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NO THRUST, NO SWELL, NO SUBJECT?
A Critical Response to Stephen K. White

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STEPHEN WHITE'S "Burke on Politics, Aesthetics, and the Dangers of Modernity" (*Political Theory* 21 [1993]: 507-27) offers a valuable corrective to the political theory literature on Edmund Burke. Arguing that Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1759) shaped his later political views, Professor White shows that "some of the most basic categories animating Burke's thinking are aesthetic, or better, aesthetic affective" (p. 522). More specifically, White reads the *Enquiry* as foregrounding Burke's well-known plea for restraint, moderation, and humility in human affairs, a plea that took the shape of an obsession in Burke's twin crusades against Jacobinism in France and Warren Hastings in India.

White rightly suggests that we can better understand this obsession by attending to the young Burke's supposedly naturalized conception of the "aesthetic-affective dynamic underlying both individual and social life" (p. 512). This dynamic was modified over the course of Burke's political career, White observes, but its original formulation can be traced to Burke's early reflections on the very different effects that sublime and beautiful objects produce in the human subject, as well as in a corresponding "natural alignment of binary distinctions: sublime/beautiful, male/female, public/private" (p. 512). White thus notes but does not interrogate that "remarkable contrast" (in the words of the *Enquiry*) of the beautiful and the sublime (and, by extension, its gendered analogues).¹

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White never asks what is at stake for Burke in mapping and maintaining the “eternal distinction” between the (feminine) beautiful and the (masculine) sublime. White’s failure to pose the question leads, first, to a reinscription of this gendered opposition; second, to a misconstrual of the political meaning of its collapse in the French Revolution; and, finally, to an implicit reassertion of Burke’s horror at what I call a feminine sublime (political women in the Burkean shape of “the furies of hell”) as the shift from an “authentic [masculine] sublime,” which produces a respect for human limits, and a “false [masculine] sublime, a sublime that annihilates the confrontation with finitude” (p. 512). The result is a problematic reading of the Burkean subject that elides the question of sexual difference and ends in a troubling, if tentative, call to revive the Burkean sublime as an enduring reminder of human limits.

White’s reading of the *Enquiry* focuses almost exclusively on the sublime, noting but failing to interrogate the beautiful. This focus is not wholly unjustified. Burke himself is clearly fascinated with the former and almost disdainful of the latter. The (masculine) sublime is associated with the truly momentous aspects of human existence, the (feminine) beautiful with those of less dignity and concern. And yet, as several feminist and literary critics have shown, it turns out that dominant terms—especially those coded as masculine—require and depend on the very subordinant terms—especially those coded as feminine—that they appear, at first glance, to hold at a distance. Far from being natural, the Burkean “remarkable contrast” of the (feminine) beautiful and the (masculine) sublime is a fragile, unstable, and fundamentally artificial distinction that both grounds and unsettles the Burkean “aesthetic-affective dynamic.” Burke’s heroic effort to naturalize and keep distinct the (feminine) beautiful and the (masculine) sublime is at the heart of his semiotics of gender, a semiotics whose instability animates his political conservatism.²

White begins his discussion of the sublime with an analysis of *Peri Hupsous* by Longinus. In White’s reading, the Longinian sublime (which is figured as a matter of rhetoric) has a double meaning. “On the one hand, sublimity is tied to the ‘thrust of human theorizing and perceptiveness,’ the passion to go ‘beyond the limits’ of the ordinary either in poetic expression or political action. On the other hand, this passion for *limitlessness* remains in tension with human *limitedness*, the parameters of which form when we ‘gaze up openly at the cosmos’ and when we reflect on the ‘hard destiny’ or fate that awaits human projects” (p. 510). Although Burke too casts the sublime as “a confrontation with human limitedness or finitude,” adds White, he departs from Longinus by saying “almost nothing . . . [which relates] the sublime to the limitless ‘thrusting’ of human will and intelligence” (p. 511).

Even the subject's fantasized encounter with death—which characterizes the Burkean sublime in its highest degree and produces what Burke calls “delight”—is, according to White, “a vivification of our finitude” (p. 511).

White builds his case by citing a passage from the *Enquiry* that describes Burke's “mood during a severe flood in Dublin” and arguing that the passage serves “as a model for his notion of the sublime,” namely, its function in securing human limits, just as it evinces “that peculiarly ambivalent quality—fear mixed with a peculiar pleasure [i.e., delight].”

It gives me pleasure to see nature in those great tho' terrible Scenes, it fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the Soul in upon herself. This . . . forced some reflections on me . . . I considered how little man is yet in his own mind so great! (p. 511)

How should we read the Burkean subject's dual experience of finitude (“how little man is”) and limitlessness (“yet in his own mind so great!”)? Because White emphasizes the overriding importance of limits in Burke's aesthetic and political thought, he cannot account, finally, for the most intriguing feature of the sublime experience: namely, the transformation of the subject's respect for limits into the desire to transgress them. The sublime excites, first, a sense of awe, humility, and respect for all that is more powerful than the apprehending subject (e.g., Nature, God, or a great poet) and, then, a limitless sense of that same subject's own powers. How is this possible?

By means of an identification with the source of the sublime itself. The “thrusting” action that White attributes to the “false sublime” he finds in *Peri Hupsous* also has its place in the *Enquiry*. Burke himself tells us that “whatever . . . tends to raise a man in his own opinion, produces a sort of *swelling* and triumph that is extremely grateful to the human mind; and this *swelling* is never more perceived, nor operates with more force, than when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects, *the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates.*”³ Burke credits none other than Longinus with this fundamental insight.

Thomas Weiskel suggests that the eighteenth-century revival of the Longinian sublime effects a relocation and amplification of subjectivity. For Weiskel, this shift is a response to Lockean sensationism, which undermined the autonomy of the mind. For in the Lockean model (appropriated by Burke), writes Weiskel, “the mind is not its own place, but the space in which semiotic sublimations occur. It cannot control the making of meaning.” The sublime, in short, is a response to the crisis of the autonomous subject, to “the anxiety of nothingness, or absence.”⁴ Aesthetic theoreticians like Burke seek to rescue this very subject from its fate in Lockean epistemology by claiming

for it, as Longinus did, the greatness, originality, or power of the sublime object that it contemplates.

In the *Enquiry*, Burke's effort to rescue the autonomy of the subject is radically entangled with the question of sexual difference. Burke's account of the "swelling and triumph" experienced by the masculine subject is preceded by a description of the domestic (maternal) sphere, which, in contrast to that of the public, is governed not by a "thrusting" ambition but by "the [passive] passion for imitation." "If men gave themselves up to imitation entirely," he writes, "it is easy to see that there could never be any improvement amongst them. . . . Men must remain as brutes do," with neither culture nor language, "the same at the end that . . . they were in the beginning of the world." The sublime, Burke shows, releases the masculine subject from the "eternal circle" of imitation in which he would remain otherwise undifferentiated, nameless.⁵ The "swelling" here is a phallic sign that distinguishes men from mothers, confirming the place of the subject in the paternal symbolic order.

The Burkean sublime, then, marks the rupture rather than preservation of human limits. These limits, in their most suffocating form, trap men in the maternal, domestic circle of imitation, and, in their less stifling form, preserve what Burke calls tradition or custom. If we think about them as psychic and symbolic limits (i.e., the undifferentiated maternal space of the domestic sphere and the femininized cultural space of custom), we can see that Burke's stance on tradition (and the humble subject that respects and secures it) is fraught with ambivalence. To the extent that Burke shows the process of swelling occasioned by the sublime to be the sine qua non of masculinity or rather subjectivity *tout court* (i.e., no swell = no subject), the supposedly false sublime is absolutely crucial to his aesthetic cum political theory. Indeed it is the answer to another kind of terror: the terror occasioned by the dissolution of the masculine subject in the "eternal circle," that is, its regression in what, following Julia Kristeva, I call the maternal.⁶ Therefore, although White is correct to read the *Enquiry* as articulating a politically significant "aesthetic-affective dynamic," the problem for Burke turns not on containing the masculine subject's thrusting ambition (a "false sublime") but on taming that ambition's potentially disastrous political effects. And bringing a swelling masculine subjectivity in line with the requirements of social order is the function of none other than Burkean woman.

It is partly true, as White claims, that Burkean woman, as beautiful object, excites in the masculine subject love, affection, and tenderness rather than awe, fear, and respect. Still, what are we to make of Burke's unusual claim that "this quality [beauty], where it is highest in the female sex, carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for

which reason they learn to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. . . . Beauty in distress is the most affecting form of beauty.”⁷ White reads this passage as containing little more than a series of “obtuse [and presumably politically insignificant] remarks” (p. 519). Again failing to question, he implicitly reinscribes the so-called *natural* basis of a gendered aesthetic-affective dynamic. But Burke himself shows that the feminine beautiful, supposedly eternally distinct from the masculine sublime, comes down to nothing more than artifice, a cultural performance of endangered femininity. What is the place of the womanly device of strategic counterfeiting in the phallic theater? In Burke’s words, “We submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in the one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance,” swelled with a sense of “our” importance.⁸ The aesthetic-affective dynamic stands on nothing but a fraud: it is as unstable as the gendered semiotic code that governs “our” response to objects is arbitrary.

When the masculine subject’s thrusting/swelling action is taken as constitutive of its very status as subject; when the opposition between the (feminine) beautiful and the (masculine) sublime is read as artificial, arbitrary, and unstable; and when Burkean woman (the beautiful) is understood as harboring the far from reassuring maternal or feminine sublime, the aesthetic-affective dynamic in Burke’s political theory becomes significantly more complicated than Professor White allows. The French Revolution marks not, as White would have it, the eclipse of the “authentic [masculine]” by the “false [masculine] sublime” but, rather, the breakdown of the Burkean gendered semiotic code. The result? The ravages of phallic ambition are no longer mitigated by the moderating machinations of female submission. The active, political women Burke figures as “the furies of hell” confound the “remarkable contrast” that grounds his conservative understanding of the social order. If, for Burke, the sublime becomes false, it is largely because in 1789 it becomes feminine—personified by political women.

Attending to the question of sexual difference not only renders significant those not at all “obtuse remarks” on feminine beauty, it also suggests that Burke’s depiction of the Jacobin assault on Marie Antoinette is, contra White, not at all an inexplicable poetic digression that does “not shed much light on the dilemmas of modern politics” (p. 519). On the contrary, Burke’s figuration of the Women’s October 5th March on Versailles—a march that in the earlier hours of the 6th led a large group of women and a *few* men to enter the queen’s chambers—could not be more symbolically and politically important. That sublime staging is the scene of the Burkean battle between one kind of woman (passive/ beautiful/domestic—queen) against another kind (phallic/sublime/public—*sans culottes*). Hence Burke’s hysterical de-

fense of the queen against those political women whom he casts as “the furies of hell” is crucial to his understanding and figuration of Jacobin abomination or frenzy—crucial, that is, to the transgression of *his* conceptualization of human limits, which are also gendered ones.

In conclusion, then, White claims that “Burke’s emphasis on the sublime is an attempt to provide us with a mode of experience that humbles us in the face of both the past and future and thus gives us a new carefulness in our present projects” (p. 523). Should we allow ourselves to be so humbled? This claim is rooted in Burke’s semiotics of gender: a fragile cultural code that bespeaks his concern about the arbitrariness of masculinity and femininity and an *ambivalence* about human limits. To be humbled before the Burkean sublime is to be enlisted in the larger Burkean cause, namely, the endless quest for Marie Antoinette, for Woman, the beautiful object of a swelling subject.

NOTES

1. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited by James T. Boulton (London: University of Notre Dame Press), 124.

2. See Linda M. G. Zerilli, “‘The Furies of Hell’: Woman in Burke’s French Revolution,” in *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), chap. 3. A modified and abbreviated version of this chapter appeared as “Text/Woman as Spectacle: Edmund Burke’s French Revolution,” *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 47-72.

3. Burke, *Enquiry*, 50-51, my emphasis.

4. Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 17, 18. See Frances Ferguson for a similar argument about eighteenth-century appropriations of the Longinian sublime. “A Commentary on Suzanne Guerlac’s ‘Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime,’” *New Literary History* 16 (Winter 1985): 291-97.

5. Burke, *Enquiry*, 50.

6. See *Signifying Woman*, 63-73; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 11-12.

7. Burke, *Enquiry*, 110.

8. *Ibid.*, 113.

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