

# ***The King's Virtual Body: Image, Text, and Sovereignty in Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France***

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**Craig Carson**  
*Adelphi University*

FOLLOWING EDMUND BURKE'S 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, counterrevolutionary writing of the late eighteenth century entrenched itself in opposition to the speculative political programs emanating from revolutionary France. For Burke and his inheritors, such as Joseph de Maistre and Novalis, the driving force behind the "the most horrid, atrocious, and afflicting spectacle" was not the biological needs of the Parisian multitudes but what Burke calls the "naked reason" of Enlightenment rationality.<sup>1</sup> Opposing these abstractions, especially the new political theories outlined in *La déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, Burke insists that politics must ground itself on concrete historical realities. While the Glorious Revolution of 1689 was a mere "deviation" within an otherwise normal historical continuity, France was in the midst of a "complete revolution," trying to remake the nation in conformity with such newly fashioned concepts as the universal rights of man.<sup>2</sup> What ultimately distinguishes these two revolutions, however, is a point that will remain a central tenet of Burke's later counterrevolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *Select Works of Edmund Burke* (a new imprint of the Payne edition) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 2:159. Unless otherwise noted, all further references to *Reflections* are from this edition. For a thorough inquiry into Burke's counterrevolutionary politics as an opposition "against theory," see David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Burke uses the expression "complete revolution" to describe the absolute character of the French Revolution in his "Letter to a Noble Lord," which was published in 1795. For Burke's typology of revolution, see Frank M. Turner, ed., *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 14–24.



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work: sovereignty, in order to be concrete, needs a monarch.<sup>3</sup> Burke's 1791 *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* claims that England's mixed constitution, in order to exist at all, must have a "real, not nominal monarchy, as its essential basis."<sup>4</sup> More decisively still, *Reflections* insists that, without a concrete sovereign, "our institutions can never be embodied . . . in persons; so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment."<sup>5</sup> Against mere abstraction and empty juridical formalism, political sovereignty, in a very literal sense, must have a body.<sup>6</sup>

At first blush, the demand for an embodied sovereign may appear an obvious position for a political conservative such as Burke. From Machiavelli to Carl Schmitt, the often-reactionary traditions of political realism have continually insisted that sovereignty be concentrated in an individual who, in times of crisis, can declare war, martial law, or the state of exception. But even while predicting that a Cromwell-like dictator would fill the vacuum left by a deposed monarchy, *Reflections* never depicts sovereignty in these traditional terms of suspending the constitution or declaring war. Burke's monarch is given a singular task: "to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment" and thereby to bind the political body together.<sup>7</sup> Burke's sovereign does not exert power or dictate legislation; instead, he or she creates political affect. "To make us love our country," Burke writes to elucidate his peculiar logic of an embodied sovereignty, "our country ought to be lovely."<sup>8</sup> This chiasmus, which conjoins love, beauty, and politics, reveals *Reflections'* superimposition of a political vocabulary onto the scaffolding of Burke's aesthetic treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, written over thirty-three years earlier. While this conflation of aesthetics and politics has remained a lynchpin of contemporary Burke criticism, spanning from Peter Melvin's 1975 "Burke on Theatricality and

<sup>3</sup> Although writing his *Reflections* when the National Assembly was still working toward establishing a constitutional monarchy, Burke argues that the limitations placed on Louis XVI mark the end of the institution of monarchy as such. According to his logic, the abstract principles guiding the revolutionaries are entirely at odds with an embodied sovereign; following this logic, as early as 1790, Burke famously "prophesies" the execution of the royal family.

<sup>4</sup> *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1963), 604 (Burke's emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 171.

<sup>6</sup> If, for example, as Bernard Groethuysen proposes in *Philosophie de la Révolution française*, the philosophical task of the French Revolution was not to discover new conceptual systems but rather to "demonstrate how certain abstract principles"—in particular, the notions of the *volonté générale*, the nation, a people, etc.—"were concretized, becoming in a manner of speaking living images" and "in a certain manner personifying the ends of the Revolution," the contradictions are glaring. More specifically, if the people is neither simply a numerical majority—"half the citizenry plus one"—nor a mere abstract power of the masses, it becomes a concrete revolutionary force, as Groethuysen argues, only by virtue of its capacity to transform itself from mere abstraction into a concrete reality, passing from a mere "mass," which is not representative of anything, into a unity which can manifest its will and which ultimately "must be present to us" (*il faut qu'il nous soit présent*). Bernard Groethuysen, *Philosophie de la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 81–82.

<sup>7</sup> In many respects, Burke's sovereign superficially resembles Hegel's monarch in the *Philosophy of Right*, whose presence is required for, in addition to declarations of war, what Hegel describes elsewhere as dotting the i's and crossing the t's. The monarch gives a physical manifestation to the formalism of the written constitution. Hegel is virtually forced by the weight of his own logic to inscribe the physical person of the sovereign, an irrational remnant of an anachronistic political theory, at the center of his rational vision of the state. Even if relegated to highly circumscribed duties, the sovereign, by virtue of his or her physical existence, endows the otherwise merely formal institutions of law and the written constitution with a concrete actuality, or *Wirklichkeit*. The question of the monarchy and the existential basis of the political order is the focus of Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "The Hegelian Monarch," in *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 110–42.

<sup>8</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 172.

Revolution” to Sara Suleri’s inquiry into Burke’s “Indian sublime,”<sup>9</sup> the present article asks a precise question concerning Burke’s logic of aesthetics and sovereignty: how can Burke’s now infamous arguments concerning monarchy be anything more than a curiosity in the museum of political thought, if not simply an outright embarrassment? Taking seriously Burke’s obviously anachronistic defense of monarchy, this article outlines how Burke’s *Reflections* helps us to reconceptualize the relation between aesthetics and politics as well as to grasp more securely the myths and unspoken presuppositions concerning our modern liberal democracy.

### COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY LOVE

It is of no little consequence that Burke’s *Reflections* was written in response to a speech entitled “A Discourse on the Love of Our Country” and delivered in November 1789 by the dissenting minister Dr. Richard Price. In this speech commemorating the centennial anniversary of England’s Glorious Revolution, Price historically links the English Revolution and the French Revolution, situating both of them within a larger millennial vision of history. While moving through a period of revolution toward the end of days, history, according to Price, was opening onto a period of perpetual peace, the decline of national interests, and the universal rights of man. Indirectly conjuring up the perpetual-peace discourse of the abbé Saint-Pierre, Price understands the coming millennial pacification as based on a universal right and the rule of law, which have been announced in the new political gospel of *La déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen*. Price’s political theological vision rests on a redefinition of the conjunction of politics and affective relations; it is a speech, after all, the title of which promises reflections on the relation between “love” and “country.”

Grounding a new political concept of right on a theological concept of love, Price argues that the French Revolution furthers the advent of the rule of law, which will become effective with the emergence of a universal love of one’s neighbor.<sup>10</sup> No longer an exclusive concept, Price’s “neighbor” includes all mankind, regardless of nation or citizenship. To love one’s neighbor is to construct cosmopolitan relations with humanity at large, without exception, exclusion, or particularity. A new patriotism must overcome the particular love of one’s fellow citizens, expanding beyond the limitations of national boundaries. To this end, Price identifies political “idolatry,” a term by which he refers to the institution of monarchy, as the principal obstacle. Since Milton’s *Eikonoklastes*, the refutation of Charles I’s *Eikon Basilike: The Portraiture of His Sacred Majesty in his Solitudes and Sufferings*, the discourse of iconoclasm had functioned on both a religious and a political register in the late premodern world. The “image of the king” had become at least as fraught as perceived crypto-Catholic influences within the Church of England. For Price, monarchy’s demise will usher in the new world order; monarchy is *the* central political

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<sup>9</sup> Especially noteworthy are Neal Wood’s early, excellent article “The Aesthetic Dimension of Burke’s Political Thought,” *Journal of British Studies* 4, no. 1 (1964): 41–64; Linda Zerelli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); W. T. J. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Other important contributions to this rich critical tradition include Peter H. Melvin, “Burke on Theatricality and Revolution,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no. 3 (1975): 447–68; Frans De Bruyn, *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke: The Political Uses of Literary Form* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1996); and, more recently, Anne Mallory, “Burke, Boredom, and the Theater of Counterrevolution,” *PMLA* 118, no. 2 (2003): 224–38.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country, 1789* (New York: Woodstock Books, 1992).

problem. Price's revolutionary Millennium pushes monarchy into the shadows of modern political life, as a relic of a barbaric and tyrannical past. It is this precise argument that sets the stage for Burke's reply, which implicitly poses the question: politically speaking, can anyone care for—much less love—*everyone*?

*Reflections* criticizes the burgeoning violence of the French Revolution but is much more preoccupied with refuting Price's notion of universal love. Ultimately, for Burke, the two go hand in hand. The violence rendered in hyperbolic detail in *Reflections* belies his perception that the French revolutionaries operate according to empty, universal principles. A political program grounded on empty rationalism or the "nudity" of metaphysical thought "can never be," as Burke says, "embodied, if I may use the expression, in persons—so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment." For Burke, a perverse "nudity," without a body, governs the Revolution.<sup>11</sup> Worse yet, to love everyone is to love no one in particular; all individuals become expendable in the name of a love for an abstract mankind. Without a concrete political body, the empty abstract laws, divorced from the "lovely" incarnation that creates a national love, "are to be supported only by their own terrors." Consequently, "at the end of every visto, you see nothing but the gallows."<sup>12</sup> To be politically effective, political affect (i.e., the love of one's country) must be a concrete or particular love, or even more specifically a love of some particular object, or better still a person. Lacking this embodiment "in persons," politics can be governed only by terror, if not even leading inevitably to The Terror.<sup>13</sup> It is for this reason that, although the National Assembly and Louis XVI or Abbé Sieyès and the framing of the constitution of 1789 are the primary objects of concern for most writers of the time, the *mise-en-scène* of Burke's *Reflections* focuses almost entirely on the "manhandling," as Ian Balfour appropriately describes the highly gendered depiction, of Marie Antoinette during Burke's much-derided depiction of the march on Versailles.<sup>14</sup> Virtually naked, the queen escapes what amounts to an attempted (and hyperbolically narrated) rape. Clearly, Marie Antoinette functions as Burke's tragic heroine suffering on the stage of world history. But this is not, as Paine would have it, a simple misrepresentation of reality; it is, instead, a part of a much more systematic argument concerning the aesthetic nature of politics. The stakes of this easily derided account of the march on Versailles, replete as it is with misogyny, excess, and falsification, concern the representations of a nation to itself, how it is staged, rendered visible. If both Paine and Price call for a species of political iconoclasm, Burke focuses on the political actors in the drama of state. But perhaps the more interesting question is posed only implicitly: even without a monarchy, does political life not still need a stage or a medium?

On this account, the work of Hannah Arendt, which consistently critiques Paine and valorizes Burke, presents a conception of politics within the twentieth century that addresses a version of this kind of political staging.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the numerous explicit references to Burke, Arendt implicitly draws on Burke when she insists that rights become effective only when they

<sup>11</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 171.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Many of Burke's commentators continue to refer to the "prophetic" dimension of his critique of the French Revolution because of its insistence on terror before the outbreak of the Terror. See, e.g., Connor Cruise O'Brien, "Edmund Burke: Prophet against the Tyranny of the Politics of Theory," in Turner, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 213–32.

<sup>14</sup> Ian Balfour, "Torso: (The) Sublime Sex, Beautiful Bodies, and the Matter of the Text," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 323–36.

<sup>15</sup> For a continuation of this line of inquiry, see Richard Sennett's excellent book, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Norton, 1976).

are rendered visible “before of the eyes of others.”<sup>16</sup> But if Arendt champions the nation-state against abstract (and unenforceable) human rights, she does not resuscitate Burke’s theatrical or aesthetic nature of politics per se. For Burke, the political realm relies on aesthetics, not in the modern sense of “art,” but in the eighteenth-century sense of a reflection on human sensibility and embodied experience. Although Burke insists that sociopolitical orders are sacred, his conception of embodied sovereignty is nonetheless far more indebted to aesthetics than to theology for a very specific reason: the notion of Christian love, precisely as Price’s “Discourse” implicitly suggests, is *agape* and not *eros*. The love of one’s neighbor is a disembodied love, one that must sacrifice its physical or bodily dimension; love for a particular object is suppressed and redirected toward a universal love. Any conflict between family and society, formalized much later in Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for instance, is in this way short-circuited in Burke’s formulation. Burke counteracts the “discontent” of society, resulting from the repression of immediate sexual satisfaction, by conceiving of the *polis* in the same terms as the love found in the site of sexual reproduction, the *oikos*. Price’s revolutionary love, by contrast, is a repressed love. Burke’s love of the English nation, therefore, is not what Freud calls “aim-inhibited love,” which typically defines a political or societal love, but is an ambiguously sensual love, according to which the love of the nation is exactly the same love as the love of a sexual partner, even though it must necessarily remain unreciprocated. The abstraction of a universal love, if it is typical of the formation of larger political associations, gains no ground in Burke’s theory of politics, insofar as his politics, like Freud’s notion of the family, “will not give up the individual.”<sup>17</sup> This “individual,” however, is not the sexual partner but the queen, who functions simultaneously as an object of amorous desire and of political fascination that unites the nation’s people in a system of concurrent and vertical relations of sensual love. No wonder his depiction of the march on Versailles in *Reflections* ends in the bedroom of the queen. Here, the structural exclusion of heterosexual women and homosexual men is the least of Burke’s problems; this is very dubious political thought to say the least, although it has far-reaching ramifications.

Another reason Burke turns away from Price’s politico-Christian love in favor of another notion of love is his reliance on his own earlier work, *Enquiry*, where “love of beauty” takes place within the “society of the sexes,” the driving force of which is the generation of the species.<sup>18</sup> The abstraction of the French Revolution, of the universal rights of man, and of the Enlightenment rationality of the *philosophes* leads to the dissipation of the uniting political affect and the rise of its opposite, terror. Despite Burke’s hand-wringing about the end of chivalry, which became a war cry for rearguard elements of the counterrevolution, the central point here concerns the questions of politics and its mediations, which resonates more than ever with our highly “mediatized” political realities. Perhaps Paine has missed the point: *Reflections* does not itself aestheticize politics. Much

<sup>16</sup> The fact that Arendt’s denunciation of the universality of the rights of man, both in “The Decline of the Nation State” and in *On Revolution*, is explicitly underwritten by Edmund Burke’s archconservative arguments is not so strange: it is Burke who everywhere insists on the “rights of an Englishman”—that is, rights that are in every case the rights of a particular people and are grounded and guaranteed by a political constitution—against the universal, inalienable, and natural rights of man. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); and Hannah Arendt, “The Decline of the Nation State and the Ends of the Rights of Man,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 58.

<sup>18</sup> See section 9, “The Final Cause of the Difference Between the Passions Belonging to SELF-PRESERVATION, and those which Regard the SOCIETY of the SEXES,” in Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 41–42. For a fuller account of gender and the sublime, see Balfour, “Torso.”

more fundamentally, it elaborates a detailed account of sovereignty's fundamentally aesthetic or representational nature. In other words, against the emerging liberal insistence of the likes of Price and Paine on an iconoclastic immediacy or transparency, Burke insists that one must always consider the mediations of the political sphere. If, as Rousseau argues in *Social Contract*, sovereignty is unconditioned and indivisible, *Reflections* asks a much more nuanced question: what are the representational conditions in which such unconditional sovereignty becomes possible? The contempt for Burke's vision of this necessity, however, suggests some of the unacknowledged presuppositions about the genesis—as well as the present state—of our political modernity.

Much of the critical work dedicated to *Reflections*, however, continues to overlook the crucial logic binding aesthetics and politics, too often separating aesthetic representations from concrete political realities. Interesting claims concerning Burke's "aesthetic ideology," or the various aesthetic modes that mask the real political power, have been popularized in Tom Furniss's *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*. By contrast, my contention is that Burke insists on the aesthetics and mediations of politics rather than their necessary separation, not to hide or recalibrate power, but as its very condition of possibility. Sovereignty, to be efficacious, must be staged. As I will develop in what follows, Burke's real drama concerns the conflict of sovereignty's media, most notably the clash between its visual and textual reproductions.

### AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

Burke's aesthetic writing, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, which was first published in 1757, functions as a revolution within aesthetics. It stands on the threshold of eighteenth-century aesthetics, looking backward to the neoclassicism of the Augustan Age while at the same time pointing forward to a new era of burgeoning Romanticism.<sup>19</sup> It stands on the cusp between an earlier aesthetic theory dominated by the rational and rule-bound notions of taste, proportion, and the Aristotelian Unities and the rise of the boundless imagination, defined in terms of genius and originality. Burke's slim volume on aesthetic theory brings these two historical periods, both future and past, into direct confrontation precisely as the opposition named in the title: the beautiful opposed to the sublime. The real innovation of Burke's wayward treatise on aesthetics, with its incredible section titles such as "The Cries of Animals," "Proportion Not the Cause of Beauty in Vegetables," "Suddenness," and "The Artificial Infinite," lies in the insistence that the beautiful and the sublime are two entirely independent phenomena. As the seventeenth-century debates surrounding Boileau's French translation of *Peri hupsous* were increasingly transposed from a rhetorical register to one of subjective (and, for Burke in particular, physiological) experience, the sublime increasingly came to be understood as an extreme instance of the beautiful.<sup>20</sup> Not until Burke's *Enquiry* do these two terms

<sup>19</sup> Whereas in his introduction to Burke's *Enquiry*, J. T. Boulton states that to "claim Burke as a Romantic would be manifestly absurd" (lvii), I would simply argue that to reduce Burke simply to a Romantic would be "absurd."

<sup>20</sup> Longinus, *Traité du sublime*, trans. Nicolas Boileau (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1995), 68. Both Pope and Johnson elaborate on Boileau's statement in his preface to his translation of *Traité du sublime* that "in speaking about the sublime, [Longinus] is himself very sublime." Pope, in "An Essay on Criticism," first published in 1711, writes: "Thee, bold Longinus . . . / Whose own example strengthens all his laws / And is himself the great sublime that he draws." Appropriating this idea, Johnson, in his *Dictionary* of 1755, writes that "Longinus strengthens all his laws / And is himself the great sublime he draws." In contrast to Boileau's opposition to the "sublime style," both Pope and Johnson, very tellingly, reorient the question of the sublime around the notion of the law. The English appropriation of the French debates surrounding the translation of *Peri hupsous* very firmly situates the notion of the sublime as intrinsic to the rules or the laws of aesthetics. If this rule-bound sublime is also central to Addison's "Pleasures of the Imagination," it is even more patent in his treatment of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in several issues of the *Spectator* in 1712,

become separated; the opposition between these two aesthetic concepts maps out very succinctly the rupture of a century torn between neoclassicism and Romanticism.<sup>21</sup>

Beauty and sublimity do not intersect, Burke argues, because the affects underlying each are entirely unrelated. While the experience of the beautiful results in a pleasurable love, the experience of the sublime, by contrast, spills into terror of pain and violent death. Both pleasure and pain are themselves divided between positive and negative experiences: the feelings of *disappointment* and, to a greater degree, *grief* are negative experiences of pleasure, because they accompany experiences of the loss of an object of pleasure. No matter how painful, grief has no relation to pain properly speaking and always maintains at least a minimal aspect of pleasure. Mourning, for example, is “pleasurable” because it is fundamentally a procedure of conjuring up memories and therefore conjuring up the pleasurable object, albeit lost. The sentiment proper to the sublime, rather maladroitly designated (as Burke himself notes) as *delight*, is precisely the counterpart of *grief*. That is to say, delight is the negative experience of pain, a positive pain attenuated or removed, a pain that threatens but does not “press too close.” The sublime is not, therefore, a contradictory mingling of pleasure and pain but an ambiguous conjunction of positive and negative pain, resulting in delight, which maintains no relation to pleasure whatsoever. It is precisely this cessation of pain that makes Burke’s notion of the sublime so fascinating for Jean-François Lyotard, for instance. “The sublime,” Lyotard writes, glossing Burke’s sublime “delight,” “emerges from the very core of this imminent annihilation [*cette imminence du néant*] when something, nonetheless, comes to pass, something takes ‘place,’ which announces that all is not over. It is a simple ‘here it is’ [*voici*], the minimal happening, of the ‘place’ itself.”<sup>22</sup> As Lyotard himself argues in the article “Postscript to Terror and the Sublime,” however, sublimity cannot be sustained politically, because it always necessarily results in some form of terrorism.<sup>23</sup> Explicitly, Burke makes the same point: the sublimity of the French Revolution results in terror, even if a sustained inquiry into the question of politics and the sublime reveals, as I will argue later, something very different.

Long before Burke’s explicitly political writing—famously dedicated principally to the English failures in the American colonies, the abuses of the East India Company, and his diatribe against the French Revolution—*Enquiry* had already addressed politics. In a section entitled “Power,” Burke states that the power of “kings and commanders” arises from its conjunction with a sublime terror, which is the source of the frequent title of “dread majesty.”<sup>24</sup> The logic of *Reflections* depends, however, not on a sublimely powerful potentate, but, on the contrary, on the beautiful presentation of the state, in what amounts to a political metonymy. For this reason, Eagleton argues that Burke’s notion of sovereignty, as a hybrid of beauty and sublimity, hegemony and power, as well as female and male, is fundamentally a “hermaphrodite” hegemony. But while Eagleton and others associate the sublimity of sovereign power with the person of the monarch, *Reflections* outlines a different source of sovereign power, one opposed to the monarchy, in the hands of the revo-

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where he argues that Milton’s sublimity is a result of his perfect application of the laws of epic poetry, in which the English author surpassed both Virgil and Homer.

<sup>21</sup> See Samuel Monk’s seminal study, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960).

<sup>22</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “L’instant, Newman,” in *L’inhumain* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 95. My translation.

<sup>23</sup> In Jean-François Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: Correspondance, 1982–1985* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 99–110. For further inquiries into the relation between politics and the sublime, see Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Donald Pease, “Sublime Politics,” *boundary 2* 12/13 (Spring–Autumn 1984): 259–79.

<sup>24</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 64–70.

lutionaries.<sup>25</sup> By contrast with Furniss's claim that Price and other revolutionary enthusiasts had developed the revolutionary potential of Burke's *Enquiry*, here I want to make the opposite (and apparently counterintuitive) claim: it is Burke's *Reflections* that develops a concept of popular sovereignty, legible in Burke's political appropriation of the sublime.

To appreciate the conceptual work of the sublime within *Reflections*, it is necessary to trace the relations between *Enquiry* and *Reflections* more precisely, especially the fact that both texts rely on the same fundamental division between love and terror. What becomes clear is that Burke's entire denunciation of the French Revolution is based on the opposition between, on the one hand, the "embodiment" of the state, which creates love, and, on the other hand, the inability to see, sense, feel, and love the abstract revolutionary principles that, because they are sublime, must rely on "terrors." Within the text of *Reflections* itself, when the term "sublime" appears, albeit infrequently, it describes the abstraction of the French revolutionaries' ideals and is always opposed to the beauty of a concrete manifestation. Distinguishing between an abstract principle of right and concrete political right, Burke states that "hypocrisy, of course, delights in the most sublime speculations; for never intending to go beyond speculation, it costs nothing to have it magnificent."<sup>26</sup> Here, sublime right opposes the concrete, manifest, actual conditions that, for Burke, constitute political reality. In his discussion of the necessity of religion for the state, the sublime has less of a pejorative connotation but nonetheless needs a concrete manifestation to be effective. Burke writes that by virtue of the "consecration" of the state, "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."<sup>27</sup> The opposition between terror and love (as well as between beauty and sublimity) also organizes the opposition between England's mixed constitution and the abstraction of the French Revolution.

What, however, is the nature of this "sublime" revolutionary terror? *Reflections* presents a very specific vision of revolutionary terror: it is the destruction of political space, which leaves the mere animal life of the multitude in its wake. Revolutionary violence cannot be, properly speaking, a collective or political phenomenon. To the contrary, only the disunited mass of the "multitude" can function here, precisely because this terror results from the destruction of the political space in which collective action is made possible. Following this collapse, there is a devolution in which individuals are "degraded into brutes" and the political "people" dissipates into the "swinish multitude" and "wild beasts." The French Revolution is, properly speaking, terrible, not because it presents a "monstrous tragi-comedy" on the world historical stage, but because it presents nothing at all, at least nothing recognizably political. Revolutionary violence of "complete revolution," more than simply nonpolitical action, destroys the political theater in which political action appears as political. It is in this precise respect that so much of the criticism appears to be at odds with the text of *Reflections* itself; indeed, the sublime power referred to here is not sovereignty of the monarch but a constitutive power that undoes the existing political constitution, exposing that "a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman, a woman is but an animal—and an animal not of the highest order."<sup>28</sup> As such, the king and queen do not wield this power but are subject to it.

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<sup>25</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke."

<sup>26</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 155.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 188 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 551.

This conclusion, too, has been borrowed from the work on aesthetics. As noted above, *Enquiry* does not present a theory of pure aesthetics uncontaminated by politics. On the contrary, in his aesthetic treatise the young Burke insists on the absolute heterogeneity of the beautiful and the sublime, but not simply because the beautiful and the sublime have entirely separate affective registers. More than this, the difference between the two categories is absolute because they exist in entirely distinct domains. While the experience of the beautiful takes place exclusively within society, the experience of the sublime, by contrast, is experienced strictly in terms of a solitary concern for one's self-preservation. The latter, therefore, is always experienced in isolation and in relation to one's animal, rather than political, existence.<sup>29</sup> Beauty, according to *Enquiry*, describes an object of love—in fact, the beauty of the “fair sex”—around which a society unites, a position consistent with the claims concerning beauty made in *Reflections*. The sublime, by contrast, is always associated with the terror of a violent death and therefore is always a terror experienced in isolation. This terror pulls the individual out of collective existence and makes one focus instead on one's animal life. In undergoing the experience of the sublime, the individual is stripped of every relation, torn from every societal or political connection. The French Revolution is sublime, in the young Burke's sense of the term, because it marks a turn from the domain of politics to a preoccupation with self-preservation, with mere animal existence, or with what Burke calls elsewhere in *Reflections* “our naked, shivering nature.”<sup>30</sup>

In *Reflections*, therefore, the French Revolution is necessarily linked to the question of terror precisely because the revolutionaries have, in the process of the Revolution itself, torn the fabric of the political sphere to shreds, leaving everyone stripped bare, abandoned to his or her apolitical nature. Terror, by this definition, is the destruction of the political sphere mediating between law and its application. It is, therefore, the abstract law applied immediately to the apolitical multitude, functioning without any recourse to political or juridical mediation. Opposed to the political-aesthetic space of the ancien régime, principally conditioned by the monarchy but also by the first and second *états*, the sublime rupture of the French Revolution is conditioned by the disappearance of sovereignty, a political sphere not “embodied in persons” but abstracted, withdrawn, empty, “nude,” leaving not a people but a mere multitude.<sup>31</sup>

Either by virtue of its power to render someone less than animal or simply a man whose homicide Burke describes sarcastically as “pardonable,” the terror generated by revolutionary violence is the terror of an unlimited power that threatens to dissolve the political domain, to kill people with respect to both biological and political life. For Burke, it is a virtual death sentence in which the bare life of “our naked, shivering nature,” stripped of its belonging to a political constitution, continues to be subject to sovereign power. Well before the Reign of Terror, Burke makes his case for a widespread terror in rather obvious ways, especially with the hyperbolic representations of violence of the march on Versailles, at the same time macabre and ridiculous. In this highly criticized section of *Reflections*, denounced in *Rights of Man* as being “calculated for theatrical representation, where facts are manufactured from the sake of show,” Burke first al-

<sup>29</sup> See the sections “Of the passions which belong to Self-Preservation” and “Of the passions which belong to Society” in *Enquiry*, 38–41.

<sup>30</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 171.

<sup>31</sup> Burke's contempt for the multitude is infamous, and his *Reflections* clearly belongs to the tradition in political thought that, as Paolo Virno describes, is rooted in Hobbes rather than in Spinoza. This reading of Burke, however, is an attempt to demonstrate that Burke's notion of a people is thoroughly determined by a notion of the multitude, despite his utter rejection of the importance or even the “naturalness” of the latter. See Paolo Virno, *Grammaire de la multitude* (Paris: Editions de l'Éclat, 2001).

cludes to the eventual “murder” of the royal family.<sup>32</sup> After describing a failed attempt on the life of the queen by a “band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with blood,” and after the mob had taken the king and queen from the “most splendid palace in the world,” which was left “swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses,” Burke sardonically states that the only imperfection in this otherwise “*beautiful day*” was the “actual murder of the king and queen, and their child.”<sup>33</sup> If this remains vague as a prediction concerning the eventual execution of the royal family, this insight is later made more concrete in *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, written in January 1791, well before Louis XVI’s flight to Varennes. There, Burke states that the king will be “assassinated as soon as his name will no longer be necessary to their designs” and that for the moment the revolutionaries keep Louis XVI “alive for the purpose of exhibiting him, like some wild beast at a fair, as if they had a Bajazet in a cage.”<sup>34</sup> In both cases, Burke’s insight into the king and queen’s eventual execution results from his claim that they have, politically speaking (but not yet in biological fact), *already been killed*. When he stresses in *Reflections* the “actual” (as opposed to the virtual) murder of the queen or, in the *Letter*, to the fact that the king has already been stripped of his humanity by being stripped of his political existence, kept alive as mere biological existence or animal life, it is clear that the effective execution to follow will thereby simply be the realization, or “actualization,” of their virtual deaths. In other words, Burke points to the first of the *two* deaths that are necessarily implied by the logic of the king’s two bodies. What is made patently clear here is that this sovereign power—or, quite literally, the constituent power—belongs not to the monarch, not even to the people, but to the multitude.

But these conclusions are grounded in Burke’s carelessness with his own conception of the sublime. The identification of terror and the sublime in *Reflections* (and in contemporary Burke criticism) is possible only through an active forgetfulness of the notion of *delight*. Terror, as *Enquiry* makes clear, can never be in itself sublime. Properly speaking, the sublime experience of delight (i.e., the negative experience of pain) is the counterpart, not of the positive pleasure of the beautiful, but of grief (i.e., the negative experience of pleasure). Love and terror are the extreme forms of positive pleasure and pain respectively, while grief and delight, the latter of which is the properly sublime experience, are the negative forms of each. To this extent, it is clear that there is a direct and consistent connection between *Enquiry* and *Reflections* insofar as both texts rely on a fundamental opposition between love and terror. But what has been transformed in the transposition from one text to another is that the sublime, which in the early text is the delight (negative pain) at the cessation of terror (positive pain), in *Reflections* is immediately identified with terror. The fold that distinguished Burke’s aesthetic treatise is thereby flattened. The critical reception of Burke’s aesthetics, even today, continues in this respect to perpetuate exactly the same confusion by continuing to insist that, in Burke’s aesthetics, the experiences of the sublime and the beautiful are mirror images, thereby eliding the necessary aspect of delight and surreptitiously equating the sublime with terror.

As the sublime cannot be reduced to mere terror, its inclusion within *Reflections* opens another way of reading the opposition between beauty and sublimity: the opposition between image and text. Indeed, according to *Enquiry*, the sublime is associated with language (especially poetry), while the beautiful is associated with visual arts (painting most importantly). In this re-

<sup>32</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 446.

<sup>33</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 166 (Burke’s emphasis).

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Burke, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (London: Dodsley, 1791), 26.

spect, against Marie Antoinette's theatricality, the text pushes toward the obvious mediations of the linguistic text. Even as Burke explicitly argues for the visual medium of spectacular sovereignty, his *Reflections*, as a private letter that he makes public, does something very different. Describing the necessity of the visibility of the sovereign in a textual medium, ekphrastically, Burke's open letter reveals the burgeoning of the new basis for popular sovereignty: the textual world of print culture and, quite literally, a republic of the letter. Burke's notion of the sublime opens up a new mode of thinking about popular sovereignty, even contrary to his own intentions. Rather than the critical commonplace identifying sublimity and terror, Burke's appropriation of the concept of the sublime represses a republican dimension of his own earlier definition of the sublime and is no longer beholden to the beauty of the monarch but to a textual popular sovereignty associated with the burgeoning print culture. This sublime sovereignty, which can never be present to itself, is also never, properly speaking, sovereign in a traditional sense (i.e., unalienable, indivisible, etc.). As in Lyotard's aforementioned description of the Burkean sublime, "It is a simple 'here it is,' the minimal happening, of the 'place' itself," which is the textual stage, the space of writing, the world of print.

Reading *Reflections* and *Enquiry* together, therefore, underlines, I would argue, that the sublime body of the multitude and the beautiful body of the monarch, according to Burke's aesthetic logic, are independent of one another. The beautiful body of the monarch is not supplanted by the "animal" body of the multitude, and the monarch and the multitude no longer stand opposed to one another as a politics of sublime terror and a politics of beautiful love. Once the concept of the repressed structure of the sublime, based on delight, is taken into consideration, what begins to emerge is a space within Burke's text in which the multitude is not simply devastated by the terror of the abstraction of the French Revolution but *reconstituted* in a new textual body of the people. No longer caught between the opposition between sensual love and abstract universal love, the multitude is a "people" reconstituted and existing in the pocket of a devastation withheld. Like the shuddering sailors in *Peri hupsous* who are "scantly upborne . . . from the clutches of death" after the shipwreck,<sup>35</sup> the multitude begins to reform, pointing, I would argue, toward a public sphere that is not based on the mourning of a lost figure of sovereignty but on a democratic politics of mediations and distances. Maintaining a necessary relation to its "dissolved" form, the multitude is a fractured "people," sutured together not by an erotic love but by the written text.

What appears in the comparison is Burke's attempt in his political text to subordinate these aesthetic categories to political ends, in an effort to shut down the potentially radical aspects of aesthetics that he himself is responsible for importing into the domain of the political. Due to the uneasiness surrounding the conjunction of politics and aesthetics that spans at least from Thomas Paine to Walter Benjamin, the eighteenth-century sublime has not been as adequately accounted for from the perspective of politics. Burke's political program in *Reflections* is explicit in its attempts to counteract any danger it might pose to the stability of the state, precisely by reducing the question of the sublime to the question of terror. Effectively, this is what takes place when the aesthetic opposition between the beautiful and the sublime is transposed into the political opposition between the beautiful/political and revolution/terror. The procedure is one in which Burke attempts to reduce the entire domain of aesthetics to the exigencies of the political but which leads to very different conclusions than he may have intended. In this light, the infamous "Burke problem" perhaps should be cast, not in terms of the relatively superficial conflict

<sup>35</sup> Longinus, *Traité du sublime*, 91.

between the “revolutionary” and “counterrevolutionary” writings or even, as C. B. Macpherson posits, between incipient capitalism and the feudal order of the ancien régime, but instead as a question of the intersection of aesthetics and liberal democracy, which even now continue to be treated as if they were mutually exclusive terms.<sup>36</sup> A

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<sup>36</sup> Although Burke has been abused by his contemporaries as well as by later critics such as Hazlitt for his apparently shifting opinions concerning revolution in general—that is, his seemingly contradictory support of the English and American revolutions but his vitriolic denunciation of the French Revolution—or for what appeared to be an irreducible division between Burke the liberal reformer and Burke the conservative opponent to liberty, it is clear that, if not with Burke’s response to these charges in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, then at least since E. J. Payne’s introduction to the *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, this controversy has been put to rest. Perhaps more persuasive than Burke himself on this point, Payne argues that the consistency of Burke’s work is determined, not by its relation to a notion of Revolution in the abstract, but indeed by its continual rejection of abstraction in politics. On this score, all Burke’s apologists are in agreement: the disavowal of the concrete political situation and the championing of a “politics of theory” such as that witnessed during the French Revolution and its infatuation with the Enlightenment philosophy of the *philosophes* (as if the causes of the French Revolution were entirely theoretical!) cannot but result in terror, if not the Terror. And it is precisely this metaphysical reasoning that Burke was combating from his *Vindication of Natural Society* until his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*.