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# *Burke's Higher Romanticism: Politics and the Sublime*

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## *Introduction*

Both Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau can be grouped among the key thinkers of the eighteenth century. They are widely understood to be quite different from one another, and their outlooks—especially their political-philosophical views—are often contrasted by scholars. Among those who have profitably contrasted Burke with Rousseau is the early twentieth century literary scholar and social critic Irving Babbitt. Babbitt famously favors the “classic” over the “romantic”; he considers romanticism’s ethical and political implications to be destructive of society. He uses Rousseau as his prime representative of romanticism and of all that is wrong with it, and uses Burke as a foil in criticizing Rousseau. Although Babbitt never explicitly describes Burke’s thought as “classical,” Burke sometimes seems to serve as Babbitt’s primary representative of the “classical” perspective he champions.

What is odd about Babbitt’s treatment of Burke and Rousseau is that Babbitt never points out that Burke is, himself, a romantic. Literary scholars and students of aesthetics have long grouped both Rousseau and Burke among the originators or articulators of the romantic tradition. Although it is Rousseau who is more widely associated with the romantic movement today, Burke’s

*Burke and  
Rousseau both  
romantics.*

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*Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was, for a century, almost ‘required reading’ for writers and artists of a romantic bent, or for anyone with an interest in romanticism, not just in the English-speaking world but on the Continent as well. Burke’s romanticism is rarely discussed by political theorists, and many rank-and-file conservatives who admire Burke’s politics have probably never thought of him as a representative of the romantic movement. Yet, this is an undeniable dimension of Burke’s thought. It is argued here that understanding Burke’s romanticism is an important part of understanding Burke. Understanding Burke’s romanticism also helps one understand the subtle ways in which aesthetics, ethics, and politics interact.

### *Burke, Rousseau, and Romanticism*

In some ways, Burke’s romanticism seems problematic and even paradoxical. Harold Laski maintained that “no man was more deeply hostile to the early politics of the romantic movement . . . than was Burke; yet, on the whole, it is with the romantics that Burke’s fundamental influence remains.”<sup>1</sup> This raises the question: How can Burke, who viewed Rousseau’s legacy and the “early politics of the romantic movement” so negatively, be identified closely with the same movement? Of course, this is only a meaningful question if one believes that strong connections exist between the aesthetic (or artistic) and the political and ethical. This article is premised upon such a belief. But, perhaps the case of Burke and romanticism suggests that such connections do not exist, or, at least, do not exist in this case. Or, one might argue that the political and ethical worldviews of Burke and other romantics like Rousseau are really not as different as is usually supposed, and as Burke’s own remarks suggest. Or, one might argue that Burke is really not a romantic at all. The perspective articulated by this article is that, for Burke (and for other thinkers such as Rousseau), close ties do in fact exist between aesthetic approaches and political-ethical worldviews. Also, it is accepted that Burke and other romantics like Rousseau are in fact quite different politically and ethically, but that the common classification of Burke as a romantic is nevertheless correct.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold J. Laski, *Political Thought in England: Locke to Bentham* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950; first published in 1920), 181.

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Although Babbitt never mentions Burke's associations with romanticism (of which he was surely aware), he does note some similarities between Burke and Rousseau: he finds them both to be, in some way, "individualistic,"<sup>2</sup> and he admits that "the antiintellectual [sic] side of Burke reminds one at times of the antiintellectual side of Rousseau," but maintains that "the resemblance is, however, only superficial."<sup>3</sup> On very rare occasions, Babbitt will specify that when he is criticizing romanticism he is addressing only "a particular type of romanticism" exemplified by Rousseau.<sup>4</sup> Presumably this would open the door to identifying and discussing other forms of romanticism, such as that of Burke, but Babbitt does not do so. Perhaps Babbitt feels compelled to dismiss resemblances between Burke and Rousseau as "superficial," and to avoid any acknowledgment of Burke's romantic side, because, for him, romanticism is inextricably bound up with the ethics and politics of Rousseau, and with Rousseau's mark on modern society.

From an ethical and political perspective, Babbitt finds that "every imaginable extreme, the extreme of reaction as well as the extreme of radicalism, goes with romanticism; every genuine mediation between extremes is just as surely unromantic."<sup>5</sup> Romantics like Rousseau lack a sound ethical center; particularly, they lack a meaningful sense of self-restraint. One reason why Babbitt likes to contrast Burke with Rousseauesque romanticism is that Burke so famously emphasizes restraint and humility. Moral and political restraint and moderation are for Babbitt linked aesthetically to the classical emphasis on "decorum." Indeed, at the most basic level, Babbitt finds that "a thing is classical" when it is "representative of a class," while, "a thing is romantic when it is strange, unexpected, intense, superlative, extreme, unique, etc."<sup>6</sup> He sets up a contrast between wonder—which he associates with romanticism—and awe—which he associates with more classical thought. To Babbitt, wonder is a fascination with strangeness and

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<sup>2</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1979; first published in 1924), 125.

<sup>3</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991; first published in 1919), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 79.

<sup>6</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 4.

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variety, while one experiences awe when he “attends to the unity which underlies the manifoldness and that likewise transcends him.”<sup>7</sup> In distinguishing between the thought of Rousseau and that of Burke, Babbitt finds that “Rousseau is plainly an apostle of wonder” while Burke’s focus is on preserving awe.<sup>8</sup>

In rejecting decorum and restraint, Rousseau’s romanticism leads to a rejection of existing political and social orders. Indeed, Rousseau finds civilized society (at least, as we know it) to be corrupting; it interferes with man’s natural goodness. Likewise, as Burke scholar Peter Stanlis has argued, Rousseau “distrusted discursive reason and logic and the methods of science, and placed his faith in his emotions, intuition, and imagination as higher instruments for knowing truth.”<sup>9</sup> One effect of the romantic emphasis on emotion and rejection of decorum and restraint is the loss of a meaningful concept of virtue. One commentator on Rousseau, Arthur M. Melzer, maintains that “Rousseau is so far from subscribing to the reality or moral necessity of virtue that he repeatedly proclaims himself ‘the best of men’ even while denying that he is virtuous.”<sup>10</sup> As Babbitt points out, to the romantic, morality becomes defined as strong emotion, such as sympathy; in the process of this redefinition, meaningful standards for action are lost. He describes how Rousseau abandons his own children but lavishes pity on a dying pig.<sup>11</sup> Politically, this sort of irresponsible emotionalism translates in part into universal benevolence for mankind, accompanied by an absence of truly moral action for real people.

If this is romanticism, how then can Burke, who certainly emphasized such qualities as restraint, humility, responsibility, consistency, and decorum, be a romantic? An examination of Burke’s romanticism and its relationship to his broader worldview will follow.

*Rousseau’s  
romanticism  
rejects  
decorum and  
restraint.*

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<sup>7</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy*, 131.

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Stanlis, “Burke, Rousseau, and the French Revolution,” in Stephen J. Tonsor, ed., *Reflections on the French Revolution: A Hillsdale Symposium* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 64.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau’s Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 259.

<sup>11</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau*, 143.

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### Burke's Aesthetics

Famous  
passage on  
Marie  
Antoinette  
reflects  
Burke's  
romanticism.

For most readers of Burke today, exposure to his romanticism comes not by reading his writings on aesthetics or the arts, but by experiencing it directly through his use of romantic imagery. Perhaps the best-known exemplification of Burke's romantic side is a famous (or perhaps infamous) passage in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles, and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in—glittering like the morning star, full of life and splendor and joy. Oh! what a revolution! and what a heart must I have to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I dream when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom; little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.<sup>12</sup>

This passage, full of emotion, dripping with nostalgia for an idealized past which some might say never really existed, and seeming to elevate the dauphiness beyond the level of any mere mortal, was the subject of much derision. Indeed, one may get a sense here of the sort of emotional superficiality often associated with romanticism. Is Burke, then, no different from Rousseau, except for the particular subjects he chooses to idealize and to demonize? Exploring this question requires a deeper investigation into Burke's aesthetic thought.

Burke's aesthetic thought is laid out most explicitly in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the first edition of which was published in 1757. In the *Enquiry*, Burke shows great concern for the affective dimension of the beautiful and the sublime. He sets up a sharp contrast, perhaps too sharp a contrast, between an experience of the beautiful and an experience of the sublime, relating those experiences to human

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<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 66.

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passions. In the case of beauty, Burke explains that it is that quality in bodies “by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it.”<sup>13</sup> Accompanying this emphasis on “passion” is an emphatic insistence that beauty is not “at all an idea belonging to proportion.”<sup>14</sup> This rejection of proportion, along with similar rejections of “fitness” and “perfection,” represents a clear repudiation of the standard classical conception, or neoclassical conception, of beauty. Burke had been steeped in classical writings, including those on aesthetics and including those of Aristotle; he was very respectful of those writings, and this break is not something he would have made lightly. In the case of proportion, Burke explains that the problem is that “proportion relates almost wholly to convenience, as every idea of order seems to do; and it must therefore be considered as a creature of the understanding, rather than a primary cause acting on the senses and imagination.”<sup>15</sup> Aesthetic experience has an immediacy to which Burke is very sensitive. Here Burke anticipates modern aesthetics.<sup>16</sup> Proportion is associated by him with “the measure of relative quantity,”<sup>17</sup> which is a matter for our reason, and we need not bring our reason to bear when deciding whether an object is beautiful. Instead, “the senses and imagination” are directly engaged without the intervention of reason. Leo Strauss maintains that the “most important thesis” of the *Sublime and Beautiful* is this refusal “to understand visible or sensible beauty in the light of intellectual beauty.”<sup>18</sup>

Here, as in many other places, it would seem that Burke “dis-trusted discursive reason and logic and the methods of science, and placed his faith in his emotions, intuition, and imagination as higher instruments for knowing truth,” exactly as Stanlis says of Rousseau. For Francis Canavan, another of the major twentieth-

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<sup>13</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Paul Langford, general editor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989-2000), vol I, 255.

<sup>14</sup> *Writings*, I, 255.

<sup>15</sup> *Writings*, I, 255-56.

<sup>16</sup> Benedetto Croce, for example, associates art with intuition and rejects measurements and other such “physical facts” as constructions of the intellect for utilitarian, not artistic, purposes. See Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics (Brevario di estetica*, 1913), trans. and intro. by Patrick Romanell (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Writings*, I, 256.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1971; first published in 1953), 312.

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century writers on Burke, Burke's rejection of the classical concept of proportion as the key criterion of beauty is tantamount to an exclusion of order from his aesthetic theory. Therefore, in Canavan's view, Burke's aesthetic theory cannot be tied to his political thought. This is the case because Burke's political-philosophical perspective, Canavan argues, fits rather neatly into the natural law tradition. In its most common form this tradition tends to emphasize God's reason, the resulting order in the world, and the ability of humans to know that order through the exercise of their own reason. Because Burke rejects any emphasis on order and reason in the appreciation of beauty, Canavan concludes that "it is doubtful that Burke's epistemology, as it appears in his early writings, was compatible with the metaphysic implied in his moral and political theory." Unlike his aesthetics, "Burke's presuppositions about the nature of the universe and the moral law were intellectualist in quality, because he took for granted a metaphysical order intelligible to the human mind."<sup>19</sup>

*For Burke, beauty affects us immediately, without intervention of reason.*

One may argue that, despite Fr. Canavan's analysis, Burke's romantic approach to the concept of beauty is in fact highly compatible with his approach to politics. First, Burke argues that our experience gives us empirical evidence that proportion does not work as a formula for beauty, at least not in a particularly useful way. He points out that we may, for example, attempt to determine through exhaustive measurement the many different proportions which make a horse beautiful, but these will not be the proportions that make a dog beautiful. Burke's basic observation here of the inadequacy of an abstract theoretical formulation in the face of the complexity of reality may be compared to his later rejection of an emphasis on simplistic "metaphysical" formulas or maxims as a means to addressing subtle and complex political and moral issues. Second, Burke's rejection of proportion is based on his view, already mentioned, that the assessment of proportion has an intellectual quality, while beauty has an immediacy which affects us directly, without the intervention of our reason. Burke's downplaying of the role of "reason" or "understanding" in aesthetics may be compared to his famous disparagement of "reason" in politics. Strauss picks up on this connection. He finds that

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<sup>19</sup> Francis P. Canavan., *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1960), 40.

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Burke's treatment of beauty represents "a certain emancipation of sentiment and instinct from reason, or a certain depreciation of reason. It is this novel attitude toward reason which accounts for the nonclassical overtones in Burke's remarks on the difference between theory and practice" and for his opposition to "rationalism."<sup>20</sup>

Strauss is certainly correct about the presence of "nonclassical overtones" in Burke, if one understands "nonclassical" to mean romantic. If Strauss is also correct about Burke's aesthetics emphasizing "instinct," then it would appear that Burke's romanticism does in fact point toward Rousseauesque moral and political thought. "Instinct" and "sentiment" are different things, however, and should not be lumped together so casually. Burke's true emphasis, on sentiment, does not amount to the celebration of some sort of wholly innate, "natural" feelings which exist independently of learning or of civilized society, or which are categorically different from "reason," if this term is understood broadly as representing informed judgment. This becomes evident when examining Burke's treatment of the subject of taste. Two years after the first publication of the *Enquiry*, Burke published a revised edition which incorporated an "Essay on Taste" as a preface to the work. In the new preface Burke observes that "there is rather less difference upon matters of Taste among mankind, than upon most of those which depend upon the naked reason."<sup>21</sup> Burke does not attribute similarity of taste, however, to the fact that taste is a more "instinctive" or "natural" faculty than reason. In fact, the primary thrust of Burke's essay on taste is an explicit rejection of the view that taste is a "species of instinct by which we are struck naturally" or that it is "a separate faculty of the mind, as distinct from the judgment and imagination."<sup>22</sup>

*Burke's  
aesthetics  
based on  
judgment,  
not instinct.*

Burke's characterization of taste as essentially a matter of judgment and imagination is very important. Taste is a preference for one thing or another based largely upon whether that thing pleases us aesthetically. This preference is primarily not intellectual in nature. In most (but perhaps not all) cases, it is essentially an immediate response, uncolored by much conscious consideration. Yet Burke explains that differences in taste generally "pro-

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<sup>20</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right*, 312-13.

<sup>21</sup> *Writings*, I, 207.

<sup>22</sup> *Writings*, I, 208.



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ceed from differences in knowledge." Taste involves a form of knowledge that is held and employed without the use of conscious reasoning. For him "the cause of a wrong Taste is a defect of judgment. And this may arise from a natural weakness of understanding . . . or, which is much more commonly the case, it may arise from a want of a proper and well-directed exercise, which alone can make it strong and ready."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, although Burke's discussion of beauty and of the sublime is to a great degree devoted to the rejection of an "intellectualist" approach to aesthetic response, he devotes his preface on taste to what might appear to be a contradictory project, the connection of aesthetic response to judgment and to knowledge.

For Burke, aesthetic response is primarily non-rational in nature but is nevertheless something which we can cultivate and develop. We learn to like, to appreciate, to respond positively on an aesthetic level to some things, and to respond negatively to others. He maintains:

It is known that the Taste (whatever it is) is improved exactly as we improve our judgment, by extending our knowledge, by a steady attention to our object, and by frequent exercise. They who have not taken these methods, if their Taste decides quickly, it is always uncertainly; and their quickness is owing to their presumption and rashness, and not to any sudden irradiation that in a moment dispels all darkness from their minds. But they who have cultivated that species of knowledge which makes the object of Taste, by degrees and habitually attain not only a soundness, but a readiness of judgment, as men do by the same methods on all other occasions.<sup>24</sup>

For Burke taste is virtually indistinguishable in operation from other forms of judgment. If one's taste has not been properly developed, a sudden or unreflective decision of taste will simply be a rash and uncertain one. For those who have developed their taste properly, however, good decisions come readily. Burke indicates that taste is to a great degree the product of experience, and of knowledge derived from experience and study; that is, it is largely based upon our social, historical existence in human civilization. It is not a form of instinct which will provide the benefit of any "sudden irradiation" without careful cultivation. This discussion of taste brings to mind Burke's later treatment of political and

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<sup>23</sup> *Writings*, I, 202, 207.

<sup>24</sup> *Writings*, I, 209.

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moral judgment. In particular, it bears some similarity to his defense of “prejudice” decades later, in which he finds that prejudice “does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved.”<sup>25</sup> The cultivation of what Burke calls “just prejudice,” and its role in good moral and political judgment, would seem to parallel closely the cultivation of good taste, and the role of this cultivation in aesthetic judgment.

Burke’s views on taste, and his extension of these views into the political/ethical sphere, certainly seem to place him within the romantic tradition. Like Rousseau, Burke has an anti-intellectual side, and sees value in “sentiment” and in immediate, intuitive responses. For Rousseau, of course, this perspective supports an approach to politics that places the greatest value in the immediate expression of the will of the masses. Representation and excessive deliberation are seen as enemies to the pure expression of this will. In Burke’s case, his idea that sound intuitive judgments are not simply innate, but must be, at least in part, the products of careful cultivation, yields a different view of politics. For him, some people will have more sound intuitions or sentiments than others; the simple, unreflective sentiments of the masses are not the last word in politics. Instead, Burke’s perspective could be seen to justify roles for elites, for representative government, and for deliberative processes which help people to sort through their sentiments and intuitions and to improve their judgment. And, by emphasizing the need to cultivate sound intuition and to develop sound “prejudices,” the need to conserve and foster civilized society and its many elements is also emphasized. In Rousseau’s case, radical political and social reforms are the way to eliminate the corrupting influences of society and bring forth more pure expressions of people’s naturally sound sentiments. For Burke, radical political or social reforms pose the risk of undermining the soundness of citizens’ sentiments. While Rousseau’s thought seemed to inspire, paradoxically, both highly “rationalistic” political schemes and a heavy reliance on the unreflective popular will, Burke’s aesthetics points to a rejection of both.

*Burke and Rousseau’s anti-intellectual sides point in opposite directions.*

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<sup>25</sup> *Reflections*, 78.

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### *Burke's Politics of the Sublime*

Burke identifies beauty with love, the sublime with terror.

The sublime is actually the first subject addressed in Burke's *Enquiry*, and it seems to be the subject with which he is most fascinated. It is Burke's treatment of the sublime which most clearly demonstrates his central place in the emerging romantic aesthetics of the period. Key to Burke's approach to the sublime is his identification of terror as its "ruling principle." This is contrasted with beauty's core passion, love. For Burke the terrible "is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling." He explains that danger and pain, "at certain distances, and with certain modifications . . . are delightful."<sup>26</sup> Consequently, he finds that, for example, large, ferocious animals, powerful people, and other things that strike fear in us can be sublime. This argument generated some ridicule when the *Enquiry* was published, but when Burke issued the second edition he did not take advantage of the opportunity to modify or qualify it. Instead, he beefed it up, and in fact made a point of defiantly reiterating his commitment to all the controversial positions he had taken throughout the work.

Burke essentially treats the sublime and the beautiful as opposites; an experience of the sublime is for him dramatically different from one of the beautiful. The sublime evokes particularly powerful and unique emotional responses, which are a key to its appeal:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect.<sup>27</sup>

In extreme cases, at least, one's reasoning is suspended when one is under the influence of the sublime; one is powerfully compelled on a sub-rational or super-rational level.

An important part of Burke's treatment of the sublime is his

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<sup>26</sup> *Writings*, I, 230, 216, 217.

<sup>27</sup> *Writings*, I, 230.

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extended discussion of “obscurity.” Burke maintains that to make a thing “terrible” in a way which is sublime, “obscurity seems in general to be necessary.”<sup>28</sup> This obscurity may take different forms, such as darkness, blinding brightness, or poetic language. In part, obscurity helps to make things sublime because of our fear of the unknown. However, it is hard to see terror or danger at play in all of the examples Burke discusses. In fact, Burke suggests that “obscurity” contributes to almost any sort of emotional response. He finds that “in reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever.”<sup>29</sup> It is in part because of its “obscurity” that Burke attributes great power to poetry, which is in his view usually more effective than simple prose or a clear visual image in evoking an emotional response. In true romantic fashion, he believes that dark temples, dark woods, and the like have a stronger effect on us than well-lit places and images.

The argument that Burke offers for the power of obscurity is at first blush rather surprising. He states that “there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than the clear. It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions.”<sup>30</sup> Burke’s pairing of “ignorance” with “admiration” may seem a bit odd, but he is getting at the fact that we admire that which is, in some way, above or beyond us. To admire something is to look up to it, and it is difficult to look up to something that we fully understand, since if we fully understand something it is presumably on our level, at least in some sense. Burke’s interest in “obscurity” is therefore closely tied to his less surprising identification of “vastness” and “infinity,” or suggestions of infinity, as important sources of the sublime. A kind of humbling is associated with a sublime experience, which gives us a new perspective on ourselves. It may also be argued that what infinity and the sublime in general give us is a sense of a greater order in which humanity participates. This order, being greater than humanity, is an order that humanity can only partly understand. Burke’s sublime can therefore be tied to an experience of mystery.

*Sublime experience gives us a sense of a greater order in which man participates.*

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<sup>28</sup> *Writings*, I, 231.

<sup>29</sup> *Writings*, I, 232-3.

<sup>30</sup> *Writings*, I, 233.

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*Awe  
versus  
wonder.*

In discussing the role of obscurity in the sublime, Burke defends his position with this argument: "But let it be considered that hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing."<sup>31</sup> Obscurity, then, is sublime in part because it suggests the infinite. As an example Burke cites an "amazingly sublime" passage in the book of Job, recounting a terrifying night vision in which an undiscernible form appears and a voice is heard saying, "Shall mortal man be more just than God?"<sup>32</sup> No clear painting of this or any other vision, Burke argues, could approach the sublimity of the poetic text. Significantly, this example pulls together many of the different elements of the sublime that Burke discusses. One element is "obscurity" in the form of the text, the darkness, and the vision itself. Another is the experience of terror arising in part from this obscurity. Finally, there is the humbling sense of the awesome power and ultimate unfathomability of God, and of man's inadequacy in the face of it. Although this strong emphasis on the sublime is certainly romantic, if one applies Babbitt's framework it is evident that the effect in Burke's case is to promote a 'classical' sense of awe, rather than a 'Rousseuistic' sense of wonder.

Burke ends the preceding passage on obscurity and infinity with the striking conclusion that "a clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea."<sup>33</sup> This remark may be taken in part as a case of youthful hyperbole; Burke's own political writings and speeches certainly contain many "clear ideas," and many of these ideas are by no means little. And, while his works are known for their rhetorical strength and poetic elements, he does not hesitate to muster impressive arrays of precise facts and figures where appropriate. He never seems to be out to confuse his listeners or readers, but to convey ideas to them as clearly as possible. But, Burke's observation is an important one. In part, it can be seen as a foreshadowing of his later adamant rejection of attempts to address complex moral and political questions with simple formu-

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<sup>31</sup> *Writings*, I, 235.

<sup>32</sup> *Writings*, I, 235. Quote is Job 4:17.

<sup>33</sup> *Writings*, I, 235.

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las. For Burke, such maxims barely scratch the surface of reality. If we think we can solve great problems with simple formulas, this means that we do not know enough even to realize how much we do not know. Ultimately, life is shrouded in mystery, and ideas about important questions must necessarily be complex and somewhat fuzzy, and will be difficult to formulate or express clearly. Our response to mystery need not, and should not, be a sense of futility, but must include a profound humility. Burke expresses some of this humility quite explicitly in the *Enquiry*. When he discusses the cause of the sublime and beautiful, he is careful to specify that he is enquiring into the efficient cause only, since “that great chain of causes, which linking one to another even to the throne of God himself, can never be unraveled by any industry of ours. When we go but one step beyond the immediately sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth.”<sup>34</sup> While this statement may have been influenced by Humean skepticism or Lockean empiricism, in Burke it conveys neither skepticism as it is found in Hume nor empiricism as it is found in Locke, but a strong sense of mystery.

*Life ultimately shrouded in mystery.*

The “humble” perspective on the world which Burke associates with the sublime is highlighted and given additional depth by his discussion of how and why power can be sublime. He uses the example of a horse, an animal with many useful qualities which Burke briefly identifies. To illustrate how such an animal may be sublime Burke turns again to the book of Job, this time to God’s first speech recounting the greatness and mystery of His creation. The poetic portrayal there of the horse, “who swalloweth the ground in fierceness and rage,”<sup>35</sup> is in Burke’s view highly sublime, and stands in sharp contrast to a portrayal of the useful aspects of a horse, which is not sublime at all. Burke explains that “whenever strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime; for nothing can act agreeably to us, that does not act in conformity to our will; but to act agreeably to our will, it must be subject to us; and therefore can never be the cause of a grand and commanding conception.”<sup>36</sup> That which acts simply in conformity to our will, or that which is

*The simply useful cannot be sublime.*

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<sup>34</sup> *Writings*, I, 238.

<sup>35</sup> *Writings*, I, 237. Quote is Job 39:24.

<sup>36</sup> *Writings*, I, 237.

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simply useful, cannot be sublime. This observation brings to mind Heidegger's concept of *Zuhandenheit*, the quality of things fitting our existence well (or, perhaps, too well). These are things which are useful, and which, to the extent that they are given much thought at all, are thought of in terms of their usefulness. The problem with *Zuhandenheit* for Heidegger is that experiences which occur in this context, fully in conformity to one's will, do not raise the central problem of Being. As such they contribute to an inauthentic existence, which is characterized by an insignificance of everything, in contrast with an authentic existence, which is characterized by "wonder" (perhaps really something more like Babbitt's "awe") and by appreciation of everything.<sup>37</sup> "Wonder" and appreciation are therefore linked to a sense not only of the limitations of human understanding, but of limitations to human will.

*A sense of human limitation integral to political morality.*

For Heidegger a key characteristic of the modern world is that "man sets up the world toward himself, and delivers Nature over to himself." Burke's contrast between the sublime horse of God's creation and the non-sublime, useful horse of our everyday thought likewise can be seen as reflecting concern on Burke's part regarding the modern mentality and the dangers that can result from that mentality. Heidegger describes modern man as "the one who wills." In this modern context there is a great loss; a sort of closure occurs, and everything "turns irresistibly into material for self-assertive production. The earth and its atmosphere become raw material. Man becomes human material, which is disposed of with a view to proposed goals." This sort of willing, and this sort of relationship to the world, emerges in part in an excessive emphasis on science and in the emergence of the "total state."<sup>38</sup> Burke's interest in the sublime and his contrast of the sublime with the useful can, therefore, be seen to have a similar connection to his later visceral reaction to the monster "metaphysicians" who would treat human beings as "mice in an air-pump," as well as his strong aversion to "caprice" or uncontrolled willfulness in various forms. For Burke a particular response to the world, characterized by awe, openness, and a sense of humility, and seen aes-

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<sup>37</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962).

<sup>38</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What Are Poets For?*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 110, 111, 112.

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thetically in the experience of the sublime, is a necessary element of political morality.

One commentator who draws a particularly strong connection between Burke's aesthetic interest in the sublime and his political thought is Stephen K. White. White argues that what most animated Burke's rejection of the French Revolution, and his response to "political modernity" in general, was a concern regarding the emergence of a "false sublime." In the true, or classical, sublime, one experiences human limitedness in the face of the limitless. In contrast, in the false sublime, "human beings themselves now *produce* a sort of *human infinite* that displaces what had before stood for the infinite, or God, or fate."<sup>39</sup> Common examples of such a humanized sublime identified by White include romantic genius and the shocking work of an avant-garde artist. To demonstrate Burke's awareness of this phenomenon, White points out that Burke expresses some of his greatest horror and detestation not for the violent acts of the French revolutionaries but for the revolutionary festivals and vast spectacles they put on for the public.<sup>40</sup> This "false sublime," which "annihilates the confrontation with finitude,"<sup>41</sup> produces the opposite effect of the authentic sublime. While traditionally an experience of the sublime encourages humility, a sense of the new humanized sublime gives free rein to "the familiar vice of 'vanity'" by opening it to the "unlimited horizons of rational imagination." Traditional constraints are thrown off, and the human will is empowered "to embrace limitlessness itself."<sup>42</sup> Because people, individually or collectively, now embody the infinite, they see no limits, either moral or practical, on their ability to remake the world and each other.

White's "false sublime" can be seen as an aesthetic manifestation of the phenomenon that Eric Voegelin labeled "Gnosticism." Gnosticism involves a "divinization" of the state or of society and is for Voegelin a key characteristic of modernity. Eschatological expectations are transferred from the divine realm to the temporal realm, and political activity is undertaken with the aim of self-salvation. Put simply, "the Gnostic revolution has for its purpose a

*The "false sublime" destroys traditional restraints.*

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen K. White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 75 (emphasis in original).

<sup>40</sup> White, *Modernity*, 74-75.

<sup>41</sup> White, *Modernity*, 32.

<sup>42</sup> White, *Modernity*, 75.



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change in the nature of man and the establishment of a transfigured society.”<sup>43</sup> Burke’s monster metaphysicians who “are ready to declare that they do not think two thousand years too long a period for the good that they pursue” exemplify Voegelin’s Gnosticism. Because humans essentially stand in the place of God, their wills become unbounded. Burke’s observation that French revolutionary morality “has no idea in it of restraint” reflects his understanding of this phenomenon.<sup>44</sup> In the process of the divinization of human society there is an undermining of traditional Christianity and of traditional religious experience in general; we become closed off from this dimension of our existence. This is not surprising if one considers the incompatibility of an unbounded “divinized” human will and the humbled will of one who has a sense of human limitation in the face of divine mystery.

In this context it makes sense that White finds that, for Burke, the false sublime “rapidly depletes the natural sensibility for the authentic sublime.”<sup>45</sup> White recounts Burke’s mention of the fact that the space under the scaffold in Paris was hired out to a troupe of dancing dogs to entertain the crowds between executions.<sup>46</sup> The executions are horrible, but more horrible still is the loss of any sense of the gravity of the taking of a life, which is a consequence of the loss of any sense of the sanctity of human life and of the dignity of the human person. What may seem to be simply an aesthetic issue, a matter of bad taste, has a deep moral significance. A loss of a sense of the true sublime is linked to a loss of moral bearings in general, since it is a loss of the sense of anything more meaningful or important than a capricious human will.

A practical political application of Burke’s sense of the sublime can be seen in his famous aversion to “rights-talk” in its more extreme forms. Burke recognizes that discussions about rights are really discussions about people, or about human nature, however that term is conceived. For him, a simplistic, doctrinaire emphasis on rights not only fails to penetrate far into the mysteries of human nature, it makes the mystery go away. Human nature, or the

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<sup>43</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987; first published in 1952), 152.

<sup>44</sup> *Correspondence*, VI, 210, cited in White, *Modernity*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> White, *Modernity*, 70.

<sup>46</sup> White, *Modernity*, 70. Reference is to Burke’s *Letter I to a Member of Parliament on the Proposals for Peace with the Regicide Directory of France*, in *Works*, V, 316.

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human person in the fullest sense, is certainly something which Burke ultimately linked “to the throne of God himself” and was regarded by him as a proper subject for awe, inspiring reverence and humility. It is, in a sense, sublime. Declarations of rights threaten that sublimity, in part by stripping away “obscurity.” An over-emphasis on “clear” ideas of rights creates the sense that we know all about human nature. The effect is to diminish, rather than enhance, the individual’s standing and worth. In effect, human beings cease to be regarded as sacred.

Moreover, Burke points out that no sooner are supposedly absolute and inviolable declarations of rights made than they are compromised or modified or somehow made contingent. He remarks sarcastically in the *Reflections* on the fact that voting rights in France have been made conditional upon the payment of certain fees: “What! a qualification on the indefeasible rights of men?”<sup>47</sup> Five years later, upon hearing reports that the French regime is moderating because it has rejected portions of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, Burke responds that, “if possible, this their recantation of the chief parts in the canon of the Rights of Man is more infamous and causes greater horror than their originally promulgating and forcing down the throats of mankind that symbol of all evil.”<sup>48</sup> If the *Declaration* is a “symbol of all evil,” why is its renunciation even worse than its promulgation? Because this renunciation undermines the entire concept of rights. This is also why Burke treats as so important the “minor qualification” which was attached to political rights. Even though the qualification is minor, it amounts to the “utter subversion” of the Jacobin’s principles: “You order him [a citizen] to buy a right which you before told him nature had given to him gratuitously at his birth, and of which no authority on earth could lawfully deprive him.”<sup>49</sup>

In the making of universal declarations of rights, these rights, and the human beings to whom they adhere, are shifted from a mysterious, sublime realm to the more prosaic domain of human reason and understanding. The subsequent recantation or qualification of those rights completes the process, by shifting rights and

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<sup>47</sup> *Reflections*, 153.

<sup>48</sup> *Fourth Letter on the Proposals for Peace with the Regicide Directory of France*, in *Works*, VI, 87.

<sup>49</sup> *Reflections*, 153.

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humanity into the domain of a capricious will. This is essentially Heidegger's modern problem of *Zuhandenheit*.<sup>50</sup> Burke finds that natural rights "are indeed sacred things," and he fears the loss of this sacred quality. He remarks of the "metaphysicians" that "finding their scheme of politics not adapted to the state of the world in which they live, they often come to think lightly of all public principle."<sup>51</sup> Rights are for Burke a dangerous concept, because if this concept is undermined and rights come to be seen as subject to the will, they become arbitrary. This is to say that they cease to exist. Rights truly exist only when they are sacred, or, one could say, sublime.

*Connection to  
the sublime  
gives life a  
sacred quality.*

Burke is comfortable with rights talk, and uses it himself, when it is applied in a manner that is unlikely to jeopardize the sublime quality of the human person. This is one reason why he is generally most comfortable with rights that have become established through long practice. Such rights have acquired relatively precise meanings which are broadly accepted, which have proved workable in practice, and which therefore are unlikely to be suddenly circumscribed. They have become at least somewhat internalized; that is, they are firmly established in the moral imaginations of the public. They are a part of the landscape, a part of one's inheritance from one's forefathers, and therefore are not seen as something which people "just made up" and can change at will. They have that implied connection to the infinite which gives them a sublime and sacred quality. At the same time, because of their close connection to a particular network of social and legal practices, such rights have a certain conventional quality. It may seem contradictory to claim that some rights are simultaneously seen as sacred and conventional, but a sense of a mysterious connection between what is particular and conventional and what is universal and sacred is an important component of Burke's thought. A common awareness of the partly conventional nature of rights actually helps to protect the sacred quality of the human person. If rights are seen as partly conventional and culture-specific, their specific meanings, that is, the specific interpretations of particular rights, can be subjected to minor modifications over time, without

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<sup>50</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962).

<sup>51</sup> *Reflections*, 55.

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those rights, and the human nature which they address, losing their sublime quality.

Not only Burke's approach to rights, but his general conservatism can be seen as intimately tied to his romantic emphasis on the sublime. Just as rights must possess a sublime quality in order to be respected and upheld, so must the political and social order as a whole. Consequently, political change must be approached with caution, and brought about incrementally. This is not because the old ways are always 'better,' but because the old ways are the old ways. They stretch back into the mists of time, either into obscurity/infinity, or to some mythologized heroic events, times, or people. Either way, the status quo can be seen to possess a sublime quality. Because the existing order, and all that goes with it, is not seen as simply the result of arbitrary human will-action, people conform their lives and their internal checks to it. Changes that strip existing norms of their sublime quality may result in the kind of social collapse and free-for-all that characterized the French Revolution and its Reign of Terror.

### *Conclusion*

Resemblances between the thought of Burke and that of romantics like Rousseau are more than "superficial." It is with good reason that Burke is identified as a romantic; significant parallels exist between his thought and other forms of romanticism, not just in aesthetics in the narrowest sense, but in dimensions of epistemological/cognitive thought and, to a very limited degree, even in some aspects of ethical thought. Subtle differences in outlooks, however, ultimately yield almost polar differences in the ethics and politics of different forms of romanticism. While Burke's aesthetic and epistemological outlook clearly has strong romantic dimensions, emphasizing sentiment, intuition, imagination, and the non-rational experience of the sublime, it does not point toward the expansive, undisciplined willfulness, sentimentalism, and primitivism that are commonly associated with some forms of romanticism. Instead, it points in the opposite direction: toward humility, toward reverence, toward a sense of order and of moral values, and toward an emphasis on the development of sound judgment in the context of civilized life.

The "paradox" of Burkean romanticism suggests that connections between aesthetics and politics are highly complex. In this

*Different forms of romanticism yield polar differences in ethics and politics.*

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*Rousseau's  
romanticism  
emphasizes  
wonder;  
Burke's  
emphasizes  
awe.*

particular case, it suggests that those, including Irving Babbitt perhaps, who paint romanticism in a one-sided manner or with a broad brush as promoting undesirable forms of ethics and politics are making a mistake. Those who prefer a Burkean worldview, and Burkean politics, need not shy away from romanticism in every sense; romantic works can support the ethics and politics of a Burke just as much as those of a Rousseau. In Babbitt's terminology, they can support "awe" just as much as "wonder." Everything depends on which *type* of romanticism is involved. This ability of romanticism to go in such different directions, however, points to a real danger regarding the influence of art forms on society: the ultimate effect of a particular work could perhaps turn out to be very different from what was intended. All the more reason to develop a nuanced understanding of relationships between the aesthetic and the political in philosophic thought and in life.