Edmund Burke's Sublime Revolution

Charles Franklin Bisbee, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Edmund Burke’s Sublime Revolution

Chuck Bisbee

Dr. Cahan

History 823

Revised
Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution* notably offended Thomas Paine. “I cannot consider Mr. Burke’s book in any other light than a dramatic performance,” Paine wrote in refutation, targeting his summary to Burke’s account of the 1789 “October days.” Critics since have only underscored the importance Paine grasped in defining events at Versailles on October 5 and 6 as possibly emblematic to the revolution’s contemporary meaning outside France. The focus Burke put on Marie Antoinette makes the passage “the most famous…in all of Burke’s writing.” Indeed, Burke’s “case succeeds or falls…in persuading the English public to accept his representation.” That public was, as Paine sensed, “being asked to make judgments, which by 1793 amounted to war or peace [with the revolution], on the basis of Burke’s veracity.” Thus, today, “historical understanding of the *Reflections* and [its] influence…requires careful attention to the means Burke employed to convince his readers of the truth of his arguments.”

Investigating Burke’s means can safely assume that the ablest orator of his time and place has nothing in the *Reflections* by chance. A critical reading centered “on the effort to interpret the intentional dynamics of a text” should disclose why Burke centralizes Marie. Necessarily related is considering Burke’s rhetorical choices of style in shaping a passage so celebrated, or notorious, two centuries later. Thirdly, close critical reading should discover the passage’s relationship to Burke’s attack on the *philosophes*, for such a relationship must exist if there are no missteps in the *Reflections*. Reviewing substance and style together should do more than shed light on Paine’s charge. It should aid understanding the work as Burke understood it, as his audience understood it, and what its construction might say today.
Burke’s Rhetorical Situation

In London during the afternoon of November 4, 1789, Reverend William Price, a self-admitted “protestant dissenter from the established [anglican] church,” delivered a “Discourse on the Love of Our Country” to the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain. Price argued the legacy of the revolution of 1688 as far more incomplete than “glorious.” Parliament’s 1689 Bill of Rights, by which it obtained a permanent share in government and secured a protestant royal succession, failed in Price’s view to guarantee to dissidents proportionate representation in government. English “liberty” can perforce be but “partial…when the representation is partial.” But the Society’s fellow dissidents should “be encouraged” for the times “favor all exertions in the cause of liberty.”

I have lived to see thirty millions of people, indignant and resolute, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice, their king led in triumph and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects…I have been spared to be a witness to two revolutions [American and French], both glorious.  

The Price “Discourse” was bound with the Society’s congratulations to the French National Assembly in a pamphlet Burke read “the third week of January 1790.” Although “it was inevitable that…Burke would take a public stand [on the French Revolution]…the form this response would take was by no means predetermined.” By February 13, however, the London World carried an announcement of a forthcoming Burke essay entitled Reflections on certain proceedings of the Revolution Society, of the 4th of November, 1789, concerning the affairs of France. The form Burke’s response would ultimately take was epistolary, a reply to a letter from
Charles-Jean-François Depont, a Jacobin soliciting Burke’s views on the revolution. As he began the *Reflections*, what survey might Burke have made of the rhetorical landscape?

In 1790 Burke roiled in political isolation. Irish by birth, he studied at Trinity College, moving to London at age twenty-one to take up law and literature. Wendover elected him its member to the House of Commons in 1765. Standing as a Whig, Burke soon “figured in the public prints as the British Cicero,” and enjoyed the sponsorship of Whig leader Charles Watson-Wentworth, Marquis of Rockingham. His patron’s death in 1782 allowed party rivals Carless Fox and Richard Sheridan to lessen Burke’s influence; he spent the rest of the decade in increasing disillusion with his party. Essentially, Burke saw steadied Whig suspicion of monarchical power dissipate into “aristocratic radicalism” that took the party to defeat in the 1784 elections. He seemed destined for the historical footnotes as he began his fortieth year in London.

Energy and language, however, remained under his command. “Burke intended the *Reflections* to do the Whig party a service” by recalling it from Fox’s position of embracing the revolution. The author’s major problem was that Fox’s position seemed plausible enough. For example, in “the second half of 1790, the atrocities which had accompanied the first phase of the revolution were fading away…[as] irrelevant.” Some saw the revolution as a concluded event that established a constitutional monarchy similar to England’s. From that perspective, the dissidents Price addressed could deem as equally plausible his implied argument that a French Revolution was needed to complete the Bill of Rights. Such a scenario was exactly what Burke feared the most. But solving the immediate problem of refuting Price risked leaving undisturbed the complacency of elite opinion. To persuade his audience to see the French revolution as he saw it, Burke needed a larger, more affirmative, even dramatic argument.
His choice of the letter form was therefore strategic. In the particular context of Burke’s world, argues critic Frans De Bruyn, the letter form was “adapted to the privileged, exclusive ambit of eighteenth-century politics…it is clear how carefully Burke size[d] up his audience.”

The letter creates “a more personal sense of relationship between author and reader” and permits Burke a “discursive manner.” This Burkean discourse will tap the classical literature he studied while in college. Deliberative rhetoric, the speech identified by Aristotle as for “exhortation or deterrence,” largely informs the argument Burke divides in half. The first half deductively analyzes the Glorious Revolution; the second inductively flays the National Assembly. Bridging the two sections is the October days account. Resultantly, political principle brackets the Reflections, and Aristotelian contrast is a natural rhetorical topic. So forceful are Burke’s contrasts that it seems to scholar Christopher Reid “the whole weight of British tradition is thrown against…revolutionary France.”

Burke’s Argument in General

British tradition’s “cornerstone” for Burke is the Declaration of Rights “made to preserve our ancient indisputable laws and liberties extant even before Magna Carta.” Political history, in other words, is stability “reinforced, explained, improved…but] in its fundamental principles forever settled.” What particularly defines this stability is a continuous reassertion of “our liberties as an entailed inheritance…from our forefathers…to be transmitted to our posterity.” The core national inheritances include an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and a house of commons and a people inheriting privileges [and] franchises.” Burke, continuing John Locke’s assertions in Chapters two and five of the Second Treatise of Civil Government, roots core individual inheritances in rights to property and the “fruits” of labor. Rights also extend to
the “improvement” of children and to “whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing
upon others.” The social “partnership” attaches limits to further rights:

He that hath but five shillings in the partnership, has as good a right to it as he that
has five hundred pounds…but he has not a right to an equal dividend…and as to
the share of power, authority and direction which each individual ought to have in
the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original
rights of man in civil society, for I have in my contemplation the civic social
man…it is…settled by convention.

Burke means here that Price has no inheritable right to representation solely because of
dissident status. The distinction between the inheritable rights and Price’s abstract rights is that
between nature and metaphysics. The ancient inheritable rights were “the happy effect of
following nature, which is evidence without reflection, and above it.” Nature is thus preserved
“in the conduct of the state” and in “our artificial institutions, and by calling in the aid of
[nature’s] instincts…we have derived…considering our liberties in the light of an inheritance.”
The perfectness of the natural world, and the political perfectibility of human nature, are united
institutionally in the “church-state connection.” God’s will is their inseparability. The link
between church, state and the inheritable rights is the heart of Burke’s social contract. This is
Burke’s Glorious Revolution. This is a thing forever settled, complete.

If Burke, then, has summoned to his cause the whole weight of British tradition, he has
had no choice. He understands history as narrative and that Price’s reading of the French
Revolution as how to finish the incomplete Glorious Revolution cannot stand. Price’s French
Revolution, after all, is led in part by a “literary cabal” planning “the destruction of the Christian
religion.” A National Assembly in their thrall “despise[s] experience as the wisdom of unlettered men.” Consequently, the French Revolution has not profited from the British example that generates unity. Instead, liberty, fraternity, and especially (guaranteed) equality in and of all “rights” not derived by nature “perverts the natural order of things.” The Assembly itself, for example, has “every possible power, and no external order” whereas the natural British system recognizes that perfectibility and virtue require that “inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection.” French confiscation of church property can only be an “unnatural persecution” that would never be countenanced in an English system prizing the church as constitutionally independent to exercise its role in social order. The French have violated the natural law ultimately by choosing destruction when “reform,” as the British would have done, was available. In sum, it is not the British constitution the French should have heeded; it is the “principles from which it has grown…[of which] the leading principle is reformation of the state, to make use of existing materials.”

A civilized tradition but amended over centuries is “to be looked on with reverence…it is a partnership…between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” All “good things” connected with civilization are “connected” to the nobility and the clergy, “the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion.” The forced return of the French nobility’s ultimate personification to Paris hardly resembled civilization’s “majestic pomp.” Rather, it resembled “a procession of American savages…after some of their murders called victories, and leading into hovels hung round with scalps, their captives.” The October days lapsed into pre-civilization are the revolution in Burke’s view. Burke is ready to enter the sublime.
Burke’s Marie

“History will record,” Burke wrote, “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 repose.” A sentinel’s outcry signals security breached. Confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter return:

…cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with [the sentinel’s] 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 just time to fly almost naked, [escaping] to …a king and husband…this king, to say no more of him, and his queen, and their infant children…were then conducted into the capital of their kingdom… and two [bodyguards]…were beheaded…[and] their heads were stuck upon spears, and led the procession…

Is this a triumph…to be commemorated?25

History almost at once and ever since has recorded multiple versions of the October 6 events. Burke’s “assassins” are Paine’s “Parisians” arrived at Versailles calmly determined that Louis XVI acknowledge the Assembly’s Declaration of the Rights of the Man. Paine reports some “tumult” but that “the King and Queen were in public at the balcony, and neither of them concealed for safety’s sake, as Mr. Burke insinuates.”26 An eyewitness writing from the point of view of the royal court aligns with Burke. Madame de la Tour du Pin, one of Marie’s retinue, recalled “murderers” and beheading of bodyguards; while hiding in the palace, she heard that
“the Queen had managed to escape to the King’s apartment by the little passage under the Oeiul de Boeuf.”

Two contemporary biographers of Marie also agree with Burke, one of them consulting the same *London Times* stories Burke used. Those stories appeared on October 12 and 13 and advised that “an unrestrained mob” had gotten to the queen’s “antichamber” [sic] to attempt “the murder of the Queen in the dead of night…her Majesty ran trembling to the King’s apartment with only her shift on.”

Recall that Burke’s contemporaries would read his version partly as information. As Burke contests Price over the meaning of the Glorious Revolution, so Paine, a member of the National Assembly, had to contest Burke and the imaginative refashioning of the *Times* account (the queen nearly naked rather than wearing a shift). But “even Paine could not condone” beheadings or overcome that those of Burke’s readers accepting the “main point” to Burke’s argument would likely not accept counter-versions the defining moment of October 6. Burke has also pre-empted the charge of theatricality exactly by being overtly theatrical. He continued:

> 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…little did I dream…that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom…she feels the dignity of the Roman matron… but the age of chivalry is gone…

Chivalry’s disappearance cues metaphor’s arrival. Louis has been “hurled” from the throne by the “Supreme Director.” The revolutionist act is so morally *extraordinaire* that the
only available analogy is a miracle in the physical world. Were “such a spectacle” represented on stage, Burke claims, his tears would run freely. But inwardly he would be “ashamed” to weep at a “painted” depiction of a king hauled from a throne if he joined Price’s exaltation over the same event in “real life. People would think the tears that [David] Garrick formerly, and [Sarah] Siddons not long since, have extorted from me, were the tears of hypocrisy; I should know them to be tears of folly,” Burke concludes his October days narrative.31

Chancing extensive quotation in discussion is needed because Burke’s etorical apostrophe is dense and sophisticated. Of course others at the time, besides Paine, thought otherwise. “In my opinion,” friend Philip Francis wrote Burke, “all that you say of the Queen is pure foppery.” Burke answered defiantly from the heart: “I tell you again that the recollection of…the Queen of France in the year 1774…compared to the abominable scene of 1789…did draw tears from me.”32 There is as well an unstated defense of the passages if we consider how Burke uses the apostrophe to reach the sublime.

The Roman rhetorician Quintilian defined “apostrophe” as speech “distracting from the main issue.” The Reflections’ bridge may technically qualify, if the issue is refuting Price, or influencing Whig policy, or attacking the Enlightenment, or some combination thereof. Yet Quintilian tacitly acknowledged that his definition allowed great latitude. It is especially useful for “putting [a matter] before the eyes, [and] this happens when, instead of stating that an event took place, we show how it took place, and that not as a whole, but in detail.” Moreover, from the use of detail, “we can form a picture not only of the past and present, but also of the future.”33 Burke’s rearrangement of the Times account, pushing the mob from the “antichamber” into the bedroom, and nearly stripping Marie, is far from whimsical. He purposively sharpens
the details of horror to put before the Whig and other eyes what was being forgotten in the fashion to admire the revolution.

The spoken part of Burke’s defense of this rhetorical move skims the sublime. Roman rhetoric infused style into Aristotle’s emphasis on syllogistic logic; Quintilian equates “care for words and concern for subject” as the factors of eloquence. Thus the rhetorician should be able to self-inflict emotion, “for the very nature of the language which is used to move the passions of others rouses the orator in a greater degree than any of those who listen to him.”\textsuperscript{54} Burke’s tears while writing the “flashback” portion of the passages are a “transport out…of…self,”\textsuperscript{35} as Longinus defined the sublime, in a work Burke read as a student.\textsuperscript{36}

That which has “power of amazing us, always prevails over what is merely convincing and pleasing,” Longinus added. “These things exercise an irresistible power…a well-timed flash of sublimity shatters everything like a bolt of lightning.”\textsuperscript{37} Emotion, grandeur, and visualization are elements of the sublime Longinus explicitly states. Implicitly, he adds a fourth, reversal, or turning a thing upside down, as method or topic producing astonishment. Burke seems to have accepted and expanded Longinus. In his own work on the sublime, Burke describes producing the sublime by indirection,\textsuperscript{38} and Longinus combined with Burke’s thinking is on eminent display in the passage.

Visualization, to begin to look at the elements separately, is vivid from the beginning. A storming mob, bayonets shredding the bed, an “almost naked” queen fleeing “in the nick of time,” are all discrete visualizations, in succession. The emotion of “distress” permeates the passage. As De Bruyn says, Burke first highlights Marie, then the mob; it might be added that the “recollection” of young Marie provides the grandeur. Two other things are also notable about the
passage’s first part. One is how, in virtually a single breath, Burke brings Louis onto the scene, and then marginalizes him. The second is Burke’s use of apostrophe within apostrophe. A “remarkably effective” move when executing apostrophe, Quintilian explains, is “speech turn[ed] on the adversary (‘what was that sword of yours doing, Tubero, on the field of Pharsalus?’”).

Burke’s “is this a triumph…to be commemorated” works on at least three levels. Immediately, as here the mob is foregrounded, Burke refers to its “triumph” in having seized the royal couple. Per Quintilian, “triumph” is also turning Price’s speech back on him; this procession of violence and mayhem would be Price’s triumphant Glorious Revolution, Burke is saying. Finally, any definite question – those arising “from a combination of facts, persons, times” – implies an indefinite question. Burke puts his indefinite question indirectly in the second part, asserting that “the age of chivalry is over.” Burke could ask: “Is the age of chivalry over? Is the age of chivalry over if this can happen to the monarchy?”

Asserting the answer in the positive in the second part allows the link to idealize Marie. In turn, Burke etches, in detail, his favorite topic in the general argument, that of contrast. Heeding Longinus, Burke underscores sublimity with hyperbaton, an “arranging of words and thoughts out of the natural sequence…the truest mark of vehement emotion.” “Never lighted on this orb…a more delightful vision” grants Marie at the beginning an absolute uniqueness, contrasted to the anonymous mob, as delight further contrasts to bayonets and beheadings. This is further imbued with Burke’s own advice. Marie is described by effect (upon Burke) rather than by physicality. Note also how, again, the detail mirrors the general. Not just the specific reference to Marie, but the entire passage is “arranged out of the natural sequence,” for it is not chronological, the “natural sequence” of narrative history. Burke sets the more recent horror before the antediluvian idyll in both senses of “before.” His arrangement out of the natural order
emphasizes the world upside down, and not for the better; Burke sublimely developed his thesis that the French revolution “is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world.”

To this point in the passage Burke has stayed well within, if at the highest levels, of overt rhetoricity in the classical style. Why not stay there? Why did Burke add theatrical metaphor? The reason is that metaphor, which asks us to see one thing in terms of a related substitute, allows Burke to transfer real-life reversal to a “Marie” brought before audience eyes on stage. Eighteenth-century literary convention approved the mixing of genres, so Burke is skilled in interpolating non-political forms into the letter and the parliamentary speech. His reference to the two most celebrated actors of his era’s Drury Lane theater is intended for his audience to make certain associations.

Burke was a regular patron of the theater. He was friends with Garrick and served as pallbearer at Garrick’s funeral years before the Reflections. Siddons was “the greatest tragic actress of her generation,” and Reid’s research locates Burke at her performances in The Mourning Bride, Percy, Julia, and as Lady Macbeth. Reid adds that, by 1790, tragedy on the English stage incorporated some definitely non-Aristotelian “contours.” The principal “emergences” Reid cites are a (usually victimized) female protagonist, the primacy of a “pitying response” and “the use of scenes of pathos for the formal expression of correct moral sentiments.” The title character enacted by Siddons in Julia, for instance, barely saves herself from being the unjustly accused victim of a planned revenge killing. Interestingly, one critic categorizes Percy (1777) and Julia (1787) as gothic, a genre of “the dark side of human nature…terror…fear…pity” and spectacle. The parallels between this new theater, exemplified by the Siddons characters, and Burke’s portrayal of an innocent Marie endangered by a rampaging mob are already unmistakable. Still another is available. Siddons characters in The
Grecian Daughter and The Roman Matron wielded concealed daggers to resolve the plots. Reid suggests that the phrase “sharp antidote” would have “called to mind the tragic tableaux in which the figure of Siddonian woman, threatened, like Marie Antoinette, with violation, prepared to defend her honor.”45 Undoubtedly the ambit of the intelligentsia to whom Burke is speaking would have appropriately decoded the meaning in Burke’s metaphor of Marie as (the) Roman matron.

Burke, perhaps writing here “in the white heat of emotions,”46 included a clue as to the meaning of the theatrical references for him. Expanding on the events of October 6:

Indeed the theater is a better school of moral sentiments than the church…

poets, who have to deal with an audience not yet graduated in the school of the rights of man, and who must apply themselves to the moral constitution of the heart, would not dare to produce such a triumph as a matter of exaltation….

whether applied to the attainment of monarchial or democratic tyranny.

Thus, Burke says in an adjoining paragraph, “it is natural” that he opposes the revolution.47 The theater would never exalt in symbolizing the “triumph” of the “school of the rights of man” over “the moral constitution of the heart.” The theater of Siddons that knows the natural heart would oppose to the revolutionary procession Burke’s tableaux of the dauphine and the later captive Marie bearing her “imprisonment…with a manner suited to her rank…and [who] will fall under no ignoble hand.”48 Such a personification would dramatize that Burke has reduced Paine’s Parisians “to a context of anarchic savagery…protests of the crowd are thus
drained of any political significance.” Since Burke moves from here to his review of the National Assembly, his sublime apostrophe is the rhetorical key to the whole work.

The Philosophe Rousseau

Paine understood the sublime well. “It suits [Burke]…to exhibit the consequences without the causes. It is one of the arts of the drama to do so.” Paine is absolutely right. Transposing his audience out of themselves cannot succeed if the *Reflections* are anywhere weighted down with the revolution’s grittier reasons. The transport has also solved, as far as Burke is concerned, any quibbling with dramatic license. Burke knows, along with Aristotle, that precision is unnecessary in a deliberative discourse aimed at a large audience. The greater concern for Burke at any rate is that he now has an uncluttered path towards creating the enemy of British tradition: the philosophe.

“We are not the converts of Rousseau, we are not the disciples of Voltaire,” Burke wrote. “We fear God; we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with reverence to priests; with respect to nobility.” Why? Because “it is natural to be so affected.” The *philosophes* would replace rights derived from nature with rights that, derived from sophistry, could never be anything but artificial. The pragmatic stability learned from the wisdom of the ages would be destroyed by “sophists, economists and calculators.” Their deism is “atheism.” “While they are possessed of these notions, it is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fixed form of a constitution, whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience, and an increasing public strength and national prosperity.” Burke’s arguments and characterizations cast the 1780s *philosophes* as a group “evil, immoral, warped or pathological and therefore a continuing threat regardless” of any particular proposal or political success. In
other words, they are the classic political enemy. No one is as delineated in Burke’s sights as the “citizen of Geeneva” Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Letter to a Member of the National Assembly following the Reflections drives towards an attack over Rousseau as the Assembly’s “canon of holy writ.” Rousseau as avatar is bereft of virtue but full of “vanity.” Since the opposite quality is humility – “the basis of the Christian religion” – the Assembly has chosen an “immoral” author to guide legislation. Rousseauian immorality will seep into all society. The National Assembly hopes that:

that the females of the first families of France may become an easy prey to dancing masters, fiddlers, pattern-drawers…who… may be blended with you by regular and irregular relations. By law, they have made these people your equals. By adopting the sentiments of Rousseau, they have made these people your rivals. In this manner, these great legislators complete their plan of leveling, and establish their rights of man on a sure foundation.

Regarding this passage, De Bruyn says correctly that “a situation that in another context might furnish the scenario for a farcical opera buffe here proves a fundamental threat to the social order.” Perhaps it is time for the Roman matron, Sarah Siddons and the sharp antidote of a dagger.

It is nonetheless “natural” for Burke to use that metaphor. He was a deeply moral man who believed politics was local and practical. On all three counts the “rights of man” to which the Enlightenment has come is the destruction of everything known to the orator steeped in the early eighteenth century. It had not been the case earlier.
We have already seen Burke evoke Locke. Scholar F.P. Lock notes that Burke, in an unfinished work at the time of his death, called Montesquieu “‘the greatest genius which has enlightened the age’.”

Montesquieu had championed moderation against the “abuse of power,” which could summarize the Whig policy toward the monarchy when Rockingham led the party, an inheritance (to use Burke’s analogy) he saw Fox and others frittering away in admiration of the revolution. Corruption of virtue is where Montesquieu laid the blame for suspension of the laws, and this was detected as well by Burke in his consideration of the revolution. “The next generation of the nobility will be artificers and clowns,” and to Burke, the prediction was obvious in a new system that rushed to revolution and repealed all the monarchial laws. The little that the Assembly had enacted was all bad.

Burke gives particular attention to the army. Officers, in revolutionary France, were to be co-appointments of the king and the Assembly. “This double negotiation for military rank seems to me…to poison the corps of officers with factions.” Any officer opposed for promotion by either the king or the Assembly will therefore ally in faction with who sponsored promotion. “A king…not in command of an army…is nothing.” It is simply a matter of time “until some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall…(become) your master.”

No one reading Burke’s prophecy needs to comment on where the revolution headed in 1793 and 1794. Burke could foresee it as, reading Montesquieu, he regarded “society as an aggregation of interests which could, however, be made to work together”—a belief of the practical politician subscribing to Locke’s rationality of man as natural. Or could such foresight flow simply from the sublime leading, as Quintilian says, to being able to see the future?
Rousseau and the Assembly stake opposite ground. They “have benevolence for the whole species, and want of feeling for every individual with whom [they] come in contact.” Rousseau, to Burke, is a poseur as an Enlightenment rationalist. All that the Assembly has enacted is irrational posing as rationality posing as destruction. Human impulses that need to be checked if factions are to co-exist peacefully are getting free rein in a rising tide of humanity undifferentiated in the doctrine of the rights of man. It is unnatural and immoral.

*Reflections on the Revolution in France, and the concomitant Letter to a Member of the National Assembly,* constitute a warning. Understanding history as narrative, and understanding narrative as a combination of principle and the sublime, Burke was sensitive to Price’s posing of the Glorious Revolution as incomplete. Burke admirably met the challenge of his rhetorical problems in obliterating the chances of Price’s argument to achieve legitimacy. But Burke’s eloquent deliberation did not allow him to escape irony.

**Conclusion**

Many ways are available for reading the *Reflections* without resorting to twenty-first century literary or rhetorical theory. Burke biographer Conor Cruise O’Brien reads it as a work mostly analytical and “with very little rhetoric…passion is present, but Burke keeps it well under control.” Lock reads it as “overtly rhetorical…conform[ing] to the canons of classical rhetoric.” Tom Furniss reads it as testing the boundaries of the “interdependence between politics and aesthetics.” De Bruyn holds that Burke “does not lose sight of the rhetorical” but that the “real question is how use of epic illustrates the political thought.” Reid writes that the work as a whole expresses a “specifically Restoration and eighteenth century idea of tragedy.”

I submit that it is Burke’s reaching the sublime that allows such disparate approaches to all
nonetheless agree on the primacy of the October days passage.

Firstly, O’Brien’s critique holds validity only if rhetoric is considered as consisting entirely of “passion.” In Aristotle’s *The Art of Rhetoric*, which Burke surely read, inasmuch as Longinus presumes knowledge of it, emotion is but one of three elements available to secure the audience’s judgment. The other two are logic and *ethos*, or speaker credibility, and even this must be judged from the text. Both are present. Burke argues both deductively and inductively, from example and contrast, and his knowledge, down to the arcane of British law, is dazzling. The balance of the three elements is appropriate; as Reid notes, albeit in a critical way, “the histrionic mode of pathetic tragedy is not sustained beyond the account of the October days.” The passage works in part precisely because another similar episode would invite ridicule that Burke was exclusively using tableaux. Burke keeps in check and under control the balance of the elements. Consequently, Burke is incapable of losing sight of the rhetorical.

Rather, why the passage “works” is that, just as Burke keeps logic, emotion and credibility in check, so also does he fuse content, structure and style. The revolution’s basic flaw is that it does not heed the natural; not heeding the natural reason available to humankind brings on storming mobs. This mob of the *Reflections* breaks monarchical rule and so breaks “the link between tragedy and the state.” The “awe” with which “we look up to kings” can never be recreated in either political or stage life. But Marie is a much better personification than Louis of what the mob would destroy. Presenting her as the pristine dauphine, now bravely and nobly suffering as wife and mother in the mode of tragedy adapted in England, banishes the “fallen” Marie offstage. The move of banishment of the fallen Marie allows the moral Burke to claim the moral high ground for the status quo. The metaphor of Marie as Siddons, and implicitly of
Siddons as Marie, ties a conservative argument to the tastes of his audience. It is an extremely effective move that makes it difficult for Paine to interject the causes of the revolution.

Finally, Reid speculates whether Burke seeks to arouse sympathy or fear in the handling of Marie (14-17). Aristotle insists that both must be present simultaneously if Burke seeks to meet the standards of classical drama. So Reid’s question is not without interest, and in his opinion, the answer is that Burke pursues pity from the audience. The answer seems to ostensibly conform to Burke’s earlier work on the sublime; there, he defines the necessary ingredient to fear as obscurity, in keeping with this point that a thing or person presented clearly cannot produce the sublime. Obscurity is the one thing of which the October days passage cannot be accused. Proximity of danger, Aristotle says in the Rhetoric, can induce fear. The way to really put fear “before the eyes” is by “pointing out that others, greater than [the audience], have in fact suffered….and from such quarters as they did not expect…[and from] unexpected damages at unexpected times” The presentation of Marie falls much more into the camp of fear. Burke, ever the pragmatist as much as the moralist, has apparently completely reversed his thinking on the sublime in terms of fear (if not beauty). The Revolution has already changed the great orator.

Yet irony lurks inherently in the October days passage. The lack of straightforward refutation as part of the argument, and using in its stead displacement, is a rhetorical tactic modern in the extreme. It is completely against the strictures of the ancients on the use of the art of rhetoric. The eighteenth-century rhetoric of Burke’s youth retained Aristotle’s primacy of the logical. The older Burke, protesting the immorality of a mob that hurls a king from the throne, seeking to preserve tradition over the seemingly irresistible juggernaut of an Enlightenment
turned mad, hurls rhetoric forward into the late *twentieth* century. Irony, of course, is the unexpected from the unexpected quarter.


23. Burke, 79.


29. Furnis, 153-54.


31. Burke, 80-81.


Longinus, 34.


Quntilian, 4: 9.2.39.

Quintilian, 3:6.

Longinus, 22.


Reid, 2-3.


Reid, 11.

Burke, 75-81.

De Bruyn, 177.

Burke, 75.

Paine, 34.

Burke, 86.

Burke, 49.

Burke, 49.


Burke, 270.

Burke, 274.

De Bruyn, 187.

59. Burke, 49.

60. Burke, 219-21.


64. Lock, “Rhetoric,” 19, 21.

65. Furniss, 139.


67. Reid, 19.

68. Reid, 19. 5.

69. Reid, 5.

70. Reid, 15-17.


72. Reid, 17.