

## Forum

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### Burke's Histrionics

TO THE EDITOR:

In "Burke, Boredom, and the Theater of Counterrevolution" (118 [2003]: 224–38) Anne Mallory attempts a radical interpretation of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. She treats it as an account of how Burke favored revolution over reform but, having no chance of getting England to follow the French, disguised his feelings and re-created himself as a histrionic counterrevolutionary. Most readers find that Burke's ideas (e.g., that human rights are better grounded in history than in philosophy) reject the French Revolution; Mallory urges us to forget the ideas and watch Burke's performance.

Mallory runs into a problem early on—when she says that "boredom" is the guiding principle of *Reflections*. Knowing the word wasn't coined in Burke's day, she claims the idea is present as "indolence" plus "restlessness." Unfortunately, the *Shorter OED* (5th ed. [2002]) shows no connection. It defines "indolence" as "love of ease, laziness," and "boredom" as "wearisomeness" or "tedium." Nor does it make a connection between "boredom" and "restlessness." It couldn't, for the one is weary while the other is not. Mallory makes the connection through Patricia Spacks, whose 1995 book on the subject was available to the dictionary's editors, but they took no notice of it.

Mallory finds boredom everywhere in *Reflections*. Burke is bored, Price is bored, the British are bored, the French are bored. But nowhere is it found directly. It always must be coaxed inside: "Burke endured a period of enforced inactivity; inactivity led to boredom, and boredom exacerbated his sense of impotence in the face of old and new limitations on his ability to shape political events" (225). Surely it must be enforced inactivity rather than boredom that exacerbates his sense of impotence. In general, I would think boredom is a reaction to something one is doing and restlessness a reaction to doing nothing.

People can be bored by their work or by the discourse to which they are listening, but doing nothing makes them restless rather than bored.

The reformist rhetoric of *Reflections*, says Mallory, suppresses “disaffection and restlessness,” which “reemerge in the form of textual theatricalities” (226). That means disaffection and restlessness are not visible in *Reflections* but are at work under cover every time Burke gets theatrical. The argument is easy enough to refute. One has only to say, “No, they aren’t.”

Mallory asserts that Burke defends “a ‘system of manners’ as the best and most characteristically English antidote to boredom and restlessness” (230). The sentence from Burke actually says nothing about boredom or antidotes thereto: “There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish” (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien [1790; London: Penguin, 1986] 172).

Mallory quotes the following to show that Burke makes excitement the cure for boredom: “A cheap, bloodless reformation, a guiltless liberty, appear flat and vapid to their taste. There must be a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination, grown torpid with the lazy enjoyment of sixty years security, and the still unanimating repose of public prosperity” (qtd. in Mallory 226). The passage does convey excitement: “magnificent stage effect” and “grand spectacle.” But no boredom. “Torpid” means “inactive, apathetic; slow, sluggish; dull”—but not “weary,” which is the word Mallory needs. Besides, “torpid” and “unanimating repose” are sarcasms rather than literal descriptions, and the passage contains no revolutionary acts that could be thought exciting. Had Mallory started her quote one sentence earlier, she would have found three—though none to her liking. “Plots, massacres, assassinations, seem to some people a trivial price for obtaining a revolution” (Burke 156). These are the kind of acts her thesis calls for to cure boredom. Finally, this passage shows that Burke does not entirely believe England has to be changed through revolution or reform. Sixty years of continuous security and prosperity are pretty good arguments for maintaining the status quo.

Burke says that the English “conceive the undisturbed succession of the crown to be a pledge

of the stability and perpetuity of all the other members [House of Lords and House of Commons] of our constitution” (111). Mallory says this passage shows that the English “handle tedium” better than the French (231). No, it doesn’t.

Mallory says, “The English resist the trend toward disaffection, whereby ‘[n]othing [will be] left which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth. On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied . . . in persons; so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment’ ” (231). In contrast, Burke says, “In the groves of *their* academy, at the end of every visto, 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 . . . ” (171–72).

Burke’s subject is the French; Mallory makes it the English. Burke says nothing about a trend toward disaffection. In Mallory’s version, disaffection is the “mechanic philosophy”; in Burke the “vistos” are. A visto is a view seen from one end of a tunnel. Each visto is a principle of the “mechanic philosophy” that the French Academy has developed to support revolution. Burke says this philosophy supports actions that are treasonable and punishable by death, and there is nothing in it that can create a government the English can love, venerate, and so forth.

Failure to establish boredom as Burke’s guiding principle and the frequent misreadings that result seriously challenge Mallory’s thesis. Still, I found the essay interesting in itself, perhaps because it bears the same relation to *Reflections* as *Wide Sargasso Sea* bears to *Jane Eyre*.

George Bellis  
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### Reply:

I appreciate George Bellis’s interest in my essay. Clearly we disagree about both boredom and Burke. That said, his paraphrase of my position is misleading. My essay does not claim that Burke “favored revolution over reform” but rather locates traces of boredom and disaffection within his counterrevolutionary argument.

I set out not to summarize Burke’s overt arguments but to analyze passages that struck me as his-