4. The Embrace of Unfeeling

If Gibbon’s submission of his judgment to insensible processes leads him to a terminal point in the idiom’s use in Enlightenment historiography, the same vocabulary allows a figure at the century’s close to take one small step beyond it. Edmund Burke in his late writings on the French Revolution more positively than most writers discussed in this book accepts the near paradoxical linkage between feeling and unfeeling. He rises to a pitch of sentiment in portraying the unsensed way in which cherished social forms have come into being. Viewing Burke as a sentimental writer, especially about the past and its traditions, has been a feature of the critical response to his writing from the beginning. Catharine Macaulay in her pamphlet attack (1790) on Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* refers to the “methodized sentimental barbarism” of chivalry that has led Burke astray. But among other functions, the insensible helps Burke differentiate his own fervor from the “eager and passionate enthusiasm” animating the English radicals. His espousal of the idiom suggests a new sense in which he may be seen as an anti-Enlightenment figure, beyond the commonly recognized, more pronounced one, as a critic of revolutionaries’ assertions of rational and abstract ideals of rights and liberty. Instead of quietly gesturing to the unfelt to underwrite an enlightened theory of history, of the progress of politeness or the four stages, he more fully embraces it and succumbs to its embrace.
Though he published no work of history, strictly speaking, in his lifetime, a particular understanding of English constitutional development permeates Burke’s political writings. Lord Acton declared Burke “the most historically minded of English statesmen.” Burke’s unfinished but substantial fragment An Essay Towards an Abridgment of the English History (1757, running to some ninety thousand words) expresses historiographical views that will shape his subsequent writing and thought. He refers in the Abridgment, for instance, to Montesquieu as “the greatest genius, which has enlightened this age.” Burke’s career-long emphasis on manners derives in part from Montesquieu, and in the Abridgment itself, manners take a central place. Burke brings his Abridgment only to 1215, Magna Carta and the reign of King John. But in it he articulates a defining regard for gradual historical change and a particular interest in how such change forms a nation’s characteristic sentiments.

The Abridgment shows Burke’s thought to be consonant with the depictions in David Hume and other Scottish thinkers of the gradual historical refinement of both sensibility and liberty. For instance, in his discussion of Roman Britain under Agricola, Burke remarks, “He moulded that fierce nation by degrees to soft and social customs, leading them imperceptibly into a fondness for baths, for gardens, for grand houses, and all the commodious elegancies of a cultivated life.” Such slow processes are not confined to England. Like Hume’s account of the “insensible revolution” and William Robertson’s View of the Progress of Society in Europe, Burke’s Abridgment presents this expansion of liberty as an international phenomenon. In discussing contests between papal and imperial factions in France and Germany in the time of Charlemagne he remarks, “Whilst these parties disagreed in the choice of a master, by contending for a choice in their subjection they grew imperceptibly into freedom, and passed through the medium of faction and anarchy into regular commonwealths.” Like the Scottish Enlightenment historiographers, Burke narrates the gradual expansion of sentimental and political powers of European populations, but with a slight difference in emphasis.

This difference may ultimately derive from subtly contrasting political sympathies. The Abridgment articulates a Humean view that the constitution developed slowly and haphazardly and that aspects of Saxon governance such as the Witenagemot (the Saxon assembly that advised the king) are too uncertain to serve as a basis for the English constitution: Burke writes, “All these things are, I think, sufficient to shew of what a visionary nature those systems are, which would settle the ancient Constitution in the most remote times exactly in the same form, in which we enjoy it at this day; not considering that such mighty changes in manners, during so many ages, always must produce a considerable change in laws, and in the forms as well as the powers of all
governments.” All the same, despite this circumspection, the Abridgment’s “view of English history had a distinct Whig flavour,” T. O. McLoughlin remarks, with its stress on Magna Carta as a watershed and its view of the Witenagemot and other elements of the Saxon inheritance that made liberty a consistent, if often only felt, theme in English political development. Hume, who insists that English constitutional liberties really had their birth at 1688, would not go this far. (Recognizing the importance of Magna Carta, he sees it as a composite expressing Norman and Saxon impulses, as well as universal natural law.) Burke furthermore identifies religion as largely responsible for the insensible revolution in English manners in a way that Hume, who foregrounds religion’s volatility, could not countenance.

In these similarities and differences, the lineaments of Burke’s distinctive attitude toward insensible historical change appear. Like Hume and Robertson, he stresses the unintended development of manners that come to shape laws. But a kind of inarticulate feeling accompanies and also somehow directs this process. Discussing a crucial juncture in the conflict between the barons and King John, Burke remarks, “The English barons had privileges, which they knew to have been violated: they had always kept up the memory of the ancient Saxon liberty.” Thus liberty as an (at least baronial) English birthright subsists as knowledge and memory and so exerts a historical force of which the nation is conscious. But a sentence later, he offers this qualification: the barons “rather felt their wrongs, than understood the cause of them.” English liberty abides more as a feeling than as a concept of governance. By thus distinguishing the feeling for liberty from the understanding of it, Burke may the better maintain the link between such feeling and the unfelt historical processes out of which it arises. He may narrate, that his, how the English “grew imperceptibly into freedom” while still putting liberty forward as something they consistently felt if not knew, abiding and developing through “mighty changes in manners.”

This doubleness distinguishes Burke both politically and, in a subtle way, also historiographically from Hume. In his review of Hume’s complete History of England in The Annual Register, or A View of the History, Politicks, and Literature, of the Year 1761, the journal he ran for Robert Dodsley, Burke accepts Hume’s contention that England’s politics developed gradually, like a plant: “The idea of the growth, as I may call it, of our present constitution seems to be the principle of the whole work compleated by the part now published” (i.e., the medieval volumes). He also shares Hume’s view of the accidental, unplanned nature of this growth, praising his portrayal of the “strange chaos of liberty and tyranny, of anarchy and order, [from which] the constitution, we are now blessed with, has at length arisen.” But a small, suggestive difference
between the two writers appears when the review complains that Hume leaves crucial historical transactions out of the main narrative, consigning them instead to appendixes: “Yet, with deference to so learned and sensible a writer, we think some matters, as the history of the Wittangemot [sic], might in his hands have appeared to advantage in the text, and have relieved the reader in a period, where the recital of uninteresting facts seems to demand some argumentative or discursive matter to engage the attention, and so perhaps might the origin of the feudal law.”

Burke knows that Hume’s placement in an appendix of his account of the Witenagemot could be a way of announcing its lack of “discussive” importance in understanding England’s political evolution. For Hume, the Witenagemot did not represent the people and so could not be seen as an ancestor of the House of Commons.

Yet despite all its uncertainties and haphazard manifestations, a Saxon spirit of liberty, which found expression in such hazily distant institutions, for Burke somehow brought forth signal moments like Magna Carta, though it was liberty “rather felt . . . than understood.” Likewise, the historian surveying such developments must find a way to narrate them, now seen as “argumentative or discursive matter,” within England’s main political storyline. If this story progresses by insensible steps, it is also tied together by feeling, however inarticulate—a feeling that the historian must recognize, include, and perhaps share. (Thus, much later, his remarks on English historiography in Reflections on the Revolution in France, while discounting the accuracy of previous pedigrees of the ancient constitution, will nonetheless insist that “the powerful prepossession towards antiquity” of English legal historians alone decisively maintains the constitution.)

Another much more discussed early work of Burke’s, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), offers an account of insensible affective change that is brief but more psychologically precise than the political and historical pictures presented in the Abridgment. Still, like the Abridgment, the Enquiry at large demonstrates (in F. P. Lock’s words) that for the young Burke, “feeling is more reliable than reason.” A wealth of scholarly literature in recent decades has explored the “aesthetic ideology” of Burke’s Enquiry and connected it to his later revolutionary writings and historical views in general. Many, including Tom Furniss, have emphasized the special pertinence of the sublime to Burke’s account of politics. The mental exercise demanded by the sublime has been read as a kind of allegory of actual physical labor in the economy; for Furniss it is associated with “the political and economic project of the rising middle class,” which valued the exercise of talent. The beautiful, though significant enough in the Enquiry, has been
placed by Furniss and others on the side of an enervating, “feminine” luxury, associated with the aristocracy, which Burke is said to despise.\textsuperscript{120}

Commentators in this vein sometimes go so far as to identify the beautiful with a kind of stupefying privative insensibility, an “evil” slackness for which the laborious sublime acts as “remedy.”\textsuperscript{121} But Burke does not portray beauty as quite so slack as all that. In two chapters, “Gradual Variation” (part 3, chapter 15) and “Variation, Why Beautiful” (part 4, chapter 23), he associates beauty with an insensible of the more positive, additive kind. While affirming that “the genuine constituents of beauty, have each of them separately taken a natural tendency to relax the fibres,” Burke maintains that a kind of quiet change or dynamism maintains the beautiful object as such:

Another principal property of beautiful objects is, that the line of their parts is continually varying its direction; but it varies it by a very insensible deviation, it never varies it so quickly as to surprise, or by the sharpness of its angle to cause any twitching or convulsion of the optic nerve. Nothing long continued in the same manner, nothing very suddenly varied can be beautiful; because both are opposite to that agreeable relaxation, which is the characteristic effect of beauty. . . . Rest certainly tends to relax; yet there is a species of motion that relaxes more than rest; a gentle oscillatory motion, a rising and falling.\textsuperscript{122}

Here beauty’s “very insensible deviation” causes not a senseless stupefaction at all but rather an “agreeable relaxation.” (The sublime certainly rescues us from disagreeable relaxation, but it is hard to read Burke as viewing the mind as in need of rescue from beauty as here described.) William Hogarth’s discussion in \textit{The Analysis of Beauty}, which appeared four years earlier (1753),\textsuperscript{123} contains a similar point, of which Burke approved.\textsuperscript{124} Change is essential, Burke notes, because “nothing long continued in the same manner” can be beautiful, but it must be change of an insensible sort. Sentiment thrives not on the privative sort of insensibility but on the insensible character of the right kind of variation.

The account in the \textit{Enquiry} of the “positive pleasure” taken in insensibly varying objects sheds light on the historical thinking that infuses Burke’s later political writing. It does so not as some crude allegory of politics—as if the English constitution, or the traditions and customs that stabilize a society, were beautiful objects like the neck of a dove or the breasts of a woman (Burke’s examples). More precisely psychological, the \textit{Enquiry}’s account of beautiful variation illustrates how a positive, powerful sentiment in the human mind may originate from objects whose active and effective powers are not sensed.
As in other examples discussed in this book, the point here is how the unfelt may affect feeling, not what specifically in any given context may be affecting (a neck, the constitution) or what truths such things may stand for. So beautiful affect does not allegorically represent some social class or other, or any particular political aspiration, but rather activates a feature of human psychology, the more widely shared by persons in groups and reinforced for being included among the “passions which belong to society.”

A few examples from Burke’s late political writing only begin to suggest how the idea of unfelt affect helps him to articulate his sentimental grasp of historical processes. As any usage of the term insensibly must, they all designate significant change, not the comforts of consistency, of static custom, habit, and tradition, sometimes seen as the core of Burke’s political ideals. And such change ultimately touches and brings into being significant sentiment. Like the beauty in the Enquiry that results from insensible variation, such sentiments are remarkable, not merely the product of inert customary norms; as the Enquiry puts it, “if we suppose proportion in natural things to be relative to custom and use, the nature of use and custom will shew, that beauty, which is a powerful and positive quality, cannot result from it.” The Burkean politician is affected by contemplation of insensible changes in manners from which he feels his own affections grow. (Those merely immersed in “use and custom,” on the other hand, do not feelingly recognize the arc of insensible change that brings them to their immediate, practical concerns.)

So in a famous passage in Reflections on the Revolution in France, Burke insists on both the basis of such processes in the unnoticeable and the intensity of attention they arouse. In the Burkean political effort “at once to preserve and to reform,” the legislator’s “vigorous mind, steady, persevering attention, various powers of comparison and combination, and the resources of an understanding fruitful in expedients” are assisted by time: “It is one of the excellences of a method in which time is amongst the assistants, that its operation is slow and in some cases almost imperceptible.” Again, the point is not that it is right to call what the legislator does “beautiful.” But his activity is nonetheless remarkable, not merely an indifferent falling in with custom. He does not resemble a snuff-taker who passively and insensibly falls into his habit. What the legislator does, “to preserve and to reform,” is a species of motion, productive of change, fruitful, vigorous, persevering (and if not quite a “gentle oscillatory motion, a rising and falling” like the beautiful stimulus, at least one that moves between gently opposite impulses). Yet it is often so “slow” as to be “almost imperceptible”—to the legislator, to the society he benefits, and to the observer-historian.
And with Burke, as with others discussed in this book, such imperceptibility, far from negating sensibility, is what constitutes it. He continues, “If circumspection and caution are a part of wisdom, when we work only upon inanimate matter, surely they become a part of duty too, when the subject of our demolition and construction is not brick and timber, but sentient beings.”

Burke’s architectural metaphor reverently presents a continuum between the renovation of ancient buildings and that of human beings. Both become affecting by the unnoticed way they are affected. Finally, he declares, “the true lawgiver ought to have an heart full of sensibility”—notably fuller, it seems, than the “sentient beings” he helps construct. The reverence of the legislator is not only directed at maintaining a social and governmental fabric that has insensibly evolved through time. His own sentiment is the product of such evolution. In such passages, then, the insensible provides the ground on which the wisdom of the legislator and the meaningfulness of social history may meet. In this gentle embrace of the insensible, Burke distinguishes himself from those historians and their societies who find themselves merely subject to it.

Burke’s political writings of subsequent years will return to this near paradoxical imperative to attend with special feeling to the insensible. The slowness of political change produces the sentiment of its subject, who in turn feelingly maintains this change. The irrelevance of the divide between passive and active, spectator and spectacle, is part of Burke’s point. In *A Letter from Mr. Burke, to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791) he remarks that politically, the British “have always cautiously felt our way”: “The parts of our constitution have gradually, and almost insensibly, in a long course of time, accommodated themselves to each other, and to their common, as well as to their separate purposes.” Again, the peculiar combination of feeling our way (cautiously, deliberately) as the object we feel changes (insensibly) distinguishes Burke’s specially direct approach to the unfelt. Our own agency and that of the “parts of the constitution,” far from being opposed, amount to the same thing. Our way with the almost insensible accommodation can be “felt” only because it almost cannot be. And yet Burke’s impassioned prose must make a kind of rhetoric of such feeling.

The next year Burke elaborated on the role that a people must play in allowing change to occur in ways they cannot feel. In his *Letter from the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, M. P in the Kingdom of Great Britain, to Sir Hercules Langrishe, Bart. M.P on the subject of Roman Catholics of Ireland . . .* (1792) he declares, “We must all obey the great law of change, it is the most powerful law of nature, and the means perhaps of its conservation. All we can do, and that
human wisdom can do, is to provide that the change shall proceed by insensible degrees. This has all the benefits which may be in change, without any of the inconveniences of mutation.”

Here physical law, “the most powerful law of nature,” proves itself continuous with moral and political law. The comparison of historical change to change in nature represents a culmination of the naturalization of sentiment and its unfeeling bases in accounts of history in the period. It again may seem a paradox that Burke asks human wisdom to “provide that change shall proceed by insensible degrees,” as if wisdom were asked to look after something whose defining element is its unavailability to inspection. But inasmuch as our feeling and attention, our passions and interests, are themselves always and continuously products of unfeeling, the gulf separating them from almost imperceptibly gradual processes of political, social, and historical change seems less unbridgeable. The “almost” in many of Burke’s formulations (though it is not in this last) testifies to their vanishingly subtle point of contact. When the “almost” is omitted, one might say their identification only becomes more complete.

Hence, for Burke, the insensible is a moral imperative that we must “provide” for if not experience, and its function is historical. Part of this view derives from his inheritance of the previous half-century’s reflections on the evolution and historical function of moeurs. At the end of his life, in the first of his Letters on a Regicide Peace (1796–97), a passage (often quoted) decisively elevates manners above laws and epitomizes his understanding of the political significance of historical change: “Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in.”

Burke will observe that the “French Legislators” have learned this heightening of the lessons of Montesquieu too well, settling a new and debased system of manners on the French people. His string of verbs soon moves from immediately and presumably individually experienced moods (“vex or soothe”) to slow, collective processes of corruption, purification, and so on. Yet all signify subtle changes to sentiment and manners, not the indifferent extension of custom and habit, not the insensibility of privation but the insensible of addition. We keep breathing moment after moment, but the air operates on us constantly without being noticed. Air itself is a synonym for manner, both taken breath by breath and inhabited through time. We breathe it in but also breathe in it.

Burke was interested in air. He corresponded with Joseph Priestley about his experiments in the 1770s and helped Priestley in his efforts to dedicate an abridged edition (1790) of Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air.
to the Prince of Wales. But by the time of Burke’s writings about the Revolution, he began to see the violence of chemical and governmental experiments as linked, comparing the action of air to that of liberty: “The wild gas, the fixed air is plainly broke loose,” he would exclaim in the Reflections. The air of the new manners concocted by the revolutionaries is plainly toxic. Only air left to its insensible nature, not experimented on and forced to be an object of theoretical scrutiny, may support our social life.

Burke’s derivation of political sentiment from insensibly operating natural laws and his comparison of their action to air reenact the common tendency I have noted in chapter III of this book to illustrate, and even link, unfelt social change with material or physical processes. But these linkages preserve an antidogmatic view of such materialism. Like Montesquieu’s “force de la chose,” Hume’s liberty that “acquire[s] new force” of its own inertial motion, and Gibbon’s unfeeling immersion in the ocean of history, the insensible in Burke portrays our feelings as having a basis in the laws and unfeeling matter of the physical world. But far from proposing a materialist theory, these turns of writing identify the energy, the natural force of matter, as the profoundest source of feeling—a profundity consisting of the fact that feeling cannot feel it. Most historians I have discussed have stylistically employed the insensible as the extra ingredient needed for an enlightened account of historical movement to complete itself. Burke’s more deeply felt acceptance of the insensible takes him in a subtly different direction. The elusive nature of what the idiom designates ensures that this acceptance cannot be theoretical or even conscious, exactly, and it is certainly not comparable to any revolutionary rationalism. He alludes to the insensible movements in history as a kind of affect to provide for the working of affect on us.