss.

The importance of these passions and the potency of the aes-
thetic response in Burke's epistemology puts him in the tradition of the
Scottish Enlightenment and the moral sense philosophy articulated by
Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith. Reason always remained,
for Burke, a precarious faculty which lacked the efficacy of the pas-
sions. Sentiment, as defined in the Enquiry, can immediately recognize
aesthetic qualities. Although some scholars place Burke in the rational
tradition of Aristotle, Cicero and Aquinas, this interpretation is
erroneous.(31) Burke considered himself a disciple of the Scottish
Enlightenment. In a book review of Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Senti-
ments, Burke praised Smith's moral sense epistemology and reaffirmed the
verity of sentiment as a means of insight:

This author has struck out a new, and at the same time a
perfectly natural road of speculation on the subject....We
conceive, that here the theory is in all essential parts just,
one founded on truth and nature. The author seeks for the
foundation of the just, the fit, the proper, the descent, in our
common and most allowed passions; and making approbation and
disapprobation the tests of virtue and vice, and shewing that
those are founded on sympathy, he raises from this simple truth,
one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory, that has
perhaps ever appeared.(32)

31. See Peter James Stanlis, Edmund Burke and the Natural Law
Burke's aesthetic response is predicated upon the drives for self-preservation and pleasure and is a hypertrophy of his moral sense philosophy. The sublime which originates out of the idea of pain or danger, is the most powerful of all responses producing astonishment, admiration, respect, and reverence. Out of our drive for pleasure arises the beautiful. Its concomitant sensations are love, joy, pity, and grief.

The Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful

After analyzing the aesthetic response, Burke devotes the remainder of the Enquiry to an investigation of the sublime and beautiful as they exist in the object. Unlike Boileau and Dennis, who formed only generalizations about the sublime, Burke meticulously analyzed over a dozen qualities inherent in this idea. Foremost, was the element of power. In order for anything to startle the soul into astonishment, power must be brought down upon the observer, suspending his or her reason, "I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power....as power, is undoubtedly a capital source of the sublime."(33)

Yet it was only a certain type of power which Burke found sublime. When power projects out from a work of art, it must not be perceived as a neutral or benign force inclined to the dictates of our will, for then it becomes a source of pleasure:

Whenever strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime; for nothing can act agreeable to us, that does not act in conformity to our will; but to act agreeably to our will, it must be subject to

33. Burke, Enquiry, p. 64, 70.
us; and therefore can never be the cause of a grand and commanding conception.\(^{(34)}\)

It is therefore apparent that the sublime acts against our drive for self-preservation, subordinating our will, and impressing upon us its capacity for inflicting pain and destruction. In the *Enquiry*, Burke analyzed this imagery of power:

An ox is a creature of vast strength; but he is an innocent creature, extremely serviceable, and not all dangerous; for which reason the idea of an ox is by no means grand. A bull is strong too; but his strength is of another kind; often very destructive, seldom (at least among us) of any use in our business; the idea of a bull is therefore great, and it has frequently a place in sublime descriptions and elevating comparisons.\(^{(35)}\)

A sublime power, like that of a bull, acts against our will, intimidating and subordinating us. Power, a dynamic entity for Burke, once disposed to our will, as in the case of the ox, does not impinge upon our instinct for survival and consequently becomes contemptible.

Although Dennis associated the response of terror with the idea of the sublime, it was by no means conclusive of his definition. What is of interest in Burke's treatment of the sublime is his preoccupation with trepidation and the perilous, "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its power of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain and death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime...."\(^{(36)}\)

\(^{(34)}\) Ibid, p. 66.

\(^{(35)}\) Ibid, p. 65.

\(^{(36)}\) Ibid, p. 57.
Burke's emphasis on terror as the quintessential in the sublime is, in the judgement of at least one scholar, responsible for the *Enquiry's* heightened popularity. Art historian Samuel Monk notes:

The keystone of Burke's aesthetic is emotion, and the foundation of this theory of sublimity is the emotion of terror...It was Burke who converted the early taste for terror into an aesthetic system and who passed it on with great emphasis to the last decades of the century, during which it was used and enjoyed in literature, painting, and the appreciation of natural scenery.(37)

Obscurity is another quality, according to Burke, in the sublime. This element, which is a lack of definition or form in an object, creates with the imagination's disposition to seize upon its external environment, an uncertainty and fear of the unknown, "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of apprehension vanishes."(38)

The magnificent, vast, and infinity are also elements in Burke's sublime. The earlier example of the view overlooking a plain enforces the sublime because its magnitude of distance exceeds the imagination's limited powers. Likewise, the idea of infinity, because its calculability is beyond the combinative powers of the imagination, is also suggestive of the sublime. As we are awe-struck by the seemingly infinite number of stars on a black night or the apparently endless succession of columns in a long promenade, these impressions conjure up feelings of exaltation and resplendence:


Another source of the sublime is infinity;...Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with a sort of delightful horror....Whenever we repeat any idea frequently, the mind by a sort of mechanism, repeats it long after the first cause has ceased to operate....After a long succession of noises, as the fall of waters...the water roars in the imagination long after the first sounds have ceased to affect it; and they die away at last by gradations which are scarcely perceptible. The senses strongly affected in some one manner, cannot quickly change their tenor, or adopt themselves to other things; but they continue in their old channel(39)

In this manner, the sublime produces that ineffable response that fills us with awe. A powerful impression enters the senses ricocheting through the imagination which Burke described as a faculty composed of varying levels of taut and fine fibers. The reverberation of these sinews, by virtue of their nexus to the judgement, also held to be in some degree a constellation of tendons, so thoroughly agitates the rational faculty that it no longer is able to process sense data. The passions, once having been bonded through association to the imagery impressed upon the imagination, now unrestrained by reason's precarious rule, resonate through the soul.

Burke concluded his definition of the sublime with the ideas of darkness, vacuity, solitude, and silence. Though of lesser consequence to the sublime, the reasons for their association with it can easily be inferred.

After defining the sublime, Burke delves into an analysis of the beautiful. His treatment of this idea is very much at odds with those of his contemporaries because he rejects the classical theory of proportion as the cause of the beautiful. Much of classical and Renaissance

39. Ibid, pp. 73-74.
art considered beauty a proportioned geometric ratio between the parts. Burke's rejection of this theory again suggests the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on the young Dublin student. His psychology is too anti-rationalistic to accept the theory of proportion. Proportion, according to Burke, is a notion involving a measure of relative quantity. This comparative analysis involves a consultation of our reason, a faculty too torpid to grasp aesthetic ideas instantaneously. Thus, it remained to one's sensibility to comprehend the idea of the beautiful.

Although Burke's definition of the beautiful is neither as detailed nor original as that of the sublime, he does discuss five elements which he felt most representative of the idea. Opposed to the power and vastness in the sublime, petiteness is an element of the beautiful. Whereas the sublime inundated the imagination subjugating our will, small objects solicit our senses and allow our will to seize upon them. These objects, by virtue of their size, do not confront our instinct for survival and, as objects of our will, are sources of pleasure and objects of our affections:

There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; 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.(40)

Gradual variation and smoothness are also components of the beautiful because they massage and relax the senses. The tempered variation of color within a painting or the measured swell of a musical

40. Ibid, p. 113.
piece seduces the imagination into a pleasureful laxity. While discussing the beauty of women, Burke noted, "Observe that the 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." (41)

Two other elements resident in the beautiful, according to Burke, are gracefulness and delicacy:

An air of robustness and strength is very prejudicial to beauty. An appearance of delicacy and even of fragility, is almost essential to it.... The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it....

Gracefulness is another idea not very different from beauty; it consists in much the same things. Gracefulness is an idea belonging to posture and motion. In both these, to be graceful, it is requisite that there be no appearance of difficulty;...

Aside from elucidating his idea of beauty, the above passages illustrate Burke's gender differentiation between the sublime and beautiful. The beautiful qualities, petiteness, softness, delicacy, and smoothness, reside principally in women. Because their beauty is, according to Burke, an object of our will, women are a source of pleasure and love. The sublime, whose qualities are of an active, powerful nature, is masculine and subdues our volition.

Obviously enough, Burke's definition of beauty is stereotypical, if not insipid. Yet, this stilted definition of the beautiful is characteristic of Restoration aesthetics. James T. Boulton, in his

41. Ibid, p. 115.

42. Ibid, pp. 116, 119.
introduction to the Enquiry, tries to account for Burke's contrived definition of the beautiful. In part, it may have been because "a false delicacy and affected timidity prevailed amongst women of fashion at the time of the treatise's publication." (43) He further suggests, as does Isaac Kramnick, that Burke's characterization of beauty parallels those descriptions given of his wife, who was, according to Kramnick, the embodiment of the traditional, feminine, and passive virtues. (44)

In sum, the dichotomy between the sublime and beautiful is far from subtle. The sublime is composed of the great, vast, and magnificent, and is predicated upon our instinct for survival and subordinates our will. The beautiful, which consists of the petite, delicate, and graceful, originates out of our drive for pleasure and is the object of our volition. Whereas power is requisite to the sublime, it is highly prejudicial to beauty.

**Importance of Burke's Aesthetic Theory**

This chapter has presented Burke's aesthetic theory of the sublime and beautiful. Romantic in tone, Burke's Enquiry enjoyed immense popularity during his lifetime and, within the history of aesthetics, it culminates a nearly two-hundred year evolution of the idea of the sublime. In his treatise, Burke explores the aesthetic response and its relation to good taste. Within the aesthetic response, we experience the ideas of the sublime and beautiful. The sublime is that the grand and magnificent idea which evokes feelings of astonishment,

awe, and terror. Opposed to this is the grace, delicacy, and petiteness of the beautiful, an idea which instills in us feelings of love and compassion.
CHAPTER 4

THE MORAL EQUILIBRIUM OF THE
SUBLIME AND BEAUTIFUL

As a moral sense philosopher, Burke was sensitive to the aesthetic dimension of moral philosophy. Because the passions provided insight, ethical concepts were, for Burke, something realized intuitively in a manner similar, if not identical to the aesthetic response. In short, ideas of virtue and vice, when contemplated, produced an aesthetic reaction which imbued to the individual the nature of their verity.

To be sure, Burke felt that the actions and customs of an individual or people, much like a painting, contained an aesthetic charm worthy of comment. In a letter written to Adam Smith in 1759, Burke praised the aesthetic appeal of Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments, noting elements of the sublime and beautiful:

Besides so much powerful reasoning as your Book contains, there is so much elegant Painting of the manners and passions, that it is highly valuable even on that account. The stile is everywhere lively and elegant, and what is, I think equally important in a work of that kind, it is well varied; it is often sublime too, particularly in that fine Picture of the Stoic Philosophy towards the end of your first part which is dressed out in all the grandeur and Pomp that becomes that magnificent delusion. I have mentioned something of what affected me as Beauties in your work.(1)

1. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 1, p. 130.
In analyzing the aesthetics of morals, Burke made a distinction between man's pristine drives for self-preservation and pleasure and their refined social forms of expression. By virtue of the individual's acculturation in society, the differentiated expressions of these instincts become ossified and collectively form the customs of a people. In describing the origins of man's social customs, Burke noted, "Man is a gregarious animal. He will by degrees provide some convenience suitable to this natural disposition; and this strange thing may sometime or other, assume a more habitable form. The fish will at length make a shell which will fit him."(2)

This "shell" of habits is man's acculturated or social nature and is that aspect of human nature which, for Burke, contains an aesthetic quality. In the Enquiry, Burke applies his aesthetic theory of the sublime and beautiful not only to art but to ethics and customs. Sublime qualities, when they reside in individuals, parallel what Burke calls the sublime virtues of wisdom, fortitude, and temperance. For example, (Burke noted) in the Enquiry, "Those virtues which cause admiration, and are of the sublimer kind, produce terror rather than love. Such as fortitude, justice, wisdom, and the like."(3)

These are sublime virtues because they, like the aesthetic sublime, originate out of our instinct for self-preservation, and are qualities which preserve our existence. Because they are so essential,

2. Ibid, vol. 6, p. 80.
they command our admiration and inspire our awe. For this reason, Burke also calls them the great virtues, "The great virtues turn principally on dangers, punishments and troubles, and are exercised rather in preventing the worst mischiefs, than in dispensing favors; and therefore are not lovely though highly venerable....Never was any man amiable by force of these qualities."(4)

To demonstrate this, Burke analyzes the customs of the Greeks and Trojans in Homer's poetry. The sublime virtues characterize the Greeks. We hold them in awe because their councils of war, strength in arms, and dedication to duty are superior to the Trojans. Because of these attributes they are victorious:

...[Homer] has made the Greeks far their [i.e. Trojans] superior in the politic and military virtues. The councils of Priam are weak; the arms of Hector comparatively feeble; his courage far below that of Achilles. Yet we love Priam more than Agamemnon, and Hector more than his conqueror Achilles. Admiration is the passion which Homer would excite in favour of the Greeks, and he has done it by bestowing on them the virtues which have little to do with love.(5)

After establishing the sublime virtues which arise out of our instinct for self-preservation, Burke examines the customs which originate out of our drive for pleasure. Because our instinct for survival is stronger than our drive for pleasure, the beautiful virtues, though more lovely, are of less consequence to public life. The beautiful virtues, which arouse our affection, emphasize the compassionate side of human nature and find their end, not in the polis, but in domestic society:

Those [virtues] which engage our hearts, which impress us with a sense of loveliness, are the softer virtues; easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality; though certainly [these]. . .are of less immediate and momentous concern to society, and of less dignity. But it is for that reason that they are so amiable.(6)

These beautiful virtues end in the betterment and love of the individual. To support this contention, Burke again refers to the poetry of Homer. Whereas the sublime virtues characterized the politic Greeks, the Trojans are representative of the domestic virtues and excite our pity and love rather than our admiration:

It may be observed that Homer has given the Trojans, whose fate he has designed to excite our compassion, infinitely more of the amiable social virtues than he has distributed among his Greeks. With regard to the Trojans, the passion he chooses to raise is pity; pity is a passion founded on love; and these lesser, and if I may say, domestic virtues, are certainly the most amiable.(7)

Through a comparison of two Roman statesmen, Caesar and Cato, Burke further dichotomized the sublime and beautiful virtues. Caesar, known for his benevolence, inspires our love, while Cato, the prominent Stoic and opponent of Caesar, prompts our admiration.

The subordinate [virtues] turn on reliefs, gradifications, and indulgences; and are therefore more lovely, though inferior in dignity....It is worth observing, how we feel ourselves affected in reading the characters of Caesar and Cato....In one, the ignoscendo largiundo; in the other, nil largiundo. In one, the miseries perfugium; in the other malia pernicium. [In one, pardoning and giving, in the other, never giving. In one, the compassionate place of refuge, the other, a pernicious evil.] In the latter we have much to admire, much to reverence, and perhaps something to fear; we respect him, but we respect him at


7. Ibid, p. 158.
a distance. The former makes us familiar with him; we love him....(8)

Burke's gender differentiation mentioned in Chapter Three becomes even more apparent in his analysis of the parental figures:

To draw things closer to our first and most natural feelings... The authority of a father, so useful to our well-being, and so justly venerable upon all accounts, hinders us from having that entire love for him that we have for our mothers, where the parental authority is almost melted down into the mother's fondness and indulgence. But we generally have a great love for our grandfathers, in whom this authority is removed a degree from us, and where the weakness of age mellows into something of a feminine partiality.(9)

The responses of the sublime and beautiful, an extension of our most primordial drives, encompass the entire continuum of our emotions. Any passion, regardless of its tremor, is in some degree a gradation of the sublime and beautiful. Consequently, Burke applies his analysis of the aesthetic response not only to the world of art, but to the cultural and political institutions which surround our daily lives. Most saliently, the Christian deity, for Burke, was a sublime idea. Burke's conception of the Godhead was Judaic; nothing, according to Burke, inspired more terror and exacted more obedience than the omnipotent deity. His power and transcendence fill mortal men with awe, for while contemplating:

...so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into a minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him....[Nothing] can wholly remove the

8. Ibid, p. 111.

9. Ibid.
terror that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand.(10)

Analogous to the idea of God is that of the monarchy. As can be recalled, power, like that of a bull, is "a capital source of the sublime." Hence, aside from the Godhead, a monarch, for Burke, most embodied this idea. In the *Enquiry*, he noted our reaction to this sublime institution:

Thus we are affected by strength, which is natural power. The power which arises from the institution in king and commanders, has the same connection with terror. Sovereigns are frequently addressed with title of dread majesty. And it may be observed, that young persons little acquainted with the world, and who have not been used to approach men in power, are commonly struck with an awe which takes away the free use of their faculties.(11)

It is apparent that the sublime virtues are political, military, active, and masculine in character, inspiring our admiration, awe, and submission. Because they are a response to danger, they end in the preservation of the organism. The beautiful virtues are domestic, humane, passive, and feminine in nature, evoking feelings of love and affection. As they arise out of our drive for pleasure, they end in the indulgence of the individual. Collectively, the sublime and beautiful virtues take into account the entire realm of human desire and when resident within an individual or political institution compose a moral equilibrium.

This dichotomy between the sublime and beautiful permeates Burke's entire political philosophy. Although some scholars may consider the

10. Ibid, p. 68.
Enquiry little more than a youthful endeavor, the ideas of the sublime and beautiful and the moral equilibrium which they compose, are fundamental to his political analysis.

In An Essay Toward An Abridgment of the English History, written in 1767, Burke's concept of feudalism is predicated upon a moral equilibrium of the sublime and beautiful virtues. Whiggish in conception and anything but an abridgment, Burke's chronicle starts with the invasion of Julius Caesar and ends with the reign of King John. Although it is today of little historical value, Burke's excavation of the origins of chivalry is important because it foreshadows his conception of the Ancien Regime in the Reflections. Indeed, Burke conveys in his chronicle some of the later romanticism found in the Reflections through the glorification of what he believed to be the conception of chivalry during the Crusades:

The lamentable representation given by history of those barbarous times justifies the pictures in the old romances of the castles of giants and magicians. A great part of Europe was in the same deplorable condition. It was then that some gallant spirits, struck with a generous indignation at the tyranny of these miscreants, blessed solemnly by the bishop, sallied forth to vindicate the chastity of women and to redress the wrongs of travellers and peaceful men. The adventurous humor inspired by the Crusade heightened and extended this spirit and thus the idea of knight errantry was formed.(12)

Although this kind of literary romanticism hardly adds to the historical credibility of Burke's abridgment, what is important in this work is his emphasis on manners. In Burke's historiography, a people's norms and customs are, like the economic factor in Marx's

interpretation of history, the primary determinant in society. Consequently, Burke's historical analysis focuses not so much upon the development of political institutions, or even legal structures, but on the manners and customs he believed these institutions rested upon. In accounting for this emphasis, Burke later noted:

Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. They touch us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex and soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a steady, constant, uniform, insensible operation like that of the air we breathe in. They give whole form and color to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.(13)

After describing the pristine savagery of the ancient Celts in his abridgment, Burke delves into the Roman invasion of Britain by Julius Caesar. Most crucial to this conquest was the mode in which Roman manners affected the ethos of the native Celts. In discussing Julius Agricola's further subjugation of the island in 84 A.D., Burke commented:

Every step in securing the subjection of the conquered country was attended with the utmost care in providing for its peace and internal order. Agricola reconciled the Britons to the Roman government by reconciling them to the Roman manners. He moulded that fierce nation by degrees to soft and social customs, leading them imperceptibly into a fondness for baths, for gardens, for grand houses, and all the commodious elegancies of a cultivated life. He diffused a grace and dignity over this new luxury by the introduction of literature. He invited instructors in all the arts and sciences from Rome; and he sent

the principal youth of Briton to that city to be educated at his own expense. In short, he subdued the Britons by civilizing them, and made them exchange a savage liberty for a polite and easy subjection. (14)

The introduction of Roman government is predicated upon the cultivation of Roman manners. Once the Roman's inclination for baths, gardens, architecture, and literature had been grafted on to Celtic savagery, political quiescence ensued. It is also apparent that, for Burke, the Celtic ethos had assumed an aesthetic dimension. The Romans elevated Celtic manners in a way which developed a sense of beauty. Far from civilizing the pristine passions through the inculcation of Roman law, Agricola beautified Celtic life through the introduction of "commodious elegancies" and diffusion of grace and dignity. In short, by refining those untamed passions mentioned in the beginning of the Enquiry into a penchant for luxury and an inclination for erudition, the Romans domesticated Celtic society.

With the Romans' departure from the island in 355 A.D., and the upheaval brought about by the Anglo-Saxon invasions, the Britons, according to Burke, reverted back to their fierce, unbridled savagery. In the following, Burke describes the precarious nature of Saxon political institutions and the ensuing social chaos:

This view will be the best comment on their institutions. Let us represent to ourselves a people without learning, without arts, solely pleased and occupied with war, neglecting agriculture, abhorring cities, and seeking their livelihood only from pasturage and hunting through a boundless range of morasses

and forests. Such a people must necessarily be united to each other by very feeble bonds, their ideas of government will necessarily be imperfect....(15)

As a consequence of this neglect of the arts and learning and preoccupation with the martial endeavors, three hundred years of clan warfare prevailed throughout England. Only with the hegemony of the House of Wessex in the late ninth century did England enjoy a repose from this political turmoil. In accounting for this, Burke credited Christianity. Alfred the Great, in order to improve his civil administration, assimilated both the spirit and bureaucracy of the Catholic Church, domesticating Britain much in the manner of Roman rule:

The Christian religion, having once taken root in Kent, spread itself with great rapidity throughout all the other Saxon kingdoms in England. The manners of the Saxons underwent a notable alteration by this change in their religion; their ferocity was much abated; they became more mild and sociable; and their laws began to partake of the softness of their manners, everywhere recommended mercy and tenderness for Christian blood.(16)

In effect, Christianity had inculcated into the Anglo-Saxon ethos all those beautiful, domestic virtues Burke had found so compelling in Homer's Trojans. Yet, because of the decentralized authority implicit in the federation of the seven kingdoms, the House of Wessex's rule remained infirm. Usurping vassals constantly vied with one another and their lord for supremacy. In the seventh chapter of the History, entitled "Of the Laws and Institutions," Burke commented on the unrestrained ambition and defiance which beset the embryonic feudalism of pre-Norman England:

The sovereign, with great pretensions, had but little power; he was only a greater lord among great lords, who profited of the differences of his peers; therefore, no steady plan could be well pursued, either in war or peace....All that professed arms became in some sort an equality. A knight was the peer of a king....The temerity of adventurers was much justified by the ill order of every state, which left it a prey to almost any who should attack it with sufficient vigor. Thus, little checked by any superior power, full of fire, impetuosity, and ignorance, they longed to signalize themselves, whenever any honorable danger called them; and wherever that invited them, they did not weigh very deliberately the probability of success.(17)

Like the Trojans, the rule of the Saxons perished to a superior, political and military organization. Unable to awe their vassals into submission, the House of Wessex fell to the Norman Conqueror whose centralized monarchy, according to Burke, daunted and attracted wayward retainers into a chivalrous subordination.

Burke romanticized the character of William the Conqueror in his account of the Norman Invasion of 1066. The contrast between William and even a notable Anglo-Saxon king like Alfred the Great is immediately apparent, for Burke ascribes sublime qualities to the former. The House of Wessex's inability to subjugate rival claimants proved to be its undoing whereas William's authoritative manner quickly swayed the indifferent and deterred the defiant into a feudal allegiance. William, for Burke, was the first of the few chivalric monarchs:

There is nothing more memorable in history than the actions, fortunes, and character of this great man....The silent inward satisfactions of domestic happiness he neither had nor sought. He had a body suited to the character of his mind, erect, firm, large, and active, whilst to be active was a praise, a

countenance stern, and which became command. Magnificent in his living, reserved in his conversation, grave in his common deportment, but relaxing with a wise facetiousness, he knew how to relieve his mind and preserve his dignity; for he never forfeited by a personal acquaintance that esteem he has acquired by his great actions. Unlearned in books, he formed his understanding by rigid discipline of a large and complicated experience. He knew men much, and therefore generally trusted them but little. (18)

Burke's characterization of William the Conqueror is suggestive of his definition of the sublime in the Enquiry. Both his body and mind were erect, firm, large, and active (a description which may be of interest to the psychoanalyst). As a monarch, he carried himself in a grave and magnificent manner which undoubtedly inspired a somber awe in his subjects. His rigid discipline and large, complicated experience, again implies the sublime's difficulty and vastness. Also of note is Burke's immediate dismissal of the beautiful virtues. William never knew domestic life. Laconic in his demeanor, neither William's conversation nor enjoyment of leisure ever detracted from his sense of solemnity.

In continuing his description of this chivalric monarch, the sublime qualities are complimented by William's Christian faith, the one domestic element which did temper the severity of his rule. Of particular merit was the Christian monk Lanfranc, William's confessor, who developed in the Conqueror the domestic virtues he previously lacked:

...[Lanfranc], by mixing with the concerns of state, did not lose his religion and conscience, or make them the covers or instruments of ambition;...but tempering the fierce policy of a new power [William] by the mild lights of religion, he became a

blessing to the country in which he was promoted. The English owed to the virtues of this stranger, and the influence he had on the king, the little remains of liberty they continued to enjoy, and at last such a degree of his confidence as in some sort counter balanced the severities of the former part of his reign.(19)

After assimilating the Christian ethos to his sublime authority, William the Conqueror came to embody, for Burke, the ideal feudal monarch. In thwarting the rebellion of an Anglo-Saxon vassal in 1070, Burke noted:

...there were often seen in this one man, at the same time, the extremes of a savage cruelty, and a generosity that does honor to human nature....The king, having thus, by the most politic and the most courageous measures, by art, by force, by severity, and by clemency, dispelled those clouds which gathered from every quarter to overwhelm him, returned triumphant to Winchester, where...he was crowned with great solemnity. After this he proceeded to execute the plan he had long purposed of modelling the state...upon an immovable foundation.(20)

William embodies both extremes in human nature, encompassing the ideas of both the sublime and beautiful. Yet, it is of note that although William was capable of clemency, a virtue ending in the pleasure of the individual, the sublime virtues of courage, force, severity, those which, by Burke's admission, put the monarchy upon a sure foundation, predominate.

In completing his analysis of the Norman Conquest, Burke creates an equilibrium between the sublime and beautiful virtues which he believed was essential to feudalism. Of first importance are the sublime virtues of courage, force, severity, and clemency which, by Burke's admission, put the monarchy upon a sure foundation.
virtues, which, as an expression of our drive for self-preservation, end in the survival of the organism. According to Burke, it was the political and military character of the Greeks and the Normans which accounted for their victory and the deficiency of these customs which proved to be the undoing of the Trojans and the House of Wessex. The beautiful virtues as embodied in the Christian faith serve to elevate the harsh disposition of the sublime into a "politic and easy subjection." Together, they create a symbiosis which Burke, in Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents, held to be the genius of Roman rule:

They [the Romans] believed private honor to be the great foundation of public trust; that friendship was no mean step towards patriotism; that he who in common intercourse of life, showed he regarded somebody besides himself, when it came to act in a public situation, might probably consult some other interest than his own....It was their wish, to see public and private virtues, not dissonant and jarring, and mutually destructive, but harmonious combined, growing out of one another in a noble and orderly gradation reciprocally supporting one another....(21)

The sublime qualities of private honor and public trust, political qualities in the clan and feudal system, are harmonized according to Burke, with affections toward family and country.

Summary

It is apparent from this analysis that as a moral sense philosopher, Burke imputed an aesthetic dimension to ethics. The sublime virtues are political and military in character and end in the preservation of the individual. Contrary to these are the beautiful virtues

which are domestic in nature and end in the indulgence of the individual. Collectively, they compose a moral equilibrium which Burke feels is central to feudalism. In his analysis of the origins of feudalism, it is the sublime and beautiful qualities, as embodied in the person of William the Conqueror, which lay the foundation for the age of chivalry.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE SUBLIME AND THE BEAUTIFUL
IN THE ANCIEN REGIME

Introduction

Thirty years after the Enquiry's publication, Burke penned the Reflections on the Revolution in France. At the time of its publication in 1790, many English Whigs, dissenters, and radicals had welcomed the revolution, hoping it would establish, if not a republic, at least a constitutional monarchy. A few of these English sympathizers were so bold as to link this insurrection abroad with social reforms at home. Amidst this enthusiasm for revolution and reform, Burke published his Reflections. Understandably, months before its printing, rumors of Burke's attack against the revolution circulated in London. Many of Burke's contemporaries, most of whom disagreed with Burke on the French cause for liberty, eagerly awaited its sale. Once published, the work touched off a war of words between Jacobins and reformers at home and a nascent conservative reaction against the revolution.

Although many disputations have since been advanced both for and against the revolution, few have remained so enduring as the Reflections. In part, this is due to Burke's masterful analysis of the French radicals who, according to Burke, recklessly abolished those beneficial social institutions which embody the collective intelligence and
perseverance of past generations. Without such institutions, Burke maintained, anarchy is inevitable.

Much scholarship has focused on Burke's analytical critique of the French Revolution and philosophy of historical conservatism. To this end, he will continue to be appreciated by conservatives, liberals, and humanists. Yet in addition to being a treatise on statecraft, the Reflections is a work of literature filled with sensational imagery designed to captivate the reader's imagination. To account fully for this tract's controversial reception and profound influence, it must also be appreciated as an imaginative work employing sophisticated aesthetics which instruct the reader in a moral sense philosophy.

In the Reflections, Burke's use of aesthetic theory is continuous and, upon closer examination, fundamental. Some scholarship has investigated Burke's use of imagery within his political rhetoric; however, no one has attempted to interpret it within the aesthetic theory outlined in the Enquiry. In what is to date probably the most thorough work on the subject, James T. Boulton in The Language of Politics in the Ages of Wilkes and Burke explores Burke's use of symbols and emotional appeal in the Reflections. Boulton rightly claims,

Burke was not only a great thinker, he was also an imaginative writer who requires a response from the reader as a whole and not simply as a creature of intellect. Consequently his exposition -- the play of imaginative insights as well as the statement of logical argument -- itself becomes 'proof' in this special sense that it communicates, and affirms while communicating, the rich complexity of a philosophy of life; it does not merely demonstrate the truth of set of proposition.(1)

Boulton then suggests that Burke’s use of four sacred analogies, the Bible, a great noble house, nature, and the family, is an attempt at sanctioning the holiness and indivisibility of the Ancien Regime. Conversely, Burke’s association of prophecy, medicine, intoxicants and trade with Dr. Price’s revolutionary zeal signifies the unnaturalness and perverse nature of this enthusiasm. The effect of Burke’s imagery, Boulton maintains, was to "arouse the emotional fervour normally associated with serious drama and to suggest that the proper state of mind for observing the French Revolution is appropriate to watching a tragedy."(3)

David Weiser in "The Imagery of Burke’s 'Reflections,'" builds upon Boulton’s work. Like Boulton, Weiser notes that Burke used imagery as part of his demonstrative proof. The reason, Weiser claims, is that Burke, by using abstract principles with concrete sensory expressions has united reason and imagination, man’s two avenues for understanding, thereby creating a holistic appeal:

His style thus derives from a unified sensibility and calls for a similar unified response in the reader. It is style that directly reflects his own belief in the unity of man’s being....The passions give zeal and vehemence. The understanding bestows design and system....The whole of man moves under the discipline of his opinions.(4)

2. Dr. Richard Price (1723-1791), a non-conformist minister who strongly supported both the American and French Revolutions. It will become apparent that Burke explicitly aimed the Reflections at Dr. Price, who, like other dissenters, sought to use the French Revolution to usher in liberal reforms in England.


Weiser also notes that Burke's analytical abstractions usually precede his imagery. The purpose, according to Weiser, is to transform the political "ought" as stated in his theoretical premise into an actuality as demonstrated by his concrete images.(5)

More relevant to this thesis are Neil Wood's observations in "The Aesthetic Dimension to Burke's Political Thought". (6) Wood shows how the ideas of the sublime and beautiful underlie Burke's political philosophy. According to Wood, the sublime principle of deterrence and the beautiful axiom of compassion constitute Burke's two precepts for good government. Unfortunately, in supporting his conclusions, Wood quotes too much from Blackstone and not enough from Burke. More importantly, although he is aware of the moral equilibrium which the sublime and beautiful compose, Wood does not analyze the Reflections or any other of Burke's political writings in terms of this aesthetic theory.

Finally, and most recently, is Isaac Kramnick's psychoanalysis of Burke, The Rage of Edmund Burke. (7) Kramnick argues that Burke's obsession with the French Revolution is a hypetrophy of his own sexual repression. According to Kramnick, Burke unconsciously sees the revolution in sexual terms. For example, while describing the Jacobins, Burke uses phallic symbolism and censures them for their savage, unbridled

5. Ibid, p. 224.
masculinity. Kramnick believes Burke ascribes to the Ancien Regime a femininity whose virtue is violated by these revolutionary rapists.\(^{(8)}\)

There is merit in each of these analyses. Boulton and Weiser, through an examination of Burke's imagery, have realized to some extent the emotional aspect of Burke's appeal in the *Reflections*. Wood has begun to show the nexus of Burke's psychology in his social thought and Kramnick has explored the gender variable within the *Reflections*. Yet, none of these analyses goes far enough. To understand fully the function of Burke's imagery and his method of persuasion, Burke's political rhetoric must be interpreted in the framework of his aesthetic theory of the sublime and beautiful and his concept of sensibility.\(^{(9)}\)

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8. Kramnick argues, "The aristocratic and chivalric ideal of the ancien regime was quintessentially feminine as described by Burke. Its hegemony was the triumph of womanly guile. It subdued 'the fierceness of pride and power,' 'without force,' but through its 'soft collar of social esteem.' 'Stern authority' was compelled to 'submit to elegance,' and 'dominating vanquisher(s) of laws' were 'subdued by manners.' But this reign of feminine virtue was doomed. The aristocratic principle stood threatened like Marie by the 'bayonettes and poniards' of the Jacobins.' Kramnick's analysis of the gender variable within the "Reflections" is basically correct; however, his documentation of Burke's repressed homosexuality and adolescent identity crisis which ultimately produced ideological inconsistencies in his later life is weak. It seems a matter of conjecture, not fact, that Burke's wavering animosity toward both the bourgeoisie and aristocracy were outgrowths of his libido. Kramnick, *Burke*, p. 153.

9. Kramnick also notes, "...[the "Enquiry"] deserves a more important place in the corpus of Burkeana than it now occupies. A fascinating essay with terrifying and fearful fathers and gentle loving mothers, with ambitious Wills [Burke's roommate on Grub Street and lifelong friend] and gentle Janes [Jane Nagle, Burke's wife] it directs one's attention to Burke's earliest years, while at the same time its towering and terrifying monsters link it directly to the concerns of his later years." Ibid, p. 98.
Background of the Reflections

Throughout the summer of 1789, Burke paid little attention to the proceedings in France. When the Third Estate convened itself into the National Assembly and swore its Tennis Court Oath on 20 June, Burke remained distant from the events across the channel. Although he was aware at this time of the deficiencies in the French government, like many of his contemporaries, he was confident that a peaceful solution would be found. Throughout October, he apparently maintained this optimism, for his correspondence mentions nothing of the affairs in France. However, events in November drastically changed his perspective on the French Revolution. Most important was the November 4 meeting of the London Revolutionary Society held to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the Glorious Revolution. At this convention, its toastmaster, Dr. Richard Price, delivered a sermon which not only praised the work of the National Assembly and the right of revolution, but welcomed this same kind of radical reform into Hanoverian England.

As a veteran of politics with over thirty years experience, Burke had had many previous disputes with Price going back as far as the Reverend's unabated support of the Colonists in the American Revolution. More recently, Price's efforts to establish religious toleration for Catholics through the repeal of the Test and Corporation Act further antagonized Burke whose support for a state supported Church would admit no compromise. Another source of contention occurring simultaneously was the growing sentiment among reformers and workers' associations for expansion of the franchise and abolition of the rotten boroughs in
Parliament. This movement, which Price helped organize, Burke had fought against in the House of Commons, thinking it would introduce the most radical and undeserving elements into the political process.

When Burke heard of Price's latest remarks, he was livid. Further events only reinforced Burke's animosity towards this liberal dissenter. In January of 1790, Burke learned of a correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, two of Price's colleagues who were much engrossed, if not intimately involved with the revolution in France. By virtue of this exchange of letters and the aforementioned events, Burke was now convinced that Price and the London Revolutionary Society were part and parcel of an international Jacobin conspiracy designed to subvert the English constitution and destroy religion. Such peril, Burke concluded, demanded immediate attention. He decided to expand a previous letter written to Charles Jean Francois Depont, a minor bureaucrat in the newly formed French government, into a pamphlet proclaiming to all of England the real motive behind the revolution.(10)

It is apparent that Burke had come to identify Price and the French Revolution with international Jacobinism.(11) The aristocratic principle, that of a stratified society in which one's natural superiors remained atop, was in grave danger. The cause of the aristocracy, for Burke, became the cause of England. Sure of his righteousness, Burke

10. Although in the Reflections, Burke dates this letter in October, in fact he is in error. He did not receive Depont's initial inquiry until 11 November to which, according to Thomas W. Copeland, Burke's reply was not immediate. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, p. 39.

eagerly assumed a self-appointed leadership in this newly-found cause. Hardly six months earlier, he had considered retirement because of the uneventful nature of public life. Now, with a gainful opportunity to prop up an otherwise ailing political career, the aging Whig sounded an alarm to awake England from its slumber and nip the Jacobin movement in its infancy. In explaining his anti-revolutionary enthusiasm to his son, Richard, Burke cried, "This is not the Cause of a King, but of Kings; not the Interest of the French Nation but of all nations; Not the Business of this time, but what must decide on the Character and course of the happiness of many Generations."(12)

Burke's hatred for the Jacobins was no passing vendetta. With each year, the French Revolution would become even more an obsession for him. By the time of his death in 1796, he had delivered nine major speeches in Parliament warning against the French peril and published several more letters and pamphlets to the same effect.(13) To Burke it seemed that civilization itself was in imminent danger. So much so that in 1793, while admonishing Parliament to continue the current war against the new Republic, Burke harangued:

And is, then, example [the French Republic] nothing? It is everything. Example is the school of mankind and they will learn at no other. This is a war against that example. It is not a war for Louis the Eighteenth, or even the property, fidelity of France. It is a war for George the Third, for

12. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, p. 353.
13. In addition to these speeches, Burke was quite vocal in giving advice in matters concerning English policy vis-a-vis France. For example, his proposal in 1791 advocating aid and abetment to French émigrés and the numerous motions made against Charles James Fox's proposals for reconciliation with France in 1792-93.
Francis the Second, and for all the dignity, property, virtue, and religion of England, Germany, of all nations.(14)

Vehement in his crusade to save Europe, Burke undoubtedly utilized all the resources at his disposal, including an aesthetic appeal, to persuade his audience. With an aesthetcian's knowledge of art, he studiously intended much of the imagery in the Reflections to affect his reader in the manner described in the Enquiry. This chapter will now examine how Burke romanticizes the Ancien Regime imputing to it many of the sublime and beautiful qualities detailed in Chapter Three. The imagery of this ideal, which in reality is a composite of English constitutionalism and the French Regime under Henry IV and Louis XVI, is intended to stir within his readers feelings of astonishment, awe, love, and grief.

The Sublime in the Ancien Regime

Burke's most frequent use of his aesthetic theory within the Reflections is in his construction of sublime iconography. Purposefully, he creates images suggestive of the idea of the sublime to astound his reader. In initiating the Reflections, Burke launches into a diatribe against the principles put forth by Dr. Price at the Revolutionary Society's meeting of 4 November. After denouncing the Reverend's social contract interpretation of the Glorious Revolution Burke expounded upon what he felt to be the sacrosanct nature of the state. Unlike many political theorists of the Enlightenment, who

considered the state a corporation established upon the grounds of expediency, Burke believed that the commonwealth was in its essence eternal and divinely conceived, reflecting a people's collective genius. Like the great chain of being which Burke spent a lifetime reaffirming, the state, when brought before our minds, inspired in us something very much reminiscent of the sublime:

...but the state ought not be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico, or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence, because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.(15)

Burke is quick to disassociate the state from its mundane functions, thereby accentuating its transcendent qualities. It is not, as some of the philosophers had argued, a cartel set up to expedite the acquisition of material of domestic goods. Rather, the state is a means to the development of those sublime political and military virtues analyzed earlier in Homer's Greeks. In stating that each commonwealth is but one link in the eternal covenant linking the mundane to the ethereal and past generations to future ones, Burke has succeeded in suggesting

those magnificent and awe-inspiring motifs which characterize the sublime.

Indeed, Burke considered the commonwealth a divine benefit which inspired our awe and commanded our obedience. So much so that after defining the spiritual essence of the state and detailing the exact relationship between the individual and this higher body, Burke re-enacted the sublime response to the commonwealth: "In England we have not yet been completely embowelled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, ... We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms. We fear God; we look up with awe to kings, ..., with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility."(16) Burke reacts to these authorities with fear, awe, reverence, and respect, all of which are responses to the sublime.

Because the state was a sacred covenant in all perfection developed collectively and progressively, it remained for Burke indisputably intertwined with the Church. Burke conceived of man as essentially a religious animal, one whose precarious reason often led him astray, leaving him only the premonitions of his instincts and the consolation of his faith, "We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but instincts, and that it cannot prevail long."(17) So ingrained was this piety to man's nature that to repudiate religion seemed to Burke tantamount to disembowelment.


17. Ibid, p. 103.
Consequently, Burke believed that only religion provided the true basis for civil society: "Church and state are ideas inseparable...and scarcely is the one ever mentioned without mentioning the other....We know, and what is better, we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort."(18)

In the Enquiry, while detailing the obscurity inherent in the sublime, Burke noted how the dark, solemn ambiance of the pagan temple heightened the mystique of the priest.(19) Likewise, Burke argued, the sanctification of the commonwealth with the mysteries of religion, imbued it with a similar aura:

I had almost said this oblation of the state itself as a worthy offering on the high altar of universal praise, should be performed as all public, solemn acts are performed, in buildings, in music, in decoration, in speech, in the dignity of persons, according to the customs of mankind taught by their nature -- this is, with modest splendor and unassuming state, with mild majesty and sober pomp.(20)

This consecration of the state served two purposes. First, it undoubtedly reinforced the hallowed nature of holding public office. In knowing that they were accountable for their policies to an exacting Almighty, the governing class, Burke believed, would administer their duties more conscientiously:

18. Ibid, p. 113, 102.

19. "...[the idea of obscurity] has been the same in many cases of religion. Almost all the heathen temples were dark. Even in the barbarous temples of the Americans at this day, they keep their idol in a dark part of the hut, which is consecrated to his worship. For this purpose too the Druids performed all their ceremonies in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks." Burke, Enquiry, p. 59

This consecration is made that all who administer in the
government of men, in which they stand in the person of God
himself, should have high and worthy notions of their function
and destination,...Such sublime principles ought to be infused
into persons of exalted situations, and religious establishments
provided that may continually revive and enforce them.(21)

Secondly, while those exercising sovereignty remained tractable
to the laws and accountable to God, the idea of a sanctified state
functioned most ubiquitously within Burke's overall political philosophy
to subordinate, if not terrorize, the pupil. In the Reflections, Burke
considered a salutary fear of God paramount in deterring the ingrate and
opportunist:

...we have consecrated the state that no man should approach
to look into its defects or corruptions but with due caution,
that he should never dream of beginning its reformation by its
subversion, that he should approach to the faults of the state
as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling
solicitude. By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with
horror on those children of their country who are prompted
rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces and put him into the
kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds and
wild incantations they regenerate the paternal constitution and
renovate their father's life.(22)

The aesthetic response described above, with its emphasis on
"pious awe," "trembling solicitude," and "look with horror," is exactly
the type of sublime response mentioned in the Enquiry. As when we step
out upon a high precipice overlooking a vast depth, we should look to
the state, as we watch our movements upon the ledge, with "due caution."
Burke's analogy of the commonwealth as a patriarchal figure further
accentuates its sublimity and our deference toward it. As can be
recalled from Burke's analysis of our reactions to parental figures, it

is the father who within the family is most removed from our love and responsible for our discipline.

After establishing the sublime ambiance of the state in the Reflections, Burke turns to his analysis of the monarchy. As in the commonwealth, the monarchy, be it constitutional or absolute, must possess that sublime power and severity which commanded the citizenry’s reverence and subordinated the knave. Even where absolutism had long since declined, Burke still postulated a sublime power inherent in a viable monarchy. In reference to George III, Burke claimed:

He is a real king and not an executive officer. He will not trouble himself with contemptible details, nor wish to degrade himself by becoming a party in little squabbles....The direct power of their king of England is considerable. His indirect power, and far more certain power, is great indeed. He stands in need of nothing towards dignity, of nothing towards Splendor -- of nothing towards Authority, -- of nothing at all towards consideration abroad.(23)

Despite Burke’s past antagonisms toward the Crown, he felt power, that capital element in the sublime as mentioned in the Enquiry, a principle characteristic of any monarchy.(24)

After praising the English constitution, Burke turns his attention directly to the French monarchy. At this point he delves into

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24. Burke held a long standing rivalry with the English crown dating back to 1770 when he introduced legislation to curb George III’s efforts to recapture privileges lost to the cabinet during the reigns of the previous Hanoverian Monarchs. In addition, Burke’s sympathies for the Colonists during the American Revolution further antagonized the crown. Although he did come to enjoy George III’s favor due to the Reflections, their past differences may not have been forgotten. This perhaps accounts for the king’s indifference to the House of Lords’ petition for Burke’s peerage.
history, romanticizing the character of Henry Navarre. (25) Henry IV occupies a central role in Burke's chivalric tale of French absolutism. In his panegyric recalling the grandeur of French civilization, it was Henry, the reconciler of warring religions factions, who won Burke's acclamation:

...Henry of Navarre was a resolute, active, and politic prince. He possessed, indeed, great humanity and mildness, but a humanity and mildness that never stood in the way of his interests. He never sought to be loved without putting himself first in a condition to be feared. He used soft language with determined conduct. He asserted and maintained his authority in the gross, and distributed his acts of concession only in the detail. He spent the income of his prerogative nobly, but took care not to break in upon the capital, never abandoning for a moment any of the claims which he made under the fundamental laws, nor sparing to shed the blood of those who opposed him, often in the field, sometimes upon the scaffold. Because he knew how to make his virtues respected by the ungrateful, he has merited the praises of [all]....(26)

Like Burke's description of William the Conqueror, there is a preponderance of the sublime virtues in the above. Resolute, active, and politic are the exact terms he used earlier to characterize William. As a chivalric monarch whose mere presence inspired awe, Henry knew how to make his position respected by the ungrateful. Because he "asserted and maintained his authority in the gross," he enforced that sublime subordination amongst the lower orders. Capable of delicate language, Henry nevertheless acted with fortitude. Although he possessed the humane and beautiful virtues, they never stood in the way of his

25. Henry IV (1553-1610), restored peace in France after forty years of civil war. Originally a Huguenot, Henry of Navarre converted to Catholicism in order to pacify the Catholic majority. By the time of his death, Henry had successfully revived French commerce and agriculture.

rendering a swift and severe justice. True to Machiavelli's advice, Henry knew it was better to be feared than to be loved.

This portrait of Henry IV involves an artistry which Burke undoubtedly added for aesthetic affect. While writing the Reflections, he usually forwarded each chapter to Pierre-Gaeton Depont, translator of the tract into French, for editorial purposes. Upon reading Burke's account of the Catholic king, Depont advised Burke to retract this austere description, noting that it ignored the mildness and benignancy which memorialized Henry in the hearts of Frenchmen. (27)

Burke opposed altering this passage. He argued that if Henry granted clemency, the dispensations given were few in number and done so out of choice rather than necessity. Although Depont had insisted that Burke's character analysis would be considered mere sentimentality by those familiar with French history because it failed to consider Henry's compromised sovereignty to the Assembly of Notables at Rouen in 1597, Burke remained recalcitrant. This, he feigned, was mere ceremony for Henry, whenever he was liberal with his promises "always spoke with his hand on his sword." Finally, in concluding his defense of this sublime characterization, Burke parried:

As to shedding blood -- not one drop to be sure beyond what was necessary for the support of that Title which he never would submit to any sort of popular decision. But every drop, which that necessity demanded, he did shed. How many bloody battles did he fight against the far greater Majority of the people of France? How many towns did he sack and plunder? Was his Minister and favourite ashamed to take the share of pillage that had fallen into his hands? It is true, that he winked at the relief which a set of poor famished Wretches gave themselves by gathering at the hazard of their Lives a few Ears of Corn

27. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, p. 145.
beneath the walls of his Capital whilst he held it under a
strict blockade. I approve of this; but I look upon it with no
enthusiastic admiration....He had been almost a monster in
cruelty, as well as a driveller in policy, if he had done
otherwise than he did. But if he was this indulgent to a few
dozens of starving people it cannot be forgotten, that it was he
who starved them by the hundreds and thousands, before he could
be in a condition to (bestow) this scanty mercy to a few of the
miserable individuals.(28)

Burke's exacting rebuttal to Depont's critical analysis betrays
his dramatic end. He has a vested interest in emphasizing the sublime
qualities in Henry's character while minimizing those humane attributes
Depont tried to give voice to. Through this sublime portrayal, Burke is
trying to solicit in his readers the sublime responses of awe and
respect, thereby heightening the reader's appreciation of the French
monarchy and the Ancien Régime. In doing this, Burke communicates two
things. First, that it is a sublime Henry, suppresser of civil
disorder, who epitomizes the princely ideal, and secondly, that the
France of Burke's day is the direct benefactor of this chivalric insti-
tution and consequently, like Henry, worthy of our admiration.

After setting forth this princely ideal, Burke than instructs
the reader on the effect of such a sublime monarch upon revolutionaries
like Dr. Price:

But there are some people of that low and degenerate fashion of
mind, that they look with a sort of complacent awe and
admiration to kings who know to keep firm in their seat, to hold
a strict hand over their subjects, to assert their prerogative
and, by the awakened vigilance of a severe despotism, to guard
against the very first approaches to freedom. Against such
as these they [those of the Revolutionary Society] never elevate
their voice.(29)


In continuing his defense of the French monarchy, Burke celebrated the cultural and economic renaissance within the Old Regime as a testimony to its vital and capable sovereignty. As a prosperous nation in need of reformation but not revolution, he found much to admire in France besides its dynastic kingship:

Indeed, when I consider the face of the kingdom of France, the multitude and opulence of her cities, the useful magnificence of her spacious high roads and bridges, the opportunity of her artificial canals and navigations opening the conveniences of maritime communication through a solid continent of so immense an extent; when I turn my eyes to the stupendous works of her ports and harbors, and to her whole naval apparatus, whether for war or trade; when I bring before my view the number of her fortifications, constructed with so bold and masterly a skill and made and maintained at so prodigious a charge, presenting a armed front and impenetrable barrier to her enemies on every side; when I recollect how very small a part of that extensive region is without cultivation, and to what complete perfection the culture of many of the best productions of the earth have been brought in France; when I reflect on the excellence of her manufactures and fabrics, second to none but ours, and in some particulars not second; when I contemplate the grand foundations of charity, public and private; when I survey the state of all the arts that beautify and polish life; when I reckon the men she has bred for extending her fame in war, her able statemen, the multitude of her profound lawyers, and theologians, her philosophers, her critics, her historians and antiquaries, her poets and her orators, sacred and profane — I behold in all this something which awes and commands the imagination, which checks the mind on the brink of precipitate and indiscriminate censure....(30)

In the above, sublime imagery proliferates. Like the large number of columns within a long promenade or the seemingly infinite number of stars on a black night, the sheer number of images ricochets through our imagination.(31) The multitude, opulence, magnificence, immensity, and stupendousness of France's commercial development and

30. Ibid, p. 150.
infrastructures are all characteristic of Burke's sublime. Her fortresses, obtrusive and insurmountable, are suggestive of the noble castle much celebrated in the Gothic revival. In perusing French culture, the multitude of her sages and statesmen, and immensity of her learning again evoke something of the transcendent sublime virtues noted earlier. To be sure, Burke's reaction to the scene is entirely in keeping with that laid out in the Enquiry. Upon seeing such grandeur, his imagination is awed and his reason confounded.

Burke's method of narration is also of interest. In actuality, he is not describing France but rather his own inner mental processes. The mood of the passage is one of introspection. Burke considers, brings to view, turns his eyes, recollects, reflects, contemplates, reckons, beholds France and then is filled with astonishment. This self-analysis by Burke testifies to the highly personal tone of the Reflections and its introspective character. Although Burke's purpose in assuming this perspective will be elucidated in the next chapter, it should be noted that his critique of the Ancien Regime, like that of his aesthetics, examines both the object and subject.

It is apparent that Burke found much sublimity in the Ancien Regime. France's chivalric prince, Henry of Navarre; the seemingly eternal characters of her feudal past; its prosperous economy and high culture; all are images designed to solicit within us some sense of the grand and magnificent sublime. Yet, in the Reflections, Burke uses other kinds of imagery to captivate our imagination. The sublime and

31. The reader is reminded of Burke's earlier analysis of the idea of infinity within the sublime. See pp. 36-37.
its varying gradations are but half of the total aesthetic experience. Complementing his grand depiction of France is his use of the beautiful. For in recounting the greatness of this Gallic nation, Burke saw much which not only commanded our respect, but supplicated our love.

The Beautiful in the Ancien Regime

Burke's apostrophe to Marie Antoinette, the French queen, exemplifies the romanticism he has since been accused of. It is also probably the most celebrated passage in the Reflections, and one which epitomizes his use of the idea of beauty.

Scholars have investigated Burke's motive in writing this eulogy. James T. Boulton suggests that this encomium is Burke's lament over the decline of the family which Marie Antoinette, ironically enough, represents for Burke. According to Boulton, Burke believed that the clan structure on which feudalism predicated itself, fell victim, like the royal family, to the poniards of the Jacobins. (32) There is merit in this observation for in the Reflections and even more so in his later speeches, Burke is outraged over what he considers to be the Jacobins' systematic attack on the family. Boulton further argues that Burke's vague description of the queen and lack of particulars concerning her beauty is suggestive of the obscurity and mystery in the sublime. Although Boulton is correct in noting that the portrait of the queen is vague, as will be shown, Burke is surely trying to convey the idea of the beautiful.

The queen’s portrait occurs in Burke’s discussion of the Bread Riot of 6 October and the royal family’s abduction from Versailles. When introducing the queen, Marie Antoinette, Burke waxed sentimental:

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 — glittering like the morning star, full of life and splendor and joy. Oh! what a revolution! and what a heart must I have to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall!(33)

Burke intimates a sense of petiteness and delicacy (elements of the beautiful) in his description of the dauphiness who, when walking, hardly seemed to touch the ground. She bestowed to her milieu a decorum and cheerfulness which certainly square with Burke’s analysis of the aesthetic response to the beautiful. Finally, Burke’s likening of the dauphiness to a morning star is a subtle use of the idea of the beautiful. The above describes Burke’s only encounter with the queen. This occurred in 1773 when he attended his son Richard’s enrollment at a school in Auxerre so that he might learn French while still at an impressionable age. He gives no other mention of this encounter than the above, so there is no evidence to discredit this account. Yet, if this passage is interpreted within the literary milieu of the Restoration, Burke’s use of the idea of the beautiful becomes obvious.

After the publication of Joseph Addison’s Pleasures of the Imagination in 1714, the concepts of the sublime and beautiful had become fairly well entrenched amongst the English intelligensia. Coinciding with this was the popularity of Newton’s Optics and the

33. Burke, Reflections, pp. 85-86.
preoccupation with Newtonian theories of light and color amongst poets and writers. Many of these artists applied the concepts of the sublime and beautiful to the colors of Newton's prism. The darker reds and violets along with unbroken white light were considered sublime, while the lighter rays of yellow, orange, and green represented the beautiful. Thus, with the arrival of the scientific revolution and this new scrutiny of nature, light was a new object of celebration in literature. The sublime terror of a cold, dark, winter night or a piercing, hot, summer sun became repeated refrains. Conversely, the temperate seasons of spring and autumn with their azure, yellow sunrises and pink sunsets were the subject of more than one poets' ode to beauty. With this in mind, Burke's use of a sunrise to surround the queen's appearance and her comparison to a glittering morning star is no accident. The scene is clearly representative of the so-called "descriptive poetry" popular in the mid-Restoration.(34)

34. This poetry was considered descriptive because of the vast detail used in describing nature. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, investigated the impact of Newtonian theories of light on eighteenth century poetry, Burke's adolescent obsession. Nicolson notes, "Newton might say that, thanks to his prism, the 'Science of Colours' had become a truly mathematical speculation, but the interest of the descriptive poets in the Optics had nothing to do with mathematics. It is no exaggeration to say that Newton gave color back to poetry from which it had almost fled during the period of Cartesianism. Like Galileo before him and Locke after him, Descartes had regarded the primary qualities of size, shape, figure as the only inherent properties of natural objects or of the ultimate atoms. Until Newton's experiments the geometrical conception of nature had not been extended to color. Although, as we shall later see, the 'Newtonian philosophy' came to be involved with the Cartesian and Lockean, there is no question that the first effect of Newton's resolutions of the colors and his careful analyses of their properties was to produce a new scientific grasp of a richer world of objective phenomena peculiarly sympathetic to poets.
In continuing this romantic portrayal of the queen, Burke dramatized her attempted escape and subsequent capture by the Parisian mob on 6 October 1789:

History will record that on the morning of the 6th of October, 1789, the king and queen of France, after a day of confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter, lay down, under the pledged security of public faith, to indulge nature in a few hours of respite and troubled, melancholy repose. From this sleep the queen was first startled by the sentinel at her door, who cried out to her to save herself by flight -- that this was the last proof of fidelity he could give -- that they were upon him, and he was dead. Instantly he was cut down. A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen and pierced with a hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and, through ways unknown to the murderers, had escaped to seek refuge at the feet

To the descriptive poets of the Age of Newton, light was the source of beauty because it was the source of color. This is a persistent refrain in the period. While light was glorious in itself, it was most immediately and obviously beautiful when it was refracted into color, affording beauty,..." Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Newton Demands a Muse*, (Princeton University Press, 1946), pp. 22-23.

Burke's treatment of light in the "Reflections" is indicative of the newly found interest in color. His portrayal of Marie Antoinette parallels many descriptions of nature given by these "descriptive poets"; compare Moses Browne's "Essay on the Universe":

Thy Colors point the Sky's ethereal Blue,
And stain the lifted Rainbow varying Hue,
Diversely the Clouds with Tinctures gay,
And thro' thy Depths is shed the golden Day.

Also compare William Somerville's, "The Chase":

The Rising Sun, that o'ver th' horizon peeps
As many colours from their glossy skins
Beaming reflects, as paint the various bow
When April showers descend.

As quoted in ibid, pp. 23-24.
of a king and husband not secure of his own life for a moment.(35)

High drama! And not without considerable forethought on Burke's part. He took, as Thomas Paine accused him, his poetical liberties for neither in the Reflections nor his correspondence does Burke divulge his source of information regarding the queen's peril and flight. One thing, however, is certain. His tale contradicts the reports of those present at the royal family's capture. According to one of her attendants, Marie Antoinette was forewarned of the impending danger and was, contrary to Burke's innuendo, fully dressed and aware of the crowd's hostility outside the palace. Secondly, the palace guards, far from fighting off the attacking mob, capitulated to them. Thus, the royal family's capture was, for the most part, peaceful and the palace was not, as Burke would have us believe, strewed with carnage.(36)

35. Burke, Reflections, pp. 81-82.

36. Kramnick, who has investigated this matter notes, "The eyewitness account of that night by Madame de la Tour du Pin, an aristocrat Irish lady-in-aid to the queen, is at variance with Burke's account. The queen's guards seem not to have been killed, and the incident seemed to most courtiers, to have been less the product of Jacobin frenzy than of the incompetence of the guards whom it is suggested were part of an internal plot orchestrated by the Duc D'Orleans. Madame du Pin also notes that the women in the court had been forewarned of potential danger and had not undressed that evening. She makes no reference to the queen's lack of clothing when fleeing, a fact one might expect to be of some importance for an eyewitness chronicler. It would seem that no one even saw the queen flee by the little passage which linked her bedchamber to the king's. Yet Burke is quite insistent that this humiliating violation was inflicted on the nearly naked queen." Kramnick, Burke, p. 152.

Kramnick goes on to explore the sexual imagery of this passage. The mob represents in Burke's mind a band of aspiring rapists who, after penetrating the palace, attempted to ravish the queen with their "hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards."
Clearly Burke is trying to heighten our appreciation of the Bread Riot through fictionalization. The sentry’s heroic sacrifice of self upholds the queen’s virtue while, at the same time, emphasizes the viciousness of her assailants. Her innocence is further underscored by the quietude of her sleep and resultant helplessness at the hands of her captors. This juxtaposition of the queen’s purity and jeopardy to the peril and macabre carnage of the Jacobins is a standard literary ploy within not only the Restoration, but within most of modern literature designed to accentuate beauty. For example, in the *Enquiry*, beauty is enhanced by its delicacy and timidity:

...where [beauty] is highest in the female sex,...[it]
almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature. Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty. (37)

When Francois Depont reviewed this passage his criticisms were even more pointed than those regarding Burke’s treatment of Henry IV. Depont thought this melodramatic episode of the queen’s capture so distorted that it endangered Burke’s entire cause:

Indeed, there is little credibility to Burke’s account. His son, Richard, who spent much of his time during the first two years of the revolution, in France wrote a year after the incident reporting to his father that he had met the attendant Burke thought murdered, "The Garde du Corps, whom you are accused of having killed, is here [in Coblenz]. In his next letter to Richard, Burke makes no mention of his son’s claim. Burke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, p. 372.

37. Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 110. Burke later remarks that, "The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it." Ibid, p. 116.
In my opinion all that you say of the Queen is pure foppery. If she be a perfect female character you ought to take your ground upon her virtues. If she be the reverse it is ridiculous in any but a Lover, to place her personal charms in opposition to her crimes.... But in effect when you assert her claim to protection and respect on topics but those of gallantry and beauty and personal accomplishments, you virtually abandon the proof and assertion of her innocence, which you know is the point substantially in question.... Or are you such a determined Champion of Beauty as to draw your Sword in defense of any jade upon the Earth provided she be handsome? Look back, I beseech you and deliberate a little, before you determine that this is an office that perfectly becomes you.... The mischief you are going to do yourself is, to my apprehension, palpable. It is visible.(38)

Depont's comments must have contained some verity for they caused Burke considerable anxiety. In answering Depont, Burke first confessed, "I sat up rather late at Carleton House; and on my return hither I found your Letter on my Table, I have not slept since."(39) Yet Burke was determined to retain the apostrophe in its original form. Accusations against the queen's character, he deemed, were irrelevant for it was her rank which demanded our affection. In further defending this portrayal of the queen, Burke likened it to Euripides' tragic tale of the Trojan Queen Hecuba, whom the Greeks sold into slavery after the sack of Illium:

I know nothing of your Story of Messalina. Am I obliged to prove juridically the Virtues of all those I shall see suffering every kind of wrong, and contumely, and risk of Life, before I endeavour to interest others in their sufferings, and before I endeavour to excite an horror against midnight assassins at back stairs, and their more wicked abettors in Pulpits? What, are not high Rank, great Splendour of descent, great personal Elegance and outward accomplishments ingredients of moment in forming the interest we take in the Misfortunes of Men? The minds of those who do not feel thus are not even Dramatically

38. Burke, Correspondence, vol 6, pp. 86-87.

right. "What Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba that he should weep for her?" What because she was Hecuba, the Queen of Troy, the Wife of Priam, and suffer'd in the close of Life a thousand Calamities. I felt too for Hecuba when I read the fine Tragedy of Euripides upon her Story: and I never enquired into the Anecdotes of the Court or City of Troy before I have way to the Sentiments which the author wished to inspire; nor do I remember that he ever said one word of her Virtues.(40)

Burke's studied refusal to alter his character sketch of Marie Antoinette in order to "excite an horrour" once again betrays his dramatic end. As in Euripides' Trojan Woman, the queen's fall is meant to inspire in all whose minds are at least "dramatically right," meaning that they are still capable of appreciating a tragedy, feelings of love and grief.(41) Indeed, Burke's first reaction to his account of the queen who "glittered like a morning star" was one of love. Now, as she was led off to Paris by her "amazon" guards, a profound remorse filled his heart. In his correspondence to Depont, Burke juxtaposed these two passages and then elaborated on the extreme grief which befell him upon the queen's capture:

I tell you again that the recollection of the manner in which I saw the Queen of France in the year 1774 and the contrast between that brillancy, Splendour, and beauty, with the prostrate Homage of a Nation to her, compared with the abominable Scene of 1789 which I was describing did draw Tears

40. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, p. 90.

41. Boulton sees this as the apogee of the Reflections, for the queen's demise is, in his view, representative of the age of chivalry, "The Queen symbolizes all that is finest in a whole civilization, and with her perish the benefits which society derived from that civilization: dignified obedience, exalted freedom, the unifying and ennobling power of human emotions." Boulton, Language of Politics, p. 131.

However, the queen alone does not, as Boulton would have us believe, embody all that was dear to Burke in feudalism. As is being demonstrated, it is the various individuals and politics which as a whole compose the Ancien Regime, which Burke found so memorable.
from me and wetted my Paper. These Tears came again into my Eyes almost as often as I looked at the description. They may again. You do not believe this fact, or that these are my feelings, but that the whole is affected, or as you expressed it, "downright Foppery." My friend, I tell you it is truth — and that it is true, and will be true, when you and I are no more, and will exist as long as men—with their Natural feelings exist. (42)

Burke's character sketch of Marie Antoinette is his most apparent, if not blatant, use of the idea of the beautiful within the Reflections. The queen's aplomb, the adulation paid her at Versailles, and the dramatization of her capture all square with Burke's ideas of the beautiful outlined in the Enquiry. However, this elegance does not end with the doyenne. Burke also projected this aesthetic into the French nobility. Concomitant to his defense of the French monarchy, Burke praised the gentility and erudition of the nobility of the sword:

On my best observation, compared with my best inquiries, I found your nobility for the greater part composed of men of high spirit and of a delicate sense of honor, both with regard to themselves individually and with regard to their whole corps, over whom they kept, beyond what is common in other countries, a censorial eye. They were tolerably well bred, very officious, humane, and hospitable; in their conversation frank and open; with a good military tone; and reasonably tinctured with literature, particularly of the authors in their own language (43).

Elements of the beautiful predominate in the above. Unlike Henry IV or Homer's Greeks, it is the social virtues which characterize the French nobility. In discharging their duties, they are guided by a high spirit, meaning a lofty and perhaps too romantic sense of fealty, and a delicate sense of honor; two attributes which easily complement

42. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, p. 91.

the *Enquiry*'s definition of the beautiful. (44) Burke also emphasizes their conviviality and civility rather than their martial skills. Because they are tolerably well bred and reasonably tinctured in literature, a gracefulness of personality and refinement of taste is implied. Even the two sublime qualities mentioned, "a censorial eye," and "a good military tone," are hardly suggestive of the sublime severity found in William the Conqueror.

In continuing his observations, Burke noted, "Nobility is a graceful ornament to the civil order. It is the Corinthian capital of polished society." (45) Such a metaphor, using the most ornate of Grecian capitals, with its rows of finely sculptured acanthus leaves atop the sublime column of absolutism, again squares with Burke's idea of beauty and is but another attempt to endear the much maligned noblesse to the reader.

Finally, in surveying their function, Burke found the French nobility deficient in one principle sublime element: power.

In cities the nobility had no manner of power, in the country very little. You know, Sir, that much of the civil government, and the police in the most essential parts, was not in the hands of that nobility which presents itself first to our consideration. The revenue, the system and collection of which were the most grievous parts of the French government was not administered by the men of the sword, .... (46)

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44. Earlier in the *Reflections*, Burke commented, "...I, for one, always thought you, a generous and gallant nation, long misled to your disadvantage by your high and romantic sentiments of fidelity, honor, and loyalty...." ibid, p. 41.


46. Ibid, p. 158.
Without power, the nobility could hardly inspire the terror and awe characteristic of the sublime. Both the collection of revenue, the most "grievous" or painful part of government, and the execution of civil authority resided in the monarchy. Consequently, it was the French doyonesse and nobility which, for Burke, illuminated the beautiful within the Ancien Regime.

These usages of the sublime and beautiful are the most salient examples of Burke's aesthetic theory within his critique of the French Revolution. The Reflections is littered with other such passages much in keeping with his aesthetic principles, although most are not as detailed or elaborate as those concerning Henry of Navarre or Marie Antoinette. A cursory glance through this polemic reveals dozens of references to "sublime principles" viewed with "pious awe," and a commonwealth which inspires "the well-placed sympathies of the human beast."

**The Sublime and Beautiful in the Chivalric Ideal**

Although Burke's apostrophe to the queen is probably his most celebrated passage, his eulogy to chivalry is, for the purposes of this thesis, the apogee of his aesthetic appeal, for in this homage Burke harmoniously blends the ideas of the sublime and beautiful to astonish and captivate our sensibility in its entirety. Previously, the ideas of a sublime monarchy and France's economic and cultural splendor commanded our awe while the beauty of the French queen and aristocracy inspired our love. Now, in what can be considered the most gripping eulogy
within the Reflections, Burke interfuses these two ideas into his concept of chivalry:

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, that subordination of the heart 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 and heroic enterprise, is gone! It is gone — that sensibility of principle, that charity of honor which felt a stain like wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil by losing all its grossness. (47)

The chivalric ethos, peculiar to Europe and her greatest benefit, is a symbiosis of the sublime and beautiful virtues. In the above, a sublime pride is balanced by submission, dignity by obedience, and an exalted freedom by a subordination of the heart. It imbued into society an elegance in manners while providing Europe its best defense. As the most mature expression of those innate drives mentioned in the Enquiry, chivalry refines our selfish ambition into an inspired courage and transforms our gross lust into a generous loyalty.

To be sure, Burke is explicit in this synthesis of the sublime and beautiful into feudal manners. In the following lament over chivalry's decline, note the oxymora of gentle power, liberal obedience, and the assimilation of private sentiments into public life:

But now all is changed. All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and

47. Ibid, p. 86.
soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. (48)

This reconciliation of our two most basic drives is fundamental to an understanding of Burke's aesthetic appeal and overall social thought. Far from being a mere summation of two principles, the sublime and the beautiful, when integrated, create an ethos greater than the sum of the parts. In condemning the National Assembly for destroying this symbiosis, Burke noted how chivalry predicated itself upon this reconciliation of opposites:

In your old states...you had all that combination and all that opposition of interests; you had that action and counter-action which, in the natural and in the political world, from the reciprocal struggle or discordant powers, draws out the harmony of the universe. These opposed and conflicting interests which you considered as so great a blemish in your old and in our present constitution interpose a salutary check to all precipitate resolutions. They render deliberation not a matter of choice, but of necessity; they make all change a subject of compromise, which naturally begets moderation; they produced temperaments preventing the sore evil of harsh, crude, unqualified reformations and rendering all the headlong exertions of arbitrary power, in the few or in the many, forever impracticable. (49)

In the above passage, which draws much from the psychology detailed in the Enquiry, Burke shows how the healthy organism, be it political or psychological, reconciles opposing drives. A plurality of interests produces a harmony made necessary by compromise. Had one drive or


49. Ibid, p. 40. In a passage detailing the process of reform, but which could just as easily be applied to his analysis of the chivalric ethos, Burke pleaded, "We compensate, we reconcile, we balance. We are enabled to unite into a consistent whole the various anomalies and contending principles that are found in the minds and affairs of men. From hence arises, not an excellence in simplicity, but one far superior, an excellence in composition." Ibid, p. 198.
interest been allowed to go unchecked upsetting this equilibrium, "a harsh, crude, unqualified" lust for power and pleasure would prevail.

To be sure, Burke conceded that feudal manners, the fundamental determinant in the age of chivalry, were the product of the sublime and beautiful:

Nothing is more certain than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners and with civilization have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles and were, indeed, the result of both combined: I mean the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion.(50)

As far as can be discerned from his writings, Burke considered Christianity a benevolent social institution which domesticated and beautified society. This blending of the sublime and the beautiful into the chivalric ethos created within the commonwealth a powerful aesthetic. According to Burke, the charm of feudalism is that the drives for survival and pleasure, crude in themselves, are refined through their opposition to one another into the most esteemed qualities in human nature. While lamenting the lack of aesthetic charm within the Jacobin government, Burke explained how feudalism, with its refined mores, appealed to our aesthetic or moral imagination:

50. Ibid, p. 89. Both the idea of religion and a gentleman can be seen as a synthesis of the sublime and beautiful. As has been shown, Burke associated the omnipotent Godhead with the sublime. Yet, in his "English History", Burke considered Christianity a benevolent institution which domesticated and beautified society. Together, the sublime imagery of the Old Testament and the compassionate message of the New Testament create a symbiosis.

This same balance can also be seen in the idea of a gentleman. In feudal times, the gentlemen connotated someone from the warrior class. But the idea also incorporates the gentility which distinguished the noble from his underlings.
All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity is our estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion. (51)

When the commonwealth dons this "drapery" of manners, it becomes the immediate possession of the heart. This charm was essential for any viable polity, Burke claimed, because it regulates our behavior where the laws cannot. Indeed, this is Burke's most fundamental criticism of the National Assembly. Opposed to the feelings of love and admiration for the Ancien Regime, the abstract, insensitive philosophy of revolutionary France left nothing which engaged the moral imagination:

Nothing is left which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth. On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied, if I may use the expression, in persons so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. But that sort of reason which banishes the affections is incapable of filling their place. These public affections, combined with manners, are required sometimes as supplements, sometimes as correctives, always as aids to law....There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-informed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely. (52)

Admiration, veneration, love, and attachment are four aesthetic responses discussed in the Enquiry. The Ancien Regime, shrouded in a drapery whose shadows create a sublime mystique tempered by the various shades of the beautiful, inspire within us the public affections of heroism and patriotism.

In place of the chivalric ethos which had provided Europe its best defense for ages, the National Assembly, which Burke often calls

51. Burke, Reflections, p. 87.
52. Ibid, p. 88.
"the conquering empire of light and reason," has substituted a base and prostitute lust for a love of society and a coarse, savage ambition for a sublime heroism:

...[the new French legislators] settled a system of manners, the most licentious, prostitute, and abandoned that ever has been known, and at the same time the most course, rude, savage and ferocious. Nothing in the Revolution, no, not a phrase or a gesture, not to the fashion of a hat or a shoe, was left to accident....The noblest passions, the love of glory, the love of country, have been debauched into means of its preservation and its propagation.(53)

This mechanic philosophy of the Jacobins will not inspire our love or admiration. Like pure, white light, the brilliancy of the philosophers' wisdom is an uncompromising sublime light, too bright to behold -- it is in effect an unmitigated terror possessing none of the warmth of the Ancien Regime. Consequently, the very idea of this new system of manners is enough to fill Burke with "disgust and horror."

The end of government and Burke's chivalric ideal is liberty, an integration of both the sublime and beautiful virtues. As has been shown, the unrestrained excesses of the individual generally present the greatest threat to society. Therefore, the sublime virtues in the commonwealth function to check this rampant individualism. While accounting for the supposed chaos plaguing France, Burke stressed the necessity of this sublime restraint:

Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done by a

power outside of themselves, and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue.(54)

This emphasis on the restraint of the individual is even more evident in the following. In one of the more cited passages from the Reflections, Burke describes the sublime subordination inherent in his notion of good order:

Good order is the foundation of all things. To be enabled to acquire, the people, without being servile, must be tractable and obedient, the magistrate must have his reverence, the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds.(55)

Obviously enough, the sublime virtues take precedent in Burke's social thought.(56) If society is to enjoy any sort of liberty, the populace, or as Burke might be more inclined to have it, the vulgus, must submit quietly to authority. This can only be done by confronting the drive for self-preservation with a sublime terror. Yet, once this deterrence has been established and the welfare of the state and private

55. Burke, Reflections, p. 287.
56. Burleigh Taylor Wilkins observed, "This arrangement [of the virtues] is of considerable relevance to Burke's politics. It helps to explain why in his political practices and theoretical exercises he chooses to exalt wisdom and justice over relief, gratifications, and indulgences. Political wisdom and justice involve, Burke thought, matters of life and death and are therefore of ultimate concern in a way that easiness of temper, compassion, kindness, and liberality are not. It is well known that Burke's conception of justice bears practically no relation to those considerations of compassion, kindness, and liberality which, while they do not account for the content of what we call 'social justice' (as critics of social justice allege), at least they help to
property secured the ruling intelligensia should address itself to the more humane ends of government.

In the above, Burke recognizes the individual's right to acquire. In doing so, he acknowledges within the political context, our drive for pleasure. In the mature polity, government must address itself to both ends. A society without restraint, in Burke's view, easily disintegrates into anarchy whereas a commonwealth without concern for the individual degenerates into tyranny. This equilibrium between the sublime and the beautiful underscores Burke's axiom of right. In the following, the pleasures of acquisition are balanced by the demands of the state, "To keep a balance between the power of acquisition on the part of the subject and the demands he is to answer on the part of the state is the fundamental part of the skill of a true politician."(57)

Thus, it is this moral equilibrium between the sublime and beautiful virtues which chivalry predicates itself upon and one which underlies Burke's idea of liberty.

The Imbalance of the Sublime and Beautiful in the Ancien Regime

This equilibrium of virtues is of use in understanding Burke's analysis of the Ancien Regime. Under the reign of Louis XVI, the sublime is conspicuously absent. It was the reign of Henry IV, which preceded the revolution by almost two hundred years, that fired Burke's admiration. To be sure, in a letter to Depont, Burke explain the feelings that 'social justice' often arouses in us."


found little in Louis XVI which inspired his admiration:

You know Sir, that no party can act without a resolute, vigorous, zealous, and enterprising chief. The chief of every monarchical party must be the monarch himself: at least he must lend himself readily to the spirit and energy of others. You have a well intentioned and virtuous prince — But minds like his, bred with no other view than to a safe and languid domination, are not made for breaking their prisons, terrifying their Enemies and animating their friends:...(58)

Unlike Henry IV, the current French monarchy failed, in Burke's mind, to terrorize the populace into submission. Although Louis was a well intending prince, his languid disposition could not deter Jacobin opportunists. This contrast between Louis and Henry proved so profound that in his letter to Depont defending his sublime characterization of Henry of Navarre, Burke could not help but note the overly sensitive, unkingly nature of the current sovereign:

The present King is in the place of the Victim not of the avenger of these Crimes. That he did not prevent them with the early Vigour, activity and foresight of an Henry the 4th is rather his Misfortune than his Offense. He has, I hear, and believe, a good natural understanding, as well as a mild and benevolent heart; and these are the rudiments of Virtue. But he was born in purple; and of course was not made to a situation which would have tried a Virtue the most fully perfected. By what steps, by what men, by what means, or what pretexts, thro what projects, by what series of mistakes and miscalculations of all kinds he has been brought to the State, in which he is obliged to appear as a sort of instrument in the ruin of his Country, is a subject for History.(59)

In Burke's analysis of the French Revolution, neither a Bourgeois quest for liberty nor class inequities lead to the overthrow of the Ancien Regime. In his historiography there is neither an

58. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, p. 241.

59. Ibid, p. 149. Compare this description with Burke's earlier one of George III.
unabashed voluntarism, that is seeing history as a series of events composed of rational actors choosing between good and evil, nor is there a historical determinism in which economic factors or class conflict catalyze society. Rather, Burke’s social theory is one of historical conservatism, where habituated human volition, a composite of the pristine drives mentioned in Chapter Three wrought into custom by its constant interaction with its environment, catalyzed history.

In explaining this historical conservatism, Burke likened the commonwealth to a biological organism whose healthy constitution was characterized by a taut disposition of fibers and humors. Once enacted, royal policies of an indulgent nature, resonated throughout society loosening its sublime humors and upsetting the moral equilibrium within. According to Burke, Louis XVI and his predecessors had, through their preoccupation with court life and capricious political innovation, destroyed the social fiber of the Ancien Regime. In Burke’s view, the monarchy was effete, if not effeminate. Deficient in the sublime virtues, most noticeably wisdom and jurisprudence, Louis, having been duped by his court advisors, turned on his nobility, snapping the great chain of being so central to the Ancien Regime and to Burke’s ideology.(60) Given the influence of the monarchy in this absolute

60. Burke considered Louis as a kindly but inept monarch lacking the sublime virtues of wisdom and fortitude, "...too much countenance was given to the spirit of innovation, which soon was turned against those who fostered it, and ended in their ruin. It is but cold, and no flattering, justice to that fallen monarchy to say that, for many years, it trespassed more by levity and want of judgment in several of its schemes than from any defect in diligence or in public spirit...." Reflections, p. 151. Six years later, Burke still held this view, "Louis the Sixteenth was a diligent reader of history. But the very lamp of prudence blinded him. The guide of human life lead him
state, this dissolution of the sublime only encouraged a once tractable populace into rebellion. After noting the regal and austere manners which had previously ruled in the French state, Burke declared: "France, when she let loose the reins of regal authority, doubled the license of a ferocious dissoluteness in manners and of an insolent irreligion in opinions and practice, and has extended through all ranks of life...." (61)

More than any other institution, the French monarchy, in Burke's view, contributed to the Ancien Regime's demise. Louis XVI, and to a lesser extent his immediate predecessors, had toppled the French regime through a dissolution of the sublime ethos. Yet it was not only the monarchy, but the French nobility whom Burke indicted. As has been shown, Burke ascribed to the French aristocracy those genteel virtues associated with the Trojans in his *Enquiry*. In part, this was meant to evoke feelings of affection within the reader for the Ancien Regime. However, given the function and predominance of the sublime in the astray...but nobody told him...that the world in which he read and the world in which he lived were no longer the same." Edmund Burke, "On the Genius and Character of the French Revolution as it Regards Other Nations," vol. 5 of *The Writings and Speeches of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, (New York: J.F. Taylor, 1901), pp. 378-79.

According to Burke, the king's lack of sublime guile made him a pawn of his court advisors who, being anxious to accommodate the Third Estate, duped the monarch into destroying the nobility, the king's most trusted executives, "It was thus that the king of France...was ruined...The king's counselors had filled him with a strange dislike to his nobility, his clergy and the corps of his magistracy....With his own hand...Louis the Sixteenth pulled down the pillars which upheld his throne,..." "Thoughts on French Affairs," vol. 4 of *The Writings and Speeches of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* (New York: J.F. Taylor, 1901), p. 363.

healthy commonwealth, this disposition is, in effect, a further arraign-
ment of the Ancien Regime's laxity and effemeness. In the Reflections,
after extolling the severity of Henry IV, Burke acknowledged the domes-
tication of the current French noblesse:

....I, for one, always thought you, a generous and gallant
nation, long misled to your disadvantage by your high and
romantic sentiments of fidelity, honor, and loyalty;....[The]
nobility of France [have] degenerated since the days of Henry
the Fourth....I am ready to admit that they are not without
considerable fault and errors. A foolish imitation of the worst
of the manners of England, which impaired their natural
caracter without substituting in its place what, perhaps they
meant to copy, has certainly rendered them worse than formerly
they were....They countenanced too much of that licentious
philosophy which has helped to bring on their ruin. (62)

The nobility had, in their attempt to emulate both the demeanor and
income of the English aristocracy, assumed all the ornamental fopperies
associated with the English Restoration without those manly, sublime
qualities which Burke thought characterized the English gentry. From
the perspective of the art critic, the noblesse had imitated another
artist rather than nature. (63)

Indeed, Burke's choice of imagery during his defense of the
French aristocracy betrays his judgment of their effeminity. The
imagery of a Corinthian capital upon the column of absolutism contrasts

philosophy" is a condemnation of Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose
sentimentalism Burke considered effeminate.

63. Burke placed great importance on the function of models and
constantly warns of the dangers through imitation. In the Enquiry, he
wrote, "It is by imitation far more than precept that we learn
everything; and what we learn thus we acquire not only more effectually,
but pleasantly. This forms our manners, our opinions, our lives." Enquiry, p. 49. The French aristocracy had erred, Burke believed, by
imitating one another rather than nature, Burke's surest guide to poli-
tics and art.
sharply with his description of the English aristocracy. Unlike the French noblesse, the English lords, towering above the lower orders like perennial oaks, projected for Burke, something very much of the sublime. In a letter to the Duke of Richmond, Burke groveled:

Persons in your Station of Life [nobility] ought [to] have long Views. You people of great families and hereditary Trusts and fortunes are not like such as I am, who whatever we may be by the Rapidity of our growth and of the fruit we bear, flatter ourselves that while we creep on the Ground we belly into melons that are exquisite for size and flavour, yet still we are but annual plants that perish with our Season and leave no sort of Traces behind us. You, if you are what you ought to be are the great Oaks that shade a Country and perpetuate your benefits from Generation to Generation.\(^{64}\)

Whereas the French noblesse resembled the highly cosmetic Corinthian capital atop a tottering column of absolutism, the English aristocracy were, in Burke’s mind, towering oaks spreading their branches into the heavens bestowing shade and shelter upon all of England.

Through a comparison of the manners and imagery Burke uses to describe the Ancien Regime and his chivalric ideal, it is apparent Burke believed the Old Regime fell because it had become too domesticated, comely, and effeminate for the contingencies of the modern world. Like the Trojans and the House of Wessex discussed in Chapter Four, the French monarchy and aristocracy failed to inspire that sublime subordination inherent in the "good order" of the society. This imbalance of virtues, the object of Burke’s frequent references in the \textit{Reflections} to the Ancien Regime’s "distemper," is, if not the cause, at least the opportunity for the Jacobin insurgency.

\(^{64}\) Burke, \textit{Correspondence}, vol. 2, p. 377.
Summary

This chapter has presented Burke's aesthetic critique of the Ancien Regime in the Reflections. In this polemic, he utilizes the concepts of the sublime and beautiful to arouse within his readers a variety of emotional responses. His portrayal of the French monarchy and Gallic nation as sublime does much to inspire our awe and command our admiration. In addition, his depiction of the queen and French noblesse is designed to stir within us sentiments of love and affection. Together, the sublime and beautiful virtues produce the aesthetic appeal of chivalry.

This equilibrium of the sublime and beautiful, by way of comparison, also reveals the factors Burke believed precipitated the Ancien Regime's demise. In his account of contemporary France, the monarchy and aristocracy has lost its sublimity. Without this deterrent, the Ancien Regime is unable to withstand rampant individualism and the sublime terror of the National Assembly. In short, France has lost the moral equilibrium which, in Burke's view, characterized the celebrated reigns of William the Conqueror and Henry of Navarre, leaving her, like the ancient Celts, a nation "without learning, without arts,...solely pleased and occupied with war."(65)

CHAPTER SIX

SENSIBILITY IN THE
REFLECTIONS

The Reflections is not only an analysis of political conservatism, but a polemic in the moral sense philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment designed to instruct the reader in how to feel about the French Revolution. Burke's adolescent fascination with man's passionate nature and affinity for Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments has already been demonstrated. His assimilation of Francis Hutcheson's psychological hedonism has also been discussed. Given the potency of the sublime and beautiful in Burke's aesthetic theory and its frequent use in his political thought, there is indeed something distinctly anti-theoretical in Burke's social thought. (1)

Throughout the Reflections, Burke's strongest evidence and most vehement rhetoric is intended to appeal to one's emotions. This

1. Morton J. Frisch also puts Burke firmly in the Scottish Enlightenment, "Quite in line with eighteenth century British empirical tradition, he [Burke] admitted the impossibility of explaining the ultimate principles of reality; he used metaphysics, theory and speculation as terms of reproach; and he rested his principles on 'experience.'" Although Frisch incorrectly ascribes to Burke an unmitigated skepticism, he is nevertheless correct in documenting Burke's anti-Aristotelian bias. "The real difference between Burke and Aristotle came in when Burke rejected the superiority of theory....His principles of morality, as well as his views of politics, were not deduced from metaphysical premises, but based on feeling and sentiment." Morton J. Frisch, "Burke on Theory," Cambridge Journal 7 (1954), pp. 292, 297.
emphasis on feeling warrants closer examination. As much as this book is an account of the events in France, it is also an analysis of Burke's sensibility, which he claimed provided the best insight into the real nature of the French Revolution. For example, when condemning the new constitution of France, Burke testified:

In England we have not yet been completely embowelled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate, those inbred sentiments which are faithful guardians, the active monitors of our duty, the true supporters of all liberal and manly morals....We preserve the whole of our feelings still native and entire, unsophisticated by pedantry and infidelity. We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms. We fear God; we look with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is natural to be so affected; because all other feelings are false and spurious and tend to corrupt our minds, to vitiate our primary morals, to render us unfit for rational liberty,...(2)

The above is no mere quibble added parenthetically to amuse the reader amidst material of a more serious nature. Rather, it is the gist of the Reflections. Note the intensity and variety with which Burke describes his reaction to the actions of the National Assembly. Because his emotions originate in the depth of his viscera, they seem earthy and authentic. He then assures the reader that his feelings are untaught and uncontaminated by any theoretical or metaphysical preconceptions. When the ideas of God, king, parliament, magistrates, and priests are brought before his mind, Burke responds with a variety of sensations, all of which are in accord with his analysis of the sublime and beautiful. Even more importantly, he feels first and thinks secondly. Despite his contempt for the sensual philosophy of Rousseau, Burke had

2. Edmund Burke, Reflections, pp. 97-98.
more in common with this Frenchman than he would like to admit, for both emphasized the verity and primacy of feeling. Finally, Burke's entreaty to nature is of note, for throughout the Reflections, his most frequent appeal is to nature. Burke regarded his own reactions to the revolution as natural, that is operating according to the physical laws of nature. Conversely, he considered the revolutionary fervor of Dr. Price and the National Assembly unnatural. Thus, Burke often associates the malignant with the a priori speculations of the French philosophes while sanctioning his feelings with the idea of nature. (3)

3. Perhaps this association accounts for the Reflection's powerful appeal and the sense of inevitability Burke speaks of in his analysis of the revolution. Boulton has examined this dichotomy between the natural and the unnatural in Burke's critique, "It was inevitable; it was necessary; it was planted in the nature of things." Here in a nutshell is the reader's response to Burke's fundamental premise. As a premise it is appropriate to either 'the natural order' -- that which depends on authority, precedent, and antiquity, and is creative and beautifying -- or the 'unnatural' disorder, that which depends on metaphysical theory, which denies the value of the wisdom of the race,...This attitude -- expressed in various ways,...engenders an onward, inevitable movement which both dominates the total literary experience and is a primary element in Burke's argument." Boulton, The Language of Politics, pp. 104-105.

In explaining how our sensibility responds to the ideas of the sublime and beautiful, Burke appropriated some of Newton's theories on physics and light. For example, in the Enquiry, Burke considers himself very much a scientist in search of the basis principles within the psyche, "Love, grief, fear, anger, joy, all these passions have in their turns affected every mind; and they do not affect it in a arbitrary or casual manner, but upon certain natural and uniform principles." Burke, Enquiry, p. 22.

In his treatise, Burke employs a bizarre scientific determinism within his epistemology which, in part, explains its popularity. Burke accounted for the sublime in the following fashion. If we were to look out upon a high precipice overhead a vast distance, the enormous number of light rays in their varied configurations so thoroughly agitated our optic nerves that these sensations reverberated throughout the whole body ultimately producing fear and terror within the psyche. Likewise, a beautiful piece of music by virtue of its less frequent and vibrant
Indeed, Burke justified his opposition to the revolution by continuously appealing to his natural inborn sentiments. So profound were these aesthetic reactions, that when viewing the revolution Burke claimed:

All circumstances taken together, the French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world....Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and all sorts of crimes jumbled with all sorts of follies. In viewing this monstrous tragicomic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed and sometimes mix with each other in the mind, alternate contempt and indignation, alternate laughter and tears, alternate scorn and horror.(4)

Given Burke's sensibility as he looked across the channel to the proceedings in Paris, no doubt he did feel everything was out of nature. The great chain of being he had spend a lifetime upholding had now been snapped. The contempt intermixed with indignation, laughter amidst sorrow, and scorn commingled with horror, indicated to Burke the vile nature of this rebellion. Opposed to the admiration and love Burke feels for the Ancien Regime, the aesthetic responses quoted above contain several mutually exclusive and therefore unnatural reactions. In "Hints for an Essay on Drama", an outline written while at Trinity College, Burke noted how ill-suited a syncophony of antithetical passions is to any genuine aesthetic experience. Comedy, he claimed, must refrain from the doleful as must tragedy be free from any levity if

sound waves, massage the eardrum and psyche into a pleasureful lull. Having supported his epistemology with these scientific theories, Burke believed his reactions to the events in France occurred with an unquestioned and fixed frequency, like Newton's law of gravity. For a detailed examination of Burke's use of Newtonian theories in the Enquiry, see Vincent M. Bevilvaqua, "Two Newtonian Arguments Concerning 'Taste'," Philological Quarterly 47 (1968) No.4, pp. 585-592.

4. Burke Reflections, p. 11.
they are to achieve their genuine end. For Burke, it seemed impossible to incorporate into one genre these two mutually exclusive humors. (5) Thus, the rapid succession of these contrary passions further accentuates the perversity Burke feels when viewing the French Revolution.

This pervasive dichotomy between the natural and perverse in the Reflections, makes it clear that Burke's most profound criticism against the Jacobins is that they are in possession of an unfeeling heart. In accounting for the wayward direction Burke believed the revolution had taken, he lamented "It is an Errour not of the head, but of the heart. The whole of man is turned upside down." (6) More than anything, Burke

5. Burke considered a singularity of passion essential for any dramatic performance, "We are not to forget, that a play is, or ought to be, a very short composition; that, if one passion or disposition is to be wrought up with tolerable success, I believe it is as much as can in any reason be expected....If they be checkered scenes of serious and comic, you are obliged continually to break the thread of the story and the continuity of the passion...it is needless to observe how absurd the mixture must be, and how little adapted at answer the genuine end of any passion." Burke, "Hints for an Essay on Drama", vol. 7 of The Writings of Speeches of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, (New York: J.F. Taylor, 1901), p. 155.


In the Reflections, Burke explains this process by which the imagination becomes indurative, "The worst of these politics of revolution is this: they temper and harden the breast in order to prepare it for the desperate strokes which are sometimes used in extreme occasions. But as these occasions may never arrive, the mind receives a gratuitous taint; and the moral sentiments suffer not a little when no political purpose is served by the depravation. This sort of people are so taken up with their theories about the rights of man that they have totally forgotten their nature. Without opening one new avenue to the understanding, they have succeeded in stopping up those that lead to the heart. They have perverted in themselves, and those that attend to them, all the well-placed sympathies of the human breast. Burke, Reflections, pp. 73-74.
thought, the Jacobins were deprived of those natural sentiments of grief over a fallen queen and respect for regal authority:

As to France -- I believe it is the only Country upon earth, thro which, for so long a way, a spectacle of suffering Royalty, in every circumstance of dignity, of Sex, and of age, things that are apt to mollify the hardest hearts, could have passed, without any other sentiment, than that of the most barbarous and outrageous insolence. One person only chose to shew the feelings of a man; and he was murdered for his sensibility...those who have deny'd the God of humanity and made the Apotheosis of Voltaire, are deprived of all the feelings of nature and of Grace.(7)

The hearts of Jacobins, according to Burke, are phlegmatic. Calloused by their intoxication with sublime theories about the rights of man and the prolonged extremity of what Burke considered ruthless measures, the democrats in France spewed forth an inhumane philosophy which, according to Burke, recognized only quantity and substance while denying the "well-placed sympathies of the human heart."(8)

Like those individuals mentioned in the Enquiry who suffer from a want of taste, the sensibilities of Dr. Price and his cohorts were incapable of being affected by those sublime and beautiful ideas which command the moral imagination. Thus, anyone still possessing his or her

7. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, p. 291.

8. This atrophied disposition accounts for Burke's frequent references to Dr. Price's "lack of taste." Burke called Dr. Price's jubilation over the events of 6 October, "a thing in its best form unmanly and irreligious, which...must shock, I believe, the moral taste of every well-born mind." Burke, Reflections p. 76-77.

In explaining what he considered the grim nature of the French Enlightenment and the work of the philosophes, Burke claimed, "On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terror..." Ibid, p. 87-88.
sensibility, as in the case of the queen's attendant guarding the royal bedchamber on the eve of the Bread Riot, is brutally murdered.

Burke repeatedly contrasted this want of taste or lack of sensibility with his own sensitivity. When making his closing comments on the Bread Riot, he exclaimed, "Here, thank God, we are all in our Senses."(9) More ubiquitously, within the Reflections, Burke vaunted this inborn sensibility as the first and foremost requisite for the legislature:

But it seems as if it were the prevalent opinion in Paris that an unfeeling heart and undoubting confidence are the sole qualifications for a perfect legislator. Far different are my ideas of that high office. The true lawgiver ought to have a heart full of sensibility. He ought to love and respect his kind, and to fear himself.(10)

Burke scholar Frederick Dreyer in "The Genesis of Burke's 'Reflections'" has correctly drawn attention to the intellectual milieu in which Burke attacked Dr. Price for his lack of sensibility.(11) Aside from their political differences, dating back to the American Revolution, Burke and Price also held differing epistemological positions.(12) Price, who was a dissenter conversed in natural science, theology, and psychology, had written in 1758 a treatise entitled

12. Both Burke and Price supported the Colonists in their initial dissent against England. However, they differed over the Declaratory Act, a piece of legislation sponsored by Lord Rockingham, Burke's patron, which stated that Parliament had the right to legislate in all Colonial matters, a measure which Price considered an infringement on the liberties of the Americans.
A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals. In this tract, Price put forth a pre-Lockean epistemology which stated that reason, unaided by instinct or empirical investigation, could correctly arrive at objective knowledge and ethical precepts. Burke was aware of Price’s philosophical views and although the Reflection is very much an attack on Price’s revolutionary politics, it is also a treatise critical of Price’s a priori ethics. Thus, Burke’s continued appeal to our “unerring instincts” and arraignment of Dr. Price’s unfeeling heart is in part a hypertrophy of a philosophical dispute dating back thirty years. Interpreted within this intellectual milieu, one can see how Burke’s Reflections is a testimony to sensibility based upon the moral sense tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment. To be sure, after Burke’s apostrophe to the queen and the age of chivalry in the Reflections, Burke bears witness to his sensibility and examines his motive in using an aesthetic appeal:

Why do I feel so differently from the Reverend Dr. Price and those of his lay flock who choose to adopt the sentiments of his discourse? For this plain reason: because it is natural I

13. Dreyer writes, "Burke's attack on Price had an intellectual dimension. This is not to say that Burke's motives for attacking Price were largely intellectual. Nevertheless, a profound theoretical disagreement with Price influenced the manner in which he made his attack....[Price] undertook to demonstrate that our distinctions between right and wrong rested upon a metaphysical foundation...The theory that Burke applauded and ascribed to all right-thinking Englishmen in the Reflections was manifestly the moral-sense system of Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith." Ibid, pp. 469, 471, 474.

In a letter to his editor Depont, Burke disavowed any partisan motive in his attack on Price, claiming that his reasons were more philosophical, "But I intend no controversy with Dr. Price or Lord Shelburne or any of their sect. I mean to set in a full View the danger from their wicked principles and their black hearts." Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, pp. 91-92.
should; because we are so made as to be affected at such spectacles with melancholy sentiments upon the unstable condition of moral prosperity and the tremendous uncertainty of human greatness; because in those natural feelings we learn great lessons; because in events like these our passions instruct our reason; because when kings are hurled from their thrones by the Supreme Director of this great drama and become 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.(14)

The above is instrumental in understanding the didactic function of the Reflections. First, Burke defends his reactions to the revolution as natural, noting that, "we are so made to be affected at such spectacles...." Then he explains how these reactions teach us great lessons. When sublime kings are cast from their thrones and become objects of ridicule, and beautiful queens are pitied on account of their misfortune, we are alarmed into reflection. As in the aesthetic response detailed in the Enquiry, our reason is confounded and we are startled into a state of astonishment. The sublime terror and beautiful pathos function as a catharsis, purifying our minds of any revolutionary distemper. Purged of this hubris, we are endowed with a reverence for the sanctity of the Ancien Regime. In short, through the use of the sublime and beautiful, Burke is teaching the reader to feel as Burke does about the events in France.

In constructing this didactic function in the Reflections, Burke is indebted to English philosopher John Locke. Although Locke was a British empiricist, many moral sense philosophers like Hutcheson and

Burke, appropriated aspects of Locke’s epistemology to support their own theories of human nature. Indeed, Burke’s *Enquiry* utilizes many of the concepts found in Locke’s *Essays on Human Understanding*. For example, Burke’s use of Locke’s definitions of imagination and judgment has already been noted. He also assimilated, as did Hutcheson, Locke’s pain and pleasure principle. Finally, and most importantly, Burke incorporated much of Locke’s empiricism to explain the basic workings of the human psyche.

Locke divided human knowledge into two processes. The first is sensation, that process whereby primary qualities in objects called simple ideas enter the avenues of our understanding. The second process is reflection. Here our judgment, that ability to make contrasts and comparisons, organizes simple ideas into complex ones and observes the operations of itself in doing so.

Secondly, the other Foundation from which experience furnisheth the understanding with Ideas is, the Perception of the Operations of our own Mind within us, as it is employ’d about the Ideas it has got; which Operations, when the Soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the Understanding with another set of Ideas, which could not be had from things without: and such are, Perception, Thinking, Doubting, Believing, Reasoning, Knowing, Willing,...This Source of Ideas every Man has wholly in himself: and though it be not Sense, as having nothing to do with external Objects; yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be call’d internal sense. But as I call the other Sensation, so I call this Reflection, the Ideas it affords being such only, as the Mind gets by reflecting on its own Operations within itself.(15)

Through reflection, Locke claimed, one gains probable knowledge about the external environment and the inner self. Simple ideas are

organized into relationships called complex ideas which symbolize existing structures in the outside world. In addition, through the organization of these ideas, the mind becomes aware of its own operations and abstracts from these processes complex ideas about itself.

In the dispute over the origins of creativity, aesthetic theorists of the early eighteenth century were quick to appropriate Locke's theories. For some, the seemingly scientific views of this empirical philosopher lent credibility to their pedagogical arguments.(16) Joseph Addison's *Pleasures of the Imagination* published in 1704 was the first aesthetic criticism to incorporate Locke's pleasure principle and theory of association. Building upon this, John Baillie's *Essay on the Sublime* also included Locke's distinction between sensation and reflection. In explaining the causality of the sublime, which he often equated with the Vast, Baillie noted:

> But as a Consciousness of her [i.e. the soul's] own Vastness is what pleases, so nothing raises this Consciousness but Vastness in the Objects about which she is employed. For whatever the Essence of the Soul may be, it is the Reflections arising from Sensations only which makes her acquainted with Herself, and know her Faculties. Vast objects occasion vast Sensations, and vast sensations give the Mind a higher Idea of her own Powers -- small Scenes (except from Association)...have never this Effect;...the Soul is never filled by them.(17)

16. Monk writes, "...Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* had inaugurated a sort of psychology, by seeking to explore the mind by an analysis of experience. What more natural than that the English should apply the empirical method to the discussion of the sublime, and should seek to analyze the effect of the sublime on the minds and reactions of men?" Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 45.

This essay, published sixteen years prior to Burke's *Enquiry*, contains much the same epistemology as the *Reflections*. Sensation, according to Baillie, produces within the soul a consciousness of its own existence. As the vast inundates our imagination, the subsequent sensations stir our passions and provoke our introspection. Through this reflection on the Vast, the soul is reminded of its own magnitude and higher nature. Thus, the end of the aesthetic experience is, for Baillie, a knowledge of the soul's own good.

Burke, like Baillie, appropriated Locke's notion of reflection and imputed to it a moral sense function. While Locke had defined reflection as a strictly empirical process in which primary ideas are abstracted into complex ones, Burke considered it a process whereby our judgment becomes aware of our sensibility (i.e. sensation and imagination). When we observe a given action or certain character trait, our sensibility, which operates uniformly in all persons according to the laws of nature, imports to our understanding, sensations of pain and pleasure, according to whether the action is virtuous or vile. Thus, a reflection upon the ideas of sublime and beautiful, according to Burke, would teach us great lessons in virtue.

Burke was always aware of the didactic nature of this reflective process. During the second year of his studies at Trinity, in a letter to Shackleton, he describes the swollen Liffy River as it engulfed the street surrounding his quarters. In an introspective mood, the young student contemplated this sublime deluge and noted the grand reflections which it gave rise to:
...every thing around me conspires to excite in me a Contrary disposition, the melancholy gloom of the Day, the whistling winds, and the hoarse rumblings of the Swoln Liffy, with the flood which even where I write lays close siege to our whole Street....

It gives me pleasure to see nature in those great tho' terrible Scenes, it fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the soul in upon herself. This together with the sedentary Life I lead forc'd some reflections on me which perhaps otherwise would not have occurred. I consider'd how little man is yet in [his] own mind how great! he is Lord and Master of all things yet Scarce can command any he is given a freedom of his will....(18)

Like Baillie's definition of the sublime, the passions stirred by the terrible flood of the Liffy forced Burke into reflecting upon man's greatness and insignificance.

Undoubtedly, Burke used the word "Reflection" quite purposefully. Both in the Reformer and in the previously examined passages, the term refers to a process of introspection, the end of which is a knowledge of the moral good. In reminding his readers of the Reformer's purpose, Burke noted:

I have read of Persons whom some Misfortunes threw among barbarous People, where being habituated to their Company, they grew in Love with their Manners and never remembered or never desired to see their native Country. A small Time properly applied to Reflection, would prevent such a scandalous degeneracy; and there is none who cannot spare it,...(19)

A period of reflection would remind the soul of a moral good long forgotten. Likewise, Burke's grand polemic against the French Revolution is also a didactic reflection on manners. While discussing his

motive in writing the Reflections with his editor Depont, Burke commented on the reflective process inherent in his work:

You may easily believe, that I have had Eyes turned with great Curiosity to the astonishing scene now displayed in France. It has certainly given rise in my Mind to many Reflexions, and to some Emotions. These are natural and unavoidable.(20)

A reflection on the Ancien Regime and the chivalric ethos is the underlying focus of the Reflections. Like his criticisms in the Reformer, a reflection upon our natural sensibilities would, in Burke's view, prevent "a scandalous degenera[tion]" of morals and restore our appreciation of the Ancien Regime. The poignant imagery of a sublime king and a beautiful queen fleeing for her life is intended to awaken our sensibilities. After consulting these inborn sentiments of admiration, love, respect, and grief, our minds are purged of any revolutionary distemper and become wise through the reverence and endearment of tradition.

Summary

 Appropriately enough, Burke entitled his grand polemic Reflections on the Revolution in France to suggest the introspective and didactic character of the work. His use of aesthetic theory within his moral sense psychology reveals the inner focus of the Reflections which has been up to this point ignored in Burkean scholarship. Not only is this work an analysis of the French Revolution, but it is also Burke's self-analysis, evincing man's sensibility and the limits of reason.

20. Burke, Correspondence, vol. 6, p. 41.
Though appealing to one's sensibility, Burke is trying to persuade the reader to feel as he does about the revolution. By reflecting upon the passions having been awakened in us by the events in France, we learn to respect and revere the Ancien Regime while the very idea of the National Assembly fills us with horror and disgust.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the aesthetic critique in Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France. The Reflections is often lauded as the founding of historical conservatism, but is also needs to be appreciated as a book of literature utilizing an aesthetic appeal to instruct the reader in the moral sense philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment.

The continuum between Burke's early interest in literature and the theater as a student at Trinity College and his later thought as a social theorist and political rhetorician is clear. His adolescent preoccupation with poetry foreshadows his later testimony in the Reflections to man's passionate nature, while his criticisms of the Smock Alley Theater in the Reformer bear witness to the didactic function Burke bestowed upon art.

Burke's early enthusiasm for the fine arts ultimately culminated in one of the most influential tracts on aesthetics during the late Restoration A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. In this treatise, Burke defines his concept of sensibility, that initial emotional response to the ideas of the sublime and beautiful as they exist in nature, art, and literature. According to Burke, the sublime is that grand and magnificent idea which confronts
our instinct for survival and inspires within us feelings of astonishment, awe, and even terror, while the beautiful is that refined and eloquent idea which invites our pleasure and solicits our love and affection.

Later, as a social theorist, yet still much an artist, Burke applied these aesthetic ideas within his criticism of human behavior and society at large. The sublime virtues are those awe-inspiring, political and military qualities which subordinate the individual, thereby maintaining what Burke called "the good order" within society. Opposed to these are the beautiful virtues which soften and humanize our existence. Burke argues in An Essay Towards an Abridgement of a English History that an equilibrium of these two genera of virtues constitute a healthy commonwealth. According to Burke, feudalism owed its conception to the beautiful qualities introduced into European society by Christianity and the sublime subordination incorporated in William the Conqueror's centralized monarchy.

After establishing this pervasive moral equilibrium in Burke's social thought, this thesis investigated how Burke applied this aesthetic theory in his most urgent cause, the crusade against the French Revolution. In the Reflections, Burke utilizes the ideas of the sublime and beautiful to command our reverence and solicit our love for the Ancien Regime. Purposely, he constructs iconography of a sublime French monarchy and Gallic nation to inspire our awe and then juxtaposes these with the beautiful, as represented by the French queen and nobility to supplicate our affection and pity.
After examining the moral equilibrium within the Ancien Regime under Louis XVI the inadequacies which Burke believed precipitated the Ancien Regime's demise are apparent. The France of Louis XVI toppled, according to Burke, because, unlike the age of chivalry in the days of William the Conqueror and Henry of Navarre, it lacked the requisite sublime disposition to secure respect for its laws, reverence for its tradition, and subordination of its subjects. In short, Burke sees it as effeminate and effete.

An analysis of Burke's aesthetic within the Reflections also draws attention to the concept of sensibility underlying his political thought and his indebtedness to the Scottish Enlightenment. Burke's most efficacious appeal in support of his cause is to one's feelings, which he believes provide the best insight into the real nature of the revolution. A reflection upon our feelings would, in Burke's view, purge our minds of any revolutionary distemper and instill in us the natural feelings of admiration and love for the Ancien Regime. Thus, Burke entitled his grand polemic, Reflections on the Revolution in France, to emphasize the didactic introspection recurring throughout this work.

Further topics for research still remain. Burke's idea of imitation in art and revolution warrants further consideration. An analysis of Burke's imagery representing the National Assembly, an institution which this aged Whig found entirely sublime and completely terrifying, would undoubtedly prove interesting. The gender variable as outlined in the Enquiry and which permeates his entire critique of the French Revolution has also been largely passed over. Also of interest is Burke's use of
medical analogies. Throughout the Reflections, he makes frequent reference to the Ancien Régime's "distemper" and "laxity of fibers" which account for its current malaise. Finally, the importance of manners in Burke’s analysis of revolution deserves further attention. This incomplete agenda is itself eloquent testimony to the fruitfulness of using Burke’s aesthetic ideas to understand his political and social theory in the Reflections.
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