

Cementing the Nation:

Burke's Reflections on Nationalism and National Identity

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Recent historians and theorists have argued that nationalism is primarily a modern phenomenon fundamentally connected, at least in its early phases, with the emergence of modern nation states. There are considerable differences about the definitions of nationalism, nation states, and even nations themselves, and little consensus about when these phenomena begin to emerge. Yet there is general agreement that the American and French Revolutions were path-breaking episodes which ushered in the era of nationalism and nation states that reshaped the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ This assumption often leads to the claim that nationalism in Britain was a belated phenomenon emerging only in a reactionary form in the face of threats from revolutionary and Napoleonic France.² Burke's response to the French Revolution is often seen as a founding moment in the development of this reactionary nationalism in Britain.³ Yet, as several recent historians have shown, there were in fact a number of nationalist movements in eighteenth-century Britain, some of which were backed by fully articulated nationalist ideologies.⁴ This has allowed critics to argue that Burke's conservative nationalism was developed through appropriating and reorienting the assumptions of an already flourishing

¹. A sense of the modern debate about nationalism can be gained from the extracts collected in John Hutchinson and Antony D. Smith, eds, Nationalism (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). On the consensus about the relation between nationalism, modernisation and the French Revolution, see Hutchinson and Smith, pp.3-10.

². See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London and New York: Verso, 1983, 1991).

³. It is revealing that an extract from Burke's Reflections is the only item from eighteenth-century Britain included in The Nationalism Reader, edited by Omar Dahbour and Micheline R. Ishay (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995). Alfred Cobban argues that Burke's consideration of the plight of Ireland, Corsica and Poland from the 1760s onwards allowed him to become a forerunner in the development of nationalist theory in Britain. See Alfred Cobban, Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1929), pp.97-132.

⁴. See Gerald Newman, The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987), and Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837 (Yale University Press, 1992; London: Random House, 1994).

radical English nationalism.⁵ In what follows, I will argue that the nationalist ideology that Burke develops in his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) was shaped not only in reaction to the radical nationalism being instituted in France but also in response to the radical British nationalism articulated in Richard Price's 'A Discourse on the Love of our Country' of 1789.

As is often the case with nationalist ideologies, Burke's English nationalism identifies internal as well as external enemies. As its subtitle suggests, the Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event is as much concerned with reflecting upon particular responses in London to the French Revolution as it is with reflecting on the event itself. Burke's title refers to the 'proceedings' of 'two clubs of gentlemen in London, called the Constitutional Society, and the Revolution Society.'⁶ Burke dismisses the Constitutional Society as a charitable organisation that distributes radical books that no one would otherwise bother to buy or read. The Revolution Society, which had been created to celebrate the centenary of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, is a much more serious threat in Burke's eyes. At its meeting on the fourth of November 1789, Price had delivered his sermon, 'A Discourse on the Love of Our Country,' in which he celebrated the French Revolution and appeared to suggest that those who really loved Britain ought to follow the French example. In the 'Discourse,' Price offers a radical reinterpretation of the British constitution and of the duties entailed on citizens who love their country.⁷

Price's sermon of 1789 was not the first occasion he had reflected on questions of national identity and the duties of those who love their country. His great contribution to the discourse on nationalism in the eighteenth century was to combine Puritan and Whig traditions, the political theories of Locke, Milton and Rousseau, civic humanism and dissenting millennialist doctrine, into a radical Enlightenment version of nationalism. As D.O. Thomas has argued, Price's 'defence of religious liberty, of the freedom of enquiry, of the right to participate in the process of government, of national autonomy, ... above all, his concept of

⁵. See Newman, The Rise of English Nationalism, especially pp.228-29, and Anne Janowitz, England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape (Oxford and Cambridge Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990), especially pp.98-100.

⁶. Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), edited by Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.85.

⁷. Most of the time, Burke uses 'England' and 'English' rather than 'Britain' and 'British.' It is not always clear why he chooses one or the other; I have tended to use 'Britain' and 'British' only where Burke does so. By contrast, Price is clearly concerned with Britain.

patriotism, deserve to be celebrated as an enduring contribution to the thought that has shaped our political traditions.⁸ Beginning in 1759 with a sermon called 'Britain's Happiness, and the Proper Improvement of it,' Price's contributions to the discourse of nationalism are powerful instantiations of Linda Colley's thesis: taking full account of the implications of the Revolution of 1688 and the Act of Union of 1707, Price's imagined nation is emphatically Protestant and British.⁹ In this early sermon, Price lists the peculiar qualities and advantages of the British nation and suggests that these are signs that Britain is the Jerusalem of the modern world and that the British are God's chosen people.¹⁰ As the chosen people, however, the British have to remain vigilant against encroachments on national virtue, since only virtue guarantees liberty and God's continued approbation. Nationalism is rarely purely celebratory: one of its defining characteristics is a critical alertness to the potential corruption of the nation. In his Two Tracts (1778), Price suggests that Britain's attempt to force its will on the American colonies reveals a potential for tyranny akin to that which the Catholic church exercised over peoples all over the world. Price implies that the baton of liberty is passing from Britain to America, where he imagines an ideal republican society is already being established 'without bishops, without nobles, and without kings.'¹¹ By 1785, in his Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, Price argues that America has displaced Britain as the most politically advanced nation in the world and it is now the Americans who appear to be God's chosen people.¹²

In the sermon of 1789 Price is not so idealistic about Britain as he was in the sermon of 1759. He celebrates the British constitution for its potential rather than for what it has become; yet he also suggests that the virtuous struggle to realise that potential is one of the principal duties of those who love their country. Price describes the love of country as 'a noble passion' which, 'like all other passions, ... requires regulation and direction.'¹³ In order to regulate and direct this passion, Price begins

8. D.O. Thomas, ed, Richard Price: Political Writings (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.xxii.

9. See Linda Colley, Britons.

10. Richard Price, 'Britain's Happiness, and the Proper Improvement of it' (1759), Political Writings, pp.1-13.

11. See Richard Price, Two Tracts on Civil Liberty, the War with America, and The Debts and Finances of the Kingdom, in Political Writings, pp.14-100 (19).

12. See Richard Price, Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, in Political Writings, pp.116-51.

13. Richard Price, 'A Discourse on the Love of our Country' (1789), 4th edition, in Richard Price: Political Writings, pp.176-96.

by defining what is meant by 'country.' He sets out by stressing that he is referring to a civil and political society rather than a piece of land or geographical area: 'by our country is meant, in this case, not the soil or the spot of earth on which we happen to have been born, not the forests and fields, but that community of which we are members ... under the same constitution of government, protected by the same laws, and bound together by the same civil polity' (Political Writings, p.178). Price's nationalism, then, is a civic nationalism. Although loving our country in this sense is a primary obligation, this 'does not imply any conviction of the superior value of it to other countries' (p.178). Price therefore urges his listeners and readers 'to distinguish between the love of our country and that spirit of rivalry and ambition which has been common among nations' (pp.178-79). This is to distinguish between blind patriotism and an enlightened nationalism compatible with the general love of humanity that Christianity inculcates. A proper love of our country should be ardent but not exclusive; it should lead us to strive for our country's good, but allow us at the same time to 'consider ourselves as citizens of the world, and take care to maintain a just regard to the rights of other countries' (p.181).

Price argues that the love of one's country ought to manifest itself in efforts to promote truth, virtue, and liberty in that country. According to Price, 'our whole duty to our country' is included in these three aims: 'for by endeavouring to liberalize and enlighten it, to discourage vice and to promote virtue in it, and to assert and support its liberties, we shall endeavour to do all that is necessary to make it great and happy' (p.184). Yet since nationalism often depends on the identification of internal and external enemies (identity, or sameness, being formed through a staged encounter with otherness), Price stresses that the love of one's country involves being prepared to defend it against 'enemies ... of two sorts; internal and external, or domestic and foreign' (p.187). Price indicates that the people ought to be ready, if need be, to die fighting against their country's external aggressors (p.188). Internal threats frequently come from rulers attempting to extend their power and it is thus the duty of citizens always to be ready to resist such encroachments on their rights. Yet there are other, more intangible but equally dangerous, threats which come from within. Since virtue is the origin and sign of a nation's liberty, internal corruption and luxury is perhaps the greatest threat of all.

According to Price, the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 was a response to both kinds of internal threat. In effect, it was an example of the people successfully resisting a ruler (James II and VII) who had become an internal enemy by posing threats to religious and civil rights. The Revolution delivered the people from 'the infamy and misery of popery and slavery' and established various principles which, Price stresses, need to be adhered to and improved:

First, the right to liberty of conscience in religious matters.

Secondly, the right to resist power when abused. And

Thirdly, the right to chuse our own governors, to cashier them for misconduct, and to frame a government for ourselves. (pp.189-90)

Yet if these are the rights established by the Revolution, Price nonetheless urges his readers 'to remember that, though the Revolution was a great work, it was by no means a perfect work' (p.191). The constitution that was set up by the Revolution is itself in need of reform, and efforts towards such reform are one of the duties involved in loving one's country. In the first place, the religious toleration obtained by the Revolution was 'imperfect' because it 'included only those who could declare their faith in the doctrinal articles of the church of England' (p.191). Because such a declaration was necessary for obtaining civil posts, the Protestant Dissenters (of which Price was one) were excluded from full citizenship (Price is not, of course, troubled by the similar exclusion of British Catholics). The most important defect of the constitution, however, 'is the inequality of our representation' -- which is an evil in itself and leads to corruption (pp.191-92).

For Price and the Dissenters, then, the Revolution set up a constitutional pattern that was a first sketch, at least, of a radical nationalism. But if patriots had a duty to maintain and reform the constitution, an equally important duty was to sustain this patriotic zeal through moral virtue. Virtue and liberty together constitute the ethical 'cement' of radical, Protestant nationalism in eighteenth-century England. This assumption allows Price to mobilise the characteristic nationalist claim that internal elements of moral corruption are threatening the country's well-being:

It is too evident that the state of this country is such as renders it an object of concern and anxiety. It wants (I have shewn you) the grand security of public liberty. Increasing luxury has multiplied abuses in it. A monstrous weight of debt is crippling it. Vice and venality are bringing down upon it God's displeasure. That spirit to which it owes its distinction is declining, and some late events seem to prove that it is becoming every day more reconcilable to encroachments on the securities of its liberties. It wants, therefore, your patriotic services and ... we ought to do our utmost to save it from the dangers that threaten it (pp.194-95).

One of the recent events that Price alludes to here is the response of the people to George III's recovery from a bout of 'madness' in 1788, in which 'we have appeared more like a herd crawling at the feet of a master than like enlightened and manly citizens rejoicing with a beloved sovereign, but at the same time conscious that he derives all his consequence from themselves' (p.185). Price stresses that the people need to realise that they are themselves the source of majesty and sovereignty and that they confer these upon their civil governors and kings:

Civil governors are properly the servants of the public and a King is no more than the first servant of the public, created by it, maintained by it, and responsible to it; and all the homage paid him is due to him on no other account than his relation to the public. His sacredness is the sacredness of the community. His authority is the authority of the community, and the term Majesty, which it is usual to apply to him, is by no means his own majesty, but the majesty of the people. (pp.185-86)

Price, then, measures Britain at the end of the eighteenth century against the nationalist ideals that he claims are at least implicit in its constitution. Behaving according to the duties entailed in his own account of what it means to love one's country, Price calls on his readers to rectify a number of defects in the political system and to resist the encroachment of internal corruption. By going on to claim that the example of the French Revolution has made the 'present times' particularly favourable 'to all exertions in the cause of public liberty,' Price almost seems to imply that it is the duty of patriotic Britons to try to emulate the French example (p.195). Certainly, his rapturous greeting of the French Revolution at the end of his sermon presents it as the triumph of the French nation over the ancien régime. Yet we should remember that Price is celebrating the English as well as the French Revolution. Since he thanks God for having allowed him to share 'in the benefits of one Revolution,' and for having 'spared [him] to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious' (p.195), it would appear that he sees the English Revolution as the first of a series of similar, though perhaps more progressively radical, revolutions. Hence Price is not calling for the British to imitate the French Revolution but rather for British patriots to renew their efforts to complete the work begun in 1688 so that Britain might realise the full potential and promise of its own revolution. That he sees Britain and the new France as essentially similar to one another is brought out in a footnote that looks forward to the two 'kingdoms' working in harmony together to bring about world peace and liberty (p.188, n.22).

As well as providing a platform for Price's sermon, the Revolution Society sent a congratulatory address to the National Assembly and received a grateful response. The Revolution Society had then published Price's 'Discourse' along with the congratulatory address and the National Assembly's reply. In the Reflections, Burke suggests that, by taking it upon itself to address the government of another country, the Revolution Society had seemed to assume a representative status -- or, as Burke puts it, 'a sort of public capacity' (Reflections, pp.87-88). By receiving an address by a group of private individuals, most of whose names were not attached to the document, the National Assembly had revealed its own political inexperience and conferred an inappropriate importance on the Revolution Society:

the house of Commons would reject the most sneaking petition for the most trifling object, under that mode of signature to which you have thrown open the

folding-doors of your presence chamber, and have ushered into your National Assembly, with as much ceremony and parade, and with as great a bustle of applause, as if you had been visited by the whole representative majesty of the whole English nation (p.89).

Burke, then, seeks to impress on his readers the difference between the representations of the Revolution Society and 'the whole representative majesty of the whole English nation.' Each element in this phrase -- 'whole,' 'representative,' 'majesty,' 'English,' and 'nation' -- carries an impressive weight, and the phrase apparently adds up to a powerful conception of the nation. While Price invokes the majesty of the people, and while the Revolution Society might claim to represent English opinion, only Parliament (presumably) could properly represent the whole majesty of the English nation. Yet Burke's phrase is more ambiguous than this makes it sound. The ambiguity arises over the problem of deciding whether 'majesty' is attached to the visiting representation or to the English nation that is being represented. Is Burke invoking the majesty of Parliament or the majesty of the people?

Burke counters the Revolution Society's illegitimate ambassadorial status by dwelling on the implications of writing and publishing his own reflections on the French Revolution. One of the original stimulants for the Reflections was a private letter from a French correspondent asking Burke to comment on, and give his seal of approval to, the doings of the National Assembly. Although the Reflections outgrew Burke's original reply, it retains the rhetorical form of a private letter between an individual British subject and a French citizen. This appears to allow the Reflections to avoid the issues about improper representation that Burke claims are raised by the exchange between the Revolution Society and the National Assembly. In the opening paragraph, he tells his correspondent that in his original letter 'I wrote neither for nor from any description of men; nor shall I in this' (p.85). A few paragraphs later he seeks to distinguish his own action in publishing the Reflections from the actions of the Revolution Society:

I certainly take my full share, along with the rest of the world, in my individual and private capacity, in speculating on what has been done, or is doing, on the public stage; ... but having no general apostolical mission, being a citizen of a particular state, and being bound up in a considerable degree, by its public will, I should think it, at least improper and irregular, for me to open a formal public correspondence with the actual government of a foreign nation, without the express authority of the government under which I live. (p.88)

Burke, then, refuses any suggestion that he might be writing in an official representative capacity. Yet the question of representation is continually at issue throughout the Reflections. Burke repeatedly brings into question Price's claims to represent anything other than the opinions of an eccentric minority in England; and although he claims to speak only for himself, Burke frequently suggests that he is able

nonetheless to speak for the people of England. Responding to what he took to be Price's celebration of the 'triumph' of the events at Versailles on 5-6 October 1789, Burke seeks to differentiate between Price's opinions and those of the majority of the people of England:

To tell you the truth, my dear Sir, I think the honour of our nation to be somewhat concerned in the disclaimer of the proceedings of this society of the Old Jewry and the London Tavern. I have no man's proxy. I speak only from myself; when I disclaim, as I do with all possible earnestness, all communication with the actors in that triumph, or with the admirers of it. When I assert any thing else, as concerning the people of England, I speak from observation not from authority; but I speak from the experience I have had in a pretty extensive and mixed communication with the inhabitants of this kingdom, of all descriptions and ranks, and after a course of attentive observation, began early in life, and continued for near forty years. (p.180)

Burke, then, assumes that he can speak for the people of England on the basis of the long and extensive experience he claims to have of English people 'of all descriptions and ranks.' Although the opinions of Richard Price and the Revolution Society may have been thrust upon the attention of the French, Burke urges his reader not to take those opinions as representative. He claims to be surprised how little the French seem to know the English, and suggests that 'this is owing to your forming a judgment of this nation from certain publications, which do, very erroneously, if they do at all, represent the opinions and dispositions generally prevalent in England.' In fact, he will 'almost venture to affirm, that not one in a hundred amongst us participates in the "triumph" of the Revolution Society' (pp.180-81).

The Reflections, then, can be read as dramatising a struggle over who and what represents authentic English opinion. In order to discredit Price and his cohorts, Burke foregrounds his own character as authentic and exemplary. A major task of the Reflections is to promote Burke himself as a man of extensive experience -- as a practical politician, and as someone familiar with English feeling through long years of attentive observation and experience. But Burke presents himself as more than a mere observer of Englishness: instead, he becomes an embodiment of the English national character -- despite the fact that politicians and journalists constantly harped on Burke's Irishness. Burke's assumed character includes being a man imbued with nationalist sentiment: he assures his correspondent that he is 'Sollicitous chiefly for the peace of my own country, but by no means unconcerned for your's' (p.92). He describes himself as having demonstrated in his public career a love for liberty that can match that of anyone in the Revolution Society: 'I flatter myself that I love a manly, moral, regulated liberty as well as any gentleman of that society, be he who he will; and perhaps I have given as good proofs of my attachment to that cause, in the whole course of my public conduct. I think I envy liberty as little as they do, to any other nation' (p.89). Burke also distinguishes himself from Price by posing as a

practical politician not willing to praise liberty merely in the abstract: 'I should therefore suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France, until I was informed how it had been combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order; with civil and social manners' (pp.90-91). Burke is here sketching out the programme of the Reflections, but he is also implicitly pointing out what he considers to be the defining characteristics of the English constitution -- which, as we will see, supposedly combines and balances these factors with a due degree of 'regulated liberty.'

As one of the leading Whig intellectuals of the second half of the eighteenth century, Burke spends a significant portion of the Reflections in attempting to show that Price's interpretation of the Glorious Revolution, and hence of the English constitution, is not only wrong but actually threatens the constitution in its essence:

His doctrines affect our constitution in its vital parts. He tells the Revolution Society, in this political sermon, that his majesty 'is almost the only lawful king in the world, because the only one who owes his crown to the choice of his people.' ... This doctrine, as applied to the prince now on the British throne, either is nonsense, and therefore neither true nor false, or it affirms a most unfounded, dangerous, illegal, and unconstitutional position. (pp.96-97)

Countering Price's unconstitutional doctrine, Burke seeks to demonstrate that the monarchs of Great Britain hold their crown according to a fixed law of hereditary succession rather than to the choice or election of the people. He then quotes the three fundamental rights which Price claims the people of England acquired in 1688 (see above) and asserts that they add up to a 'new, and hitherto unheard-of bill of rights.' He goes on to suggest that 'the people of England' would be bound by law to reject such a bill of rights and, more revealingly, that they 'have no share in it. They utterly disclaim it. They will resist the practical assertion of it with their lives and fortunes' (p.99). A few pages later, Burke asserts that 'The people of England ... look upon the legal hereditary succession of their crown as among their rights, not as among their wrongs; ... as a security for their liberty, not as a badge of servitude' (p.111). The claim to know and speak for what the English people think, feel and will do is repeated throughout the Reflections. But this is not simply an example of Burke taking it upon himself, legitimately or not, to speak for the English people. Instead, as with his own self-characterisation, it can be read as a process of constructing (or reconstructing) the English national character rather than simply reflecting a pre-existing character and set of opinions. Burke is not only reinventing the English constitution at a moment of impending crisis; he is also using that crisis as an occasion for coaxing the English people into re-imagining who they are and what they ought to think and do.

But for all Burke's differences from Price, they both share the widespread eighteenth-century assumption that the well-being of states, like that of individuals, depends on their collective virtue. The claim to moral virtue is characteristic of almost all nationalist movements. Nationalists tend to represent their programme as a moral crusade devoted to re-establishing native virtues and to resisting the moral corruption of foreign nations or of 'alien' elements within the nation state.¹⁴ Such assumptions can be seen in radical nationalism in Britain from Milton through to Price. In the Reflections, Burke is contending for the same high moral ground, using similar rhetorical strategies, on behalf of a different kind of nationalism. As part of his self-characterisation as a generous nationalist, Burke represents himself as being prepared to admire a nation's efforts to regenerate itself. The very title and function of a National Assembly would normally have commanded his veneration: 'In that light the mind of an enquirer, subdued by such an awful image as that of the virtue and wisdom of a whole people collected into a focus, would pause and hesitate in condemning things even of the very worst aspect.' (pp.127-28) Yet when Burke comes to examine the actual circumstances of the Assembly, especially its composition and actions, he represents himself as compelled to condemn what he was disposed to admire. One of the major problems, for Burke, arises from the fact that the Assembly is almost wholly composed of the Third Estate, with no counterbalancing powers in the monarch, nobility, or clergy. Burke assures his correspondent that his critique of the composition of the National Assembly does not mean that he would 'confine power, authority, and distinction to blood, and names, and titles.' Instead, he would make 'virtue and wisdom' the only qualifications for government: that country would bring woe upon itself 'which would madly and impiously reject the service of the talents and virtues, civil, military, or religious, that are given to grace and to serve it' (p.139). Yet virtue and talent need to be tried and developed through difficulty and struggle: 'If rare merit be the rarest of all rare things, it ought to pass through some sort of probation. ... let it be remembered too, that virtue is never tried but by some difficulty, and some struggle' (p.140). Even then, the recruitment of proven ability and talent into government ought to be counterbalanced, in Burke's view, through the representation of landed property -- as in the English constitution (p.141).

Burke's emphasis on the link between proven virtue and political liberty within nation states is a characteristic nationalist assumption. It is also an indicator of how close some of Burke's positions are to those developed in Price's 'Discourse.' Conservative and radical nationalism can often seem awkwardly similar. In the Reflections, such similarities occur in part because Burke's nationalism is driven to appropriate and

¹⁴. See Newman, The Rise of English Nationalism, and Ernest Gellner, Nationalism (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997), pp.5-9.

redeploy some of the central features of radical nationalism. This can be seen in those moments when Burke seeks most urgently to distance himself from Price's sermon:

Before I read that sermon, I really thought I had lived in a free country; and it was an error I cherished, because it gave me a greater liking to the country I lived in. I was indeed aware, that a jealous, ever-waking vigilance, to guard the treasure of our liberty, not only from invasion, but from decay and corruption, was our best wisdom and our first duty. However, I considered that treasure rather as a possession to be secured than as a prize to be contended for. (pp.143-44).

Burke paraphrases here those assumptions which he shares with Price: as nationalists, they both assume that their first duty as lovers of their country is an ever-waking vigilance to guard the treasure of Britain's liberty, not only from invasion, but from decay and corruption. But Burke's attempt to distinguish his position from Price's on the basis that he 'considered that treasure rather as a possession to be secured than as a prize to be contended for' is not wholly convincing. Price too claims that the Revolution of 1688 had put the people of Britain in possession of liberty; he also urges that that this possession needed to be secured against the threats imposed by current corruption. It is perhaps only in stressing that British liberty needed to be contended for once again that Price differs from Burke.

In order to prise apart conservative and radical nationalism, Burke presents exaggerated accounts of the problems emerging in France. While he claims that the version of English nationalism he is promoting is characterised by 'manly' virtue, he attempts to castigate the French Revolution for abandoning the basic principles of nationalist ideology. Instead of repudiating the tendency to licence that had marred the ancien régime, the French Revolution has allowed dissoluteness to spread like a disease through all the ranks of France:

All other people have laid the foundations of civil freedom in severer manners, and a system of a more austere and masculine morality. France, when she let loose the reins of regal authority, doubled the licence, of a ferocious dissoluteness in manners, and of an insolent irreligion in opinions and practices; and has extended through all the ranks of life, as if she were communicating some privilege, ... all the unhappy corruptions that usually were the disease of wealth and power (p.125).

The ideological task of the 'centrepiece' of the Reflections -- Burke's melodramatic account of the events at Versailles on 5-6 October 1789 -- is to put as much distance as possible between English moral virtue and the ferocious moral dissoluteness of the French Revolution. In Burke's version of these events, a 'mob' of Parisians march to Versailles, break into the royal apartments, and almost rape the queen. Behaving like 'American savages' (p.159), the people force the king and queen to return to Paris and leave Versailles 'swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses' (p.164). Two

gentlemen of the royal guard are beheaded and their heads are 'stuck upon spears' and carried at the front of the procession (pp.164-65). As the procession moves along, the monarchs are surrounded by 'horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances' (p.165). Through such lurid images, Burke is suggesting that the French Revolution is being carried out by a people who are destroying their own national character and common humanity in the process. Burke also uses this account to distance himself as far as possible from Price and to distinguish between their different versions of English nationalism. Although Price makes moral virtue the foundation of national liberty, Burke presents him as a minister capable of celebrating in the pulpit the events at Versailles as a 'triumph' of liberty. By claiming that these 'unmanly and irreligious' events filled 'our Preacher with ... unhallowed transports' (p.159), Burke attempts to bring into question the claim to virtue that is so central to Price's version of nationalist fervour.

Burke was mocked from the outset for suggesting that the events at Versailles marked the passing of the age of chivalry and its replacement by the age 'of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators' (p.170). Yet it is possible to suggest that he is making a sophisticated case for the integral role of culture in cementing and sustaining political systems. He is also implying that the French have embarked upon a revolution in their national character. According to Burke, the 'most important of all revolutions' which took place at Versailles was 'a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions' (p.175). The behaviour towards the queen of France at Versailles, together with the fact that no one seems to have attempted to defend her honour, is a sign that the French have abandoned a code of manners which had once distinguished them as a nation: 'little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers' (pp.169-70).

By saying that these events 'must shock, I believe, the moral taste of every well-born mind' (p.159), Burke begins to direct his reader to a 'proper' response. He is also reminding his readers that the 'French' cultural code of chivalry was not limited to France. It was a European-wide cultural system of the 'well-born' which, Burke claims, had distinguished modern Europe 'under all its forms of government, and distinguished it to its advantage, from the states of Asia, and possibly from those states which flourished in the most brilliant periods of the antique world' (p.170). The manly virtues of chivalry are now to be found only in England because the French, who once set the standards of European culture, have abandoned them. As Burke puts it, 'In England we are said to learn manners at second-hand from your side of the water, and that we dress our behaviour in the frippery of France. If so, we are still of the old cut' (p.163). By going on to inform his reader that 'Several English were the stupified and indignant spectators of that triumph,'

Burke indicates that the English still know how to feel in response to such outrages. Burke's display of sensibility over Marie Antoinette's treatment at Versailles bears witness to his own character, but it is also an attempt to provide an influential exemplification of Englishness. By contrast, the response of Price and his followers reveals their abandonment of English sensibility. (That Burke was Irish and Price was Welsh simply underlines the fact that the exchange between them involves ideological character positions rather than national provenance.)

While it might be said that the code of manners which Burke is referring to was limited to an elite, pan-European culture involving a relatively small number of people (the well-born), Burke claims that it also operated within nation states -- as 'the cheap defence of nations' (p.170) -- to harmonise and stabilise social and political relations across classes. In an extraordinarily revealing passage, Burke regrets that

All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. (p.171)

Although Burke may admit that the culture whose passing he laments may have been composed of a set of pleasing illusions, he nonetheless stresses that such illusions are a necessary means of cementing society together in order to form a coherent nation. Suggesting that states are like poems in that they must charm, Burke counters Price's largely rationalist account of how we come to love our country: 'There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely' (p.172). Burke, I suggest, is arguing that it is a shared culture rather than an over-arching political system that binds people together into a nation. One of the things he objects to about the Revolution is that its over-reliance on supposedly 'rational' calculation and economics seems to overlook the role that culture plays in creating emotional attachments to the nation state:

On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, ... laws are to be supported only by their own terrors.... In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows. Nothing is left which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth. On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied, if I may use the expression, in persons; so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. (pp.171-72)

Burke is suggesting here that people can only be brought to love their nation through the symbolic activity of 'embodying' its institutions in 'persons.' Without such cultural and ideological processes, a state will have nothing but violence to motivate its people.

The Reflections is of particular interest, therefore, because it lays bare and seeks to justify the processes involved in constructing a cultural nationalism which is conservative in the sense that it claims that its assumptions are the only means by which a nation can be bonded together and conserved. Faced with the collapse of the old order, Burke is driven to develop a cultural nationalism by powerfully re-imagining the relation between culture and politics that had once sustained the European ancien régime as a whole. While Burke represents himself as having once been a good European, the French Revolution has forced him not into a revaluation of all values but to their relocation within the confines of the English (sometimes British) nation state. The Revolution's destruction of the 'chivalric' culture which had once distinguished Europe above all other noble civilisations means that, for Burke, England has become the last spot on earth where the old humane values still reside.¹⁵

The geographical proximity of England and France, as well as a long history of political and cultural interchange and enmity, meant that the activities of the French revolutionaries had a particular resonance for England. The France of the ancien régime had operated as England's (and Britain's) constitutive 'other' throughout the eighteenth century, not only in the radical English nationalism traced by Gerald Newman, but also in the more widespread British nationalism which Linda Colley has drawn attention to.¹⁶ Yet we have seen that Burke's English nationalism supposedly holds on to the manners and morals of the ancien régime -- tempered, of course by the English constitution and national character. The defining other for Burke is not ancien régime France but a revolutionary France that has abandoned the established standards of humanity:

Formerly your affairs were your own concern only. We felt for them as men; but we kept aloof from them, because we were not citizens of France. But when we see the model held up to ourselves, we must feel as Englishmen, and feeling, we must provide as Englishmen. Your affairs, in spite of us, are made a part of our interest; so far at least as to keep at a distance your panacea, or your plague. If it be a panacea, we do not want it. We know the consequences of unnecessary physic. If it be a plague; it is such a plague, that the precautions of the most severe quarantine ought to be established against it. (p.185)

Feeling and providing as an 'Englishman,' Burke works continually to protect the English national character from the plague of revolutionary France. While the Revolution seems to have metamorphosed the character of the volatile French, Burke would have it that the English

¹⁵. For a similar argument, see Seamus Deane, Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.7-8, 14.

¹⁶. See Gerald Newman, The Rise of English Nationalism, and Linda Colley, Britons.

remain steadfast to their essential character. The difference in the way the two nations treat vulnerable kings reveals a critical difference:

We formerly have had a king of France in that situation; you have read how he was treated by the victor in the field; and in what manner he was afterwards received in England. Four hundred years have gone over us; but I believe we are not materially changed since that period. Thanks to our sullen resistance to innovation, thanks to the cold sluggishness of our national character, we still bear the stamp of our forefathers. We have not (as I conceive) lost the generosity and dignity of thinking of the fourteenth century (p.181).

The English national character is generous and dignified; its cold sluggishness is a virtue that expresses itself as a sullen resistance to innovation. The use of the first person plural here not only absorbs Burke himself into the general national character, but also tends to reinforce the claim that the English literally have not changed in any way since the fourteenth century. Indeed, this device is merely a foretaste of a passage in which its repeated use adds up to a powerful rhetorical delineation of the English national character:

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 preserve the whole of our feelings still native and entire, unsophisticated by pedantry and infidelity. We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms. 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. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is natural to be affected; because all other feelings are false and spurious, and tend to corrupt our minds, to vitiate our primary morals, to render us unfit for rational liberty (pp.182-83).

English feelings remain native and natural; they ensure the maintenance of 'liberal and manly morals;' and the reverence of the English for God, kings, parliaments, magistrates, priests, and nobility is not a slavery, as the radicals would have it, but the basis of their fitness for 'rational liberty.' The English national character finds its authentic expression and counterpart in the English constitution:

The whole [of the constitution] has emanated from the simplicity of our national character, and from a sort of native plainness and directness of understanding, which for a long time characterized those men who have successively obtained authority amongst us. This disposition still remains, at least in the great body of the people. (p.186)

For the English, then, to remain loyal to their constitution is to remain true to their essential national character. Indeed, as the last bastion of humanity, Burke confers enormous responsibilities on the English remaining true to themselves (or to his representation of them).

Burke embarks upon a powerful re-imagining of the English nation in ways designed to cement it together in preparation for resisting the

dissolving principles of radical nationalism. This involves Burke in developing a powerful articulation of the English (sometimes 'British') constitution. Figured, often, as a building whose foundations and fabric have been fashioned, preserved and added to over many generations, the constitution, as Burke represents it, binds the people by duty and sentiment to cherish and preserve what they have inherited -- especially when they are called on to reform and restore it. The constitution is not changeless, but changes may be made only in order to preserve it:

A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. ... The two principles of conservation and correction operated strongly at the two critical periods of the Restoration and Revolution, when England found itself without a king. At both those periods the nation had lost the bond of union in their antient edifice; they did not however, dissolve the whole fabric. On the contrary, in both cases they regenerated the deficient part of the old constitution through the parts which were not impaired. (p.106)

Rather than making the English constitution continually vulnerable to revolution whenever the people felt aggrieved, Burke argues that the Revolution sought to protect the constitution from the incursion of kings so as to obviate the need for future revolutions. By limiting the powers of a constitutional monarchy, establishing the conditions of hereditary succession, and enhancing the controlling powers of both houses of Parliament, the Revolution had set up a balanced constitution able to secure 'the rights and liberties of the subject' (p.113). Instead of breaking with the past or introducing new-fangled rights of men, 'The Revolution was made to preserve our antient indisputable laws and liberties, and that antient constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty' (p.117). Thus, in characteristic nationalist fashion, Burke assures his readers that the English constitution he is describing, perhaps partly inventing, has its roots deep in the past. English liberties are not a new invention but have been the central concern of the English constitution from time immemorial.

The continuity over time that characterises English history and its constitution is not simply a formal or legal one. Burke figures England as a huge family which extends across time as well as space: 'We wished at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers' (p.117). The use of the first person plural here -- as elsewhere in the Reflections -- allows Burke to be a constituent member of a nation whose consciousness and will seem to be unified in the present and through the past. By imaginatively and legalistically organising the English people as a national family, the English constitution allows them to claim their 'franchises not on abstract principles "as the rights of men," but as the rights of Englishmen, and as a patrimony derived from their forefathers' (p.118). In this way, the advantages of the constitution are 'locked fast as in a sort of family settlement':

In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable ... our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars. (p.120)

Families are held together in the present through bonds of blood, love, and property relations, and to the past through memory and inherited property. Burke imagines the English nation as being locked together through analogous ties and affections. Yet the family Burke is imagining here is an aristocratic one with material and symbolic connections with its past: 'By this means our liberty becomes a noble freedom. It carries an imposing and majestic aspect. It has a pedigree and illustrating ancestors. It has its bearings and its ensigns armorial. It has its gallery of portraits; its monumental inscriptions; its records, evidences, and titles' (p.121). Burke is here engaged in consecrating the nation through a kind of ancestor worship. He is also seeking to make the English aristocracy appear to be the custodians of the national family heritage rather than being alien to the national tradition (as radical nationalism asserted).

One of the crucial principles of the English constitution, for Burke, is the way it consecrates the state through connecting it with the established church. Burke praises that sense which 'not only, like a wise architect, hath built up the august fabric of states, but like a provident proprietor, to preserve the structure from prophanation and ruin, as a sacred temple, ... hath solemnly and for ever consecrated the commonwealth, and all that officiate in it' (p.189). Treating the nation state as an object of worship is one of the defining characteristics of nationalist ideology. While Price argues for the disestablishment of the Anglican Church, he nonetheless conceives of Britain as consecrated by claiming, after the example of seventeenth-century puritan republicans, that it is the Jerusalem of the modern world. Burke's metaphor of the state as a sacred temple, however, is designed to resist what he sees as the improvident desire on the part of radicals to tear down the fabric of the country in order to begin building again from nothing. The state is to be regarded as consecrated in order that we 'should approach [its] faults ... as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude' (p.194). If the state were subject to being changed with every change of fashion, Burke says, 'the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer' (pp.192-93). Thus, for Burke, a nation or commonwealth has continuity not only across the space of the national territory, but also backwards through the nation's history. This prepares the way for one of Burke's most characteristic statements:

Society is indeed a contract. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a

partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born (p.194).

England is an exemplary case here, and the English are exemplary in having understood these principles across the generations: 'These ... are, were, and I think long will be the sentiments of not the least learned and reflecting part of this kingdom' (p.195). Both these and 'the less enquiring' section of the populace accept that the state is divinely ordained as the appropriate arena for human development: 'They conceive that He who gave our nature to be perfected by our virtue, willed also the necessary means of its perfection -- He willed therefore the state' (p.196). Such a conception of the origins and purpose of the state justifies the fact that the 'oblation of the state itself, as a worthy offering on the high altar of universal praise, should be performed, as all publick solemn acts are performed, in buildings, in musick, in decoration, in speech, in the dignity of persons, according to the customs of mankind, taught by their nature' (pp.196-97). The primary focus of national culture, then, should be the pomp and circumstance of the state itself. As an embodiment of the national character, Burke assures his reader that he is speaking for 'the majority of the people of England':

I assure you I do not aim at singularity. I give you opinions which have been accepted amongst us, from very early times to this moment, with a continued and general approbation, and which indeed are so worked into my mind, that I am unable to distinguish what I have learned from others from the results of my own meditation. (p.197).

Burke, then, claims that there is continuity between his own mind and the national mind as expressed in the national culture. Personal and national identities become impossible to disentangle. It is upon such a basis that Burke claims the authority to state that the English consider the church as 'the foundation of their whole constitution, with which, and with every part of which, it holds an indissoluble union. Church and state are ideas inseparable in their minds' (p.198).

A good deal of the last third of the Reflections is made up of a sustained analysis of the achievements of the revolutionary nation builders in France. The standard of comparison throughout is, of course, Burke's own imagining of the English constitution and of the statesmanship which shaped it over the centuries. Rather than following the sustained example of the wise architects of the English constitution, the new statesmen of the French Revolution behave as if a country were a kind of tabula rasa with no history, customs, or established institutions: 'I cannot conceive how any man can have brought himself to that pitch of presumption, to consider his country as nothing but carte blanche, upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases. ... a good patriot, and a true politician, always considers how he shall make the most of the existing materials of his country' (pp.266-67). Burke complains that 'The French

builders, clearing away as mere rubbish whatever they found, and, like their ornamental gardeners, forming every thing into an exact level,' have reorganised the country according to three supposedly rational principles: territory, population, and contribution to the treasury (p.285). On the basis of the first principle, the country is divided up into squares of eighteen leagues by eighteen leagues called departments; these are then divided into squares called communes, which are in turn divided up into squares called cantons. In other words, the national map is redrawn according to geometrical principles that literally cut through the circumstantial variations of natural and human geography. Local allegiances and identities are overridden supposedly in favour of national identifications. Yet, for Burke, the inevitable result of these contrivances is to divide the country into competing, irreconcilable units:

In this whole contrivance of the three bases, consider it in any light you please, I do not see a variety of objects, reconciled in one consistent whole, but several contradictory principles reluctantly and irreconcilably brought and held together by your philosophers, like wild beasts shut up in a cage, to claw and bite each other to their mutual destruction. (p.296)

The internal divisions introduced by this spatial reorganisation of France are exacerbated, Burke complains, by the introduction of a system of representation that severs all contact between the members of the National Assembly and the general electorate who vote within the cantons. As Burke explains it, voters elect representatives to the cantons; these representatives, in turn, elect deputies to the communes; the deputies of the communes then elect deputies to the departments; and, finally, the deputies in the departments elect deputies to the National Assembly. The consequence of this system is that 'there is little, or rather no, connection between the last representative and the first constituent. The member who goes to the national assembly is not chosen by the people, nor accountable to them' (p.304). Thus the attempt to homogenise the nation leads instead to its internal fragmentation: 'They have attempted to confound all sorts of citizens, as well as they could, into one homogenous mass; and then they divided this their amalgama into a number of incoherent republics' (p.300). Although the Revolution poses as a nationalist movement, it has acted as if it were a foreign invader seeking to destroy any possibility of national sentiment or unity:

in the spirit of this geometrical distribution, and arithmetical arrangement, these pretended citizens treat France exactly like a country of conquest. Acting as conquerors, they have imitated the policy of the harshest of that harsh race. The policy of such barbarous victors, who condemn a subdued people, and insult their feelings, has ever been, as much as in them lay, to destroy all vestiges of the antient country, in religion, in polity, in laws, and in manners (pp.297-98).

Recent historians and theorists of nationalism tend to regard the theory and practice of the French Revolution as an exemplary case of modernising nationalism that sought to replace local identities and

differences with a homogenised national politics and culture.¹⁷ Burke is suggesting here that this version of nationalism wages civil war on the populace. A 'modern' homogenous culture spreads out from the metropolitan centre and attempts to destroy the local identities and cultures of the regions and districts:

It is boasted, that the geometrical policy has been adopted, that all local ideas should be sunk, and that the people should no longer be Gascons, Picards, Bretons, Normans, but Frenchmen, with one country, one heart, and one assembly. But instead of being all Frenchmen, the greater likelihood is, that the inhabitants of that region will shortly have no country. No man ever was attached by a sense of pride, partiality, or real affection, to a description of square measurement. ... We begin our public affections in our families. ... We pass on to our neighbourhoods, and our habitual provincial connections. ... Such divisions of our country as have been formed by habit, and not by a sudden jerk of authority, were so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something which it could fill. The love to the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality. Perhaps it is a sort of elemental training to those higher and more large regards, by which alone men come to be affected, as with their own concern, in the prosperity of a kingdom so extensive as that of France. In that general territory itself, as in the old name of provinces, the citizens are interested from old prejudices and unreasoned habits, and not on account of the geometric properties of its figure. (pp.314-15)

Burke's nationalism, then, is at war with revolutionary nationalism -- whose centrist and potentially totalitarian tendencies he represents as destructive of the sense of nation as he understands it. Burke's alternative to modernising nationalism involves reinterpreting the relationship between local and national cultures and identifications. Instead of thinking of a country as a blank sheet of paper to be divided up into geometrical units, a nation state is refigured as an organic system made up of local identities that cohere into an imaginative whole. Burke presents a cultural and psychological account of how citizens come imaginatively to identify with the nation through extending their primary identifications with families, neighbourhoods and provinces. In such a system, local attachments and identifications are not barriers to national ones but habits that prepare the mind for larger attachments: 'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind' (p.135).

According to Burke, then, the architects of the new France seem to be botching the job of building a nation. Their complicated and incoherent division of France into squares within squares promises to dismember their country. They have not left in place 'any principle by which any of their municipalities can be bound to obedience; or even conscientiously

¹⁷. See Anderson, Imagined Communities, pp.77-78, and Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

obliged not to separate from the whole, to become independent, or to connect itself with some other state' (p.349). This would seem especially fatal given the fact that the Revolution has destroyed the cultural mores, or pleasing illusions, which had bonded civil society in the ancien régime. Burke dismisses the new cultural 'cement' which the National Assembly has provided as incapable of compensating for the loss of the old culture or of overcoming the incoherence introduced by the new political arrangements:

Finding no sort of principle of coherence with each other in the nature and constitution of the several new republics of France, I considered what cement the legislators had provided for them from any extraneous materials. Their confederations, their spectacles, their civic feasts, and their enthusiasm, I take no notice of; They are nothing but mere tricks (p.306).

The only cementing principles which Burke takes notice of are the introduction of a paper currency based on the confiscation of the church's property, the centralisation of power in Paris, and the necessary recourse to the army. Burke predicts that each of these measures will in practice turn out to accelerate the dissolution of France.

For Burke, therefore, the French experiment is the very last example that Britain ought to follow. In fact, he advises the French to refashion their state on the British model. According to Burke, the political situation in France immediately before the Revolution was not so bad as the revolutionaries had claimed and the government simply needed to be reformed along the lines of the British constitution (p.236). Even at this late stage, Burke recommends the British system of checks and balances as the only panacea that might save France from ruin (p.227). Similarly, an authentic patriotism, a true love of country, would involve British subjects not in calling for a French Revolution in Britain but in protecting the British constitution from such a catastrophe: 'Our people will find employment enough for a truly patriotic, free, and independent spirit, in guarding what they possess, from violation. I would not exclude alteration neither; but even when I changed, it should be to preserve.' (p.375)

For Burke, the French Revolution constituted a radical break in the political world by destroying one of the old nations of Europe and attempting to replace it with a new nation state built on entirely new principles. Burke saw the Revolution as an experiment in nation making whose theory and practice would undermine the old nations without being able to construct stable nation states in their place. Yet Burke's reforming nationalism is designed primarily as a means of immunising England against a revolutionary nationalism already at work in England and given new energy by the French Revolution. In response to Price's recommendation that Britain ought fully to adopt a modern civic nationalism, Burke claims that England already enjoys the benefits of a

cultural nationalism that is the only means of cementing people into a nation.¹⁸ The difference between Burke and Price is smaller than Burke would admit, but the difference is a critical one. Civic nationalism assumes that a nation can only be free, virtuous and fully coherent when all its citizens enjoy freedom of conscience and the right to participate in the political process. Burke's cultural nationalism assumes that a nation can only be free, virtuous and fully coherent through engaging the imaginative identifications of each citizen or subject. Both these competing accounts of nationalism suggest that the source of authority is the 'majesty' of the English nation. Yet the meaning and location of this is different in each case and depends on contending interpretations or constructions of the English (or British) constitution. Perhaps the central concern of this textual struggle is about what (and who) authentically represents the English people, English opinion, and the English national character. What Burke cannot admit is the degree to which the Reflections radically refashions, reinvents, the national character and constitution in response to an emergency which is largely of his own imagining.

To a large degree, Price and Burke engage in this struggle through strategies of self-representation. Price's rapturous conclusion to the 'Discourse' implicitly presents himself as an aged, virtuous man whose years of sacrifice and waiting are being miraculously fulfilled at the end of a long life devoted to the cause of liberty:

What an eventful period is this! I am thankful that I have lived to see it, and I could almost say, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation. ... After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious. (Political Writings, p.195).

Price quotes here from 'The Song of Simeon' (Luke 2); Simeon was a 'just and devout' man to whom the Holy Ghost revealed that 'he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.' He was led by 'the Spirit into the temple,' and when he saw the child Jesus 'he took him up in his arms, and blessed God,' and uttered the following prayer:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
According to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all the people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles,
And the glory of thy people Israel. (Luke 2: 25-32)

¹⁸. For a discussion of the difference between cultural and political nationalism, see John Hutchinson, The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

Burke makes great play with Price's use of this prayer by pointing out that the same prayer was used by Dr Hugh Peter, a chaplain in the Parliamentary army, when Charles I was brought to trial. Peter (Burke calls him Peters) was executed at the Restoration 'on a charge of concerting the king's death' (O'Brien, Reflections, 379 n.8). As Burke puts it, 'Peters had not the fruits of his prayer; for he neither departed so soon as he wished, nor in peace' (p.158). Burke makes it clear that he does not wish a similar fate on Price, but he is trying to tar Price with the same regicide brush. Burke needs to defame Price because, as I've suggested, the contest of character between them is inextricably involved with their political contest. They are both striving to be representative voices of national opinion, and they are both implicitly claiming to be virtuous embodiments of their own particular version of the national character. Hence to question Price's virtue is to question his nationalism.¹⁹ This is why Burke seeks to present Price as unmanly and irreligious:

I find a preacher of the gospel prophaning the beautiful and prophetic ejaculation, commonly called 'nunc dimitis,' made on the first presentation of our Saviour in the Temple, and applying it, with an inhuman and unnatural rapture, to the most horrid, atrocious, and afflicting spectacle, that perhaps ever was exhibited to the pity and indignation of mankind. This 'leading in triumph,' a thing in its best form unmanly and irreligious, which fills our Preacher with such unhallowed transports, must shock, I believe, the moral taste of every well-born mind (p.159).

Burke concludes the Reflections by putting the finishing touches to his own self-portrait; he emerges as a man who has been driven to write the Reflections not because he opposes liberty, but because he values virtuous liberty:

Those who know what virtuous liberty is, cannot bear to see it disgraced by incapable heads, on account of their having high-sounding words in their mouths. Grand, swelling sentiments of liberty, I am sure I do not despise. They warm the heart; they enlarge and liberalise our minds; they animate our courage in a time of conflict. Old as I am, I read the fine raptures of Lucan and Corneille with pleasure. (p.373)

Burke's reference to his age invites direct comparison with Price, as does his assumption that there is a crucial connection between liberty and virtue. In the end, Burke expects his readers to base their acceptance of the superiority of his principles over those offered by Price and the French revolutionaries on the basis of his personal qualities and achievements. Ending with several paragraphs of self-characterisation,

¹⁹. It is significant, in this respect, that much of Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Men should be taken up with attempts to defend Price's character on the grounds of moral virtue and to demolish Burke's. See Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, edited by Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.1-64.

Burke offers the opinions presented in the Reflections as faithfully representing the whole tenor of his character and life's work:

I have little to recommend my opinions, but long observation and much impartiality. They come from one who has been no tool of power, no flatterer of greatness; and who in his last acts does not wish to belye the tenour of his life. They come from one, almost the whole of whose public exertion has been a struggle for the liberty of others (p.376).

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