

bordering on contempt, for the old regime they claim as their cause. The opening chapters of Maistre's *Considerations on France* are an unrelenting assault on the three pillars of the ancien régime: the aristocracy, the church, and the monarchy. Maistre divides the nobility into two categories: the treasonous and the clueless. The clergy is corrupt, weakened by its wealth and lax morals. The monarchy is soft and lacks the will to punish. Maistre dismisses all three with a line from Racine: "Now see the sad fruits your faults produced, / Feel the blows you have yourselves induced."<sup>3</sup>

In Burke's case, the criticism is subtler but runs deeper. (Though by the end of his life, he was speaking in the same unmodulated tones as Maistre.)<sup>4</sup> It comes during his account in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* of the storming of the palace at Versailles and the capture of the royal family. There, Burke describes Marie Antoinette as a "delightful vision . . . glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendor, and joy." Burke takes her beauty as a symbol of the loveliness of the old regime, where feudal manners and mores "made power gentle" and "by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society."<sup>5</sup>

Ever since he wrote those lines, Burke has been mocked for his sentimentality. But readers of Burke's earlier work on aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, will know that beauty, for Burke, is never a sign of power's vitality; it is always a sign of decadence. Beauty arouses pleasure, which gives way to indifference or leads to a total dissolution of the self. "Beauty acts," Burke writes, "by relaxing the solids of the whole system."<sup>6</sup> It is this relaxation and dissolution of bodies—physical, social, political bodies—that makes beauty such a potent symbol and agent of degeneration and death. "Our most salutary and most beautiful institutions yield nothing but dust and smut."<sup>7</sup>

What these two opening statements of the conservative persuasion suggest is that the greatest enemy of the old regime is