Introduction: Edmund Burke’s revolution

This book concentrates on two pivotal moments in Edmund Burke’s writing career and in the history of Britain in the eighteenth century – the publication of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757/9) during the Seven Years War, and the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in response to the way the French Revolution was being admired by radicals in Britain. Although the book is divided into two parts which focus on each of these moments in turn, the interpretive strategy adopted throughout is continuously to read each text in terms of the other. I move forwards and backwards between the *Enquiry* and the *Reflections* in order to establish and complicate the relationship between them, showing that a rereading of the former demands and enables a reinterpretation of the latter. Simultaneously with this close attention to Burke’s texts, I attempt to read the various ways in which they interact with a range of texts which constitute their different historical and discursive moments.

In the first part of the book, ‘Aesthetics for a bourgeois revolution’, I claim that Burke’s early aesthetic treatise needs to be read not simply as a ground-breaking intervention within the proliferating discussion of aesthetics in Britain, but as a contribution to the hegemonic struggle of the rising middle class in the first half of the eighteenth century. This involves developing a reading of the *Enquiry* which foregrounds embedded relations there between aesthetics, politics, and economics. Thus the *Enquiry* is read alongside texts by Locke, Hume, and Adam Smith in order to show how the theoretical assumptions which shape Burke’s aesthetics emerge out of a larger debate about the social and political consequences of the commercial revolution in the first half of the eighteenth century. This allows me to claim that Burke’s rigorous distinction between the sublime and the beautiful in terms of absolute differences between labour and
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repose, masculine and feminine, virtue and luxury, ambition and imitation, is driven by the need to refute traditionalist attacks on the ‘corruptions’ of middle-class commerce. In effect, Burke seeks to create an image of the upwardly mobile man of ability (the ‘self-made man’) as an heroic and virtuous labourer whose sublime aspirations are quite different from the beautiful but debilitating luxury of the aristocracy (and of women). Burke can therefore be said to work out a ‘revolutionary’ aesthetic designed to establish the authenticity and authority of the middle-class ethos. But in forging this necessary aesthetic ideology, Burke leaves his position vulnerable to a number of dangers: he foregrounds the ways in which the compromise between the men of ability and the Whig regime might be potentially unstable, and he articulates a meritocratic ethos which would seem to validate aspirations of the labouring poor to ‘better’ themselves. More importantly, Burke’s emphatic distrust of the beautiful in favour of the sublime can be read as a symptomatic attempt to repress or exclude the middle class’s own perhaps inevitable tendency towards the personal and political corruptions which were thought to result from material luxury. Thus the image of the middle-class subject which Burke labours to create is inadvertently revealed as a strategic fiction. The first section of this book explores how and why Burke should have got himself into this position and how he attempts to contain the problems opened up by the aesthetic ideology he is compelled to formulate.

If Burke’s early aesthetics may be seen as attempting to legitimize the socio-economic alliance between aristocracy and bourgeoisie which emerged from 1688, its need to validate the ambitions of the ‘heroic’ bourgeoisie indicates the ways in which that alliance might be inherently unstable – suggesting that, in Jacques Derrida’s terms, it contains within itself ‘the “principle” of its own opening, dislocation, disintegration’. This internal incoherence, which already disorganizes Burke’s aesthetic theory in 1757–9, is rendered more critical in 1789–90, where an apparent alliance, in France, between the bourgeoisie and ‘the people’ sets an example which threatens to dislocate, from within, the potentially fragile structure of English society which Burke had long worked to maintain. This is made even more complicated for Burke since radical celebrations of the French Revolution appear to exploit the ‘revolutionary’ possibilities of his own aesthetics in ways which promise to destroy the very social formation which the Enquiry was written to promote. The second
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part of this book, ‘Reflections on a radical revolution’, begins by examining the ‘origins’ of the Reflections in this conundrum. The Reflections is read alongside three of the principal radical texts which make up the Revolution Controversy – Richard Price’s Discourse on the Love of Our Country (1789), Mary Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Men (1790), and Tom Paine’s Rights of Man (1791/2). I trace the way Price’s Discourse draws on and extrapolates the egalitarian potential of the aesthetic ideology which Burke had developed in the Enquiry in order to induce revolutionary fervour in Britain. It is this paradox, this turn of history, which constitutes Burke’s dilemma and precipitates his ‘crisis’, prompting his notorious about turn and energizing his counter-revolutionary writings. In meeting this unexpected crisis, Burke is driven to refashion his own position by downplaying the radicalism of his aesthetics in favour of its more reactionary impulses. Burke seeks to refute any claim that the Revolution might be either sublime or beautiful by attempting to show that it is both barbaric terror and ridiculous bathos, and works instead to convince his readers that the ancien régime is the locus of all things sublime and beautiful. Yet I suggest that this necessary response to the challenge which history had sprung upon Burke ends up multiplying rather than eliminating the contradictions and incoherencies of his position. In attempting to refashion his aesthetic ideology, Burke simultaneously forges a powerful support for the partnership between landed power and capitalist energies in Britain and exposes the ways in which that compromise formation was particularly susceptible to the radical critique. One symptom of this is that Burke is driven to rearticulate and redeploy his aesthetic categories in ways which often seem incompatible with their formulations in the Enquiry. These contradictions between the Enquiry and the Reflections are dramatized as tensions and inconsistencies within the text of the Reflections itself – as astute readings by Paine and Wollstonecraft were quick to point out.

Thus the present book engages with and seeks to transform two ‘problems’ which have troubled Burke’s readers from the beginning: the question of whether Burke’s attack on the French Revolution and English radicalism represents a betrayal of his earlier ‘liberal’ politics, and the question as to the relationship between Burke’s early aesthetics and his late politics. Radical readers such as Paine and Jean-François Depont (the nominal addressee of the Reflections) were puzzled that the apparent champion of the American Revolu-
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tion should have attacked the French Revolution – and especially so violently. ‘Virtually every radical writer of this time’, James K. Chandler writes, ‘saw Burke’s position on France as a change of political colors, and at the same time realized that Burke’s reputation made him one of the worst English enemies the French Revolution could have made.’ Although Wollstonecraft analyses the implications of Burke’s political ‘reversal’ precisely in terms drawn from his earlier aesthetics, Neal Wood could claim, in 1964, that ‘apparently no systematic effort has been made to ascertain whether a relation exists between the aesthetic theory of Burke’s The Sublime and the Beautiful (1757) and his political ideas’. Although such a claim could no longer be made, Wood’s thesis claims to solve both Burke ‘problems’ in one go:

Indeed, one can argue that these aesthetic categories [the sublime and the beautiful] are a unifying element of Burke’s social and political outlook, that they give a degree of coherence and system to the welter of words which he bequeathed to mankind. This is of importance to the student of Burke who is plagued by the absence of architectonic intellectual structure.

In contrast to this, the argument of the present book claims that while Burke’s aesthetic categories clearly inform his political thought (and vice versa), they do not give a coherence to that thought. Instead, a close reading of Burke’s texts suggests that his aesthetic ideology is riven and driven by contradictions which are endemic to the political tensions of its historical context. As a consequence, the challenge for Burke’s readers is not to find a key which will ‘solve’ those contradictions, but to trace as carefully as possible the way they are dramatized in the structure and figurative strategies of his texts.

Isaac Kramnick’s ‘psychobiography’, The Range of Edmund Burke (1977), is an innovative account of the interplay between politics and aesthetics in Burke which my own interpretation both draws upon and overturns. Kramnick argues that Burke’s political ‘turn around’ needs to be understood through the way the French Revolution releases internal forces in Burke’s psyche over which he has no control, reactivating a never adequately resolved Oedipal anxiety. Kramnick’s introduction – ‘The Burke Problem’ – claims that his study ‘stands Burke on his head, replacing the Tory prophet with the ambivalent radical. There are two Burkes and doing the man and his works full justice requires a revision of the conven-
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A rereading of Burke’s œuvre is said to reveal ‘nothing less than a pivotal insight into that great turning point in our history – the transformation from the aristocratic to the bourgeois world’ (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. xii). Burke experiences the conflicts of this transformation in his own psyche: ‘At the centre of Burke’s life and thought is an unresolved ambivalence between his identification with what might be called the aristocratic personality on the one hand, and the bourgeois personality on the other’ (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 10). Since these bourgeois and aristocratic ‘personalities’ are gendered as masculine and feminine respectively in Burke’s writings, Kramnick is able to map them onto the strongly gendered categories of the sublime and the beautiful in the Enquiry. Although Burke’s aesthetics is said to indicate his partiality to ‘the masculine principle’ (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 98), Kramnick claims that Burke’s conception of art and taste entails maintaining a balance between the sublime and the beautiful (see Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 94). (In my own reading of the Enquiry I show, in fact, that the sublime and the beautiful are presented as incompatible with each other. I also argue that the beautiful represents a disturbing aspect of the bourgeois ethos itself more than it does the aristocratic principle. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the way Burke organizes his thought on a range of issues into gendered binary oppositions is not simply a manifestation of Burke’s individual psyche, but characteristic of the discourse of the period.)

The advent of the French Revolution, however, threatens to upset this ‘balance’ forever, since the active masculine principle represented by bourgeois radicalism seemed in the process of destroying the passive feminine principle represented by the aristocracy. Burke is both attracted to and repelled by the Oedipal energies of radicalism, at once despising passive femininity and regarding it as a necessary softener for masculinity. If Burke is compelled, then, to figure the ideological crises of the late eighteenth century in ways which ‘evoke Oedipal terms’ (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 109), such an insight, Kramnick contends, enables us to understand the passion of Burke’s response to the Revolution, since he is forced to live out and resist its implications for Britain in his own psyche:

The [potential] triumph of the dissenters represented the total victory in England and in Burke of the bourgeois principle, unchecked and unbalanced by the aristocratic principle. It was an unacceptable resolution of Burke’s inner ambivalence and as such he was moved to right the balance
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again by vigorous defense of the aristocratic principle. (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 151)

Yet the defence of the aristocracy which this energizes necessarily reveals the bourgeois sympathies which it seems to conceal. The Letter to a Noble Lord (1796) (in which Burke responds to the Duke of Bedford’s criticism of him for taking the civil pension by dwelling on the less-than-honourable origins of the Duke’s wealth and title) is an attack on the aristocracy which ‘reads a close kin to much of the ideological writing [Burke] so despised’ (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 6).

Kramnick claims that it was Burke’s ‘genius to recognize in this way the ideological dynamic that lay behind the great confrontation of his age between aristocratic values and bourgeois values’ (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 109). But although Kramnick usefully indicates the bourgeois, free-market strands in Burke’s writings and shows how they come into conflict with his extravagant but equivocal defences of aristocracy, he is less interested in ‘Burke’s relationship to general ideological developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 164) than in Burke’s personal psychodrama. In Kramnick’s view, the attempt to understand the contradictory impulses in Burke’s texts as arising from a crisis in what Engels sees as the essential achievement of 1688 – the balancing of aristocratic political power with capitalist economic power – suffers ‘from what we now know about Burke’ (Rage of Edmund Burke, p. 164).8

C. B. Macpherson’s recent Marxist interpretation of Burke, on the other hand, takes for granted Engels’s account of 1688 and Marx’s identification of Burke as an ‘out and out vulgar bourgeois’. In his introduction to Burke (1980), Macpherson rapidly dismisses earlier perceptions of ‘The Burke problem’ (including that which so preoccupies Kramnick) in order to redefine it in his own terms: ‘the central Burke problem which is still of considerable interest in our own time is the question of the coherence of his two seemingly opposite positions: the defender of a hierarchical establishment, and the market liberal’.9 Putting aside ‘psychohistorical’ explanations, Macpherson claims that ‘nowhere in the two-hundred-year see-saw of images of Burke is this problem adequately faced’ (Burke, p. 4). Macpherson’s ‘resolution’ of the Burke problem – and his reading falls in with the tradition of resolving Burke’s ‘inconsistencies’ – forms the central argument of his study:
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There is no doubt that in everything he wrote and did, he venerated the traditional order. But his traditional order was already a capitalist order. He saw that it was so, and wished it to be more freely so. He had no romantic yearning for a bygone feudal order and no respect for such remnants of it as still survived, notably in the royal household. Indeed, his most explicit statement of his economic assumptions came first in that full-dress defence of the old order, the *Reflections* . . . There is thus a prima facie case for seeking in Burke’s political economy a resolution of this central problem of coherence. (*Burke*, p. 5)\(^{10}\)

Macpherson therefore allows us to think of Burke’s *Reflections* as attempting to develop a necessary ideological strategy in response to the implications of the French Revolution for the future of capitalism and the existing social formation in Britain. Yet, despite their explicit differences, Macpherson’s and Kramnick’s interpretations of Burke are compatible in many ways in that both find an explanation for the complexities of his texts in his bourgeois identity and aspirations. Kramnick’s study remains useful in the way it draws attention to the ambivalences which run through all Burke’s texts and for reminding us that ‘Burke dealt with ascendent capitalism not triumphant capitalism’ (*Rage of Edmund Burke*, p. 165).

My own reading of ‘the Burke problem’ takes off from Kramnick’s and Macpherson’s in order to trace the way Burke’s discourse participates within a series of socio-economic crises in eighteenth-century England. In seeking to go beyond Kramnick’s and Macpherson’s ground-breaking work, I make the basic assumption that the quirks and qualities of Burke’s texts cannot be explained or contained by discovering their ‘origins’ in Burke’s psyche, or in his politics, or even in the complex relation between his psyche and his politics. I move away from such author-centred models of reading and textual production in order to see Burke’s texts as a weave of discourses which intersect with a range of interrelated writings in the eighteenth century. To read Burke’s texts as discourse is to analyse how their rhetorical strategies function, how they engage in intertextual dialogue with other discourses, and how they intervene in and have effects on the way political events and texts are discursively constituted and read. Thus I am interested not in what lies ‘behind’ Burke’s texts but in their texture and textile nature, in the patterns they weave, and in the unexpected designs which emerge by articulating them with larger discursive projects of the period. This allows me to suggest that there might be quite different relationships
between, say, politics, aesthetics, and sexuality in Burke’s texts than those which Kramnick assumes and quite different ways in which they ambiguously interact with radical discourse.

I have assumed, therefore, that the *Enquiry* and the *Reflections* have to be read as carefully as possible, allowing their language to lead the argument into its own labyrinths, not in order finally to discover the origin or end of all the threads in a single meaning or answer, but in order to map out or produce the contradictions and sheer complexity of these texts. In doing this, I also assume that this reveals the complexity and contradictions of the ideological formations Burke is working within and attempting to refashion. One of the implicit assumptions of the present book is that the political meanings of any text do not exist apart from the ‘texture’ of its language, and that the formal and rhetorical features of a text are deeply implicated within the textuality of the historical moment in which it participates. Thus one of the interests of this book is to attend to the shaping metaphors and strategies of the *Enquiry* and the *Reflections* – asking what they do, *describe*, *declare*, *conceal*, and *reveal*, and how these effects might be paradigmatic of more extended discursive networks.

This approach is informed by the lesson in reading which Derrida offers us, particularly in the reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*. If the modes of reading developed within the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines (politics, economics, history, literature, and so on) often appear inadequate to Burke’s texts, Derrida feels that ‘no model of reading seems . . . at the moment ready to measure up to [Rousseau’s *Confessions*] – which I would like to read as a text and not as a document’.¹¹ In reading Burke’s works as texts, however, I also assume that such ‘deconstructive’ readings reveal or produce gaps and contradictions which are symptomatic of social, political, and ideological tensions which animate the struggles of the period and place in which the text was produced. Thus my reading strategies are also informed by Michel Foucault’s conception of ‘discourse’,¹² and by the attempts of figures such as Pierre Macherey and Fredric Jameson to ‘politicize’ and ‘historicize’ post-structuralist assumptions about textuality.¹³

In *A Theory of Literary Production*, Macherey speculates on the impossibility of distinguishing between a text’s internal structure and its historical ‘context’:

we can only describe, only remain within the work, if we also decide to go beyond it: to bring out, for example, what the work is *compelled* to say in
order to say what it wants to say . . . Thus, it is not a question of introducing a historical explanation which is stuck on to the work from the outside. On the contrary, we must show a sort of splitting within the work: this division is its unconscious, in so far as it possesses one – the unconscious which is history, the play of history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges: this is why it is possible to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it.14

This description of the way to read a ‘haunted’ text is a succinct account of the assumptions which inform my own attempt to trace the various spectres which ‘haunt’ Burke’s texts. Macherey’s axioms for reading text in context seems indispensable for any reading of Burke:

We should question the work as to what it does not and cannot say, in those silences for which it has been made. The concealed order of the work is thus less significant than its real determinate disorder (its disarray). The order which it professes is merely an imagined order, projected onto disorder, the fictive resolution of ideological conflicts, a resolution so precarious that it is obvious in the very letter of the text where incoherence and incompleteness burst forth . . . ‘This distance which separates the work from the ideology which it transforms is rediscovered in the very letter of the work: it is fissured, unmade even in its making. (Theory of Literary Production, p. 155)

My reading of Burke’s Enquiry and Reflections reveals that the way these texts are ‘fissured’ ‘in the very letter of the work’, ‘unmade even in their making’, is organized according to a supplementary logic similar to that which Derrida discovers or produces in his reading of Rousseau.15 Questions about the relationship between nature and culture are always political questions, deeply implicated within the ideological struggles of a period, and all the more political precisely because this relationship is necessarily undecidable.16 Derrida traces the way Rousseau’s texts struggle to articulate the relation between art and the natural in a range of instances. On the one hand, when nature is held to be whole and wholesome, art is seen as a destructive artifice which threatens to displace or ‘supplement’ it. On the other hand, nature is sometimes seen to be incomplete or defective, and therefore in need of supplementation from wholesome artifice. This means that the notion of supplementation is distinguished into two quite different kinds: bad supplementation which damages or displaces nature, and good supplementation which harmlessly completes or adds to nature. But the problem with this is that if nature is
found to be in need of supplementation, then it seems to be incomplete in itself. And because that which is brought in to supply nature’s defect always threatens to supplant nature, the clear demarcation between good and bad supplementation begins to dissolve. If the ‘second signification of the supplement cannot be separated from the first’, Derrida traces a structuring anxiety and effort in Rousseau’s texts (as I do in Burke’s) to employ each in certain moments by strategically excluding the other:

We shall constantly have to confirm that both [significations] operate within Rousseau’s texts. But the inflexion varies from moment to moment. Each of the two significations is by turns effaced or becomes discreetly vague in the presence of the other. But their common function is shown in this: whether it adds or substitutes itself, the supplement is exterior . . . alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it. (Of Grammatology, p. 145)

This is not simply a logical tangle which Rousseau gets himself into and from which he could easily extricate himself. Instead, this reveals the way Rousseau is struggling with the central philosophical and political problems which challenged eighteenth-century Europe.

If Derrida shows that the strange economy of the supplement organizes Rousseau’s discourse on politics, sexuality, education, culture, language, law, and nature itself, then we will see how a supplementary logic both shapes and unsettles Burke’s discourse on a similar range of issues. Derrida’s description of the relation between his reading of the supplement in Rousseau and Rousseau’s own insight into the way supplementarity inhabits his texts might equally apply to the reading of Burke developed throughout the present book:

The way in which he determines the concept and, in so doing, lets himself be determined by that very thing that he excludes from it, the direction in which he bends it, here as addition, there as substitute, now as the positivity and exteriority of evil, now as a happy auxiliary, all this conveys neither a passivity nor an activity, neither an unconsciousness nor a lucidity on the part of the author . . . [My reading] is certainly a production, because I do not simply duplicate what Rousseau thought of this relationship. The concept of the supplement is a sort of blind spot in Rousseau’s text, the not-seen that opens and limits visibility. (Of Grammatology, p. 163)

My reading of Burke suggests that the strange effects of the supplement organize his various attempts in the Reflections urgently