

**“THIS NEW CONQUERING EMPIRE OF LIGHT AND
REASON:” EDMUND BURKE, JAMES GILLRAY,
AND THE DANGERS OF ENLIGHTENMENT***

– James Schmidt –

Abstract. This article examines the use of images of “light” and “enlightenment” in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and in the controversy that greeted the book, with an emphasis on caricatures of Burke and his book by James Gillray and others. Drawing on Hans Blumenberg’s discussion of the metaphor of “light as truth,” it situates this controversy within the broader usage of images of light and reason in eighteenth-century frontispieces and (drawing on the work of J.G.A. Pocock and Albert O. Hirschman) explores the ways in which Burke’s critique of Richard Price operates with a rhetoric that views Price as part of an enlightenment that was inherently “radical” and, hence, a threat to the “enlightenment” that, in Burke’s view, had already been achieved.

Keywords: Edmund Burke, Enlightenment, James Gillray, French Revolution, Richard Price, Caricature, Frontispieces, Light, Hans Blumenberg, Albert O. Hirschman, J.G.A. Pocock.

About a quarter of the way into the sprawling mass of invective, outrage, and digression that constitutes *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke offers a lurid account of the events of October 6, 1789, when an “almost naked” Marie Antoinette was compelled, along with Louis XVI, to leave Versailles and take up residence in Paris. Burke’s narrative of the indignities visited upon the royal family climaxes in a lament for the world that has been lost.

The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. [...] All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent

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drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.¹

For Burke, the catastrophe unfolding in France was the result of a “barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom as it is destitute of all taste and elegance.”² This “barbarous philosophy” was, of course, the tradition of thought that we have come to call “the Enlightenment.”

Though Burke has long been viewed as the leading figure in the “revolt against the eighteenth century,” it bears remembering that his contemporaries were sometimes confused about where he stood.³ He made his literary debut with *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1752), a work that so perfectly mimicked the critique of revealed religion in Bolingbroke’s *Letters on the Study and Use of History* that Burke found it necessary to add a preface to the second edition hinting that the work was intended as satire. His *Philosophical Observations on Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) became a frequent point of reference for Enlightenment discussions of aesthetics. And as late as 1790, Thomas Paine – newly arrived in Paris – sent Burke a lengthy report on the progress of the revolution, assuming that this friend of the American cause would share Paine’s enthusiasm for what was taking place in France.⁴

The difficulty in determining whether Burke is best understood as a (not entirely reliable) friend of the Enlightenment or a charter member of the Counter-Enlightenment has much to do with the slipperiness of both concepts. As J.G.A. Pocock has noted, it is unclear whether the term “Counter-Enlightenment” designates “one brand of Enlightenment in opposition to another, or a fixed antipathy to Enlightenment in some final sense of the term.”⁵ And, as Pocock has also argued, there are good reasons for thinking that a “final sense” of the term “Enlightenment” is likely to remain illusive.

¹ Burke [1987] pp. 66–67.

² Burke [1987] p. 68.

³ Cobban [1960].

⁴ See Paine’s letter of 17 January 1790 in Burke [1967] pp. 67–75.

⁵ Pocock [1999] p. 132.

In studying the intellectual history of the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth, we encounter a variety of statements made, and assumptions proposed, to which the term 'Enlightenment' may usefully be applied, but the meanings of the term shift as we apply it. The things are connected, but not continuous; they cannot be reduced to a single narrative; and we find ourselves using the word 'Enlightenment' in a family of ways and talking about a family of phenomena, resembling and related to one another in a variety of ways that permit of various generalizations about them. We are not, however, committed to a single root meaning of the word 'Enlightenment,' and we do not need to reduce the phenomena of which we treat to a single process or entity to be termed 'the' Enlightenment.⁶

Matters would have been even more complicated in 1790, when a number of different, and often conflicting, ways of characterizing the process known as "enlightenment" were in play.

One way of shedding light on those confusions is to look more closely at the image that looms so large in Burke's attack on the "new conquering empire of light and reason": the connection between light and reason itself. And that connection can most readily be approached by examining the flurry of caricatures that greeted the publication of Burke's *Reflections* and the visual tropes they deployed. This article will begin by contrasting a few of these caricatures before looking, more generally, at a few of the more familiar allegorical images of light and reason. It will then focus more closely on James Gillray's depiction of Edmund Burke and Richard Price in his *Smelling out a Rat* (1790), perhaps the most famous representation of the *Reflections*. It concludes with a few observations on Burke's account of the relationship between politics and religion.

Representing the *Reflections*

The publication of the *Reflections* triggered rejoinders from Mary Wollstonecraft, James Mackintosh, Tom Paine, William Godwin, and a variety of less famous critics. Though somewhat less familiar to historians of political thought, the response to the work from practitioners of the art of political caricature was no less heated.⁷ Particularly notable was the reaction of Burke's long-time nemesis Frederick George Byron, who – apparently viewing the passage on Marie Antoinette as a gift from heaven – produced a series of

⁶ Pocock [2008] p. 83.

⁷ See especially, Robinson [1996] pp. 136–170.

attacks on Burke, each one more outrageous than the last. He opened his campaign on November 2, 1790 with a mock frontispiece for the book that pictured a smitten Burke on his knees before Marie, with a fluttering cupid further enflaming his brain.



Burke's description of his encounter with Marie is quoted verbatim below the drawing. Byron continued the attack on November 15, portraying Burke as the Knight of Woeful Countenance, riding out of his publisher's office to attack the French National Assembly.



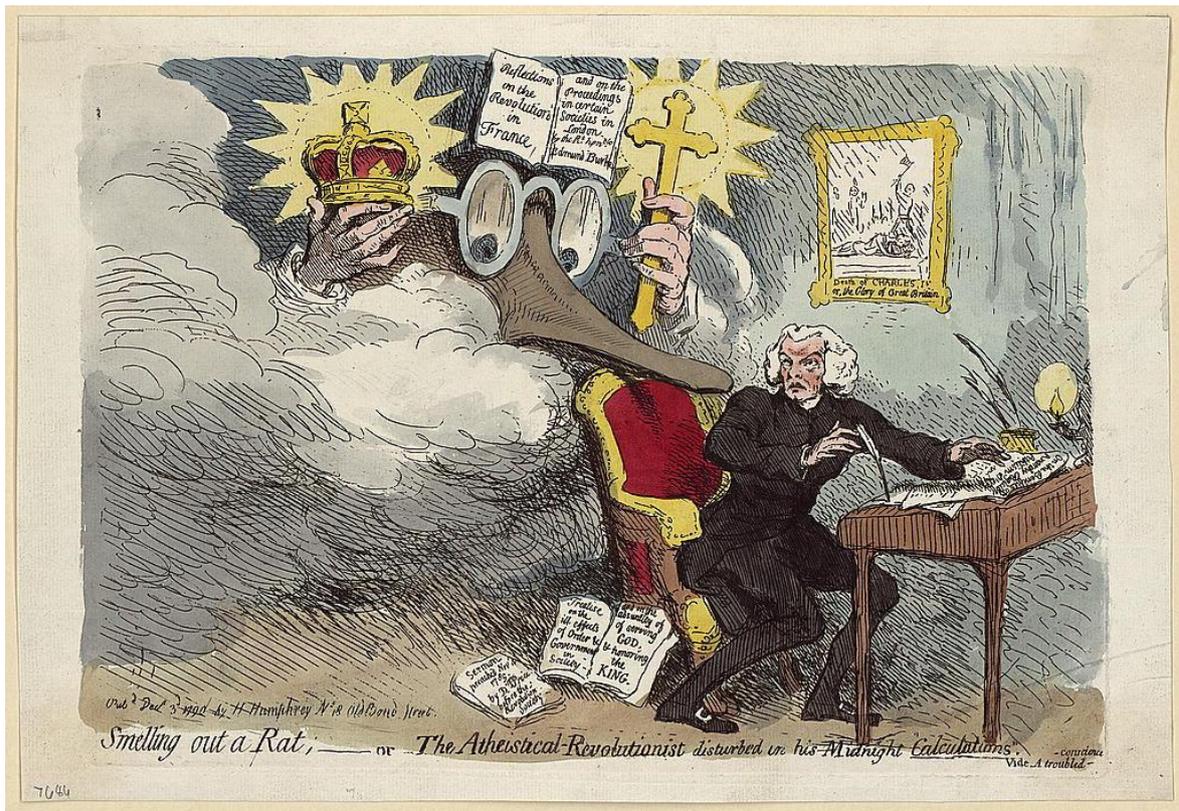
The emblems engraved on his shield drive home the political implications of the regime Burke sought to protect: the Bastille, a burning pyre, a prisoner in a cell, a prisoner being broken on the wheel. The face of the donkey on which Burke rode as he set off on his quixotic mission was that of Pope Pius VI, a gesture that raised questions about the Dublin-born Burke's religious beliefs and positioned Burke as a latter-day representative of the Popish plot that Britain had dodged in 1688, an insinuation that was further reinforced by a quotation from the *Reflections* stating that "those who are habitually employed in finding and displaying faults, are unqualified for the work of reformation."⁸ A companion piece arrived three days later, which depicted an eventual reunion of "Don Dismallo" with his "Beautiful Vision." An ecstatic Burke forswears his wife's "eggs and bacon" in favor of the "delicious Dairy" of his "celestial Vision," while an aroused Marie welcomes her "God of Chivalry" and babbles about her desire to seize his "invincible Shillelee."⁹

In the battle of caricatures, Burke had one formidable champion: James Gillray, the greatest political caricaturist of his (and, perhaps, any) age. In *Smelling Out a Rat - or The Atheistical Revolutionist Disturbed in His Midnight Calculations* Gillray pictured the principal object of Burke's attack - the clergyman, political philosopher, and actuary Richard Price - surprised by Burke's sudden arrival in his chambers, where he labors over his latest political tract. But Gillray was, as Nicholas K. Robinson has noted, was a "dangerous man to employ" and was quite capable of making those whose cause he defended look almost as bad as those he was attacking.¹⁰ In this case, he hit upon the masterstroke of reducing Burke to the two features that had long defined him in caricatures: his nose and his glasses.

⁸ Burke [1987] p. 150.

⁹ Robinson [1996] p. 143.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 144.



While this sly bit of synecdoche is lost on present day viewers, the broader design of *Smelling Out a Rat* is clear enough. Gillray stages what, in effect, is a battle between two different (and obviously unequal) sources of illumination. Emerging from the clouds that cover the left half of the print, light radiates from the crown and the cross – the symbols of union of political and ecclesiastical power that Burke was committed to defending – that Burke holds in his boney hands. At the far right, a small candle illuminates Price’s writing desk. But for all his inventiveness, Gillray was hardly alone in recognizing that, during the *siècle de lumière*, light came in a variety of forms and from a number of different directions.

Whose Light? Which Clouds?

The image of light dispelling darkness figured prominently in the iconography associated with the Enlightenment and one of the more popular ways of representing the ultimate triumph of light over darkness took the form of the image of the sun breaking through the clouds.¹¹ One of the better known instances of this particular trope appears as the frontispiece of Christian Wolff’s *Vernünfftige*

¹¹ Reichardt [1998].

Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt (1719), where a smiling sun banishes the clouds and illuminates the village below.¹²



Read literally, the motto *Lucem Post Nubila Reddit* ("it brings back the light after the clouds") would appear painfully obvious. But Wolff's readers would, no doubt, have been aware of the metaphorical implications of the sun's return: among other things, the verb *aufklären* could be used to denote the "clearing up" of the skies after a storm, a usage that was extended to cover

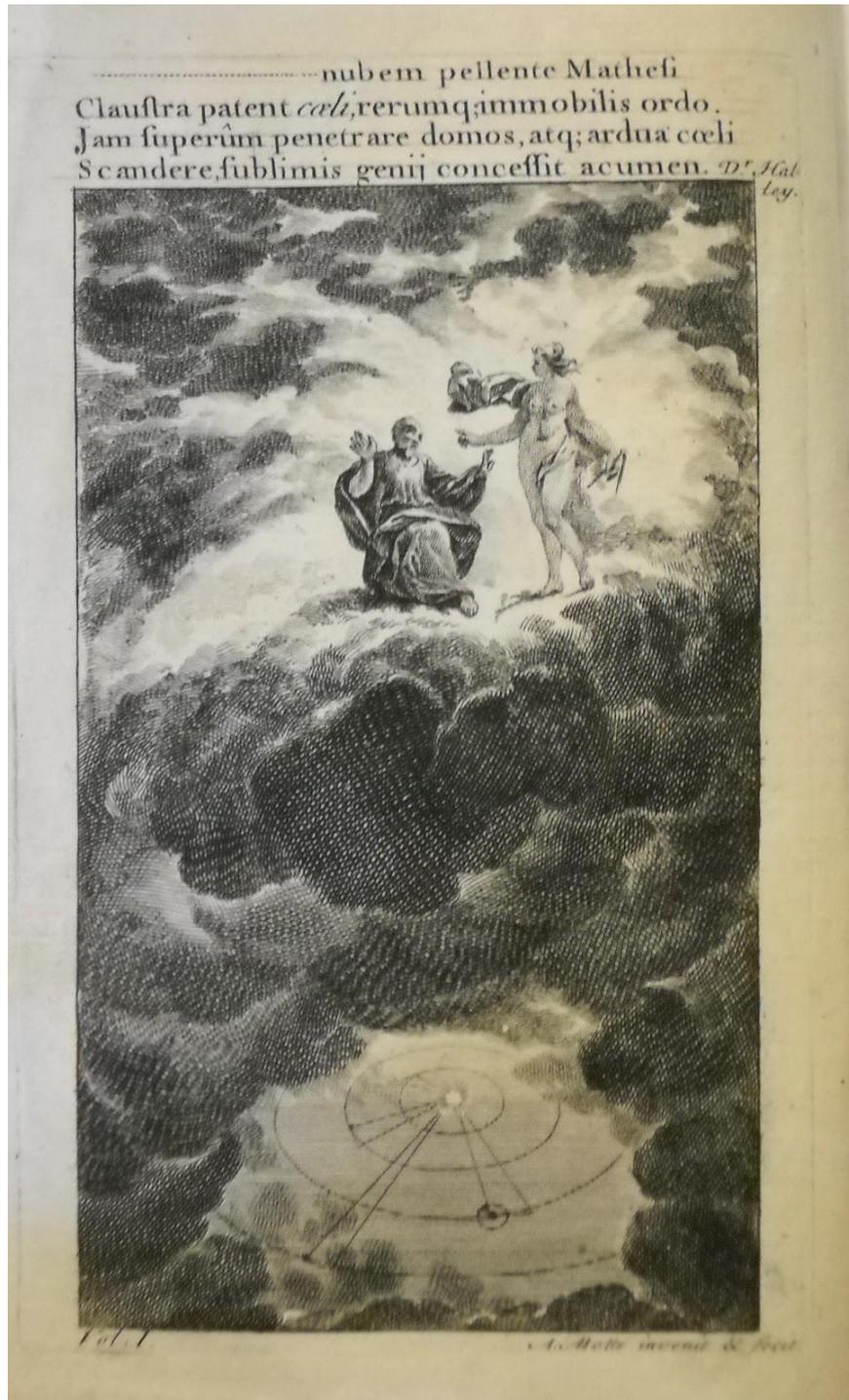
¹² For a classic discussion, see Barth [1972] p. 33. For a more recent account, see Kosky [2013] pp. 1-9.

the return to consciousness after sleep.¹³ The multiple connotations of the term may explain why, at the close of the century, the Polish-Prussian painter and engraver Daniel Chodowiecki maintained that the highest achievements of reason had no more "generally comprehensible allegorical symbol (perhaps because the thing itself is new) than the rising sun."¹⁴

The crown and the cross do much the same work as the smiling sun in Wolff's frontispiece. They disperse the clouds, drive away the darkness, and – to play out the metaphor – restore sense to a world gone mad. It is, of course, unlikely that Gillray would have been familiar with Wolff's *German Metaphysics*. But this would hardly have been necessary: images of the sun driving away the clouds were hard to avoid. The frontispiece of Andrew Motte's 1729 translation of the *Principia* depicts Newton seated in the midst of clouds, with light streaming from behind him.

¹³ Pütz [1978] pp. 12–15.

¹⁴ Im Hof [1983] pp. 115–116.



Below him the clouds are beginning to roll away, revealing the orbits of the planets. Contra Alexander Pope's famous couplet - "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night. / God said, 'Let Newton be!' and all was light" - Newton appears here less as the bringer of light than as its recipient. His enlightenment would appear to be derived from the naked woman on his left, who points to him with her right hand while holding calipers in her left hand.

In contrast, a considerably more authoritative Newton holds the calipers and does the pointing in the famous frontispiece to Voltaire's *Elements of the Philosophy of Newton* (1738), while light streams over his left shoulder from an opening in the clouds above and is reflected in mirror held by a woman (presumably the gifted mathematician Gabrielle Emilie du Châtelet) down onto the writing table where an idealized image of Voltaire, her student and lover is working.



Still more light and clouds can be found in the elaborate allegorical frontispiece to Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, along with a host of figures, which represent the various disciplines.



Since Diderot elaborated the allegory at length in a discussion incorporated into the *Encyclopédie*, it will suffice simply to note that we are informed that the veiled figure at the apex of the composition is Truth, while the figures lifting and

pulling away the veil (an action that, in effect, confirms some of Burke's misgivings as to where all this will lead) are Reason and Philosophy. As in Gillray's *Smelling out a Rat*, we are once again confronted with two different sources of light. As might be expected, Truth is "radiant with a light which parts the clouds and disperses them;" but to the right of Truth we see a separate shaft of light, descending from the clouds and illuminating the kneeling figure of Theology, which – as Diderot notes – "receives her light from on high."¹⁵

The frontispiece to the *Encyclopédie* drives home the ambiguity that haunts the motto that hovers over the frontispiece of Wolff's *German Metaphysics*: who, or what, is the "it" that "brings back" the light which banishes the darkness? As Hans Blumenberg argued in his studies of the metaphor of light as truth,

With the emergence of the Enlightenment, 'light' moves into the realm of that which is to be accomplished; truth loses the natural *facilitas* with which it asserted itself. [...] The truth does not reveal itself; it must be revealed. 'Natural' luminosity cannot be relied on; on the contrary, truth is of a constitutionally weak nature and man must help it back on its feet by means of light-supplying therapy. [...] Phenomena no longer stand in the light; rather, they are subjected to the lights of an examination from a particular perspective.¹⁶

The frontispiece of the *German Metaphysics* presents what had – since at least Francis Bacon – become the product of concerted human action as if it were the bestowal of a gift that demanded nothing more from human beings than that they wait – like the figure of Theology in the frontispiece of the *Encyclopédie* – for a light that descends from above.

Gillray's portrait of Burke as a light-bearer, bursting into the darkness of Price's study, perfectly captures the ambiguities that would continue to dog invocations of "enlightenment" until far later than the familiar narrative of struggles between "the Enlightenment" and something called "the Counter-Enlightenment" would have us believe. Since a metaphor as powerful as the image of truth as light was not something to be lightly surrendered, we are confronted with a series of battles in which all the contestants claim that theirs is the "true enlightenment." For example, in 1792 Friedrich Karl von Moser explained,

¹⁵ Gendzier [1967] p. vii.

¹⁶ Blumenberg [1993] pp. 52–53. See also the discussion in Chapter II of Blumenberg [2010].

All enlightenment that is not grounded in and supported by religion, all enlightenment that does not grow out of the dependence of the created on its Creator and on the goodness and care of the Creator for His human creations, all enlightenment that draws back from the duties of love, reverence, gratitude, and obedience to His will, His commandments, and the institutions of His great world government, all enlightenment that leaves man to his own willfulness, vanity, and passions and inspires him with Lucifer's pride to see himself as his sole, independent, ruler and to make his own arbitrary natural law – all such enlightenment is not only the way to destruction, immorality, and depravity, but also to the dissolution and ruin of all civil society, and to a war of the human race within itself, that begins with philosophy and ends with scalping and cannibalism.¹⁷

While Moser puts in a brief appearance in Isaiah Berlin's survey of the "Counter-Enlightenment," it is clear that he – like a fair number of the others that Berlin shuffled into this historically questionable category – regarded themselves as defenders of the "true enlightenment" against a French imposter.

The same might be said of Burke who, as Pocock has argued, regarded "enlightenment" as the product of a reform of manners and modes of governance that had been carried out under the aegis of religion and nobility (hence the radiant crown and cross in Gillray's caricature). The great achievement of that reform was what he termed "chivalry." That his critics found the term laughable only served to confirm his own suspicion that what was now being passed off as "enlightenment" amounted to the destruction of the enlightened systems of customs and practices that had been carefully constructed over the preceding century.¹⁸ His conviction that the results of this "enlightenment" were now being endangered by the false French variety helps to explain why – in a letter to an unknown correspondent written at around the same time as he received Paine's letter from Paris – he characterized his time as a "most unenlightened age, the least qualified for legislation that perhaps has been since the first formation of civil society."¹⁹ In other words, the "new empire of light and reason" was anything but enlightened and reasonable.

¹⁷ Friedrich Karl von Moser, "True and False Political Enlightenment," [in:] Schmidt [1996] pp. 212-213.

¹⁸ Pocock [1985] p. 199.

¹⁹ Burke [1967] p. 80.

Projection and Prescience

In a 1989 discussion of the passage in the *Reflections* where Burke takes aim at the "conquering empire of light and reason," Terry Eagleton observed, "With the executed Marie Antoinette in mind, Burke goes on to denounce revolutionary discourtesy to women."²⁰ But, contra Eagleton, at the time of the publication of the *Reflections* Marie Antoinette was very much alive (albeit, according to Burke, shivering and near naked in her nightgown). Her execution would not occur until the fall of 1793. Eagleton's slip is, however, entirely understandable: it is easy to forget that it would take the Revolution several years to match Burke's worst fears.

Eagleton is not alone in projecting things into the *Reflections* that had yet to occur. As Conner Cruise O'Brien recalled,

Reading the *Reflections* with an undergraduate class in New York, in the 1960s, I found that my students assumed that the direst events of the Revolution – the September Massacres, the Terror, the executions of the King and Queen – had already taken place when the *Reflections* was written.²¹

But Burke's tendency to make the events of 1790 look remarkably like those 1793 does not seem to have troubled O'Brien. Instead, he regards it as one of the book's virtues. And yet there is a sense in which those events are already present in the *Reflections*. They are present in the sense that the ferocious dynamic which Burke ascribes to the Revolution, even in 1790, became visible to the world, through those events of 1792–1794.

What Burke's critics (among them, Mary Wollstonecraft who, under the cloak of anonymity, accused him of writing like a woman) saw as hysteria, his admirers typically attribute to his prescience: looking at the events of 1790, he saw how things would turn out. Hence Eagleton's slip: reading Burke's account of the indignities suffered by Marie Antoinette on the evening of October 6, 1789 it is hard not to think ahead to the events of October 16, 1793. As O'Brien would have it, her execution was, in a sense, "already present" when she was forced to leave Versailles for Paris.

Less admiring readers of Burke might be inclined to regard his moments of prescience as the inevitable by-product of his attempt to defend an enlightenment that had already been achieved as a result of the steady improvement of manners

²⁰ Eagleton [1989] p. 60.

²¹ O'Brien [1994] p. 403.

and mores from a "new and conquering empire of light and reason" that, spreading from Paris, threatened to engulf London. Burke was deploying a version of the line of argument that Albert O. Hirschman characterized as the "jeopardy thesis" – the argument that certain proposed reforms, while allegedly desirable in the abstract, turn out to threaten "some previous, precious accomplishment."²² Arguments of this sort have retained a certain appeal to conservatives of a later vintage (indeed, this may be one of the few things that they still share with him). As Peter Steinfels noted, a standard trope in neo-conservative rhetoric was to draw hasty connections between "modernism and nihilism..., between government regulation and totalitarianism, between criticism of arms expenditures and subservience to Communism, between women's liberation or homosexual rights and the destruction of the family ... between the Left generally and terrorism, anti-Semitism, and fascism."²³ For Burke and his latter-day disciples, every slope – however gradual it might seem – turns out to be slippery.

Once again, Gillray's defense of Burke tends to make it all too obvious how the rhetorical machinery of the *Reflections* functions. Between the crown and the cross hovers Burke's book with its title spread across the open pages: *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London*. While Gillray was forced to abbreviate the remainder of the title (which continued, *Relative to that Event, in a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris, 1790*) he manages, at least, to include what later readers sometimes leave out: Burke's reflections on the events in France were prompted by the way in which those events had been received in "certain societies" in London. The society that figured most centrally in Burke's account was the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain, a group of political reformers and Protestant dissenters who dedicated themselves to the defense what the society's "declaratory principles" took to be the rights that had been secured by the "Glorious Revolution": "the right of private judgment, liberty of conscience, trial by jury, the freedom of the press, and the freedom of election."²⁴ Its principal activity was an annual celebration of William III birthday (November 4) that began with a sermon at the dissenting chapel in the Old Jewry and culminated

²² Hirschman [1991] pp. 7, 81–132. It should be noted that Hirschman interprets Burke differently than I have and sees him as deploying the so-called "perversity thesis" (pp. 12–15).

²³ Steinfels [1979] p. 65.

²⁴ Price [1790] Appendix, p. 12.

with dinner, toasts, and a business meeting at the Crown and Anchor tavern in the Strand.²⁵

Richard Price had been approached to preach at the inaugural celebration in 1788, but begged off, owing to poor health. He was, however, in the pulpit the next year to deliver what would subsequently be published as *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, a sermon that – after reflecting on all that had transpired since 1688 – closed by recalling the words spoken by the aged Simeon after hearing Jesus preaching in the Temple: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.”²⁶ The aged Price found these words singularly appropriate for his own situation:

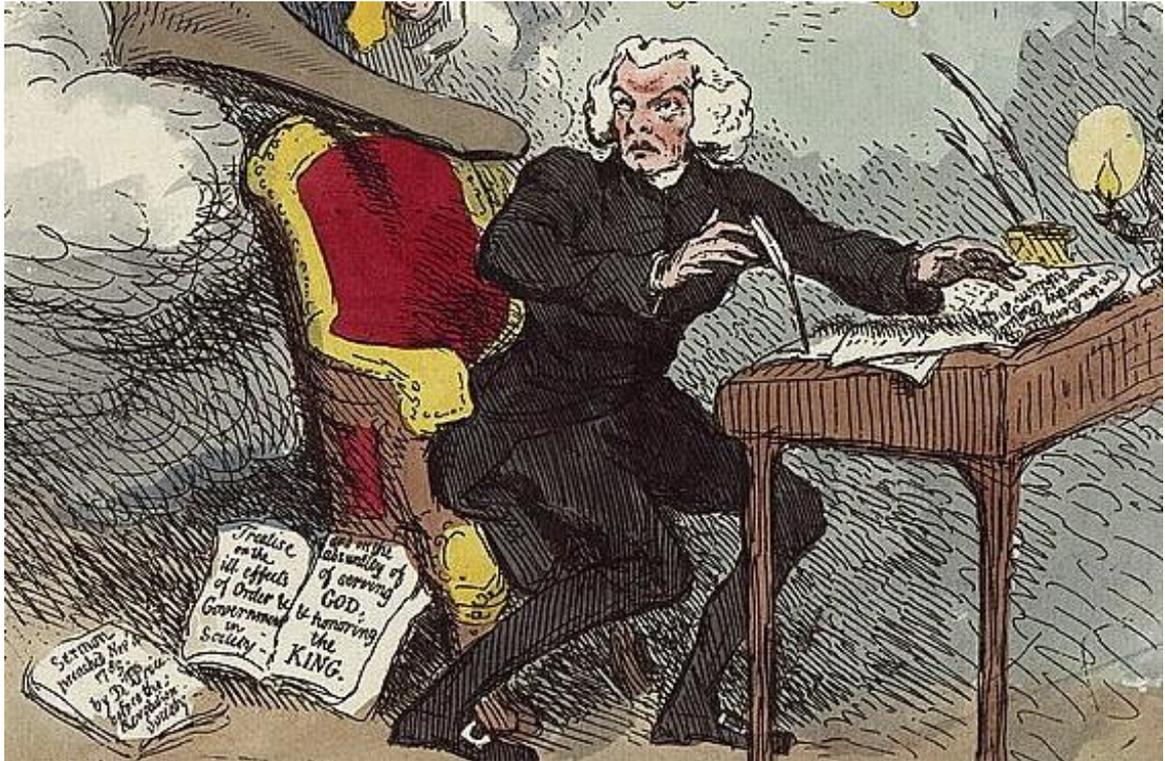
I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge which has undermined superstition and error. I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever, and nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it. [...] After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious. And now, methinks, I see the ardor for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs, the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.²⁷

In Gillray’s caricature the *Discourse* lies on the floor of Price’s study, to his far right as he works at his desk.

²⁵ Duthille [2013].

²⁶ Price [1790] p. 49.

²⁷ Price [1790] pp. 49–50.



Prior to Burke's sudden appearance, Price has gotten as far as beginning to write the title of the text - only the words *On the Benefits of Anarchy, Regicide, Atheism ...* are visible. But he appears to have finished a sequel to the *Discourse*: on the floor, between his desk and the *Discourse*, is a work entitled *Treatise on the Ill Effects of Order & Government in Society and on the Absurdity of Serving God & Honoring the King*. Finally, on the wall to his left we see a painting entitled *Death of Charles I, or, the Glory of Great Britain*.



It was central to Burke's argument that, contra Price, the French Revolution was best understood not as the sequel to the revolutions of 1688 and 1776 but, instead, as a collapse into the chaos that reigned in England from 1642 to 1651. Burke drew out the implications of this way of understanding the events in France when, at the start of the *Reflections*, he likened Price's sermon at the meeting of the Revolution Society to those of Hugh Peter, a chaplain in the New Model Army who had supported the trial and execution of Charles I. When the monarchy was restored in 1660, Peter was tortured and executed and Burke left his readers with the impression that he would not be particularly upset if Price's departure from this world was – like that of his predecessor – considerably less than peaceful.²⁸ It was this rather brutal passage that moved Mary Wollstonecraft – at the time a twenty-one year old member of Price's congregation – to wonder, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, how a man who could become so exercised over the inconveniences suffered by Maria Antoinette could harbor such violent fantasies about the aged Price.

In order to see Price as Peter, Burke had to read the *Discourse* not as looking backward from 1789 to 1688 but rather as laying a foundation for a future revolution in England. Gillray captured this suspicion by making Price the author not merely of the *Discourse* but also of the two imaginary texts that appear in *Smelling Out a Rat*. To invoke, once again, O'Brien's peculiar characterization of Burke's alleged prescience, the idea seemed to be that the imaginary works *On the Benefits of Anarchy*, *Regicide*, *Atheism* and *Treatise on the Ill Effects of Order & Government* were already somehow "present" in the pages of the *Discourse*. Less charitable readers of the *Reflections* might regard what Burke's see as prescience as a rather virulent case of projection: any enlightenment that attempts to improve what has already been accomplished turns into a juggernaut that inexorably leads to disaster. For Burke, every new enlightenment is destined to be a radical one.

The Visible, the Invisible, and the New Jerusalem

Not the least of paradoxes of *Smelling Out a Rat* is that, though it strives to make Price look considerably more radical than he was, it succeeds in making Burke look much more ridiculous than he was. Price, after all, was a rational dissenter, not an atheist. Like his fellow dissenter Joseph Priestley, he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, regarding the notion of a God who was three persons in one as absurd and (perhaps more importantly) without foundation in the Gospels.

²⁸ Burke [1987] pp. 10, 57–59. Burke consistently referred to Peter as "Peters."

Unlike Priestley, he was willing to accept the possibility of Jesus of Nazareth's "pre-existence," which made him (in the language that the eighteenth century used to keep track of heresies) an Arian rather than a Socinian. Because he found himself unable to swear allegiance to the Thirty-Nine articles that defined the Anglican faith, he (like Priestley) was subject to certain "civil disadvantages" under the Test and Corporation Acts. Rational dissenters were free to practice their beliefs without interference, but could not take degrees from Oxford and Cambridge nor could they hold seats in Parliament. Though, as a beneficiary of the Glorious Revolution, Price was willing to praise George III as "almost the only lawful King in the world" because he was "the only one who owes his crown to the choice of the people," he was well aware that the Revolution had not put an end to a mingling of civil and ecclesiastical power that, in the narratives that he and his fellow dissenters constructed, could be traced back to the Christianization of the Roman Empire.²⁹

By picturing Burke as the bearer of the crown and the cross, Gillray cast him as a stalwart defender of that marriage of Anglicanism and monarchism that was the all-too visible manifestation of what Burke, rather elegantly, characterized as

[...] that great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.³⁰

The poetry of the *Reflections* tends to obscure Burke's rather complicated stance towards the Test and Corporation Acts. He was sympathetic to the plight of Irish Catholics (and this sympathy was enough to prompt the charge that he remained a "crypto-Catholic") and he supported a broad toleration of heterodox beliefs, arguing that, while he disliked the idea of "tolerating the doctrines of Epicurus," the best way to curb the spread of such notions was to put an end to "the oppression of the poor, of the honest and candid disciples of the religion we profess in common – I mean revealed religion."³¹ But what he could not support was anything approximating the sort of separation of Church from State that – with the ban on religious tests for officeholders in Article VI of the Constitution of the United States – had already been put into practice on the other side of the Atlantic. In a 1792 speech in Parliament he insisted that, "in a Christian

²⁹ Cf. Price [1790] p. 25.

³⁰ Burke [1987] p. 85.

commonwealth the Church and State are one and the same thing, being different integral parts of the same whole."³²

The "new conquering empire of light and reason" had little respect for primeval contracts linking the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead. In the harsh light cast by a philosophy that produces "cold hearts and muddy understandings,"

Nothing is left which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth. On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied [...] in persons, so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. But that sort of reason which banishes the affections is incapable of filling their place. [...] There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-informed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.³³

But while Burke writes "ought to be lovely," what he would seem to mean is "ought to *appear* lovely."

What Price was suggesting was that the love we feel for our country may have something to do with a sense that those aspects of it that are less than lovely could - and, as Price read the signs and portents, were in fact - gradually becoming lovelier: a New Jerusalem might one day be built on the site of those dark Satanic mills. As it turned out, this vision was hopelessly naïve and, forty years later, it would be impossible to mistake Birmingham for the New Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it may still be preferable to the legacy that Burke seems to have left us of making our country look lovelier by dimming the lights and demonizing its enemies.

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³¹ Burke [1884a] p. 34.

³² Burke [1884b] p. 43.

³³ Burke [1987] p. 68.

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