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Douglas N. Archibald

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## Edmund Burke and the Conservative Imagination

by DOUGLAS N. ARCHIBALD

### Part I

*Burke has . . . left behind him two separate and distinct armouries of opinion, from which both Whig and Tory may furnish themselves with weapons, the most splendid, if not the most highly tempered, that ever Genius and Eloquence condescended to bequeath to party. He has thus, too, by his own personal versatility attained in the world of politics what Shakespeare, by the versatility of his characters, achieved for the world in general, namely, such a universality of application to all opinions and purposes, that it would be difficult for any statesman of any party to find himself placed in any situation for which he could not select some golden sentence from Burke, either to strengthen his position by reasoning, or illustrate and adorn it by fancy.*

Tom Moore, *Memories of Sheridan*, 1825

*But the fact was, that Burke in his public character found himself, as it were, in a Noah's ark, with very few men and a great many beasts.*

Coleridge, *The Friend*, October 12, 1809

IS THERE ABOUT TO BE a Burke Revival or, more accurately, *another* Burke Revival? The last one began in Chicago in 1949 when Leo Strauss gave a series of lectures which became *Natural Right and History* and helped to shape what was called, during the 'fifties, the New Conservatism. During that same year Gertrude Himmelfarb published "The Hero as Politician," which criticized Burke from an antagonistic and definably "liberal" point of view. The essay emphasizes Burke's pessimism and anxiety, his "fear bordering on hysteria," and his "vision . . . of impending danger." It sharply attacks his faith in property, protection of "the privileged few," and "his identification of what is with what ought to be."

In April 1967, writing in New York City during the midst of the anti-war movement and at the beginning of Columbia's Troubles, Ms. Himmelfarb wrote a second essay which completely revises her earlier position. Burke, she has decided, "was, in fact, in the very best philosophical company, of his time and all time." The idea which holds together this company turns out to be the Great Chain of Being with its

inherent insistence on order, authority, and hierarchy (A. O. Lovejoy might have been pleased, but Dr. Johnson would be startled at this unguarded celebration of a scheme-of-things he dismantled in 1757). In this account, "The Politician as Philosopher," Burke becomes "an exemplary liberal," now properly worried about "the democratic claims of popular sovereignty" and urging instead "the claims of ancient forces of institutions, traditions, conventions, laws, and interests." Even the paean to Marie Antoinette, mocked in 1949, is seen as part of Burke's "argument for the amelioration of tyranny and inequality." Burke, re-experienced during the traumatic 'sixties, is not a failed or phony hero, but an authentic sage, our most compelling advocate of virtue and wisdom in politics.<sup>1</sup>

Ms. Himmelfarb is one of a group of scholars, intellectuals, and public officials who have been called "the New Conservatives," or, awkwardly acknowledging Strauss and his followers, the "new New Conservatives." The group includes her husband Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell, Daniel P. Moynihan, Robert Nisbet, Martin Diamond, Seymour Martin Lipset, Norman Podhoretz, and others in New York and in several universities. Its journals are *Commentary*, frequently but not formally, and *The Public Interest*, steadily and aggressively. Except, perhaps, for Ms. Himmelfarb, they have not made Burke their patron saint—their source of authority and systematic political philosophy—as did their counterparts in the 'fifties. But they clearly read their Burke, find him admirable and compatible, and share some of his values and attitudes—his pessimism about human nature and distrust of popular democracy; his sense of the limits of personal and corporate possibility; his search for an informing tradition; his dissatisfaction with the way things are. They quote him comfortably and regularly and refer to him, during this Bicentennial year, second only to the Founding Fathers. All this does not constitute a revival, but it is an interesting phenomenon; and it may be instructive to say something about the glories and the dangers of invoking Edmund Burke, beginning with one of his most famous admirers.

Matthew Arnold's tribute to Burke's political intelligence is one of the most generous and influential statements in the lively and varied history of Burke criticism. Burke, he wrote, "is so great because, almost alone in England, he brings thought to bear upon politics, he

1. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (New York, 1968), pp. 3-31. Johnson's review of Soame Jenyns' *A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil in The Literary Magazine: or, Universal Register* (1757) insists that "the chain of nature" is a useless and pernicious abstraction. Burke, I shall argue later, does believe in abstractions, though he usually manages to give them concrete, historical identities. It is unlikely that he believed in quite so mechanistic an abstraction as the Great Chain of Being.

This is the first part of a long article about Burke and the Burkeans. In the next issue of *Colby Library Quarterly* I shall try to define some of the inherent difficulties of Burke (problems in Burke rather than of his critics) and to describe some fruitful ways of understanding him.

saturates politics with thought." Arnold's particular evidence is the last paragraph of *Thoughts on French Affairs*, "that return of Burke upon himself" which is "one of the finest things in English literature, or indeed in any literature," the capital instance of "living by ideas," of the disinterested play of the free intellect which "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" dramatizes and reveres. Arnold quotes the last six sentences:

The evil is stated, in my opinion, as it exists. The remedy must be where power, wisdom, and information, I hope, are more united with good intentions than they can be with me. I have done with this subject, I believe, forever. It has given me many anxious moments for the two last years. If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it, the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope, will forward it; and then they who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.

Arnold may well be right and, as far as I know, he has never been challenged; but an independent reader carefully attending to *Thoughts on French Affairs* cannot avoid a pang of skepticism. Is it really intellectual distance, or is it, perhaps, tactical concession? Burke has been driving very hard, with the inevitability of a steam-engine (the metaphor Arnold employs for typical, un-Burkean British politicians): "*It is a revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogma,*" a "declaration of a *new species* of government, on new principles," metaphysically articulated and politically manipulated by a sinister conspiracy: "That club of intriguers who assemble at the Feuillants, and whose cabinet meets at Madame de Staël's, and makes and directs all the ministers, is the real executive government of France." It is unprecedented in European history and an immediate, concrete threat to European stability. It is necessarily expansionist—"the terror of France has fallen upon all nations"—and the response of "the Christian Commonwealth of Europe" must be militant and aggressive.<sup>2</sup> There is nothing in Burke's correspondence or in the several biographies<sup>3</sup> to suggest second thoughts.

2. The italics, throughout, are Burke's. I am using the 12 volume Boston edition (5th ed., 1877) of *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* (hereafter *Works*), and *Thoughts on French Affairs* is IV, 313-377. As there is no standard, readily available edition of Burke, I shall also cite the Modern Library *Selected Writings* (New York, 1960), ed. W.J. Bate (hereafter Bate) and the Pelican Classics *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Baltimore, 1970), ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (hereafter O'Brien). The pertinent passages from *French Affairs* are in Bate, pp. 426-27, 431, 441-42, 446-47, 461-62, 473-75.

3. *The Works and Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, vols. I-II, *Correspondence 1744-1797*, ed. Charles William (Earl Fitzwilliam) and Sir Richard Bourke (London, 1852)—hereafter *Fitz. Corr.* This edition has been superseded by *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas W. Copeland and others (10 vols., Chicago, 1958)—hereafter *Corr.* The essential biographies are James Prior, *Life of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London, 1854); John Morley, *Burke* (London, 1887); Arthur P.I. Samuels, *The Early Life, Correspondence and Writings of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke LL.D.* (Cambridge, 1923); Robert H. Murray, *Edmund Burke: A Biography* (London, 1931); Philip Magnus, *Edmund Burke: A Life* (London, 1939); and Carl B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics* (2 vols.; Lexington, Ky., 1957, 1964).

Burke clearly feels that he has defined the evil and called for the remedy. He is nowhere near done with the subject. He has passionately declared in four major tracts written in less than two years that the minds of men are *not* fitted to the French Revolution, that general opinions and feelings draw against it, that rational hopes and fears resist it. He would not intend to liken the revolution, even in its appearance, to "the decrees of Providence itself" and has been making extraordinary efforts to show that it is a consequence of the mere designs of perverse and obstinate men. Is he not trying to demonstrate that revolutions are not great changes and mighty currents (like geological processes), but willful, self-destructive, ultimately tyrannical and sub-human acts? Is he not saying that *since* minds, opinions, feelings, hopes resist, *therefore* the Revolution is specious and delusional? And would not such a reading conform more closely to our sense of Burke's life, politics, language, and sensibility? However we read the last paragraphs of *Thoughts on French Affairs*, they are, like other autobiographical ejaculations in late Burke, unsettling—a hurried glimpse into the abyss.

Whether "The Function of Criticism" is an acute response to Burke or a misreading (I am simply arguing that the first is uncertain and the second a possibility), it is an instructive instance of the literary mind confronting political actuality. Arnold does sentimentalize Burke. *Thoughts on French Affairs* were hardly "some of the last pages he ever wrote," as Burke lived for five and a half years more, concluded the trial of Warren Hastings, and had much to say about England, Ireland, India, France and his own career—about five fat volumes in the 1869 *Works*. Arnold transfers the literary man's sense of an active, detached intelligence to an intensely committed political statement from an embattled political career. He imagines a continuity and a community of free intellectuals joining hands across time and set against the contingent world of Whigs and Tories, Adderleys and Roebucks—an imagining that is always precarious, and especially so with Burke—precisely because Burke so often shares it, and invites it.

It has never been easy to see Burke steadily and see him whole. For the first generation of romantics he was almost a contemporary and the occasion of fierce controversy. Wordsworth and Coleridge initially thought him the betrayer of humanity and liberality, the demon who "with wizard spell" blasted the "laurelled frame" of freedom in his attacks on the Revolution. That is from a Coleridge sonnet of 1794. But Wordsworth soon reverses the terms and praises Burke in just the kind of language Burke would have wished, in a simile he had often used and would have approved, and through an image Yeats was much later to elaborate. From *The Prelude*:

Genius of Burke! forgive the pen seduced  
By specious wonders, and too slow to tell  
Of what the ingenuous, what bewildered men,

Beginning to distrust their boastful guides,  
 And wise men, willing to grow wiser, caught,  
 Rapt auditors! from thy most eloquent tongue—  
 Now mute, forever mute in the cold grave.  
 I see him,—old but vigorous in age,—  
 Stand like an oak whose stag-horn branches start  
 Out of its leafy brow, the more to awe  
 The younger brethren of the grove . . .  
 While he forewarns, denounces, launches forth  
 Against all systems built on abstract rights,  
 Keen ridicule; the majesty proclaims  
 Of Institutes and Laws, hallowed by time;  
 Declares the vital power of social ties  
 Endeared by custom; and with high disdain,  
 Exploding upstart Theory, insists  
 Upon the allegiance to which men are born.

Now Yeats:

And haughtier-headed Burke that proved the State a tree,  
 That this unconquerable labyrinth of the birds, century  
   after century,  
 Cast but dead leaves to mathematical equality.

In *The Watchman* (1796) Coleridge is hostile, snippy, and rather callow; in *The Friend* (1809-10) he is admiring, though guarded; in the *Biographia Literaria* (1815-17) he is unequivocal: "In Mr. Burke's writings indeed the germs of almost all political truths may be found." William Hazlitt, no friend to the younger brethren of Burke's grove, still greatly admired the energy, flexibility, and resource of his mind. The recognition of Burke's excellences became for Hazlitt, as for many later readers, a test of critical balance: could a liberal find value in Burke? He also formulated, very sharply, a charge made frequently during the last seven years of Burke's life, and ever since: that he is inconsistent, that the Burkes who wrote on America and on France are "opposite persons—not opposite persons only, but deadly enemies. . . . In the American war, he constantly spoke of the rights of the people as inherent and inalienable; after the French Revolution, he began by treating them with the chicanery of a sophist, and ended by raving at them with the fury of a maniac."<sup>4</sup>

Burke's most perceptive nineteenth-century biographer, Lord Morley, confronted Hazlitt's charge and seems to have dismissed it. Burke, he

4. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book VII, ll. 512-530; Yeats, "Blood and the Moon," ll. 22-24; Coleridge, "Sonnets on Eminent Characters—Burke," first published in the *Morning Chronicle*, Dec. 9, 1974; *The Watchman*, No. 1 (March 1, 1796) in *The Collected Works*, vol. 2, ed. Lewis Patton (London, 1970), pp. 29-39; *The Friend*, No. 2 (Oct. 12, 1809) in *The Collected Works*, vol. 4, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (London, 1969), I, 186-202 and II, 123-33; *Biographia Literaria*, ch. X; Hazlitt, *The Complete Works*, ed. P.P. Howe (London, 1930), IV, 104-105; VII, 226-229, 231-233, 306-313; XVI, 130-134; XIX, 271-278, *et passim*. The imaginative relationship that *The Prelude* posits between the poet and the politician is strikingly similar to that posited, in a more famous passage, between Wordsworth and the Boy of Winander. In both cases the object of the poetic meditation is dead, "forever mute in the cold grave," like Lucy, Michael, and the youthful self of the "Intimations Ode."

said, amplifying a remark by Coleridge, "changed his front but he never changed his ground." His inconsistency "was merely verbal and superficial. . . in Burke's writings at the beginning of the American Revolution and in those at the beginning of the French Revolution, the principles are the same and the deductions are the same." Yet, Morley continues, "the practical inferences are almost the opposite in the one case from those drawn in the other," and the argument for consistency is heavily qualified in the full context of a biography that is as ambivalent as it is acute. Morley feels very differently about the Burke of the 1770's and the Burke of the 1790's. He deeply admires the writings about America: "they compose the most perfect manual in our literature, or in any literature, for one who approaches the study of public affairs, whether for knowledge or for practice. They are an example without fault of all the qualities which the critic, whether a theorist or an actor, of great political situations should strive by night and by day to possess." But twenty years later Burke had "unhappily . . . advanced from criticism to practical exhortation, in our opinion the most mischievous and indefensible that has ever been pressed by any statesman on any nation." The *Letters on a Regicide Peace* are "deplorable," "inexcusable" and "repulsive." Burke writes "with a vehemence that is irrational, and in the dialect, not of a statesman, but of an enraged Capucin." The liberal critics—Lecky and Leslie Stephen along with Morley—read the later Burke with the same emotion of "'grief and shame'" with which Fox heard Burke argue against relief for dissenters. Hazlitt has been absorbed rather than rebutted, and Morley's argument for consistency, in any practical or common sense understanding of the word, has become meaningless.<sup>5</sup>

The range and volubility of twentieth-century opinion is nearly as great as it was during Burke's life, and we can consider two "schools" that represent the diversity and the intensity. Sir Lewis Namier and his followers loathe Burke with what really does seem to be a deep and personal hatred. He becomes the evil genius whose distortions obscured the true structure of politics and the real character of politicians for a century and a half. "When capable of taking a detached view," Namier writes

Burke was shrewd and practical in appraising situations; but on the whole he signally lacked detachment. When the trend of his perceptions is examined, he is frequently found to be a poor observer, only in distant touch with reality, and apt to substitute for it figments of his own imagination, which grow and harden and finish by dominating both him and widening rings of men whom he influenced. To understand Burke it is necessary to pass from his works, with their polished surface, to his letters reflecting changing moods, contradictory feelings, anxiety and aggressiveness, and blatant egocentricity. . . . Burke was a solitary, rootless man who preached party; and a party politician with such a minority

5. John Morley, *Burke*, "English Men of Letters" (London, 1887), pp. 81, 145, 167-169, 201-204, *et passim*; Coleridge, *The Friend*, *Works*, 4, I, 188.

mind that (however much he denied it) he relished being in opposition. . . . There was a streak of persecution mania in Burke which heightened his aggressiveness and drove him into action.<sup>6</sup>

If Morley and the liberals are ambivalent and the Namierites hostile, the balance has been redressed, or a vigorous and combative effort has been made to redress it, by a disparate group of scholars, journalists, and politicians called, loosely, the New Conservatives. The seminal event in this "reinterpretation" was *Natural Right and History*, a book which spawned, occasioned, or complemented the broad range of studies that constitute the first American Burke revival. The New Conservatives reject all of Namier's analysis—from method to conclusion—especially his insistence on Burke's opportunism, obscurantism, party slavishness, and personal instability. Their disagreement with Morley stems from a different complex of assumptions and perspectives. What Morley sees as pragmatism and expedience (Burke's "prudence" and "utility"), they consider the temporal aspect of Burke's adherence to Natural Law. The liberal finds Burke on France inconsistent or repellent or both; the New Conservative finds him consistent and glorious. His attacks on republicanism are both inevitable and inspired—by Aquinas and Hooker and Cicero as well as by God. Their claims for the accomplishment and wisdom of Burke are very high indeed; their investment in him is partly a matter of personal and national salvation, so that they make the Browning Society sound positively stingy. Their claims for their own reading of Burke are equally high. A symposium held at Georgetown University in 1964 claimed that the "Counter-revolution on traditional grounds" had proceeded with "complete indifference" to Namier (an odd boast, and uncharacteristically insouciant), reversed the Morley position, restored Burke to his proper doctrine and status, settled the question of consistency, and demonstrated his special relevance to the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

SO MANY Burkeans means too many Burkes, which depresses the reader and obscures Burke. The conventional perspectives, and the assumptions that lie behind them, will not quite do. They can account with some success for ideas and for eighteenth-century politics, but not for Burke. They do not fully face, to say nothing of resolve, the question

6. L.B. Namier, "The Character of Burke," *The Spectator* (Dec. 19, 1958), 895-896; more generally: *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929, 1957); *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1930); *Crossroads of Power* (London, 1962); and *The House of Commons 1754-1790* (3 vols.; London, 1964) with John Brooke's biography of Burke.

7. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953); Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor, 1958); Ross Hoffman and Paul Levack, "Introduction—Burke's Philosophy of Politics" in *Burke's Politics* (New York, 1959); Charles Parkin, *The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1956); Francis P. Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, N.C., 1960). Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago, 1953), journalistic and polemical, in-



of consistency. Of course, it is possible to argue that consistency is a false issue—carping, niggling, and invidious—the academic's revenge on a busy man of affairs: Emerson on hobgoblins and little minds, or Blake on the tigers of wrath and horses of instruction. The charge against Burke, however, is not simply that he changed his mind every so often, but that the last years of his life, his attacks on the French Revolution and all it stood for, constitute a repudiation of all the brave, humane, and generous principles of his statements about and work on behalf of Ireland, America, and India. Or: the charge is that the earlier efforts were really motivated by personal party interest, the crassness and self-deception of which is only revealed by the hysteria at the end of his life. So the question is really central to our understanding and evaluation of the spirit of his age, the cast of his mind, and the decency and intelligence of his politics.

One problem is that "consistency" can mean different things and raise various issues. There is the matter of strict consistency, or *uniformity*, in practical politics. Through the course of events and because of his temperament and ideals, Burke was associated for most of his parliamentary career with the opposition reformers. These associations had practical, moral, and constitutional grounds: Irish rights, the American party, economic reform, the anti-slavery movement. By the end of his life the opposition had split into the Whig reformers under Fox, and the radicals—working men with middle-class leadership.<sup>8</sup>

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cludes a generous bibliography, as does Clinton Rossiter's *Conservatism in America* (New York, 1955). The Georgetown celebration was published as *The Relevance of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis (New York, 1964). Editorial writers for *The National Review* and other journals occasionally attempt a Burkean role and style, and so, for that matter, did speech-writers for Richard Nixon, spokesmen for his Department of Justice and joke-writers for Spiro Agnew. The *Burke Newsletter* was published from 1959 until 1961 as part of *Modern Age*, a conservative periodical, then independently, now as *Studies in Burke and his Time*; it has gained in common sense and academic respectability, but lost a bit of its frenzied charm.

I do not wish to suggest that all Burke studies are a doctrinaire tussle between Straussians and Namierites, for there are some admirable independents. W.J. Bate and Conor Cruise O'Brien bring to Burke rather different experience and outlook, but their introductions to the *Selected Writings* and the *Reflections* have much in common, most notably that they comprise the most intelligent writing about Burke since Morley. The preeminent specialists are Alfred Cobban in intellectual history [*Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1929, 1960)] and Thomas W. Copeland in biography and bibliography [*Our Eminent Friend Edmund Burke* (New Haven, 1944), the monumental *Correspondence*, and numerous essays] without whose work our knowledge and understanding of Burke would be even more incomplete than it is. Other responsible and occasionally distinguished topical studies include Dixon Wecter, *Edmund Burke and his Kinsmen* (Boulder, Colo., 1939); Donald C. Bryant, *Edmund Burke and his Literary Friends* (St. Louis, 1939); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London, 1960); Thomas H.D. Mahoney, *Edmund Burke and Ireland* (London, 1960); James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London and Toronto, 1963).

The standard bibliography is William B. Todd's (London, 1964) and the bibliographical essays include: W.T. Laprade, "Edmund Burke: An Adventure in Reputation," *JMH*, XXXIII (1960), 321-332; T.W. Copeland, "The Reputation of Edmund Burke," *JBS*, I (1962), 78-90; Donald C. Bryant, "Edmund Burke: A Generation of Scholarship and Discovery," *JBS*, II (1962), 91-114; and various essays and notices in *The Burke Newsletter* and *Studies in Burke and his Time*.

8. J.H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1950), pp. 155-163.

Burke had always resisted constitutional reform and a part of him feared and detested any reform because it implied fundamental change. That part now dominated, and Burke was alone, angry, and anxious. In 1790 he opposed a motion by Fox for relief of dissenters through the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Later in the year he published *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In 1794 the government became sufficiently worried about dissent to adopt repressive measures, and Burke supported the suspension of *habeas corpus*. His countryman and former friend and ally, Richard Sheridan, who attacked him for fostering panic, must have ruefully recalled *A Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* which, in response to the partial suspension of *habeas corpus* in America, had articulated the most eloquent and shrewd defense of civil liberties since *Areopagitica*. During these years the regular Whigs, the philosophical dissenters like Price and Priestly, and the republicans like Paine, read Burke's speeches and tracts not as inevitable or principled, but as an apostasy from their once shared goals and as a denial of his earlier self. Burke's defense, in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* and the *Letter to a Noble Lord*, is profoundly nervous. The exchanges set the terms of Burke criticism, and neither pro-Burke arguments for ultimate consistency or anti-Burke arguments for greedy self-interest are altogether convincing.

There is a second order of consistency, more philosophical than political, that we can call *coherence*. It is indeed possible to abstract from Burke a conservative Natural Law philosopher, but that tactic is full of problems and finally a dubious enterprise. It renders Burke bloodless and makes Locke a straw man. It ignores the facts of eighteenth-century political life (why did men vote the way they did?) and of Burke's career (what were the Rockingham Whigs really like?). To proceed with "complete indifference" to Namier may be a happy state of mind, but it is also delusional. The attempt to create a systematic philosopher posits both a greater proclivity for clean choice than Burke allows, and a more rigid Natural Law tradition than in fact existed. It assumes an almost complete antipathy between the Natural Law on the one hand and either Natural Rights or Utility on the other, an antipathy that need not—and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not—inhere. It tends to make Burke, of all things, a theoretical rather than a practical thinker, in spite of all his outbursts to the contrary.<sup>9</sup> It makes him more detached than he was ever able to be and less interesting than he usually is. Philosophical consistency is the wrong issue for Burke because he was never in a position to make it the right one,

9. The most sensible discussion of Burke and the Natural Law tradition is Burrell T. Wilkins, *The Problem of Burke's Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 1967); the most persuasive argument about Burke and historical tradition is J.G.A. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution," in *Politics, Language and Time* (New York, 1971) and *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge, 1957), esp. chs. II, VII, and IX. Wilkins and Pocock disagree in interpretation and emphasis, but both insist upon crucial modifications in the Straussian and New Conservative position.

or claimed that it was, or could be. When Coleridge claimed that "no man was ever more like himself" than Burke, he immediately added: "The inconsistency to which I allude, is of a different kind: it is the want of congruity in the principles appealed to in different parts of the same Work, it is an apparent versatility of the principle with the occasion."<sup>10</sup>

It is not quite what Coleridge has in mind, but "congruity" suggests *correspondence*, Burke's relationship to the dominant currents of thought of his time. Arnold said that Burke was limited only by his service to "an epoch of concentration," but in fact the age to which he most fully belongs is The Enlightenment, surely (and on Arnoldian grounds) an epoch of expansion. It is customary to say that after his trip to Paris in 1773, a shocked Burke "assumed the lead in opposing the main current of the rationalist intellectual life of his age."<sup>11</sup> That is a view which requires immense qualification. Alfred Cobban, who has done more than anyone to document and explain Burke's "revolt against the eighteenth century," acknowledges in the preface to the second edition of his influential book that "the basic affiliations of Burke are with Locke and Montesquieu" and that, while he did revolt against the century, he represents "not so much a denial as an enlargement and liberalization of its ideas."<sup>12</sup> For most of his life he shares the Enlightenment's optimism, rationalism, and tolerance; its attacks on superstition and persecution (Catholic in France, but Protestant against Catholic in Ireland); its belief in the rule of law and its efforts for legal reform. For most of his life, too, he accepts the understanding of politics that Peter Gay has assigned to the *philosophes*: "the science of politics was a supremely practical science with two related tasks: to provide intelligent, humane administration, and to discover forms of government that would establish, strengthen, and maintain rational institutions in a rational political atmosphere."<sup>13</sup>

The American writings are true documents of the age—like *The Federalist* or Voltaire—and demonstrate his congruity and his debt even in odd and surprising ways. His insistence on seeing the colonies as they really are has its theoretical justification (there are many practical justifications) in *L'Esprit des Lois*, with its vigorous cultural relativism and its causal sense of geography and climate. At Trinity College Dublin, Burke had enthusiastically read Montesquieu whom he later called "the greatest genius which has enlightened this age," and his *Abridgement of English History* takes its historiography from the French writer.<sup>14</sup> His romantic view of the colonies—their energy, independence,

10. *The Friend*, Works, 4, I, 188.

11. Magnus, p. 72.

12. Cobban, p. xiv.

13. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, II (New York, 1969), 450.

14. *The Abridgement of English History*, Works, VII, 315; also *New to Old Whigs*, Works, IV, 211 and C.P. Courtney, *Montesquieu and Burke* (Oxford, 1963).

and spaciousness; their role as a dutiful, providing child of England's old age—and his celebration of a policy of “wise and salutary neglect” through which “a generous nature has been suffered to take her own way to perfection”<sup>15</sup> is Miltonic in rhetoric, but its dogma sounds strikingly like the soon to be hated Rousseau. In the late 1750's he criticized Sir Matthew Hale's *History of the Common Law* on sociological and rationalist grounds, and only later adopted Hale's empirical, traditionalist view of the British Constitution.<sup>16</sup> *The Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* may be one of the basic anticipatory texts of the romantic reaction, but it is also deeply rooted in the Enlightenment: psychological in interest; empirical in method; sensationalist in assumption (it holds to the pleasure-pain antithesis and considers physiological causes of emotions); skeptical and bravely independent; and even (with qualifications) uniformitarian about every man's power to make aesthetic determinations. It accepts the Lockean epistemology, applies Newtonian methods to aesthetics, and is conformable with similar investigations of Hume, Diderot, and Montesquieu.<sup>17</sup> In the broadest political terms, Burke spent all of his life reinterpreting the Revolution Settlement of 1689, and revising Locke; but he does not lose touch with the first or repudiate the second until perhaps the very end, when his isolation is philosophical as well as political.

If Burke as the chief rebel against the Enlightenment (Burke as Blake) is not wholly persuasive, what can we make of Burke the incipient, anticipatory Romantic? Romanticism's most recent historian has argued that the characteristic romantic movement of mind, including European philosophers like Hegel, Schiller, Schelling, and Fichte as well as the English poets, was a youthful engagement in the French Revolution, followed by disillusion, attempts at compensation, and interiorization or domestication:

To put the matter with the sharpness of drastic simplification: faith in an apocalypse by revelation had been replaced by faith in an apocalypse by revolution, and this now gave way to faith in an apocalypse by imagination or cognition. In the ruling two-term frame of romantic thought, the mind of man confronts the old heaven and earth and possesses within itself the power, if it will but recognize and avail itself of the power, to transform them into a new heaven and new earth, by means of a total revolution of consciousness. This, as we know, is the high Romantic argument, and it is no accident that it took shape during the age of revolutions.<sup>18</sup>

15. *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*, *Works*, II, 116-118; Bate, pp. 120-121.

16. *An Essay towards an History of the Laws of England*, a fragment published with the *Abridgement of English History*, *Works*, VII, 475-488; see Pocock, esp. *Politics*, pp. 216-225.

17. See Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII Century England* (New York, 1935; Ann Arbor, 1960) and J.T. Boulton's Introduction to his edition of Burke's *Enquiry* (London, 1958).

18. M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), p. 334.

The flow of Burke's mind and the shape of his career presents, in an uncanny way, an inverse image of the romantic movement. He begins as an ambitious young man, making it in London, with books of philosophy (*A Vindication of Natural Society*), history (the *Abridgement*), aesthetics (the *Enquiry*), and a start in journalism (the *Annual Register*). He is most serious and determined about that career. One of the reasons for his break with William ("Single-Speech") Hamilton is Burke's insistence that he be allowed time for his "literary pursuits."<sup>19</sup> Horace Walpole, with that acute eye for social vulnerability possessed by the sleek and protected, described Burke's maiden speech in Commons and then briskly ticked off his liabilities: he is Irish, poor, related to Catholics and rumored to be "writing for booksellers."<sup>20</sup> He then enters a public career for disparate reasons: opportunity, ambition, energy, a genuine desire to make improvements, especially for Ireland. It is a fully engaging, demanding, and costly career. Then, in old age, he confronts the Revolution with an apprehension and hostility that inverts the romantic enthusiasm, and with equally insufficient information. The romantics were naive; he was deeply biased and substantially misinformed. He confronts it and—prophetically but wrong-headed—mythologizes it. Where they subsequently internalize, he proleptically projects. He attaches to the Revolution some of the despair and anxiety of his late years.

The final order of consistency is *harmony*, partly a matter of tone and thus difficult to describe, but most important to Burke because it dramatizes his state of being at a particular moment, and to us because it defines the experience of reading him and the usefulness and appeal of his work. Burke does not *sound* as happy, valiant, and assured in 1790 as he did in 1770, as closely in touch with the empirical data, the significance of his own experience, and the communal and cosmic realities. The American writings are assimilative, capacious, magnanimous; the French are obsessive, narrow, strident. With few exceptions, none of the approaches I have been surveying considers this harmony or conforms very closely to the experience of Burke, to what it feels like to attend carefully to *Reflections on the Revolution in France* or the *Letter to a Noble Lord*.

There are some simply bibliographical and methodological reasons for the disagreement about Burke and the insufficiency of so many of the studies of him. As Professor Copeland has said, "we cannot get Burke or his career into a sharp focus" because so many of the facts are missing or conjectural.<sup>21</sup> There was never an official biography, that is, one written by someone who knew Burke, or could talk to people who knew him, or had access to the papers. The Burke documents

19. *Corr.*, I, 165.

20. Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George the III*, II, 273, quoted by Copeland, p. 92.

21. Copeland, p. 40.

were withheld for 150 years after his death, which may seem incredible, but is not inconsistent with his deep-rooted habits of secrecy.<sup>22</sup> Controversy about Burke reflects, to a limited extent, the historiographical controversy between Sir Lewis Namier and his critics, the statisticians and the historians of ideas, and between the Whig historians and their many revisionist opponents. The idea-men and the Whigs admire Burke, often uncritically; Namierites and revisionists distrust him, often unfairly.

Controversy and insufficiency primarily depend, as they usually do, upon our habit of making what we need out of the past and its figures, especially if those figures are complex and speak to still pressing issues. So the romantics use Burke as a counter for their own oscillations about the Revolution, and as a justification for their final disenchantment or default.<sup>23</sup> The great Victorian biographers were liberal, utilitarian, and activist (Lord Morley was a member of Gladstone's cabinet, one of his most enlightened followers, and his most distinguished biographer); so their Burke, or the Burke they admire, rather sounds like Bentham writ large. Namier's hostility to the Great Whig, the synthesiser and publicist, the fierce opponent of George III, is manifest; but there are also, I believe, some tacit and tricky reasons for its intensity. Like Johnson writing about Swift, Namier saw in Burke a submerged part of himself, some qualities of his own personality with which he was not altogether comfortable. Both were outsiders, finding a place in England (Burke was never knighted); both admired and mythologized the English aristocracy; both were interested in and acute about human nature, though Burke would speak of the passions and Namier of neurosis, and both were capable of using their observations as weapons. Both men were given to passionate, personal outbursts in odd places; and one cannot avoid the feeling that Namier, returning as he often does to the malign power of "Burke's fertile imagination,"<sup>24</sup> dislikes Burke partly because he *writes* so well.

The main failing of the New Conservatives is their lust for unmediated and uncritical relevance (since the demands for relevance are likely to come from a different political quarter these days, their excesses are a useful monitor). They are too often merely interested in justifying a label and their own predispositions. Hence Burke is frequently invoked to dignify what otherwise might be too blatantly revealed as the protec-

22. In 1812 Mrs. Burke left Burke's papers in the custody of Earl Fitzwilliam, Dr. Walker King, and William Elliot. In 1843, the fifth Earl, with Sir Richard Bourke, published a four volume *Correspondence*. In 1948 the ninth Earl agreed to place the largest body of Burke papers in the Central Library of the City of Sheffield, and Thomas W. Fitzwilliam, later the tenth Earl, deposited the second largest with the Northamptonshire Record Society, now located at Lamport Hall. The "Burke industry" proceeds in both places. Copeland provides a brief history of the papers, *Corr.*, I, vii-x.

23. See the interesting essays by David Erdman and E.P. Thompson in *Power and Consciousness*, ed. C.C. O'Brien and W.D. Vanech (London and New York, 1969), pp. 149-201.

24. For example, the *Spectator* essay and *Crossroads*, p. 127.

tion of narrow and vested interests; to obscure the rationalization of human want; to disguise prejudice and to glorify the status quo. He has been enlisted glibly and hysterically—and it is not easy to be both at once—in the “anti-Communist Crusade.” He has been used as a stick with which to attack the assertion of civil rights and individual liberties: Burke as bumper sticker. He has become the excuse, particularly in the writings of Russell Kirk, for a familiar kind of Tory sentimentality—“ah, those were the days . . . when servants knew their place”—accompanied by an almost Jansenist contempt for present needs and sufferings. Lord Acton once remarked to Lord Morley, “I would have hanged Mr. Burke on the same gallows as Robespierre. Tableau.”<sup>25</sup> A few years ago, in Toronto, a young man who identified himself as an official of “The Edmund Burke Society” climbed onto the stage to attack William Kunstler, who promptly threw a pitcher of water on his assailant: a mid-century tableau: the diminished avatars of Burke and Robespierre, history repeating itself as farce. With posterity as in his life, Burke has had to keep strange company. Over two centuries after he entered the House of Commons he can still be found in a kind of Noah’s ark, where the beasts outnumber the men.

*Colby College*

25. John Acton, *Letters to Mary Gladstone* (London, 1913), p. 187, quoted by Cobban, p. 85.