

Revisiting Burke's Critique of Enthusiasm

Abstract: Edmund Burke is often considered an arch-critic of enthusiasm in its various religious and secular forms. This article complicates this understanding by situating Burke's writings against the backdrop of eighteenth century treatments of enthusiasm as a disturbance of the imagination. The early Burke, I show, was actually sympathetic to attempts by the Third Earl of Shaftesbury and others to rehabilitate enthusiasm for politics and rescue it from popular derision. Next, I reveal how Burke firmly resisted attempts to frame anti-Protestant violence in Ireland in terms of religious delusion or enthusiasm, and was alert to the political dangers posed by policies legitimated by that framing. Finally, I call into the question the close association often posited between the enthusiasm Burke saw in the French Revolution and earlier religious enthusiasms of the seventeenth century.

In reality, you know that I am no enthusiast, but [according] to the powers that God has given me, a sober and reflecting man.

Edmund Burke, Letter to French Laurence, 10 February 1797 ¹

These lines, written towards the end of his life, suggest that Edmund Burke believed his freedom from enthusiasm to be self-evident, at least to his close acquaintances. His political opponents, however, had frequently proven more difficult to convince of his reflective sobriety. Mary Wollstonecraft accused him of succumbing too easily to the ‘fumes’ of emotion and of grounding his opposition to the doctrine of the rights of man less on reflection than on ‘romantic enthusiasm.’² Even his own Whig Parliamentary allies grew alarmed by the emotional pitch he frequently reached in the course of a Parliamentary speech and eventually threatened to have him committed as insane if he failed to exercise more control over his passions.³ When faced with an exodus of these same allies from the House of Commons during one of his more blistering denunciations of the French revolutionaries Burke could only lure them back

¹ Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (general Editor Thomas Copeland), IX, ed. R.B. McDowell and John A. Woods (Chicago, 1970) p 238. Apart from Burke’s correspondence, his co-authored *Account of the European Settlements in the Americas* and the *Notebook*, citations of his texts are from *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Paul Langford (general editor) (Oxford, 1981). The author would like to thank Iain Hampsher Monk, two anonymous HPT reviewers, Mary Dietz, James Farr, Jennifer Pitts, and Ilya Winham for valuable commentary on an earlier draft of this article.

² Mary Wollstonecraft, Sylvania Tomaselli ed. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 45-46.

³ Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York, 1977), p 181. In response to a complaint from Boswell that Burke was too frequently represented as insane, Samuel Johnson quipped: ‘if a man will appear extravagant as he does, and cry, can he wonder that he is represented as mad.’ Cited in Douglas Archibald, ‘Edmund Burke and the Conservative Imagination’ *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr*, 10 (1995), p 133.

by desperately pleading his sanity: 'I am not mad... but speak the words of truth of soberness!'⁴

While most of Burke's commentators allow for, and in some cases even admire, his apoplectic political passion they also agree that Burke was a steadfast defender of moderation and a skeptic of enthusiastic excess.⁵ Michael Freeman's description of Burke as a 'philosopher of moderation' seems well deserved.⁶ Few other thinkers have elevated 'the lesson of moderation' to the status of divine instruction or argued so forcefully the necessity of placing our necks under moderation's 'yoke.'⁷ Similarly, Burke's castigation of the 'warm and inexperienced enthusiasts' at the helm of the revolutionary government in France and their radical English supporters has led Burke scholars to paint a portrait of him as an arch-critic of enthusiasm in its religious and secular forms.⁸ According to this portrait, Burke recognized in the atheist French *philosophes* a species of willful subjectivism reminiscent of religious enthusiasts of seventeenth century England whose imagined inspiration and refusal to conform to social constraints occasioned widespread political unrest. Most famously, J.G.A Pocock credited Burke with expanding the definition of enthusiasm from the narrow sense of a mistaken belief in divine inspiration to a general psychological pathology encompassing all varieties of vain intellectual presumption.⁹ Stephen K. White similarly reads Burke as attending to the 'familiar disease of religious fanaticism or enthusiasm,' a socio-medical pathology that

⁴ Cited in Archibald, 'Edmund Burke and the Conservative Imagination', p. 133.

⁵ Archibald notes that Burke's 'emotional equilibrium' was often precarious, even though he was the 'post-Reformation world's greatest apologist for order, stability and hierarchy'. Ibid., p. 132.

⁶ Michael Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism* (Oxford, 1980), p. 169.

⁷ Burke, 'Tracts Relative to the Popery Laws', *Writings and Speeches*, IX, p. 359 and 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' *Writings and Speeches*, VIII, p. 152.

⁸ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Writings and Speeches*, VIII p. 67.

⁹ See J.G.A. Pocock, 'Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm' in ed. Keith Michael Baker, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (Oxford, 1987).

encapsulated the modern subject's striving for autonomy and mastery.¹⁰ Finally, for Anthony La Vopa, Burke viewed Jacobin ideology as 'directly descended from the 'enthusiastic' excesses of Christianity,' its 'anti-Christian animus' notwithstanding.¹¹

There is admittedly a good deal of evidence to support this scholarly consensus. The appearance of what Horace Walpole called the first instance on earth of 'enthusiasm without religion' in the French Revolution undoubtedly provided an impetus for Burke's forceful critique of enthusiasm in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.¹² Nevertheless, the portrait of Burke as a kind of physician seeking to diagnose and cure the disease of enthusiasm is a deeply misleading one, or so I shall argue here. While it is true that Burke participated to a degree in the socio-medical pathologization of enthusiasm so prevalent on the eighteenth century, he also resisted it in crucial respects and was wary of the dangerous political purposes the invocation of enthusiasm could be made to serve. Burke, I aim to show, was often highly suspicious of attempts to impute psychological derangement to 'enthusiasts' and 'fanatics' and argued instead that the causes of fanatical behavior should be sought in material and environmental conditions rather than in an overly active or 'diseased' imagination. This suspicion of the pathologization of enthusiasm was grounded in an account of human physiology first articulated in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* which dramatically downplayed the extent to which the imagination could cause perturbations of the mind on its own. I further argue that Burke's hostility to

¹⁰ Stephen K. White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (London, 1994), p. 73.

¹¹ Anthony J. La Vopa, 'The Philosopher and the Schwärmer: On the Career of a German Epithet from Luther to Kant' in ed. Anthony J. La Vopa and Lawrence E. Klein, *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650-1850* (San Marino, California, 1998), p. 103. Jon Mee has similarly argued that Jacobinism was to Burke a 'latter day enthusiasm' shorn of its religious garb. See his *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford, 2003), p. 8.

¹² Cited in Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation*, p. 84.

the enthusiasm of the French revolution stemmed from his fear that, unlike earlier enthusiasms, it would not exhaust itself quickly. Instead, a people taken in by this new atheistic enthusiasm might be *irrevocably* turned away from religious belief, with disastrous consequences for political society.

With these ends in view, the article proceeds in five sections. In the first I briefly map out the socio-medical discourse that associated enthusiasm with a disease of the imagination, and its co-optation by Shaftesbury, Hume, Smith, and other thinkers known to Burke. The second section considers Burke's early intention, evident from an unpublished notebook from the 1750's, to rehabilitate enthusiasm for politics over and against its detractors. In the third section I show how Burke nevertheless expressed anxiety about the de-stabilizing effects enthusiasm could have if it spread contagiously through the political community at large. I turn, in the fourth section, to Burke's writings on Ireland to reveal how in this context he adamantly rejected what he considered prejudiced and malicious efforts to represent Catholic Irish resistance to Protestant domination as the product of deluded enthusiasm or psychological derangement, representations that his contemporary David Hume was deeply complicit in. Finally, in the closing section I return to Burke's response to the French Revolution to show how a more nuanced appreciation of Burke's pre-revolutionary theorizations of enthusiasm can tell us much about his opposition to events across the English Channel.

(I) Eighteenth century enthusiasm: hypocrisy or disturbance of the imagination?

When Burke opened his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by drawing an unflattering comparison between Reverend Richard Price, a prominent representative of

pro-revolutionary opinion in England, and the religious enthusiasts of the mid-seventeenth century, he deliberately played upon popular suspicion of enthusiasm. That suspicion derived from two influential critiques prevalent at the time. The first of these considered enthusiasm to be a form of hypocrisy, a sort of feigned inspiration used by sectarians or false prophets to garner political influence.¹³ The second critique, increasingly common towards the beginning of the eighteenth century, framed enthusiasm as kind of malady resulting from what John Locke called a ‘warmed or over weaning brain.’¹⁴ In this vein, David Hume and Adam Smith depicted enthusiasts as narcissists whose overly heated imaginations had rendered unsociable.¹⁵ So reconceived, the enthusiast appeared under this new medical paradigm to be less a scheming dissimulator than a deluded invalid in need of curing.

By mid-century anxiety about the disruptive effects of enthusiasm had begun to give way to optimism that its worst excesses could be successfully tamed and regulated.¹⁶ Adam Smith hoped that a government policy of religious toleration, combined with increased education in science (and the burgeoning ‘sciences of man’ in particular), could wean people away from the gloomy and melancholic habits of mind that encouraged

¹³ Henry More’s 1662 definition of the enthusiast as one who labors under the ‘misconceit of being inspired’ still competed with *alongside* earlier seventeenth century understandings of enthusiasts as cunning dissimulators. Henry More, *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus or, A Brief Discourse of The Nature, Causes, kinds, and Cure of Enthusiasm*, Augustan Reprint Society. Publication no. 118 (Los Angeles, 1966), p. 2.

¹⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Alexander Campbell Fraser ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004) p 600. The best account of the medical critique of enthusiasm remains Michael Heyd “*Be Sober and Reasonable: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1995).

¹⁵ The popularity of Locke’s definition can partly be attested to by Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary entry on enthusiasm that describes it as a defect arising from a ‘hot imagination.’ On the influence of Locke’s definition of enthusiasm on Hume see S.P Foster ‘Different Religions and the Differences they make: Hume on the Religious Effects of Religious Ideology’ in Stanley Tweyman ed. *David Hume: Critical Assessments* (London and New York, 1995), p. 383.

¹⁶ Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation*, p. 3.

enthusiasm.¹⁷ However, even absent such remedies, several figures associated with the Scottish Enlightenment held out the hope that enthusiasm may ultimately be *self-regulating* simply by virtue of the fact that violent and fitful passions could not be sustained over long periods of time. The frequent use of the term ‘paroxysm’ in association with enthusiastic raptures captures well this sense of a pathology whose violence would be matched only by its brevity.¹⁸ Taking it as given that enthusiasm must soon burn itself out, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury prescribed benign neglect or gentle ridicule as the most effective response of all to its appearance in a community. He praised the policy of ancient Rome where enthusiasts, ‘being let alone,’ rarely ‘raged to that degree as to occasion bloodshed, wars, persecutions and devastations in the world.’¹⁹ Hume was equally sanguine concerning the self-limiting nature of enthusiastic outbursts, hypothesizing that they must, like ‘thunder and tempest’ quickly ‘exhaust themselves’ leaving those effected ‘more gentle and moderate than before.’²⁰ Even the most ‘violent enthusiasm,’ he later wrote in his *History of England*, is ‘too strong for the weak nerves to sustain.’²¹ Hume’s friend Edward Gibbon likewise acknowledged the possibility that a

¹⁷ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 336-441. For an extensive discussion of the Scottish Enlighteners attempt to counter enthusiasm with the ‘science of man’ see James Farr, ‘Political Science and the Enlightenment of Enthusiasm’ *American Political Science Review*, 82 (1988).

¹⁸ Enthusiasm was often associated with the paroxysms of hysteria and epilepsy. Seguin Henry Jackson in his *Treatise of Sympathy* of 1781 was ‘inclined to place under the same head of sympathy, as an irregular *imitative faculty*, those inordinate convulsive actions which arise... on seeing another in the agony of an epileptic paroxysm.’ Cited in Evelyn Forget, ‘Evocations of Sympathy: Sympathetic Imagery in Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Physiology’, *History of Political Economy* 35, Annual Supplement (2003), p 287.

¹⁹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence Klein. (Cambridge, 2000), p. 8.

²⁰ David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), p. 76-77.

²¹ David Hume, *The History of England VI* (Indianapolis, 1983), p. 142.

human character could occasionally succumb to a ‘temporary enthusiasm’ but was assured that it would always ‘return by degrees to its proper and natural level.’²²

Before turning to Burke’s texts, it is important to note that not everyone was prepared to stigmatize enthusiasts. In his recent study of fanaticism, Alberto Toscano observes that enthusiasm was sometimes defended as a ‘nobler cousin of fanaticism’ that should not be tainted by association with its unruly relative.²³ Particularly in literary circles of eighteenth century Britain, efforts were afoot to rehabilitate enthusiasm as a vital spur to human creativity.²⁴ Shaftesbury initiated this campaign by distinguishing the dangerous delusions of a religious fanatic from a more ‘noble enthusiasm’ that served to elevate human beings above the level of mere animal life.²⁵ He even went so far as to declare enthusiasm a ‘natural’ passion, one that could occasionally ‘go awry’ and morph into fanaticism, but which at least had the virtue of inspiring us with ‘something more than ordinary’ that could raise us ‘above ourselves.’²⁶

Exactly what Shaftesbury was aiming at in recuperating enthusiasm in this way has been the subject of some scholarly dispute. The second French translator of his *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* saw little original in his project, claiming that the exploration of a positive ‘poetic enthusiasm’ was already well underway among several

²² Edward Gibbon cited in Abraham Phillip Persky, ‘The Changing Concepts of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’ (Dissertation, Stanford, 1959), p. 171. In her reply to Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Wollstonecraft acknowledged the Shaftesburyian connection between enthusiasm and creativity but chose to fold it into a developmental narrative whereby ‘the genuine enthusiasm of genius’ was restricted to the ‘infancy of civilization’ before its ‘wings’ were clipped by the development of reason. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 28.

²³ Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London, 2010), p. xxi.

²⁴ A rehabilitation discussed at length in Shaun Irlam, *Elations: The Poetics of Enthusiasm in 18th Century Britain* (Stanford, 1999).

²⁵ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, p. 28 and 352.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

French authors inexplicably overlooked by the ‘English philosopher.’²⁷ Evidence from Shaftesbury’s personal diaries, however, suggests that his preferred enthusiasm had a strong Stoic dimension. In a gloss on a passage from Marcus Aurelius, the earl urges himself to replace the enthusiasm of ‘false Images’ with an ‘Enthusiasm without Deceit,’ a likely reference to the Stoic doctrine that a clear sighted view of the operation of the cosmos could result in a rapturous embrace of Providential order.²⁸ Significantly for Shaftesbury, therefore, enthusiasm need not be a source of delusion; instead, in its ‘noble’ guise it could represent a moment of mental clarity. Whatever the overriding reason behind it, however, Shaftesbury’s revaluation of enthusiasm forms an important part of the backdrop against which Burke’s own critical engagement with enthusiasm, to which we now turn, must be considered.

(II) Burke’s cautious rehabilitation of enthusiasm

Burke’s initial ambitions were literary and his early days in London saw him engage with several thinkers grappling with the new sensationalist currents in moral philosophy including Adam Smith, whose Shaftesbury-inspired *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Burke reviewed positively for the *Annual Register* in 1759. Two years previous Burke had made his own contribution to these debates through his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. As Frans de Bruyn has recently noted, the argument of Book II, Section IV of the *Philosophical*

²⁷ M. Lacombe cited in Jan Goldstein, ‘Enthusiasm or Imagination? Eighteenth-Century Smear Words in Comparative National Context’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60 (1997), p. 48.

²⁸ Shaftesbury, ‘The *Askemata*’ in ed. Wolfram Benda, Christine Jackson-Holzberg, Friedrich A. Uehlein and Erwin Woff, *Complete Works, Selected Letters and Posthumous Writings* II, 5 (Stuttgart, 2007), p. 217.

Enquiry provided ample fodder to the numerous critics mentioned above who wished to present Burke as an enthusiast incapable of checking his excessively florid language.²⁹ There Burke insists that, when trying to move the passions of an audience, a speaker or writer should prefer obscurity of language over clarity, which is an ‘enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever.’³⁰ A ‘fanatic preacher’ will therefore hold great sway over his listeners, Burke continues, precisely because his ravings are so indistinct.³¹ Were the preacher’s visions rendered more exact, then the gain in clarity would be accompanied by a dampening of his affective power. As those who satirized him as an enthusiast would have keenly noted, Burke thus indirectly pays homage to the unique persuasive power of the religiously inflamed.

These remarks in the *Philosophical Enquiry* fall a long way short of an endorsement of enthusiasm, of course. A notebook from the 1750’s, however, contains firmer evidence that Burke, like Shaftesbury, was interested in rehabilitating enthusiasm and rescuing those who lay claim to inspiration from popular derision. The notebook, first published in 1957 by H.V.F. Somerset as *A notebook of Edmund Burke*, contains a fragmentary essay entitled ‘Religion of no Efficacy Considered as a State Engine.’ In that essay Burke bemoans the fact that many clergy live in fear of being ‘shamed and frightened at the Imputation of enthusiasm’ and reassures them instead that

God has been pleased to give Mankind an Enthusiasm to
Supply the Want of Reason; and truly, Enthusiasm comes

²⁹ Frans De Bruyn, ‘‘Expressive Uncertainty:’ Edmund Burke’s Theory of the Sublime and Eighteenth Century Conceptions of Metaphor’ in ed. Koen Vermier and Michael Fuch Deckard *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry* (London: 2012), p. 274.

³⁰ Burke, ‘Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful’, *Writings and Speeches I*, pp. 232-233.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

nearer the great and comprehensive Reason in its effects, though not in the Manner of Operation, than the Common Reason does; which works on confined, narrow, common, and therefore plausible Topics. The former is the lot of the very few. The latter is common; and fit enough for common affairs – to buy and sell, to teach grammar and the like; but it is utterly unfit to meddle with Politics, Divinity and Philosophy. But Enthusiasm is a sort of instinct, in those that possess it, that operates, like all Instincts, better than a mean species of Reason.³²

As the private musings of a young man (Burke was in his twenties when he wrote them) we should be cautious not to overstate the significance of these lines. Nevertheless, there are several striking elements of Burke's description of enthusiasm that should be marked. The first is that Burke considers the relationship between enthusiasm and reason to be complementary rather than antithetical. Instead of taking for granted the usual eighteenth century opposition between reason and enthusiasm, Burke posits the latter as supplying

³² Edmund Burke, *A notebook of Edmund Burke: Poems, Characters, Essays and Other Sketches in the Hands of Edmund and William Burke now Printed for the First Time in their Entirety and Edited by H.V.F. Somerset* (Cambridge, 1957) p. 68. As Richard Bourke has recently observed, Somerset's title is misleading in that the notebook in question is only one of several kept by William Burke. Several of the essays in this particular notebook were authored by Edmund and some were even written in his own hand. See Richard Bourke, 'Party, Parliament, and Conquest in Newly Ascribed Burke Manuscripts', *The Historical Journal* 55 (2012), p. 620. Somerset considers the passage cited here to be 'almost certainly by Edmund Burke.' Somerset, *A Notebook of Edmund Burke*, p. 65. The general argument of 'Religion of no Efficacy Considered as a State Engine' is that religion cannot be made to serve the ends of politics. Burke's point, I believe, is that it is an affront to religion to reduce its value to political utility. But this does not exclude the possibility that those endowed with enthusiasm may be uniquely equipped to perform extraordinary political feats.

the 'want' of the former.³³ Later in the same essay he describes their relationship as mutually supportive, recommending that we 'use our Enthusiasm to elevate and expand our Reasoning; and our Reasoning to check the roving of our Enthusiasm.'³⁴

Second, there is a notable ambiguity in the passage concerning what exactly enthusiasm is and who is affected by it. Burke begins by defining enthusiasm not as an exceptional moment of divine inspiration, but as a permanent gift bequeathed by God to human beings for their continuous use. The idea that enthusiasm may be a constitutive part of human psychology rather than an isolated instance of divine intervention similarly bears the mark of Shaftesbury, for whom enthusiasm could refer to 'whatever was sublime in human passions.'³⁵ By the end of the passage, however, Burke has taken to calling it an 'instinct' that not everyone possesses to the same degree. While most of us muddle through the more banal tasks of life with a help of a narrow, petty form of reason, 'those that possess' the instinct of enthusiasm are fit to emulate the 'very few' whose 'great and comprehensive Reason' equips them for higher sorts of tasks in more exalted domains. By declaring it to be an instinct, Burke naturalizes enthusiasm, while leaving open the possibility that it may be more finely honed in some people than in others.

Third, not to be missed is Burke's inclusion of politics as one of the exalted domains within which the enthused may excel. Far from locating the trucking and bartering of political life in the province of 'common affairs,' Burke singles out politics as an exclusive arena in which this inspired minority of enthusiasts can display their abilities, an arena which presumably should be closed to those 'utterly unfit to meddle' in

³³ On the opposition between reason and enthusiasm in the eighteenth century see Susie I. Tucker, *Enthusiasm: A Study in Semantic Change* (Cambridge, 1972).

³⁴ Burke, *A notebook of Edmund Burke*, pp. 68-69.

³⁵ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, p. 27.

it. Again, the unorthodox nature of this view is important to underline.³⁶ By entrusting politics to enthusiasts, Burke signals a readiness to challenge the common assumption that those professing divine inspiration should be marginalized as threats to public order. Moreover, by presenting the enthusiasts as a kind of exalted few, he also calls into question the frequent association of enthusiasm with what Adam Smith called the ‘inferior ranks of people.’³⁷ No longer the irrational rage of those excluded from political power, enthusiasm for the early Burke is an instinct nourishing a select group of politicians.³⁸

What specific qualities distinguish Burke’s enthusiast from the greater part of mankind? The notebook just discussed offers little further guidance here but in other writings of the same period Burke is more forthcoming with examples of different sorts of enthusiasts and the feats they are capable of. The *Account of the European Settlements in America*, co-authored with his close friend and possible distant relative William Burke, is particularly rich in this regard.³⁹ In this brief narration of the European colonization of the Americas, the Burkes invoke the power of enthusiasm for a variety of explanatory

³⁶ Michael W. McConnell calls Burke’s choice of words in this passage ‘remarkable’ precisely because enthusiasm was considered a ‘term of opprobrium’ politically. See his ‘Edmund Burke’s Tolerant Establishment’ in ed. Noel B. Reynolds and W. Cole Durham *Religious Liberty in Western Thought* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003), p. 208.

³⁷ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 436.

³⁸ As Richard Bourke has noted, Burke would repeatedly highlight the need for a ‘natural aristocracy’ to guarantee public virtue. These passages suggest that Burke saw enthusiasts as potential candidates for such an elite. Richard Bourke, ‘Edmund Burke and Enlightenment Sociability’, *History of Political Thought* XXI (2000), p. 640.

³⁹ Edmund Burke and William Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America: containing an accurate description of their extent, climate, productions, trade, genius, and dispositions of their inhabitants, the interests of the several powers of Europe with respect to those settlements, and their political and commercial views with regard to each other. A new edition, illustrated with maps* (New ed. London, 1808. *The Making of the Modern World*. Gale, 2011). Although the work was a collaborative effort, there is a growing consensus that Edmund Burke should be considered the preeminent voice. F.P. Lock goes so far as to attribute ‘any remark of superior insight’ to Edmund. F.P. Lock. *Edmund Burke Vol.1 1730-1784* (Oxford, 2008), p. 127. Richard Bourke follows Lock in assuming that the ‘philosophical contributions’ of the text ‘belong to Edmund.’ See his ‘Edmund Burke and the Politics of Conquest’ *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007), p. 425.

purposes, adopting different conventional understandings of the concept as appropriate. For the most part, the Burkes discuss enthusiasm in the sense we find in the notebook, that is, as a form of instinct that enables individuals to take on challenges that usually lie beyond common human comprehension. For example, the intrepidity of Christopher Columbus is attributed to ‘a sort of enthusiasm’ that enabled him to shun the ‘insults and presumptuous judgments of the ignorant’ who doubted him prior to his voyage.⁴⁰

In other passages in the *Account*, however, the Burkes have recourse to earlier seventeenth century understandings of enthusiasm as a kind of hypocrisy. Defined in this manner, enthusiasm appears less like an instinct implanted by God than a particular talent for dissimulation that can be cultivated for political ends. In a striking move, the Burkes even associate enthusiasm with charismatic rule. In their account of pre-conquest Peru, the celebrated Inca leader Manco Capac emerges as a ‘prince of great genius’ largely because he had that necessary ‘mixture of enthusiasm, which fits a man to make great changes, and to be a legislator of a forming nation.’⁴¹ The Burkes find in Capac’s character a salutary combination of hypocrisy and charisma, one that uniquely equipped him to be lawgiver to the hitherto disunited Inca. Capac ‘united and civilized’ this ‘dispersed and barbarous’ people, the Burkes suggest, by pretending to be descended from the Sun God. Once the majority of the ‘naturally superstitious’ Inca people had bought the ruse they offered him an obedience that was ‘filial rather than slavish.’⁴²

Capac is genuinely endowed with an instinct for politics which enabled him to lure his subjects into thinking that he truly represented a divine presence. Elsewhere in his early writings, however, Burke recognized the ever-present danger that those with

⁴⁰ Edmund Burke and William Burke *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, p 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p 103.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

such an instinct for governing others could just as easily delude themselves as deceive those they purport to rule. Not every enthusiast was as successful as Capac at keeping the notion that he is a vehicle of a higher power in check and subordinate to their political aims. That Burke was alive to this tension between the enthusiast's need to elevate himself above others, and the concomitant risk that such elevation could result in a vain subjectivism, is evident from the way it plays itself out in his famous defense of party politics, the 1770 *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*.

In *Thoughts* Burke appeals to the example of the enthusiast *both* to illustrate the need for politicians to raise themselves above the base concerns of the majority around them *and* at the same time to warn them against the illusion of self-sufficiency to which the excessive assertion of independence can lead. In enumerating the qualities befitting a Member of the House of Commons, he is careful to include a 'spirit of independence carried to some degree of enthusiasm' and contrasts that quality with the servile dependence of the man of faction determined to ingratiate himself to the Court rather than serve the public good.⁴³ On the other hand, Burke is also keen to point out that a party of individuals overly infused with such a spirit of independence would prove collectively impotent. The distance the Parliamentarian cultivates between himself and those around him must also bow to some limits (including the constraints set by the balanced constitutional order Burke composed *Thoughts* to defend), partly because effective political action requires a disciplined and controlled cooperation among actors committed to combating commonly perceived evils. 'No man,' Burke cautions, 'who is not inflamed by vain glory into enthusiasm, can flatter himself that his single, unsupported, desultory, unsystematic endeavors are of power to defeat the subtle designs and united Cabals of

⁴³ Burke, 'Thoughts on the Present Discontents', *Writings and Speeches* II, p. 296.

ambitious citizens.⁴⁴ The figure of the enthusiast now serves Burke's new rhetorical purpose of underscoring the dangers that can arise when the spirit of independence is corrupted by vanity. The consequence is to make Burke's overall rhetorical strategy in the *Thoughts* amount to a (almost) contradictory appeal to the heroic sensibilities of his fellow Whig MPs. To become heroically independent individuals, they must adjust themselves to the often un-heroic, communal work of party politics.

What the foregoing suggests is that Burke's most effective political enthusiast is frequently one in whom the exaltation arising from the belief in a personal divine mission competes with a sense of individual limitation. This all depends, however, on enthusiasm remaining the preserve of the exalted few. The elevation of the enthusiast can be achieved only if the majority persists in its 'narrow, common' endeavors. If the same sense of exaltation were to spread to the population at large then enthusiasm would quickly revert to being a threat to political authority. As we shall see presently, this fear of a contagious enthusiasm was a great source of anxiety for Burke and several of his contemporaries.

(III) The horizontal contagion of enthusiasm

Recently scholars have been keen to emphasize Burke's indebtedness to Scottish Enlightenment physiologies of the passions and in particular his endorsement, in the *Philosophical Enquiry*, of a version of the thesis that passions could be transmitted from

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 315.

‘one breast to another’ via sympathy.⁴⁵ This influence extended, I submit, to Burke’s own early views on the alarming social consequences that could result from an enthusiasm that has become contagious. Burke’s early appreciation for the enthusiast, explored above, was contingent on their sense of exaltation and empowerment remaining restricted to those few who could direct their instincts towards laudable political ends. Like the Scottish Enlighteners, the idea of that the population at large might become endowed with a similar sense of power was a cause for concern for Burke.

If we turn once more to the *Account* we find alongside the Burkes’ appreciation for the role of enthusiasm in buttressing vertical relations of authority a fear that its horizontal spread could undermine that authority and degenerate into the violent frenzy of the mob. The ‘enthusiasm of horror and fury’ that accompanied the Indian ritualized torture of prisoners captured in war serves as a particularly graphic illustration of this fear.⁴⁶ In these passages the capacity for enthusiasm to threaten established order is signaled by a perverse effect it has on traditional gender roles. In lines that anticipate Burke’s later disgust at the French ‘furies of hell’ leading the October March on

⁴⁵ Burke, ‘Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful’ *Writings and Speeches* I, p. 221. The concept of sympathy, while not unique to the Scottish Enlightenment, nevertheless occupied a central place in the debate over moral sensationalism. Burke scholarship currently abounds with commentary on Burkean sympathy. Jennifer Pitts has made the case that, in Burke’s eyes, ‘a failure of sympathy’ on the part of the British public at large was at the root of the colonial travesty in India. See her *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Liberal Imperialism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005), p. 74. Luke Gibbons similarly locates a Burkean ‘sympathetic sublime’ that allows for trans-cultural acknowledgement of suffering and oppression in his *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Politics, Aesthetics and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) chapter 3. Daniel I. O’Neill has done most to explore the full extent of Burke’s debt to the Scottish Enlightenment in general, although he focuses more on Burke’s appropriation of the Scottish stadial theory of history than on the concept of sympathy. See *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization and Democracy* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 2007). Others have been more inclined to emphasize imitation, another of the links in Burke’s ‘great chain of society,’ as the key category in Burke’s social theory. See particularly William R. Musgrave, ‘That Monstrous Fiction’: Radical Agency and Aesthetic Ideology in Burke’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 36 (1997) and Terry Eagleton, ‘Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke’, *History Workshop* 28 (1989), pp. 53-62. Burke refers to the ‘great chain of society’ at ‘Philosophical Enquiry’ *Writings and Speeches* II, p. 220.

⁴⁶ Edmund Burke and William Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, p. 149.

Versailles, the Indian women who participated in the collective torture are charged with forgetting 'the human as well as the female nature' and with transforming themselves 'into something worse than furies.'⁴⁷ Far from being a divine instinct that elevates human beings, enthusiasm in this perverted form is a force for degeneracy.

If Burke shared the Scots' morbid fascination with the destructive potential of contagious enthusiasm, two further pieces of evidence from the *Account* suggest he also shared Hume's faith that such contagions were bound to quickly subside and leave a more 'gentle and moderate' politics in their wake.⁴⁸ First, loud echoes of Hume's position on the temporality of enthusiasm are discernible from the Burkes' treatment of the Puritan community in Salem, Massachusetts. In telling the story of the frenzied witch-hunt that erupted there in 1692, the Burkes revert to the Scottish Enlightenment stereotype of the enthusiast as a deluded figure infected with a malady that could be easily transmitted to others. Once the delusion that witchcraft was present in the community took hold it 'spread like some epidemical disease' with the fury of those afflicted augmenting 'in proportion as this gloom of imagination increased.'⁴⁹ Ultimately however, as Hume's thesis would predict, this 'last paroxysm of the puritanick enthusiasm in New England' was self-limiting. Once the initial 'violent fit' was over, the Burkes write, the people of Salem quickly grew 'much like the rest of mankind in their manners' and were much 'abated of their prosecuting spirit.'⁵⁰ The implication again is

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 150. See Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' *Writings and Speeches* VIII, p. 122. This comparison is also made by Daniel I. O'Neill and Margaret Kohn in 'A Tale of Two Indias: Burke and Mill on Empire and Slavery in the West Indies and America' *Political Theory* 34 (2006), p. 197. On Burke's anxiety about the rise of 'political women' in the French Revolution see Linda Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke and Mill* (Ithaca, 1994), pp. 85 - 90.

⁴⁸ Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, p. 76.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 361 and 363.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 365.

that enthusiasm is as much of a burden on a community as on the nervous system of an individual and that in both cases it cannot be expected to last for long.

The Burkes' second application of the Humean argument is of potentially greater interest. When accounting for the success of the puritan colonists at Plymouth Rock, they find that the same 'enthusiasm which was reversing everything at home' and which must be considered 'dangerous in every settled community' was subsequently converted to 'a principle of life and vigor' once they arrived in the hostile environment of the New World.⁵¹ The reason, the Burkes find, is that a community united around a belief in divine inspiration eventually could self-impose a strict conformity of 'exact and sober manners' as 'a substitute for a proper subordination.' Without an established system of manners to subvert, the enthusiasts had nothing to direct their destructive ferocity against and so diverted it into the constructive task of establishing a new code of manners stricter than anything they had challenged in England. A force subversive of authority in one context could, with time, shore it up in another.

(IV) Ireland and the enthusiasm of the oppressed

We have already seen how Burke from early on shared the unease of many of his contemporaries about the sympathetic contagiousness of enthusiasm, even if he also shared their optimism that the affliction and social disruption it occasioned were fated to be short lived. If we transport these insights into some of Burke's writings on Ireland, however, a far more complex picture emerges. A pervasive theme of those writings is that enthusiasm arises not only from imaginations heated by religious fervor but also as

⁵¹ Edmund Burke and William Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, p. 353.

the unanticipated by-product of mismanaged government. Ireland's history of violent religious strife seems at first glance to make it a perfect illustrative case of the ills attending religious fanaticism. As I show presently, however, Burke denied that the medical paradigm of enthusiasm could be applied there without first allowing for circumstances unique to Irish society. Moreover, he was painfully aware of the malicious ends that the false imputation of enthusiasm to its inhabitants had served. To illustrate exactly how Burke diverged from the Scottish Enlighteners on this subject, I take as my point of departure an actual disagreement that took place between Burke and Hume in London over the latter's treatment of Irish religious violence in his *History of England*. Far from being of merely anecdotal interest, I maintain, this quarrel offers a gateway to understanding Burke's keen understanding of the complex relationship between historical narratives and the violence they purport to explain.

At the origin of the dispute between Burke and Hume was the latter's account of the massacre of English Protestants in Ireland by local Catholics in 1641, an event that marked the beginning of a period of unrest culminating in Cromwell's invasion of 1649. Hume makes clear in his *History* that he considered this violence to be entirely 'without provocation,' an act of 'cruelty derived from no cause.'⁵² Given Hume's methodological commitment to understanding, via sympathy, the motivations of the historical agents he describes, this was no small charge. In this case, Hume suggests that the impossibility of sympathetic identification on the part of the historian derived from the fact that there was little human to identify with. Even 'the pity, inherent in all human breasts,' Hume writes, was 'destroyed by that contagion of example which transports men beyond all the usual

⁵² Hume, *History of England V* (Indianapolis, 1983), p. 342.

motives of conduct and behavior.⁵³ With all conventional explanations seemingly unavailable to him, Hume attributes the massacre to the spread of an ‘enraged superstition’ which, when mixed with Anglophobic prejudices, had reduced the Irish to the level of the ‘inhuman.’⁵⁴ So far beyond the pale of humanity were these ‘bigoted assassins,’ Hume relates with barely concealed disgust, that they took ‘joy and exultation’ in telling their victims that their deaths would be swiftly followed by torment in hell.⁵⁵

Hume’s description of the 1641 massacre incited uproar in Ireland and a letter writing campaign was quickly launched to convince him to revise the account in later editions.⁵⁶ The stakes were not insignificant. Hume’s *History* had nearly instantly become one of the most widely read books of the eighteenth century and, what was worse, the author’s reputation for philosophical impartiality lent greater weight to his descriptions. Most importantly for our purposes here, Burke initially supported this campaign and even encouraged Thomas Leland, an old friend from Trinity College Dublin, to publish a more impartial history in response (though he distanced himself from the work that eventually resulted). According to Robert Bisset, his earliest biographer, Burke also took the fight to Hume directly and would ‘battle’ him on the topic when they would meet at private homes in London.⁵⁷ The dispute even took on a personal dimension, as Burke believed himself to be the specific target of a footnote in the fourth

⁵³ Hume, *History of England* V. p. 342

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁵⁶ John Curry and Charles O’Conor of Balanagare, the leaders of this campaign, even wrote to Helvetius to get him to convince his friend Hume to change his mind. For a full account see David Berman, ‘David Hume on the 1641 Revolution in Ireland’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 65 (1976). On the specific role played by Burke in the campaign see Walter D. Love, ‘Edmund Burke and an Irish Historiographical Controversy’ in *Theory and History* 2 (1962).

⁵⁷ Robert Bisset, *The Life of Edmund Burke, Comprehending an Impartial Account of his Literary and Political Efforts and a Sketch of the Conduct and Character of his most Eminent Associates, Coadjutors, and Opponents* (London, 1798), p. 195.

volume of Hume's *History* portraying deniers of the 1641 massacre as 'men beyond the reach of argument or reason.'⁵⁸

How are we to interpret Burke's reaction to Hume's alleged historical distortions? The otherwise sympathetic Bissett does so by essentially siding with Hume, dismissing Burke's intransigence on the topic as a lapse 'unworthy' of his character.⁵⁹ Burke's most recent biographer, F.P Lock, distributes blame more evenly, calling both sides 'equally and oppositely prejudiced.'⁶⁰ On Lock's line of interpretation Burke's own Irish origins and family connections (his mother, sister and several of his uncles were Catholic) presumably prejudiced him to such an extent that he could easily rationalize away religiously sectarian violence. If correct, the disagreement could be safely dismissed as a marginal and insignificant squabble between two thinkers, perhaps neither of who were as impartial as they imagined themselves to be.

While it may have a superficial plausibility, this interpretation obscures the political stakes at the heart of the disagreement. While the other Irish historians who implored Hume to revise his account focused principally on factual errors – the numbers killed had been grossly exaggerated, for instance – Burke, I submit, was just as preoccupied with the assumed connections between religious delusion and violence undergirding the predominant explanations of the massacre. In other words, the

⁵⁸ Hume, *History* IV, p. 395n. According to Bissett, Burke 'never forgave' Hume for this perceived insult and nursed a grudge against him right up until his death in 1796. Bissett, *Life of Edmund Burke*, p. 197. Boswell provides further evidence of Burke's hostility to the Scot, noting his haughty disdain for the autobiography Hume composed on his own deathbed and his famous refusal, recorded by Smith, to embrace Christianity even at death. See Stephen Miller, 'The Death of Hume' in *The Wilson Quarterly* 19 (1995), p. 34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195. Other of Burke's early biographers were less quick to judge. James Prior, in his 1878 study, merely records that there were 'animated discussions' and 'differences of opinion' on the topic between the two thinkers. See his *Life of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* (London, 1878). Robert H. Murray notes that an Irish Archbishop's fondness for Hume's *History* would not have 'recommended' him to Burke. Murray, *Edmund Burke, A Biography* (Oxford, 1931), p. 94.

⁶⁰ Lock, *Edmund Burke Vol.1 1730-1784*, p. 188. Lock does concede, however, that Burke's take on the massacre has fared better over the long run than Hume's.

disagreement over Hume's account of the events of 1641 gestures towards a more general discord between Hume and Burke concerning the nature of religious violence in a context of domination and political exclusion.

The closest thing we have to a written response to Hume from Burke is a passage from the *Tracts Relative to the Popery Laws*, a damning critique of the anti-Catholic Penal Laws that Burke commenced (but never finished) around 1761. In it, Burke condemns the 'miserable performances which go about under the names of histories of Ireland' and which were highly complicit in reinforcing the common belief among British administrators that the Irish were so inherently inclined towards sedition that only more draconian government and their continued civic exclusion could prevent future revolts.⁶¹ Burke does not list Hume's own *History* among these 'miserable performances,' but two of the three histories he does mention (Temple's *The Irish Rebellion* and Clarendon's *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in Ireland*) were among Hume's most cited sources.⁶² (Hume's admiration for Temple in particular is clear from his description of him, in volume VI of the *History*, as the only considerable writer of his age that managed to keep himself 'unpolluted by that inundation of vice and licentiousness, which overwhelmed' Britain in the seventeenth century.)⁶³ In any case, it is the recognizably Humean argument that the massacre was an act of unprovoked violence fueled by religious delusions that serves as the principal target of Burke's polemic. Burke's rhetorical strategy in the passage is to initially concede the possibility that human beings

⁶¹ Burke, 'Tracts Relative to the Popery Laws' *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 478.

⁶² Richard Bourke considers it 'unimaginable' that Burke did not study Hume's *History*. Bourke, 'Party, Parliament, and Conquest in Newly Ascribed Burke Manuscripts', p. 638.

⁶³ Hume, *History* VI, p. 544. The subtitle of Temple's book on the rebellion – *a History of the beginnings and first progress of the general rebellion of 1641. Together with the barbarous cruelties and bloody massacres which ensued thereupon* – suggests that it influenced Hume's own characterization of the massacre as an act of 'barbarity.' Hume, *History* V, p. 343.

may be drawn into fanaticism in some cases, before making two important counter claims:

First, that such a temper [of fanaticism] can never become universal, or last for a long time... The majority of men are not bigots; they are not willing to sacrifice, on every vain imagination that superstition or enthusiasm holds forth, or that zeal and piety recommend, the certain possession of their temporal happiness. And if such a spirit has been at any time roused in a society, after it has had its paroxysm it commonly subsides and is quiet, and is even the weaker for the violence of its first exertion: security and ease are its mortal enemies. But secondly, if anything can tend to revive and keep it up, it is to keep alive the passions of men by ill usage. This is enough to irritate the most desperate enterprises; it certainly will inflame, darken, and render more dangerous the spirit of bigotry in those who are possessed by it.⁶⁴

The redolence of Hume's theorization of enthusiasm is strong in this passage, particularly in Burke's emphasis on the paroxysmal nature of the enthusiastic spirit. Equally apparent, however, is the challenge Burke issues to that theorization. In the first place, Burke casts doubt on the argument that an inflamed imagination on its own can be a powerful motivator of human behavior, particularly if the action it encourages is contrary to one's 'temporal' interest. Second, Burke exposes how Hume's claim that enthusiasm will quickly 'exhaust itself leaving the air more serene than before' tacitly assumes that the enthusiasts themselves will be allowed, either by the weakness or

⁶⁴ Burke, 'Tracts Relative to the Popery Laws', *Writings and Speeches* IX, pp. 479-480.

toleration of government, to vent themselves freely for a time. For peoples subject to an overbearing harsh regime, however, this assumption does not obtain because the ‘security and ease’ needed to calm the spirit of fanaticism is perpetually missing. Suffering under an ‘unparalleled oppression’ their enthusiasm is artificially kept ‘alive.’⁶⁵ The experience of continual domination, in other words, alters the temporality of enthusiastic outbursts, prolonging them past the usual time required for them to dissipate.

There is evidence that Burke considered writing a history of Ireland himself at this time and gathered some initial archival materials towards that end.⁶⁶ And although he eventually entrusted Leland with that task, the *Tract* itself takes important steps towards improving on the work of the ‘miserable’ historians by restoring to the perpetrators of the massacre their status as human agents with recognizably human motives. The theory of the passions that Burke first articulated in the *Philosophical Enquiry* is, I maintain, crucial to his case against them. From the perspective of that theory, Hume’s assumption that the Catholics’ violent actions had ‘derived from no cause’ other than religious delusion is untenable for the simple reason that the imagination alone is rarely sufficient to rouse human beings out of their usual torpor. ‘The human mind,’ Burke writes in the *Enquiry*, is most of the time in a ‘state of indifference.’⁶⁷ Only feelings such as pain or pleasure – feelings the imagination on its own cannot simulate – are capable of disturbing it and they in turn are produced by external physical stimuli.⁶⁸ Moreover, because feelings are pre-cognitive, there is little

⁶⁵ Ibid., p 479.

⁶⁶ The possibility that Burke himself was engaged in writing his own history of Ireland in 1761 is explored by John C. Weston Jr. in his ‘Edmund Burke’s Irish History: a Hypothesis’ *PMLA* 77 (1962).

⁶⁷ Burke, ‘Philosophical Enquiry,’ *Writings and Speeches* I, p. 213.

⁶⁸ Aris Sarafianos has similarly emphasized the materialism and environmentalism at the core of Burke’s theory. See his ‘Pain, Labor and the Sublime: Medical Gymnastics and Burke’s Aesthetics’ in *Representations* 91 (2005).

prospect for the mind to mistake of their nature. ‘People are not liable to be mistaken in their feelings,’ Burke insists, even if they may reason incorrectly about them.⁶⁹ And because the operation of the human body is providentially ordained to be the same for all people, everyone, regardless of cultural or religious background, experiences these feelings in a uniform manner.⁷⁰ In short, to attribute to the imagination the power to generate violent passions *ex nihilo*, independently of an external physical or material stimulus, is to overstate its potency.⁷¹ What this suggests is that the fundamental causes of mental disturbances of the sort commonly associated with enthusiasm should always be sought in the sufferer’s environment and the feelings such an environment is likely to generate in all human beings.

We cannot know the details of the objections Burke voiced directly to Hume at their meetings in London, and the limited amendments to the account of the 1641 massacre in the posthumously published 1778 edition of the *History* show how little Hume had ultimately been impressed by his Irish critics.⁷² But it is also likely that Hume assumed, *pace* Burke, that he had in fact taken adequate account of the unique explanatory problems posed by the civil exclusion of Catholics. In the 1741 essay ‘Of

⁶⁹ Burke, ‘Philosophical Enquiry’ *Writings and Speeches* I, p. 211. As Hanna Pitkin puts it, for Burke, ‘people are seldom mistaken when they perceive a pain or symptom.’ Hanna Pitkin *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, 1972), p. 183.

⁷⁰ Burke’s account of human emotional life is therefore both naturalist and empirical, while at the same time infused with religious significance. As Richard Bourke puts it, the constitution of the human mind has ‘been designed by Providence with uniform reactions to specific stimuli.’ Richard Bourke, ‘Pity and Fear: Providential Sociability in Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*’ in ed. Koen Vermier and Michael Fuch Deckard *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 155.

⁷¹ Christopher Reid notes that Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* was frequently criticized for belittling the creative capacity of the imagination. See his *Edmund Burke and the Practice of Political Writing* (Dublin, 1985), p. 192. For a superb in-depth account of Burke’s demotion of the imagination to a state of dependency upon the senses see Vanessa Ryan, ‘The Physiological Sublime: Burke’s Critique of Reason’ in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2001).

⁷² David Berman notes that Hume ‘decisively changed his mind’ on the question of the numbers killed in the 1770 edition of the *History* and made some minor modifications of tone. Many of these alterations were themselves then subsequently altered for the 1778 edition in a manner that suggested a reversion to Hume’s original position. Berman, ‘David Hume on the 1641 Revolution in Ireland,’ p. 107.

Superstition and Enthusiasm' Hume had contrasted the volatility and excessive individualism of the enthusiast with the deferential and submissive qualities of superstitious Catholics who 'groan' under the 'dominion of priests.' By rendering men 'tame and submissive,' Catholic superstition was, Hume had hypothesized, normally supportive of political order and 'Kingly power.'⁷³ In the unique context of an Ireland effectively ruled by a Protestant Ascendancy, however, the relationship Hume posited between superstition and authority is inverted. The same tendency to inculcate subservience that had made Catholicism a boon to French absolutism paved the way for Irish Catholics to require 'but a hint' from their 'leaders and priests' to offer violent resistance to Protestant rule.⁷⁴ In those who carried out the massacre, therefore, Hume appeared to find a curious and toxic combination of the 'enraged' imagination he had associated with enthusiasm and the timorousness of superstitious people under clerical subordination.⁷⁵ Though Burke and Hume disagreed in substance over the 1641 massacre, therefore, they both nevertheless perceived that supposedly uniform connections between enthusiasm and disorder play out in dramatically different ways in contexts such as Ireland's.

The longer Burke spent in England the more distance he placed between himself and the efforts back in Ireland to correct the historical record on the 1641 massacre. This led many in Ireland, such as the historians John Curry and Charles O'Connor, to believe that Burke was becoming co-opted by the discourse of the British political elite he was

⁷³ Hume, *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, pp. 78-79.

⁷⁴ Hume, *History of England V*, p. 341.

⁷⁵ Hume did concede that such admixtures of enthusiasm and superstition were possible. Superstition was in fact a 'considerable ingredient in all religions' but was especially prominent in Catholicism. Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, p. 75.

striving to join.⁷⁶ While Burke may well have begun to disassociate himself from his Irish correspondents for fear of compromising his burgeoning political career, this charge might not have been entirely fair. Richard Bourke's recent attribution to Burke of the manuscript 'Hints of Ireland,' (a brief essay composed around 1757 dispelling the notion that the English gained dominion over the Irish by right of conquest) shows that Burke's challenge to flawed Irish historiography in the 1761 *Tract* was not an isolated occurrence. If Burke really was, in F.P. Lock's words, 're-invent[ing] himself as an Englishman' in the 1750's and 60's, sidelining his interests in Ireland as he did so, then the process was probably gradual.⁷⁷ More certain is that the issue of enthusiasm in Ireland only returned to the forefront of Burke's concerns in the 1790's, after a long hiatus. For at that moment, the possibility that religious persecution could render the Irish receptive to new and odious enthusiasms from revolutionary France gave the question renewed urgency.⁷⁸

In the *Letter to Richard Burke* (one of several letters on Ireland written in the 1790s possibly intended for publication) Burke alluded again to 1641, this time condemning rebels more unequivocally as having perpetrated a 'crime' of 'unpardonable magnitude,' while nevertheless insisting that contemporary Catholics should not be deemed inheritors of their guilt.⁷⁹ This shift towards a more moralizing tone notwithstanding, there is a striking degree of rhetorical continuity between the 1790's

⁷⁶ Walter D. Love, 'Charles O'Connor of Balanagare and Thomas Leland's Philosophical History of Ireland' in *Irish Historical Studies* 13 (1962), p. 20.

⁷⁷ F.P. Lock 'The Politics of Burke's Enquiry' in ed. Koen Vermier and Michael Fuch Deckard *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke's Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 136.

⁷⁸ Daniel I. O'Neill goes so far as to maintain that Burke's efforts for the relief of Irish Catholics 'had everything to do with his fear of the spread of the French Revolution.' While this explanation certainly holds true for Burke's 1790's writings, it is less able to account for Burke's advocacy of legal reforms for Catholics in the 1780's, before Jacobinism had become an issue. Daniel I. O'Neill, 'The Sublime, the Beautiful and the Political in Burke's Work' in ed. Koen Vermier and Michael Fuch Deckard *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke's Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 220.

⁷⁹ Burke, 'Letter to Richard Burke', *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 655.

letters and the earlier *Tract*, with Burke once again upending explanations of religious violence that hinged on a questionable religious psychology. In the 1792 letter to the MP Sir Hercules Langrishe we find the same determination to separate out ‘the real cause [of religious violence] from the ill effects of the passion they may excite.’⁸⁰ Burke even moves, in the same text, beyond a re-diagnosis of the nature and origin of religious violence in Ireland towards scrutiny of the prescribed ‘cure.’ As we have seen, the historians that Burke attacks in the *Tract* had drawn on and reinforced the belief that the Irish Catholics had an immutable predilection towards violence which necessitated their permanent exclusion from full citizenship. The *Letter to Langrishe* ridicules the pseudo-psychology underlying this preferred remedy of the ruling Protestant Ascendancy by exposing it as a cause of the very illness it purported to cure. Excluding the Irish from all civil rights and privileges, he writes, ‘is not a cure for so terrible a distemper of mind as they are pleased to suppose in their countrymen.’⁸¹ On the contrary, Burke continues, ‘participation in those privileges’ may ‘be itself a remedy for some mental disorders.’⁸²

The latter sentence can be read as carrying a dual meaning. On the one hand, Burke implies that the full civil inclusion of Catholics will remove the chief cause of violently anti-Protestant sentiment in the minds of Catholics. There was, however, another ‘mental disorder,’ that Burke had his eye on in the 1790’s, a disorder against which a placated Catholic population could potentially have provided an ‘invincible dyke.’⁸³ It is to this mental disorder, or rather Burke’s analysis of it, that we now turn.

⁸⁰ Burke, ‘Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe’, *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 621.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p 620.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p 620.

⁸³ Burke ‘Second Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe’ *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 668.

(V) Enthusiasts old and new: the unique danger of Jacobin atheism

It [the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*] might be the means of saving, one nation at least, from what I think a terrible contagion.

Burke, Letter to Lord Fitzwilliam, June 1791⁸⁴

Who would have imagined that atheism could have produced one of the most violently operative principles of fanaticism?

Burke, *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies*⁸⁵

If I am correct in arguing that Burke was sensitive to the malevolent ends the imputation of enthusiasm could serve, what then are we to make of his own invocations of enthusiasm in his response to the French Revolution? Taken together, his early appreciation of some benign effects of enthusiasm, and his effort to understand (if not pardon) those who are driven to a more fanatical enthusiasm through legitimate grievances, might have inclined him to look favorably on the ‘first instance on earth of enthusiasm without religion.’⁸⁶ This was the view of his Whig party colleagues, many of whom were dismayed at Burke’s condemnation of the Revolution precisely because they expected him to see the French struggle against absolutist monarchy as likewise produced by natural feelings rather than over heated brains. Even Thomas Paine wrote to Burke in

⁸⁴ Burke, *Correspondence* VI, p. 272/273. Edward Gibbon agreed, declaring the *Reflections* ‘a most admirable medicine against the French disease.’ *Private Letters of Edward Gibbon 1753-1794* 2 (Adamant Media Corporation, 2001), p. 237.

⁸⁵ Burke, ‘Policy of the Allies,’ *Writings and Speeches* VIII, p. 499.

⁸⁶ Horace Walpole cited in Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation*, p. 84 (see note 12).

the early days of the Revolution in full expectation that the champion of the oppressed in India and America would join his fellow Whigs in welcoming the latest instance of a distressed people driven to drastic measures by a regime often considered more oppressive than that of Hastings in India.⁸⁷

Disappointingly for those Whigs, Burke set out in the opening sections of the *Reflections* to compare the new enthusiasts for the rights of man not to, say, the aggrieved Irish rebels of 1641, but to the regicidal Puritans of the same époque. In making this unflattering comparison, Burke also implied that the modern doctrine of the rights of man could operate on the human mind in much the same manner as religious doctrines and ultimately produce similar ill effects on society. In the *Second Letter on a Regicide Peace* he allows that although ‘religion’ was among ‘the most powerful causes of enthusiasm’ there was ‘no doctrine whatever, on which men can warm, that is not capable of the same effect.’⁸⁸ On this evidence, it is tempting to conclude that the enthusiasm Burke objected to in *Reflections* was a secularized version of an atavistic religious fanaticism that had convulsed England over a century before. It is difficult to doubt, for example, F.P Lock’s claim that the principal purpose behind Burke’s response to Price’s revolutionary harangue from the pulpit was to ‘deny its modernity.’⁸⁹

⁸⁷ John Keane, *Thomas Paine: A Political Life* (London, 1995), p. 286.

⁸⁸ Burke, ‘Second Letter on a Regicide Peace’ *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 278. As early as 1775 Burke sensed the superior power of secular enthusiasms over religious. ‘What think you,’ he asked Charles O’Hare, ‘of that political enthusiasm which is able to overpower so much religious fanaticism?’ Burke to Charles O’Hare: 17 August, 1775 *Correspondence* 3, p. 187.

⁸⁹ F.P. Lock, *Edmund Burke Vol. II: 1784-1797* (Oxford, 2006), p 296. Iain McCalman similarly considers Burke’s strategy to be one of establishing a straightforward equivalence between the two men, and feigns incredulity at Burke’s effort to ‘equate the elderly and respectable Unitarian Preacher Dr. Price with the Civil War enthusiast and Regicide Hugh Peters.’ McCalman, ‘Mad Lord George and Madame La Motte: Riot and Sexuality in the Genesis of Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France,’ *The Journal of British Studies* 35 (1996), p. 344.

Nevertheless, in what remains of this article I wish to qualify this interpretation of Burke's strategy. While Burke did seek to draw certain parallels between religious and secular enthusiasts, it was the radical and alarming novelty of the latter that he sought most to convey to his readers. Previous scholarship has already gone some way to marking the conceptual distance between the new enthusiasm and the old in Burke's thought. For Daniel I. O'Neill, to take a recent example, Burke fretted that the spread of the new atheistic enthusiasm would bring about nothing less than the collapse of Western Civilization by attacking its two principal pillars, the Church and the aristocracy.⁹⁰ But while the general role it played within Burke's political analysis of the French Revolution has been studied, less has been said about the specific tendencies that allow atheistic enthusiasm to reach a level of destructiveness far surpassing earlier Christian enthusiasms that had *also* threatened the established Church and, in the guise of the Levellers, the nobility. Two in particular stand out: first, the tendency for religious indifference to drift into a persecutory attitude towards religion itself and, second, the tendency for atheistic enthusiasm to perpetuate itself rather than follow the usual pattern of effervescence and subsidence that characterized enthusiasms of other eras.

The trouble with indifference

Burke was convinced that 'the enthusiasts of this rising sect' would be far more intolerant and persecutory than any of their religious counterparts.⁹¹ Consider the comparison he draws between Price and Hugh Peters, the Independent minister who agitated for the execution of Charles I from the pulpit at the close of the civil war of the

⁹⁰ O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*, pp. 197-199.

⁹¹ Burke, 'Letter to Richard Burke', *Writings and Speeches IX*, p. 647.

1640s. The casting of Price as reviving the ‘pulpit style’ of Peters would seem to suggest a strong affinity between the old enthusiasts and their modern counterparts. However, a closer examination of the immediate context of this comparison in the *Reflections* complicates such a reading. For at the very moment he establishes the parallel between the two ministers, Burke immediately places some critical distance between them. Whereas Peters was an arch-type of the religious fanatic, Price is a zealous Reverend ‘of a curious character’ because he is at the same time ‘perfectly indifferent’ concerning matters of religious doctrine.⁹² Such indifference, Burke later suggests, makes of Price and his cohort a minority among the English people, who are generally ‘protestants not from indifference but from zeal.’⁹³ This criticism of Price’s indifference provides us with an early clue as to one source of Burke’s particular hostility to the kind of enthusiasm Price represented. Burke’s worry, here and elsewhere, is that those who are indifferent towards religion will do little to defend it against the spread of atheism - the ‘great political evil of our time’ - and are more likely to be recruited to the cause of persecuting religion as such.⁹⁴ If, as he argues in his *Second Letter on a Regicide Peace*, ‘they who do not love religion hate it’ then there can be no habitable middle ground between religious zeal on the one hand and atheistic persecution of religion on the other.⁹⁵ Once a people has ‘degenerate[d] into indifference’ then a further descent into ‘downright atheism’ is highly likely.⁹⁶

⁹² Burke, ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France’, *Writings and Speeches* VIII, p. 63.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁹⁴ Burke, ‘Remarks on the Policy of the Allies’, *Writings and Speeches* VIII p. 486.

⁹⁵ Burke, ‘Second Letter on a Regicide Peace’, *Writings and Speeches* IX. P. 278. This argument may have struck many of his contemporaries as counter-intuitive. Theorists of toleration had often posited the exact inverse of the relationship Burke supposes between indifference and persecution. As Christopher Hill, discussing seventeenth century religious toleration, writes: ‘Toleration comes only when men become indifferent to the issues involved. If those issues were serious, then the virtue of toleration is the result of

Significantly, this argument is not particular to Burke's response to the French Revolution but can be found in several of the 1790s writings on Ireland. This is far from coincidental. In the case of both Ireland and France, Burke perceived a connection between religious indifference and persecution. In the *Letter to Langrishe* he looked with foreboding at the spread of 'total indifference to every thing positive in matters of doctrine' that, if continued, would 'play the game of that sort of active, proselytizing and persecuting atheism, which is the disgrace and calamity of our time.'⁹⁷ Jennifer Pitts has argued that Burke's letters on Ireland in the 1790s reveal that he had come to consider the Protestant oppression of Catholics less a case of religiously motivated persecution than of a national chauvinistic oppression that employed religion as a pretext.⁹⁸ But if we consider these letters in the light of Burke's simultaneous anxieties about the spread of atheism in France then religious zeal (or rather its absence) does still occupy a central place in his analysis.

Particularly in the *Letter to Richard Burke* it becomes clear that the absence of religious zeal on behalf of the ruling Protestant elite served as a key permissive cause of persecution. In that text, Burke insists that Protestantism in Ireland has no positive content independent of its hostility towards Catholicism and has come to define itself 'not by what it is, but by what it is not.'⁹⁹ As in the case of Price's doctrinally indifferent radicals, Burke makes clear in no uncertain terms that these 'persecutors, without zeal' are more dangerous than these 'old persecutors' who sought to 'defend or diffuse' what

the vice of indifference.' Christopher Hill, 'Toleration in Seventeenth-Century England: Theory and Practice' in ed. Susan Mendus *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 37.

⁹⁶ Burke, 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies' *Writings and Speeches* VIII p. 488.

⁹⁷ Burke 'Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe', *Writing and Speeches* IX, p. 609.

⁹⁸ Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, p. 89.

⁹⁹ Burke, 'Letter to Richard Burke', *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 644.

they considered true religion.¹⁰⁰ Burke's intimation is that the 'civil excommunication of a whole people' in Ireland might have been at least comprehensible if those enacting it sincerely believed themselves to be advancing the cause of their faith.¹⁰¹ Instead, the cynical deployment of religion by a Protestant Ascendancy who themselves clung to no positive religious values serves only to corrode the credibility of religion more generally, thereby playing into the hands of proselytizing atheists and making Ascendancy policies equivalent to the 'persecution of religion itself.'¹⁰²

It might be countered that Burke, far from attacking Protestants for their indifference, instead encouraged them to contain their religious zeal, the better to make common cause with Catholics against atheists.¹⁰³ Indeed, in the 1790's letters Burke frequently downplays the significance of theological disputes, hinting that a more relaxed attitude towards them could facilitate the creation of a united Christian front. In the *Letter to Richard Burke* he declares himself willing to 'abandon to the theologians on all sides' the actual 'truth or falsehood' of various items of doctrine, a sentiment echoed five years later in a letter to an unknown addressee.¹⁰⁴ If the members of the Protestant Ascendancy would only exhibit similar indifference, Burke seems to imply, then they might see how the positive doctrines they share with their co-Christians exceed in importance any points of division.

The problem for Burke, however, is that Protestantism in Ireland has become so emptied of positive content that the doctrinal core necessary to motivate a pan-Christian

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 645.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 656.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 647.

¹⁰³ On Burke's fervent desire to see Catholics and Protestants so unify see Daniel I. O'Neill *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*, p. 199.

¹⁰⁴ Burke, 'Letter to Richard Burke', p. 645. Burke tells the addressee of *Letter to Unknown* that 'Theological controversies' are beyond his 'competence.' Burke, 'Letter to Unknown' *Writings and Speeches IX*, p. 679.

defensive action against atheism has been reduced to nothing. Burke stresses that the very term ‘Protestant *Religion*’ has literally been stripped of all meaning in the Irish context: ‘We sometimes hear of a Protestant *Religion*, frequently of a Protestant *interest*. We hear of the latter most frequently, because it has a positive meaning. The other has none.’¹⁰⁵ And again five years later: ‘Let every man be as pious as he pleases; and in the way that He pleases; but it is agreeable neither to piety nor to policy to give exclusively all manner of civil privileges and advantages to a *negative Religion*; - (such is the Protestant without a certain Creed) that is to say, to no religion at all.’¹⁰⁶ If indifference has been taken so far such that ‘Protestant’ denotes nothing more than the negation of Catholicism, then Protestantism itself is in no condition to facilitate an alliance between two normally hostile religions against the atheist threat. The final irony is that because atheists look to overturn ‘all Civil order,’ sparing no one, the Protestant Ascendancy’s religious self-debasement will be their political undoing.¹⁰⁷

We might find Burke’s argument that indifference could pave the way to persecution unconvincing and overwrought. His Manichean dismissal (‘those who do not dread [Jacobinism] love it’) of the possibility that people may be doctrinally indifferent and yet still resist the lure to persecute the more devout among their fellows will strike many today as equal parts politically menacing and sociologically inaccurate.¹⁰⁸ His argument may seem less unusual when examined through the lens of what Iain Hampsher-Monk has called Burke’s ‘Anglican Skepticism.’¹⁰⁹ Consequentialist

¹⁰⁵ Burke, ‘Letter to Richard Burke’, *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 647.

¹⁰⁶ Burke, ‘Letter to Unknown’ *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 679.

¹⁰⁷ Burke, ‘Letter to Richard Burke’ *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 647.

¹⁰⁸ Burke, ‘Preface to Brissot’s Address’ *Writings and Speeches* VIII, p. 520.

¹⁰⁹ Iain Hampsher-Monk ‘Burke and the Religious Sources of Skeptical Conservatism’ in ed. Johan Van Der Zande Richard H. Popkin, *The Skeptical Tradition around 1800* (Boston, 1998), p. 236.

arguments concerning the moral and political effects of weakened religious conviction had a long pedigree among Anglican opponents of Deists, atheists and other critics of the established Church. What Burke offers in the 1790s is an amplified version of this argument: indifference towards religious doctrine, while a boon to toleration in some circumstances, is a riskier disposition in a political and religious environment dominated by the threat of atheism and its fanatical adherents.

The threat of a permanent enthusiasm

The second troubling tendency that Burke identifies within the new enthusiasm concerns its long-term effects on human psychology. As we saw in previous sections, in earlier writings Burke seemed to share the assumption of Hume, Gibbon and others that enthusiasm at both the individual and collective level was necessarily of limited duration. We might expect that atheistic enthusiasm would prove similarly short lived. In *Reflections* and other revolutionary writings, however, Burke showed himself far less certain that this new form of enthusiasm would expend itself as quickly. In an oft-cited passage from the *Reflections*, Burke wavers between confidence that atheistic beliefs will be unsupportable by human psychology and acknowledging that the spread of atheism may introduce more permanent transformations. We ‘know,’ he writes,

that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long. But if in a moment of riot...we should uncover our nakedness by throwing off the Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort... we are apprehensive... that some

uncouth, pernicious and degrading superstition, might take the place of it.¹¹⁰

The passage's opening moment of certainty about the persistence of an unchanging human 'constitution' recalls the physiological universalism of Burke's *Enquiry*. Atheism, like the paroxysms of enthusiasm Burke saw operative in early colonial America, 'cannot prevail long' because our own instincts will work to correct the psychic disharmony it introduces. The passage ends, however, with an apprehension that this human constitution may be more plastic than Burke had previously allowed and that atheism could yet dislodge religious belief altogether, paving the way for perniciously novel forms of superstition. Most despairingly for Burke, the people of England themselves may be the authors of this change by rashly casting aside their religious beliefs and allowing themselves to be seduced by the atheistic doctrines newly arrived from France, little aware that they were doing violence to their natural condition as 'religious animals.'¹¹¹

Note the continuity between Burke's worry that English Protestants will hasten to destroy their own 'boast and comfort' with his critique of the policy and attitudes of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. In both cases, Burke takes the Protestants in question to task for their shortsightedness and failure to understand that once Jacobinism has taken hold there is little hope for a return to natural religious sentiment. In the *Second Letter to Hercules Langrishe* he derides in particular the notion that Catholics, once invited or

¹¹⁰ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' *Writings and Speeches* Vol. VIII p 142.

¹¹¹ Burke's detestation of atheism and the threat it posed to civil society pre-dates the French Revolution by several decades. In his 1772 'Speech on the Toleration Bill' he argued that Atheists would 'deprive us of our best privilege and prerogative of human nature, that of being a religious animal' and should therefore be considered 'outlaws of the constitution not of this country but of the human race.' Burke, 'Speech on the Toleration Bill' *Writings and Speeches* II, p. 388.

coerced into revising their faith, might gravitate towards Protestantism. Doing so, Burke echoes again the Anglican fideist worry that opening portions of one's faith to scrutiny could ultimately result, not in a better grounded religious faith, but in no religious faith at all. Once faith is loosened, he warns Langrishe, the process of revision will not 'stop at the exact sticking places you have marked in *your* Articles' but extend instead to a 'rejection of the whole altogether.'¹¹² Even if, historically, conversions from one Christian denomination to another could be made without the basic underlying faith of the convert being threatened, in context of the 1790's this possibility is effectively removed: 'No converts will now be made in a considerable number from one of our sects to the other upon a really religious principle.'¹¹³ And if conversion is now unidirectional, then anyone lost to atheistic enthusiasm must be considered lost for good.

Taken together, these two tendencies suggest that when Burke declared Price and his fellow supporters of the revolution to be enthusiasts he was doing more than merely heralding the return of an only too familiar fanaticism. Instead, he sought to convince his readers that the new enthusiasm was both more dangerous and potentially more permanent in its effects than the enthusiasms of any other era. For at stake in this particular contagion of enthusiasm (the stemming of which Burke considered his *Reflections* an important part) was the fate of religious belief itself as both social stabilizer and moral restraint.

Conclusion

¹¹² Burke, 'Second Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe' *Writings and Speeches* IX, p. 669.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p 669.

The ferocity with which Burke attacked the rise of atheism explains why many of his critics assumed that he himself had given in to enthusiasm, or even madness. What I have suggested here is that the extremism of his response is in turn explained by what he considered to be the unique threat posed by atheism to the very possibility of political life. ‘Those who were led only by enthusiasm, and the vanity of the moment,’ Mary Wollstonecraft wrote of the French Revolutionaries, ‘esteemed their conduct as highly extravagant, when they had time to cool.’¹¹⁴ The fear animating Burke’s own response to the Revolution is that the enthusiasm that gave rise to it would be permanent rather than momentary and that those who had imbibed Jacobinism would soon lack the requisite shame to regard their any of their previous behavior as ‘extravagant.’ With religious belief extirpated entirely, a true revolution of moral psychology is completed and a willful subjectivism more liable to persecution and political disorder than the religious enthusiasms familiar to Burke’s readers is unleashed.

Aside from serving as a corrective to those who have overstated the similarity between religious and atheistic enthusiasm in Burke’s politics my interpretation has another significant payoff. The early indication that Burke sought to rehabilitate a variety of enthusiasm for politics, coupled with his qualified appreciation for enthusiasm as a fount of political authority, complicates the image of Burke as only adopting a critical posture towards enthusiasm. At the very least, my analysis shows that Burke did not approach enthusiasm as an absolute good or evil, but rather always situated it in a particular historical and political context and asked after its effects on people, or how it may have emerged as a response to particularly chaotic or oppressive circumstances.

¹¹⁴ Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has Produced in Europe Volume 1* (Philadelphia, 1795), p. 213.