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Sublime Reason and Beautiful Rhetoric: Wollstonecraft and Burke on the Natural Rights of Man

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797) in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), written in response to a lengthy letter by Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797), *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), expresses her radical and proto-feminist views. Wollstonecraft provides an enlightened criticism of Burke's conservative writing, referring to such key notions of the long eighteenth century as common sense, sensibility, wit, and judgment (cf. the Scottish Enlightenment's, John Locke's and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's impact). While taking the author's earlier political ideas into account, the text's allusions and digressions echo Burke's early "revolutionary" writing on the aesthetic (and sexist) approach to the sublime and the beautiful (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757). In my article, I follow this thread running through Wollstonecraft's critique, and I also focus on the way how she responsibly confronts Burke with his own thought and rhetorical (mis)demeanours in the discussion of man's natural rights. In contrast to Burke's beautiful rhetoric, Wollstonecraft defends sublime reason, and she also presents her humanist view, discussing the importance of proper manners and education.

Keywords: Enlightenment – reason – sublime – Burke – Wollstonecraft

Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797), an educationalist and proto-feminist writer, is mostly known as the author of her *magnum opus*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she refers back to a pamphlet she had written two years earlier. In 1790, she was already discussing the rights of men in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, written in response to a lengthy letter by

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Wollstonecraft was the first to respond to Burke's writing (forty-five responses came out in a year), hastily publishing her review anonymously, twenty-eight days after the scandalous work appeared, and then she would give her own name on the second edition (Taylor 2007, 1 – 2).[1] Wollstonecraft, a middle-class, mainly self-taught woman, who was a little known novelist, editor and translator before 1790, takes a very bold tone in her pamphlet. On the one hand, she calls Burke to give account of his earlier political views, and on the other hand, she criticizes his rhetoric, whereas the textual allusions and digressions reveal the young Burke's radical aesthetic approach to the sublime and the beautiful. In my study, I focus on this thread when reading Burke's critique, and also on the way Wollstonecraft questions, or even confronts Burke with his own rhetorical (mis)demeanors. At the same time, however, there are many similarities in the basic vocabulary of the two writings: after all, both authors are thinkers of the Enlightenment, of the long eighteenth century. Daniel O'Neill devotes an entire book to the details of the Burke-Wollstonecraft debate with an emphasis on the notions of the Scottish Enlightenment providing a framework for the dispute. According to O'Neill, it is precisely the influence of the contemporary Scottish moral philosophers – David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Thomas Reid – that is echoed in the works of Burke and Wollstonecraft and it is particularly noteworthy how *sentiments* play a role alongside *common sense*, how *taste* and *sensibility* put side by side with *moral sense* and *manners* in the civilised, enlightened social existence of the natural man (O'Neill 2007, 11 – 16). Moreover, John Locke's ideas on the upbringing of the *gentleman* (Locke 2007) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notions on *natural* education can also be traced in the debate since Burke was influenced by Locke's sensualist philosophy (Rousseau 1979), while Wollstonecraft also integrated the Lockean notions of empiricism and *tabula rasa* in her pedagogical writings alongside with Rousseau's views on the learning process and self-development.

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[1] The responses of Thomas Paine, James Mackintosh, and Joseph Priestley, for example, are more serene, more collected analyses. However, Wollstonecraft's response shows the characteristics of her political thinking and it also presents her strong rationality as it is discussed by Virginia Sapiro (1992) and Wendy Gunther-Canada (2001).

I.

Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797), a reform Whig MP, in his conservative letter dated of 1790, describes the failures of the French Revolution, defends the French monarchy and the clergy, and details the advantages of the old English model. The letter is addressed to the aristocrat Charles-Jean-François Depont, Burke's former French correspondent, who, after the publication of the work, became disillusioned with his English master and broke off contact with the thinker. Burke's insights into the turmoil, terror and state failure that followed the revolution are prophetic in places (he even predicts the coming of a strong-arm general), but his theatrical style often misrepresents the argument. As an advocate of old customs and values, he offers an empathetic portrayal of the sufferings of the King and Queen of France, and a critique of the confiscation of priestly estates in defense of the aristocracy's right to inherit; meanwhile, he argues for the disruptive influence of the encyclopaedists and the incompetence of the National Assembly. The enlightened Burke blames the French thinkers of the day for the wrong direction in which this noble people (the French) have gone. The prattle of the French adventurous, "intriguing philosophers" has resulted in the science of "political metaphysics," "barbarous metaphysics" that contributed to the decline of the state (Burke 2003, 10, 49 and 183).[2] In a satirical climax, he speaks of the practical realization of the encyclopaedists' theories as the so-called "philosophical revolution," in which they have neglected moral sense, focusing only on rationality, in the discussion of natural human rights:

> This sort of people are so taken up with their theories about *the rights of man*, that they have totally forgotten *his nature*. Without opening one new avenue to the understanding, they have succeeded in stopping up those that lead to the heart. They have perverted in themselves, and in those that attend to them, all the well-placed sympathies of the human breast (Burke 2003, 54 – 55; italics are mine).

Wollstonecraft, like Burke, treats her long reply as a letter, addressed clearly to the politician Burke by the adjective "the right honourable" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 5). Already in the mocking opening, Wollstonecraft resents her

[2] The work abounds in buzzwords referring to French thinkers, of which I have highlighted only a few. In his satire of "the philosophical revolution," he even compares the French thinkers to the speculative, off-the-wall theorists of the Flying Island (Laputa) and to the mad scientists experimenting at the Academy of Projectors (in Balnibarbi) in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (Burke 2003, 112).

disappointment having read Burke's earlier writings, and she expresses this overtly, operating with "a manly definition" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 5) of her main topic:

> ...I chance to express contempt, and even indignation, with some emphasis, I beseech you to believe that it is not a flight of fancy; for truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime; and, in taste, simplicity the only criterion of the beautiful. But I war not with an individual when I contend for the *rights of men* and the liberty of reason (Wollstonecraft 1999, 5; italics in the original).

Although only the phrase "rights of men" is italicized in the original, the other key concepts in the above quote are borrowed from Burke. Then Wollstonecraft adds that "truly sublime is the character that acts from principle" and keeps his feelings under control, which gives strength to his actions but never takes him away (Wollstonecraft 1999, 6). Here she also states that there is a sharp distinction between Burke's public and private characters, and that *wit* (rhetoric) cannot "nourish metaphysical passion" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 6). The young Burke made a name for himself with his radical writings (e.g. *A Vindication of Natural Society, 1756; Thoughts on the Cause of Present Discontent, 1770*) and his rhetorically overwrought, sentimental speeches in Parliament but he was already sixty years old when he wrote *Reflections*.

It is not easy to find thematic unity in Wollstonecraft's writing[3] – I note that Burke's almost two-hundred-page letter is also rambling in its own rhetoric –, but after an introduction that openly castigates the author, she provides an outburst, attacking Burke's defense of the rich. Burke argues in long passages for the greatness of the aristocracy and the nobility based on historical and common law, and in so doing, he extols the virtues of concentrated wealth and large estates. Wollstonecraft denounces Burke's argument as downright nonsense, she disputes the exemplary value of the English model, and portrays the English upper classes as degenerates. The rulers of the nation are in fact uneducated, "warped" minds distorted by their education, and it will take decades for the nobles to recover their capacity to recognise true values and return to a natural state of conduct (Wollstonecraft 1999, 8). In contrast to Burke, she sees her own age as decadent and urges the reform of the medieval Anglo-Saxon legal system, while she criticizes the

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[3] Wollstonecraft's response was hasty and written in a hurry, as several analysts have pointed out. See, for example, Lock (1985, 155 – 156).

practice of arranging marriages. She says, high-class parents marry the offspring into estates and ancestral names, forcing their children into "legal prostitution," – in an *unnatural* way, and to emphasize it, there are five references to the lack of naturalness in her passage (Wollstonecraft 1999, 21). Closely related, the characters of the boys and girls who enter into a marriage of convenience at a young age are considered by the author to be unformed and underdeveloped. They are very likely to grow up to be "selfish coxcombs" and foolish coquettes, she writes, far removed from the ideal of the cultivated and moral *gentleman* and the modest and virtuous *gentlewoman*; whereas the members of the middle class snobbishly imitate the superficial (cf. unnatural) *manners* of the aristocracy (Ibid.). In her republican (re)thinking of society and the family, she recognizes that, in addition to drunken, gambling-addicted fathers, mothers should bear a greater burden of upbringing the children, relying on their *common sense* – "the cold arguments of reason, [that] give no sex to virtue," she sums up of her liberal views (Wollstonecraft 1999, 46). The masculine virtue of taking responsibility thus becomes a feature of women's norms of behavior: not manly, not womanly, but reasonable and natural.

Burke provocatively labels the queen "a woman [is] but an animal," and in the most memorable passages of *Reflections*, he is lamenting over Marie-Antoinette's abduction (Burke 2003, 66).[4] The description of the famous scene is theatrical and relies on the reader's sensitivity and good breeding through the use of ponderous rhetoric. The royal power, considered sublime in Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* and dubbed "*dread majesty*" (Burke 2004, 110, italics in the original), is here humiliated and ridiculed; moreover, the queen is almost raped by the mob. The royal couple are dragged out of their beds at night, the draperies are torn to shreds, and "this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked," Burke writes (2003, 60). The author plays the role of the English *gentleman*, gallantly standing up for the assaulted French queen in a scene he displays tastelessly sensual. In response, Wollstonecraft notes that the author has an innate (*natural*) talent for theatrical oratory, and she wryly asks whether this gentleman also sheds tears for mothers in poverty. She sees that Burke's vanity and lordolatry have obscured and suppressed his basic human feelings, thus, he sees the poor "only the live stock of an estate" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 16). In his *Reflections*, in the context of the disfranchisement of the French Church, Burke speaks out against the English Unitarians and his

[4] The quoted sentence goes: "On this scheme of things, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order" (Burke 2003, 66).

main targets being Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, who stood up for popular democracy, freedom and the French Revolution. At a meeting of the Revolution Society in 1789, Richard Price not only welcomed the French Revolution, but saw it as a worthy continuation of the English Glorious Revolution of 1688. In his letter, Burke attacks Price's views, acknowledging the model and exemplary value of the "bloodless" revolution of 1688, where the small "amendment" of legislation was brought forth in accordance with the hereditary principle that "they held [it] inviolable" (Burke 2003, 16 – 19).[5] Wollstonecraft is closely associated with the freethinkers who advocate equality and equal treatment, and defends her friends, praising at length the moral greatness of Dr Price.

Wollstonecraft is also susceptible to the inconsistencies of Burke, who, while eloquently championing the French royal couple, fails to defend King George III and his wife Queen Charlotte when the King is impeached for his madness. In her interpretation of madness, Wollstonecraft suggests that there is a greater problem than knowing of one's insanity and seeking a cure. Once again, current political events provide an opportunity for the analyst to write about Burke's inspired, almost absurd style. She defines the genius of the poetic imagination, in a phrase borrowed from Shakespeare, as "fine phrensy," where, if the passion is real, reason has no dominion over the creative imagination. At the same time, adds Wollstonecraft, "I now speak of the genuine enthusiasm of genius, which, perhaps, seldom appears, but in the infancy of civilization; for as this light becomes more luminous reason clips the wing of fancy – the youth becomes a man" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 28). She thinks that in contrast to Burke's youthful fervor, the bombastic rhetoric and meaningless figures of speech in *Reflections* reinforce the author's (old-age) *sentimental* jargon. Wollstonecraft senses that it is a theatrical pose on the author's part, and that (t)his sentimentalism has nothing to do with a key concept of the time: *sensibility*.[6] It is the period when the term, previously associated with reason, takes on a new meaning, and Mary Wollstonecraft still associates it with *common sense*: for the enlightened adult, common sense and sensibility should go hand in hand. In Samuel Johnson's first practical and

[5] The English political events of 1688 with the peaceful abdication of King James II and the double coronation of William III and Mary II are difficult to compare to the French episodes of 1789. See more about this in O'Brien (2003, 214 – 215).

[6] Christopher Reid discusses precisely this theatricality, and shows that the sentimental descriptions in *Reflections* owe a lot to the sentimental and tragic performance of Sarah Siddons, a celebrated actress of the time (Reid 1992, 1 – 27).

useful English dictionary, published in 1755, *sensibility* has the meanings of "quickness of sensation" and "quickness of perception"; the word *sense* refers to "sensations," "perception by the senses," "intellect," "apprehension of mind," "understanding," "reason," "consciousness," and "moral perception" – in addition to the basic denotation of *sensus* (Johnson 1755, 1811 – 1812). That is, in the eighteenth century, due to their common root, *sense*, the human capacities of common sense and sensibility shared similar features (senses) that were all related to mental activities.

II.

The theme of education is linked to the question of (common) sense and sensibility. While Burke writes of the poets that they should speak to the heart, not to the mind because they are aware, their audience knows little of the rights of men (Burke 2003, 69);[7] Wollstonecraft resents the loss of the very opportunity to teach goodness and virtue. She reminds Burke that man is an intelligent being, and the natural impulses of the senses may lead him in other directions, albeit the cultivation of the intellect is man's duty. Here Wollstonecraft speaks of humanity in general (cf. man) and she, armed with the ideas of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argues with Burke, who pushes enlightened notions to the background, mainly because of their French roots. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft's views of education were highly influenced by John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (1762; in English 1763). Locke mainly explored the education of young gentlemen and Rousseau wrote about the natural education of boys, but Wollstonecraft tried to apply their notions to women's development in her early works titled *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Original Stories* (1788). Moreover, two years after the Burke dispute, she engaged in a famous debate with Rousseau in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) since in *Emile*, in the fifth book on female education entitled "Sophie; or, Woman," Rousseau states that men's and women's education cannot be the same, and the modest Sophie is to be brought up mainly to accompany the naturally educated man (Rousseau 1979, 357).

Thus, on a Rousseauvian basis, Wollstonecraft claims that children are innocent and ignorant (instinctual) beings who, in accordance with the Lockean idea, should be educated through examples to lead virtuous lives

[7] Cf. "Poets who have to deal with an audience not yet graduated in the school of the rights of men, and who must apply themselves to the moral constitution of the heart, would not dare to produce such a triumph as a matter of exultation" (Burke 2003, 69).

guided by conscience and then by reason (Wollstonecraft 1999, 30 – 31).[8] In contrast, Burke refers to the ancient, God-given virtues of the English:

> We are not the converts of Rousseau; we are not the disciples of Voltaire; Helvetius has made no progress amongst us.…In England we have not yet been completely embowelled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate, those inbred sentiments which are the faithful guardians, the active monitors of our duty, the true supporters of all liberal and manly morals.…We fear God; we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with duty to magistrates; with reverence to priests; and with respect to nobility (Burke 2003, 73 – 74).

In his famous pathetic passage, Burke gives the cornerstones of his British conservative "natural" view and he regards the ideas of the French Enlightenment thinkers as a fashionable fad. Notwithstanding, it is rather instructive how Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication* provocatively questions the use of enlightened words and phrases; she asks what "inbred feelings" and noble "manly morals" the English gentleman is talking about. Wollstonecraft savors and disjoints this theatrical and majestic passage into pieces, where every word she emphasizes carries weight. As she writes,

> I reverence the rights of men.—Sacred rights! for which I acquire a more profound respect, the more I look into my own mind; and, professing these heterodox opinions, I still preserve my bowels; my heart is human, beats quick with human sympathies—and *I FEAR* God!…— I fear that sublime power, whose motive for creating me must have been wise and good; and I submit to the moral laws which my reason deduces from this view of my dependence on him.—It is not his power that I fear—it is not to an arbitrary will, but to unerring reason I submit.…This fear of God makes me reverence myself (Wollstonecraft 1999, 33; italics in the original).

In her stylistic-rhetorical feat, she writes a defense of the Enlightenment, ironically incorporating Burke's earlier phrases and putting her emphasis on reason, human feelings and the natural. Gary Kelly also attributes central importance to the passage quoted above, in which Wollstonecraft, like a rational human being, declares, it is not the historical past or the political power of the day that is to judge the moral worth of human behaviour in general (Kelly 1992, 96).

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[8] Later, she maliciously adds that children learn a lot, for example, from the foolishly extravagant lifestyle of their parents – a negative example can also be useful (Wollstonecraft 1999, 30 – 31).

The author does not intend to label Burke's political conduct, or even to counteract his insecurities; she only intends to "hunt out of [the] lurking holes" of his "pernicious opinions," to present them "stripped of the gorgeous drapery in which you [Burke] have enwrapped your tyrannic principles" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 37). Wollstonecraft throughout advocates rationality over the inspired, sentimental style of the other thinker. In addition to historical and political allusions, Burke's historical-philosophical insights include those of Locke, Hume and Hobbes, but he quotes mainly from Cicero; whereas Wollstonecraft frequently refers to French thinkers alongside English philosophers, poets and even Plato. Burke's rhetoric and career are discussed in details; Wollstonecraft points out that he is not a nobleman, but has owed his success to his talent and perseverance – especially his eloquence. She refers to that Locke himself considered rhetoric as a double-edged sword (Wollstonecraft 1999, 43). As Locke states in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding:*

> But yet, if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow, that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment;... 'Tis evident how much men love to deceive, and be deceived... (Locke 2004, 452).[9]

III.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century interpreters of *Reflections* are fond of analyzing the rhetorical and aesthetic features of the text, and its first commentator is no different. Wollstonecraft is so disturbed by Burke's antique, or rather Gothic, taste for the past that she quotes his own aesthetic discourse, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), in which the sublime is revered, powerful and masculine, while the beautiful is endearing, weak and feminine. Quoting Burke, Wollstonecraft says that "little, smooth, delicate, fair" forms are the source of beauty and women, in order to make an impact on the opposite sex, must "learn to lisp, to totter in their walk" (Burke 2004, 144; quoted in Wollstonecraft 1999, 45 – 46).

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[9] The Lockean passage is the conclusion in the chapter "Of the Abuse of Words," and the very last, gendered sentence overtly names rhetoric as "the art of deceiving," claiming that "*eloquence*, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it, to suffer itself ever to be spoken against... 'tis in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived" (Locke 2004, 452, italics in the original).

The members of the weaker (fair) sex tend to neglect "manly virtues" and morality since they have to be beautiful (and senseless) to be loved. Wollstonecraft argues that the main problem with this Burkean sensualist or even libertine approach is that "the idea of beauty is independent of reason" (Ibid.), and rationality does not attribute gender to virtue: there is beauty in manly virtue, there is grace in masculine order, and weakness is the characteristic of the timid and cowardly. However, Wollstonecraft highlights the weakness, the feminine sensibility of Burke's writing; she looks at the way its politics and morality aestheticised:

> …your politics and morals, when simplified, would undermine religion and virtue to set up a spurious, sensual beauty, that has long debauched your imagination, under the specious form of natural feelings.…You love the church, your country, and its laws, you repeatedly tell us, because they deserve to be loved; but from you this is not a panegyric: weakness and indulgence… (Wollstonecraft 1999, 48 – 50).

At this point, the author of the reply rightfully reads Burke's earlier aesthetic remarks on the politician since Burke had already moved far away from the explicit distinction between the weak, lovable beauty and the formidable, admirable sublime – precisely due to the events in France and the British reactions. The militant actions of the French, who beforehand were seen as feminine, and the hesitant inertia of the powerful British contributed to the formation – or rather the blurring – of Burke's concept of the manly sublime. In his book, discussing the changes of Burke's rhetoric and style, Steven Blakemore aptly writes that the sublime has become failed beauty, "beautiful manqué," and the British display not the great or the beautiful but "the perverted mixture of the two" (Blakemore 1988, 51). Wollstonecraft sees it clearly and thus, she detects the mixing and blurring of feminine and masculine categories in the language of the work.

The nonsense (or senselessness) of the Burkean gendered distinction between the beautiful and the sublime is matched by the passage in which Wollstonecraft discusses the duality of *wit* and *judgement*. The genuine but fallible genius is a favourite theme of the age, and the author contrasts it with sober-minded and reflective judgement. In a Kantian paraphrase, she writes: "Judgment is sublime, wit beautiful; and, according to your [Burke's] own theory, they cannot exist together without impairing each other's power" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 56). In his introduction to *Philosophical Enquiry on Taste*, Burke asserts that though taste is fundamentally pseudo-general and normative, individual differences may arise from varying degrees of sensibility

and differences of experience, and that "a perfect union of wit and judgment is one of the rarest things in the world" (Burke 2004, 69). Both are faculties of the mind but creative wit, like imagination, delights in finding similarities, whereas critical judgment points out differences. On the whole, Wollstonecraft writes of *Reflections* that the readers get a generous sample of the author's taste with an overabundance of wit and rather a few examples of his reasoned, critical commentary.

According to Wollstonecraft, of Burke's "fallacies," the most virulent "animadversion" was his defense of the French clergy and his criticism of the confiscation of church property in France; since, apart from invoking the sanctity of customary law (many do so in India, for example, notes his main critic), he has little sensible argument to support his view (Wollstonecraft 1999, 51 – 52). Nor can Wollstonecraft accept the respect of the British aristocracy – she believes, as I have already indicated, that the pampered rich of her time are soft and weak because they are used to having everything ready-made. In the Age of Enlightenment, the aristocracy work against the progress of society by their outdated and selfish thinking as for the rich, talk of human rights is extraneous, an "impertinent enquiry of philosophic meddling innovation" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 53). The English noble is unwilling to do for the common good, even though, writes Wollstonecraft, it takes a true "masculine godlike affection" and an exceptional *sensibility* to do good to others, and "to contribute to the happiness of man, is the most sublime of all enjoyments" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 54 and 57).[10] The woman philosopher dreams about a welfare state of enlightened, responsible adult humans; the climax of her social and moral argumentation is this utopian passage, in which she refers back to the earlier quoted Burkean phrases on the fear of God and to her own ironic reading of them:

> If society was regulated on a more enlarged plan; if man was contented to be the friend of man, and did not seek to bury the sympathies of humanity in the servile appellation of master; if, turning his eyes from ideal regions of taste and elegance, he laboured to give the earth he inhabited all the beauty it is capable of receiving, and was ever on the watch to shed abroad all the happiness which human nature can enjoy;—he who, respecting the rights of men, wishes to convince or persuade society that this is true

[10] Her tone is utopian, and although she does suggest practical things to do, they are rather fanciful: besides the ornate mansions of the rich, there could be well-kept farms in the countryside (instead of the dirty slums of the cities), and large forests and parks should be made open to the public (Wollstonecraft 1999, 54 and 57).

> happiness and dignity, is not the cruel *oppressor* of the poor, nor a short-sighted philosopher—HE fears God and loves his fellow-creatures.—Behold the whole duty of man! (Wollstonecraft 1999, 59; italics in the original.)

In this enthusiastic though highly naive vision, Wollstonecraft's ideal community is presented as the idyllic (Rousseauvian) garden, she believes, more altruistic and less greedy people can create. Following the above passage, the author gets carried away and has to pause, which is marked by a long series of dashes in the text – presenting "authentic feelings beyond words, her silence" as Kelly remarks (1992, 99). But after the pause, she lashes out with renewed vigor at the author of *Reflections*, bitterly and contemptuously recalling Burke's description of the sufferings of the rich with his usual "rhetorical flourishes and infantine sensibility" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 60). One almost wonders where Burke put his common sense when he composed his contradictory sophisms, one-sided arguments and warped examples. After all, Wollstonecraft admits that there are still some enlightened philosophers who are skeptical about some new ideas, and her response concludes in respect for the divine law and for reason, in accordance with the earlier statement of hers that we should "build our knowledge or happiness on a rational basis" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 55).

Conclusion

Wollstonecraft states that if Burke had been born a Frenchman, he

> would have been, in spite of your [his] respect for rank and antiquity, a violent revolutionist; and deceived, as you now probably are, by the passions that cloud your reason, have termed your romantic enthusiasm an enlightened love of your country, a benevolent respect for the rights of men (Wollstonecraft 1999, 44).

Wollstonecraft displays that Burke's conception of history is aestheticised, and his writing echoes the ideas of his early work, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, where his concept of the sublime is presented by the sharp distinction that beauty (tenderness, softness) is a feminine attribute, associated with sweetness and superficiality, while the sublime (the powerful and the decisive) is a masculine attribute, associated with nobility and depth. In her response, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, Wollstonecraft herself represents the reverential grandeur of the sublime previously described by Burke – it is what we would expect from the innovative, the revolutionary, and the proto-feminist. In *Reflections*, on the other hand, perhaps dismayed by the

sublime power of terror, Burke reinterprets his earlier views: the sublime is relegated to the background, meanwhile the eroticized femininity of beauty is replaced by "the feminized chivalric virtues of honor and reverence" (Hinnant 2005, 33). The French Revolution was aesthetically unintelligible for Burke because it went beyond the previous dichotomy: it destroyed all that was sublime and beautiful, thus confusing not only patriarchal-hierarchical social relations but also categories of taste and gender. The English theorist was unable to see the outlines of a new concept of the sublime, but her critic, as a thinking woman, was. In judging the revolution, Burke retreated, stepping back into the past and Wollstonecraft looked forward, into the future. Their thinking took them in opposite directions, for, O'Neill writes, conservatism saw the possibility of popular democracy as the end of civilisation, but (proto)feminism redefined civilisation precisely by emancipation, by extending human rights to women – however, both adjectives, "conservative" and "feminist" appear later with the names of the two authors (O'Neill 2007, 10).

Granted, the response from Wollstonecraft was hastily prepared in a rush, but in its rhetoric it did an excellent job of mimicking Burke's inspired, sentimental slapdash and provocatively reversing the author's opposition of masculine rationality and feminine sensibility. She inevitably follows the line of thought of the philosopher fathers and inserts herself into the gendered rhetoric of her debater, whereas struggling to find her own vocabulary as a female author (Gunther-Canada 2001 and Sapiro 1992). She repeatedly calls Burke to account for clarity and common sense in the name of reason. "[Y]ou have a mortal antipathy to reason," she writes in her opening, and then, in reference to Burke's Gothic and medieval allusions, she asks whether the author really "recommend[s] night as the fittest time to analyze a ray of light" (Wollstonecraft 1999, 8 and 11). The reply letter, first published anonymously, was harshly criticized, and when it was revealed that a woman was discussing "the rights of men," gallant mockery was allowed to take hold by correcting the personal pronouns (with a reference to the author as *she*, instead of *he*). One reviewer objected precisely that a woman should write about women's rights rather than men's (Kelly 1992, 101 – 102). Wollstonecraft took the admonition seriously (she also had a sense of humor) and in the title of her next work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she does indeed advocate women's rights – the gendered reception of her earlier work must have been a sufficient impetus. And in 1794, she published *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of*

the French Revolution, inspired by the works of her fellow correspondent, the historian Catharine Macaulay (1731 – 1791). The essay had been well received, although some of its commentators praised the author as "a Lady of masculine masterly understanding" (Taylor 2003, 49).[11] However, Wollstonecraft no longer argued with anyone: by that time, she knew her innate human rights and had found her own voice.

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[11] It was John Adams, the second President of the United States from 1797 to 1801, who had the appreciatory (and gendered) notice on Wollstonecraft's historical work (Taylor 2003, 49).

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