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Douglas N. Archibald

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## Edmund Burke and the Conservative Imagination

by DOUGLAS N. ARCHIBALD

### Part II

*You are certainly in the right, that the study of poetry is the study of human nature; and as this is the first object of philosophy, poetry will always rank first among human compositions. In that study you cannot have chosen a fitter object than Shakespeare. Your tracing that progress of corruption, by which the virtues of the mind are made to contribute to the completion of its depravity, is refined and deep; and tho' there are several ingenious moral criticisms on Macbeth, this seems to me quite new. In your examination of Hamlet, you have very well unravelled the mazes and perplexities of passion and character which appear in that play.*

Burke to William Richardson,  
Professor of Humanity at the  
University of Glasgow, June 18, 1777

*Burke's bright intelligence beams from his face,  
To his language gives splendor, his action gives grace:  
Let us list to the learning that tongue can display,  
Let it steal all reflection, all reason away;  
Lest home to his house the patriot we pursue,  
Where scenes of another sort rise to the view:  
Where Avarice usurps sage Economy's look,  
And Humor cracks jokes out of Ribaldry's book:  
Till no longer in silence suspicion can lurk  
That from chaos and cobwebs could spring even Burke.*

Hester Thrale Piozzi, around 1780

BURKE WROTE very early in his career, "Our constitution stands on a nice equipoise, with steep precipices and deep waters upon all sides of it."<sup>26</sup> That may be his central metaphor and he devoted most of his life to protecting and preserving his idea of that threatened balance. Moreover, and this is what makes Burke problematical, controversial, and intriguing, the threatened equipoise is psychic as well as political. His conservatism is also an expression of deep personal need and impulse.

When he first entered the House of Commons in 1765, Burke was a rather *older* bright young man; thirty-six seems young enough to most of us, but eighteenth-century politicians, especially those with power behind

26. *Thoughts on the Cause of Present Discontents* (1770), Works, I, 520. For further bibliographical information about this and subsequent references, please consult first footnote entries in Part I of this article (CLQ, XII [December, 1976], 191-204).

them, were precocious. Fox entered Parliament at twenty, Rockingham at twenty-one, Pitt was Chancellor of the Exchequer at twenty-three and Prime Minister at twenty-four. Burke was also without title, land, wealth, or established connection, the very figure of Cicero's *Novus Homo*, an epithet he combatively took upon himself in a parliamentary debate of 1770: "He knew the envy attending that Character" (William Burke rapturously describes the argument with Sir William Bagot, one of the country gentlemen): "*Novorum Hominum Industriam odisti*; but as he knew the envy, he knew the duty. . . ." Burke is cautious ("this rising merit stamp'd with Virtue would indeed seek to rise, but under the wings of establish'd Greatness"); but proud and prickly (" 'Ye may graze your fat pastures but the spirits of the world will govern the world.' "), and capable of threat ("If they are precluded the just and constitutional roads to Ambition, they will seek others, *ad populum veniam*; this he disclaimed for himself indeed, but others wou'd find that way"); and even of some strained lyricism ("We know not in what mountain of Scotland, what bog of Ireland, or what wild in America that Genius may be now rising who shall save this country").<sup>27</sup>

Fifteen or twenty years earlier, just arrived in London, Burke had written three Theophrastian Characters. They are academic exercises with dozens of possible models and the slightly stale aroma of Fleet Street and Temple Bar; they are nevertheless intriguing, and quietly plangent, the New Man making discriminations and trying out roles. There is the "Fine Gentleman," later to realize itself as a Grenville, a Pelham, the Duke of Bedford and the younger Whigs. There is the "Wise Man," by which Burke means the "mere wise man of this World," who was to appear as Bute or North or Pitt. There is the "good Man," the first of Burke's several idealized self-portraits (the last is the *Letter to a Noble Lord*), and with the same qualities of gravity, uneasiness, and yearning:

He is directed in all his actions rather by the impulse of his own excellent spirit than by any exact rules of Casuistry. . . . All the pictures of his Life are rather great, bold, and unconstrained than Perfectly regular; for which reason they are but little liked by a sort of Precise or citizen-Like minds. His understanding is fine and subtle; his imagination is lively, active, vigorous, quickly taking fire, and generally too powerful for an understanding fitted rather to conspire with it in its excesses than to restrain it. . . . A mind so rich in benevolence cannot be a great economist of it. . . . His devotion is warm and fervent but apt to have intermission. He is not perfect in this point, and he knows that he is not. . . . I never knew the good man without many and implacable, because unprovoked, Enemies. For a man that is provoked may be appeased; but what Remedy can you use to cure a man who hates you for your desire of doing him good? . . . Is any man to be serv'd or promoted? All turn their eyes on some knave. . . . but the good man, because he is not fear'd, is forgot. . . . The good man is apt to spend more than he can spare, to borrow more than he can pay, and to Promise more than he can perform; by Which he often appears neither beneficent, just, nor generous. . . . When he is overpowered by Misfortunes where are his friends? Those are his friends who resemble himself; and how many are such? . . . Abandoned by all, he almost becomes a misanthrope. This generous wine is almost soured to vinegar; untill, weary of the world, disappointed in

27. *Correspondence*, II, 126-129.

everything here, he seeks other Comforts. He dies transplanted out of a Soil unfriendly to his nature into one where it will be more understood and cultivated.<sup>28</sup>

The feeling of “many and implacable . . . enemies” was always with Burke, though sometimes the accent comes from Machiavelli rather than Castiglione. In 1745 he wrote to his first and best friend, Richard Shackleton (the son of Burke’s Quaker school-master), to commiserate and advise about an unspecified adolescent affliction: “There is no evil I believe but carries some good along with it, and if you make a proper use of the present, though it does no more, it will give you a little experience, and teach you more caution and reserve in trusting your acquaintance. We live in a world where everyone is on the catch, and the only way to be safe is to be silent—silent in any affair of consequence; and I think it would not be a bad rule for every man to keep within what he thinks of others, of himself, and of his own affairs.”<sup>29</sup> It is, as Professor Copeland says, “an extraordinary sentiment for a boy of sixteen”<sup>30</sup> and suggests that Burke’s secretive and conspiratorial sense of life was deeply rooted. It was certainly permanent. In 1766, shortly after Burke’s debut in Commons, someone wrote to Shackleton asking for information about Burke’s early life, and Shackleton returned an informative and wholly laudatory account. Burke immediately wrote, attributing the request to “the malice of my enemies. Their purpose was, since they were not able to find wherewithal to except to my character for the series of years since I appeared in England, to pursue me into the closest recesses of my life, and to hunt even to my cradle in hope of finding some blot against me.” Then, in 1770, the letter appeared in the *London Evening Post*; both men were surprised and Burke was frantic:

It . . . cuts deep. I am sure I have nothing in my family, my circumstances, or my conduct that an honest man ought to be ashamed of. But the more circumstances of all these are brought out, the more materials are furnished for malice to work upon; and I assure you that it will manufacture them to the utmost. Hitherto, much as I have been abused, my table and my bed were left sacred. . . . Do not think, my dear Shackleton, that this is written with the least view of upbrading you with what you have done with the best and purest motives, and in which you have erred from a want of knowledge of the evil dispositions of the world, and of the modes in which they execute their malice.

Shackleton was mortified: “I have received thy letter, written in all the vexation of thy spirit, cutting and wounding me in the tenderest parts, and ripping open a sore which I thought was long since healed! . . . It was dictated by a perturbed mind; it was calculated to punish and fret me; and it has obtained its end.” Burke apologized with real feeling, not forgetting to add the request “that you would commit to the flames any letter, letters, or papers of mine which you may find and think liable through some accident to be so abused.”<sup>31</sup>

28. *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke*, ed. H. V. F. Somerset (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 104-118.

29. Samuels, p. 88.

30. Copeland, p. 38.

31. Samuels, pp. 396-404.

Of course private information was abused; Grub Street was malicious, venal, and voyeuristic. It is not that Burke lacked objective reasons for his anxiety, but that its intensity and persistence seem disproportionate. Similarly, there is ample justification in eighteenth-century politics for conspiracy theories, but Burke's are rather too single-minded, self-serving, and at times absurd. He is disturbingly quick to demonize the Court Cabal, the India-men, the Job Ascendancy, and, especially, the Jacobin metaphysicians: "I charge all these disorders, not on the mob, but on the Duke of Orleans, and Mirabeau, and Barnave, and Bailly, and Lameth, and La Fayette, and the rest of that faction, who, I conceive, spent immense sums of money, and used innumerable arts, to instigate the populace throughout France to the enormities they committed."<sup>32</sup>

Burke was not only unpropertied and unconnected, he was Irish, related to Catholics, and thought to be secretly of their persuasion. The newspaper caricatures, unusually nasty even for the eighteenth century, inevitably portray him as a bog-Irishman or a Jesuit in disguise. Sir John Hawkins (an enemy) said that the Burkes were "Irish Adventurers" who "came into this country with no good auguries, nor any very decided principles of action. They had to talk their way in the world that was to furnish their means of living."<sup>33</sup> Even friendly witnesses like Sir Gilbert Eliot worried that "Burke has now got such a train after him as would sink anybody but himself:—his son, who is quite *nauseated* by all mankind; his brother who is liked better than his son, but is rather oppressive with animal spirits and brogue, and his cousin Will Burke, who is just returned unexpectedly from India, as much ruined as when he went many years ago, and who is a fresh charge on any prospects of power Burke may ever have. Mrs. Burke has in her train Miss French, the most perfect *she Paddy* ever caught."<sup>34</sup> Miss Reynolds, Sir Joshua's sister and hostess, complained about Burke's "poor Irish relations" tumbling in upon them to dinner, and Hester Thrale said that Burke "was the first man I have ever seen drunk or heard talk obscenely, when I lived with him and his Lady at Beaconsfield among Dirt Cobwebs Pictures and Statues that would not have disgraced the City of Paris itself where Misery and Magnificence reign in all their splendor and in perfect amity. (Note, Irish Roman Catholics are always like Foreigners somehow, dirty and dressy with all their clothes hanging as if upon a Peg.)—Mrs. Burke drinks as well as her Husband and . . . their black-a-moor carries Tea about with a cut finger wrapped in Rags."<sup>35</sup>

In these and other remarks there is much English snobbery, but there is also some truth. The Burke clan was busy, troubled, embarrassing, and

32. Quoted by Cobban, p. 120.

33. Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Memoirs, Anecdotes, Facts and Opinions* (London, 1824), quoted by Copeland, p. 46.

34. *Life and Letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot*, ed. the Countess of Minto (London, 1874), II, 136; Copeland, p. 58.

35. Charles Hughes, *Mrs. Piozzi's "Thraliana"* (London, 1913), pp. 33-34; Bryant, pp. 73, 272; Hazlitt, "Conversations with Northcote," *Works*, XI, 220.

very close-knit. In a moment of exasperation, William Markham, the Bishop of Chester and godfather to Burke's son, said that the establishment was "a hole of adders."<sup>36</sup> The main cause of the Bishop's displeasure was "Cousin Will" Burke, no blood relation but a householder nevertheless, and an aggressive and reckless gambler who lost heavily on East India stock, and lost his seat in Parliament and with it his immunity from debtor's prison. He twice went to India to seek a new fortune, got into difficulties there and returned, finally, to bankruptcy and drink. Richard, Edmund's younger brother, was handsome, affable, and incompetent, a double loser on India stock and West Indian land. Young Richard, Edmund's only son, had more talent and honor than either; indeed he seems to have been a rather priggish and self-righteous young man (the Literary Club nicknamed him "The Whelp") who annoyed his friends and who could not stand the strain of his father's protective idealizations and large expectations. Only Jane Nugent Burke, Edmund's wife, was able to keep her wits, grace, and integrity in a threatening world. The family shared a "common purse" and their byzantine finances—they mastered the art of living on nothing a year before Thackeray invented the phrase, and they invested £20,000 (most of it borrowed), on the elaborate estate at Beaconsfield—have been the study of minute investigation. There is now general agreement that Will and Richard were desperate and dishonest, and Edmund blindly loyal, willfully ignorant of their liabilities, and culpably naive about their characters.<sup>37</sup>

In 1781 George Crabbe sent a note to Burke presenting himself as "one of those outcasts on the world, who are without a friend, without employment, and without bread," who would be driven to suicide or prison without help.<sup>38</sup> He knew his man. Burke took him on, just as he opened himself to almost anyone in distress—an Irish painter, an Armenian wanderer, Indian travellers and French emigrés. His generosity and his prickly Irish loyalty are the most likeable features of his private character. The clan, his extended family, stayed together through it all, apparently without one serious rift, and G. M. Young is right to emphasize "the strength, the sweetness, and the exclusiveness of his domestic relationships."<sup>39</sup> Perhaps he is searching for and creating the family unity that seems to be missing from his childhood (about which we know very little for sure). His clannishness certainly expresses his need for intimacy and solidarity, with its accompanying sense of a hostile, foreign, *other* world that must be distanced and defended against—a world that increasingly assumed the shape of his public life until, at the end, they were virtually identical.

The new land owner who imitated the gentry at Beaconsfield inevitably

36. Magnus, p. 56.

37. The fullest investigation is Dixon Wecter's *Edmund Burke and his Kinsmen*; however, except for specialist curiosity, Copeland's summary (pp. 44-58) will suffice.

38. George Crabbe, Jr., *Life of George Crabbe, LL.D.* (London, 1834), p. 90.

39. G. M. Young, *Today and Yesterday* (London, 1948), p. 89.

mythologized the aristocracy. He saw them through the same sort of internal mediation with which a courtier regards his prince, a lover his successful rival, or a writer one of his titanic predecessors—that is, with admiration, impatience, and resentment. He wrote to Fox when the Rockingham party was staying away from Parliament, patiently and plaintively explaining the natural indolence of a natural aristocracy. You just could not expect industry and energy from men who were born to so much—large fortune, assured status, and orderly homes. He said the same thing to the Duke of Richmond, a fox-hunter Burke was trying to nourish into a legislator, and then, in a kindly and courtly lecture, wrote one of his most telling definitions: “Persons in your station of life ought to have long views. You people of great families and hereditary trusts and fortunes, are not like such as I am, who, whatever we may be, by the rapidity of our growth, and even by the fruit we bear, and flatter ourselves that, while we creep on the ground, we belly into melons that are exquisite for size and flavour, yet still are but annual plants, that perish with our season, and leave no sort of traces behind us. You, if you are what you ought to be, are in my eye the great oaks that shade a country, and perpetuate your benefits from generation to generation.”<sup>40</sup>

It is against the background of such silence—privileged indolence and constitutional immobility—that we need to understand Burke’s investment in his five great causes. Was there ever a statesman who *needed* causes as much as he? “Mr. Burke,” his wife wrote in 1782, “has been full as busy since we came into the country as he was in town. He is trying whether he shall have more success in saving the East than he had in his endeavors for the West . . . God’s will be done.”<sup>41</sup> A man who so much needs causes also expects too much from them. A flamboyant and passionate nature, a restless intellect, the Irish Adventurer and New Man whose public position, material security, and emotional equilibrium were often precarious—Burke became the post-Reformation world’s greatest apologist for order, stability, and hierarchy. His politics and his sensibility, superficially in opposition, in fact coalesce and sustain each other. His attachments to family, clan and party; his search for connections—position, estate, wealth—are personal analogues to the political sentiment of his later writings. Burke’s life reveals the conservative temperature as impressively as his writings distill conservative principles. Life and writings together provide England and America’s greatest model of the conservative imagination.

40. *Works*, VI, 138; *Fitz. Corr.*, I, 190. As the uneasy syntax of the long second sentence suggests, it was an idea and a metaphor that could get badly out of hand, and it does in that passage from *Reflections* where Burke contrasts dissenting intellectuals with British gentlemen: “Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate clink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field; that of course, they are many in number; or that, after all, they are other than the little shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and troublesome insects of the hour” (*Works*, III, 344; O’Brien, p. 181).

41. Magnus, p. 125.

IN THE MIDDLE 1760's, when the Burkes purchased Beaconsfield, their situations looked very promising. Will had secured a patron, Lord Verney, who was marvellously rich and conveniently dotty. Edmund became secretary to Lord Rockingham, one of the most powerful men in the country and Prime Minister at the time. Both men entered Parliament, where Edmund made a stunning debut. The East India stock promised real wealth. Less than twenty years later, everything turned sour when, in the midst of his second ministry, Rockingham died on July 1, 1782. It was a watershed for Burke and its importance cannot be overemphasized. He had long been the publicist, strategist, and ideologue of the Rockingham Whigs, the first party whip; but only once—for the three months of that ministry—did he hold political power as the eighteenth century understood it; that is, only once, as Paymaster General, was he in a position to dispense places. When Rockingham died he lost financial backing and political weight. More crucially, he lost the one man in the Kingdom who could be both patron and student, who did not need Burke as much as he was needed by him, but who depended upon him nevertheless. Burke had lost his Prince.

One index of Burke's uneasiness is his participation (again as Paymaster General) in the anomalous and short-lived Fox-North coalition. His friends thought it was grotesque. Burke was desperately anxious about security, generously and characteristically attaching his greatest concern to Richard. So, the week Rockingham died, Burke approached Horace Walpole with an amazing scheme. Walpole would convince his aged brother (whom Burke did not know) to resign the Clerkship of the Pells to Richard in return for some complicated guarantees. Walpole of course refused, said the proposal was "frantic," and chortled: "Can one but smile at the reformer of abuses reserving the second greatest abuse for himself." The Clerk of the Pells could expect about £7,000 a year and was one of those sinecures Burke might have abolished during his campaign to reform the Pay Office.<sup>42</sup> The Parliament of 1784 (Pitt's) contained many new, young members impatient with Burke's gravity and extensiveness, his crusading speeches about India and Ireland, and scornful of his participation in the coalition. Compared with their idol, Fox, Burke was so *heavy*. When he spoke, they coughed, called to order, elaborately rustled papers, or simply walked out. They called him "The Dinner-Bell." Burke was furious, hurt, and alone.<sup>43</sup>

A few years later, in November 1787, in Great Windsor Park, "the king descended from his carriage and addressed an oak tree as the King of Prussia,"<sup>44</sup> and so England plunged into the Regency Crisis. There was

42. Magnus, pp. 115-116.

43. Magnus, pp. 146-148; Copeland, pp. 75-77.

44. Plumb, p. 192; for Burke and the Regency crisis see Cone, II, 257-282.



complete confusion about the constitutional issues, wild misrepresentation of party "principles" (Pitt seemed to speak for the rights of Parliament, and the Whigs for the royal prerogative), and intense manoeuvring for place and power. Burke, calm and even-handed at first, became increasingly wild. He accused the ministers of treason and spoke of his duty to impeach them. He told the House that he had become a thorough student of madness, reading volumes, visiting institutions, and he warned of the dangers to the Royal Family at the hands of the demented Monarch. Grub Street satirists and political opponents naturally took him up on it. Even his friends worried. The loyal Windham wrote in his diary that Burke had turned on him suddenly and violently, when he had merely, and at Burke's request, given his opinion about a murder trial now twenty years past: "I must endeavor to obliterate from my mind, the impression, which passion so unreasonable and manners so rude would be apt to leave." Fanny Burney visited him in the early 1790's and reported to friends: "How I wish my dear Susanna and Fredy could meet this wonderful man when he is easy, happy, and with people he cordially likes! But politics, even on his own side, must always be excluded; his irritability is so terrible on that theme that it gives immediately to his face the expression of a man who is going to defend himself from murderers." A few years earlier, at another low moment, Boswell had complained to Johnson that Burke's enemies actually represented him as mad, and Johnson replied, "Sir, if a man will appear extravagant as he does, and cry, can he wonder that he is represented as mad." In the *Dictionary*, Johnson defines extravagant as "roving beyond just limits or prescribed methods, outrageous vehemence, unnatural tumor."<sup>45</sup>

On March 10, 1789, the King announced his own recovery, Pitt was secure, Fox still out, and Burke apparently broken and discredited, at the end of his career. The newspapers changed their tone from hostility to pity and contempt, and Burke returned to those thoughts of retirement that punctuate his letters and conversations from 1782 forward. In 1783 he told Johnson that he might soon retire. "'Never think of that,' said Johnson. The gentleman urged, 'I should then do no ill.' *Johnson*. 'Nor no good either, Sir, it would be a civil suicide.' " Now he wrote to Lord Charlemont: "there is a time of life in which, if a man cannot arrive at a certain degree of authority derived from a confidence from the prince or the people which may aid him in his operations and make him compass usefull objects without a perpetual struggle, it becomes him to remit much of his activity."<sup>46</sup>

Civil suicide came unexpectedly, and terribly. On May 6, 1791, Burke

45. *The Diary of the Rt. Hon. William Windham 1784-1810*, ed. Mrs. Henry Baring (London, 1866), p. 167; *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay*, ed. Charlotte Barrett (7 vols.; London, 1854), V, 92; the *Boswell Papers*, ed. Geoffrey Scott and F. A. Pottle (Mount Vernon, New York, 1928-34), XV, 234; Wecter, p. 99.

46. Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London, 1953), p. 1236; Cone, II, 289. Burke had always had moments of doubt and depression; to Rockingham in 1774: "Sometimes when I am alone, in spite of all my efforts, I fall into a melancholy which is inexpressible; and to which, if I gave way, I should

finally took his opportunity to reply to Fox, who, three weeks earlier, had celebrated recent events in France, calling the new constitution "the most stupendous and glorious edifice of liberty which had been erected on the foundation of human integrity in any time or country." He was repeatedly called to order and harassed by the younger Whigs. Fox left the chambers to get an orange and his troops, thinking he was making a point, followed like sheep. Burke became more and more excited, at one point bursting out to an astonished Chairman, "I am not mad most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and soberness." Incredibly, but also, one feels, inevitably, he reached that association with the archetypal victim of filial ingratitude: Lear on the heath:

the little dogs, and all,  
Tray, Blanche, and Sweetheart. See, they bark at me.

Burke continued: "It certainly is indiscretion, at any period, but especially at my time of life, to provoke enemies, or to give my friends occasion to desert me; yet if by a firm and steady adherence to the British Constitution I am placed in such a dilemma I will risk all; and as public duty and public prudence instruct me, with my last words exclaim—'Fly from the French Revolution!'"

Fox leaned forward and whispered audibly: "There is no loss of friends." Burke replied: "I am sorry, but there is. I know the price of my conduct. I have done my duty at the price of my friend: our friendship is at an end."<sup>47</sup> Fox rose to speak, could not, finally did, weeping. Burke maintained his pledge and never again considered Fox a friend. When they met, they exchanged formal greeting. Six years later, as Burke was dying, Fox requested permission to come and see him. Burke refused.

On May 12, Fox's organ, the *Morning Chronicle*, reported that "the great and firm body of the Whigs of England, true to their principles, have decided on the dispute between Mr. Fox and Mr. Burke; and the former is declared to have maintained the pure doctrines by which they are bound together and upon which they have invariably acted. The consequence is that Mr. Burke retires from Parliament." But Burke kept on, determined to keep his seat until the conclusion of the trial of Warren Hastings, the last (save one) of his "great, just and honorable causes." He continued until 1794 when his last violent speech, in May, took nine days to give and fills two volumes of his works. Hastings was acquitted. Prior estimates that nearly £20,000 were spent to attack Burke during the eight long years of trial (the figures are doubtless imprecise, but that is the same amount the Burkes supposedly paid for Beaconsfield).<sup>48</sup>

not long continue under it, but must totally sink; yet I do assure you, that partly and indeed principally, by the force of natural good spirits, and partly by a strong sense of what I ought to do, I bear up so well, that no one who did not know them could easily discover the state of my mind or my circumstances. . . . Whether I ought not to abandon this public station for which I am so unfit, and have, of course, been so unfortunate, I know not" (*Corr.*, III, 35).

47. The most notable accounts of this vivid scene include: *Parliamentary History*, XXIX, 263-428; Magnus, pp. 213-220; Copeland, pp. 77-80; Bate, pp. 32-34.

48. *Works*, IV, 62; Magnus, p. 284; Prior, I, 478.

The *Morning Chronicle*, however, is right. After the break with Fox, Burke is virtually out of Parliament, exhausted and ill: "I am not well; I eat too much; I drink too much; I sleep very little." Death was all around him: Johnson in 1784; his only sister Juliana in 1790; Reynolds and Shackleton in 1792; Will Burke lived on, in shambles. Then, in 1794, both Richard Burkes died, his son unbelievably and painfully from the family disease, consumption, "by inches before his eyes." Burke was left, in his own words, "a desolate old man" lying "like one of those old oaks the late hurricane has scattered about me."<sup>49</sup> He walked the fields of Beaconsfield and, once, a horse that had been Richard's came over to nuzzle him. Burke threw his arms about the creature's neck and sobbed. In London they said that he had finally gone mad, was confined to his estate, and wandered about kissing the animals. He soon died himself, but it is hard to believe he was at peace. The grim but probable last word is reported by Thomas Copeland: "There is a curious but well-authenticated report about Burke's burial. His bones are not now under the slab which marks them in Beaconsfield church. They are not even in the same coffin in which they were originally buried. By his own direction they were first put in a wooden coffin but later transferred to a leaden one placed in a different spot. Burke did not wish it to be known exactly where he was buried. He feared the French revolutionaries, if they triumphed in England, might dig up and dishonor his corpse."<sup>50</sup>

The death of Rockingham and the break with Fox and the Whigs were an incalculable loss for Burke, and his old age is a story of almost unbearable pain and loneliness. The man who, shrewdly and with great determination, had fought his way into, or near, the center of British political life had suddenly and cruelly lost that connection. Burke was read out of the party which, if he had not totally created, he had done more than any other man to defend and define. He now felt that his five great causes were all lost and that he was alone.

Yet—Burke had always been an outsider. He wrote to Shackleton when he was sixteen about the necessity for silence in a world on the catch. He told Boswell, "I believe that in any body of men in England I should have been in the Minority. I have always been in the Minority."<sup>51</sup> For seventeen years he was the organization and intelligence of the Rockingham Whigs who only twice, and then briefly, formed the government. Each time it was decided that it would be imprudent to give Burke a cabinet post. Except for the six years that he represented Bristol, before he lost his seat in 1780, he held a safe seat from a pocket borough; which means that he was not really responsible to or sustained by a constituency. Namier is too single-

49. Magnus, pp. 265-268; *Letter to a Noble Lord, Works*, V, 176, 208; Bate, pp. 488, 514.

50. Copeland, pp. 83-84, 90-91; Magnus, p. 291. In *Reflections*, anxious about the Revolution Society. Burke had anticipated these lurid directions: "Do these theorists mean to imitate some of their predecessors, who dragged the bodies of our antient sovereigns out of the quiet of their tombs?" (*Works*, III, 260; O'Brien, p. 107).

51. *Life of Johnson*, p. 904.

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mindful about it, but Bate is surely right:<sup>52</sup> a man cannot spend all his life in the opposition without something happening to him.

Late in his life, out of circumstances that are far happier but still somewhat resemble Burke's, Yeats wrote a poem that—*mutatis mutandis*—speaks for Burke. It is called, inaccurately but aptly enough for both men, "Remorse for Intemperate Speech":

I ranted to the knave and fool,  
But outgrew that school,  
Would transform the part,  
Fit audience found, but cannot rule  
My fanatic heart.

I sought my betters; though in each  
Fine manners, liberal speech,  
Turn hatred into sport,  
Nothing said or done can reach  
My fanatic heart.

Out of Ireland have we come.  
Great hatred, little room,  
Maimed us from the start.  
I carry from my mother's womb  
A fanatic heart.

CONTEMPORARIES were delighted to say that Burke was mad, with all the aggressive callousness that made "Bedlam" a descriptive noun, and it seems clear that some sort of applied psychoanalysis, or psycho-biography, is necessary to come to terms with him. Namier is hostile and reductive. Copeland is detailed, generous, and tentative. G. M. Young wrote a sympathetic essay which argues that domestic relations and the Rockingham circle "gave Burke that home, and the security within the home, which was necessary to the balance of his reason." J. H. Plumb says flatly: "His mother was neurotic, possibly she suffered from mental illness; his father was tyrannical."<sup>53</sup> But that—without support, qualification, or enrichment—is very casual and incidental psycho-biography, not much better than those genteel accounts we now enjoy mocking, about somebody's eye for color coming from his maternal grandmother and love of the sea from his father.

The problem is what to apply, and how. Richard Hofstadter<sup>54</sup> has written a series of penetrating and influential essays about the paranoid strain and style in American politics, and his analysis is clearly though in limited ways applicable to Burke. Paranoid assumptions and styles are eternal; but it seems appropriate that Hofstadter begins his account with reactions to the French Revolution. Burke is the great articulator of that reaction,

52. Bate, p. 7.

53. Namier and Copeland as cited; G. M. Young, *Today and Yesterday*, pp. 92-93; Plumb in the *New York Review of Books* (Feb. 11, 1965), p. 11.

54. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York, 1952, 1967), chs. 1-4.

and it is at least curious that none of the Burkeans have paid any attention to Hofstadter. His insistence that economic issues are not the sole motive forces in politics is congenial with Burke. His description of the paranoid style has real pertinence: the “qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy”; the “apocalyptic and absolutist framework”; the fervid calls for a crusade against a vast, organized and disciplined, immoral and sinister, immediately threatening enemy, an enemy which is also, partly, a projection of the self; the “quality of pedantry” that gives to the paranoid style its characteristic and “curious leap in imagination . . . from the undeniable to the unbelievable”; and the underlying sense of impotence and alienation.

In some fundamental ways, however, Hofstadter’s analysis is not applicable and could, in relation to Burke, be badly misleading. Hofstadter is really talking about “pseudo-conservatives”—post-industrial conservatives and economic individualists struggling frantically not to be post-capitalist anachronisms, rather special products of nineteenth-century liberalism, commercial protestantism, and the restlessness and heterogeneity of American life. Burke is essentially prior to industrialism and capitalism. For him property means real land with real people on it, not vast shares of stock or small suburban plots, and law and order means more than freedom from anxiety. He is a norm against which to measure modern conservatism and its styles, rather than a subject for shared analysis—or group therapy. Burke is not secularized, nor is his society, though things were moving fast, and so his appeals to the Natural Law are not adventitious or exotic. While Hofstadter’s description seems substantially correct, his terms and his analysis are, as he understands, pejorative: useful tools, but also weapons. That is not at this point the kind of combination we can responsibly bring to bear on Burke. Finally, we are concerned with a single, though significantly representative, man, Hofstadter with a quasi-movement. We must try to understand Burke’s unique, particular humanness before we generalize about his position or his system. So we should think about this complex life with its rich and diverse fruits in a singular and concrete way.

Thinking particularly in such a case means thinking about Freud; and it is possible to go through the indices of the *Collected Papers* and *Introductory Lectures*, looking under *paranoia*, *anxiety*, and *hysteria*, and to find a wilderness of possibilities. In fact, Freud’s<sup>55</sup> analysis of Daniel Schreber’s account of his own paranoia permits us to talk about Burke’s paranoia in a clinical—rather than merely casual or metaphorical—sense. Many of the symptoms that Freud detects in Schreber’s autobiography are also present in Burke: Schreber’s feeling that his body was being handled in revolting ways; his megalomania, including the conviction that he was suffering on behalf of a sacred cause, that he had a mission to redeem the

55. Freud, *Collected Papers* (5 vols.; New York, 1959), III, 390-470.

world, and that he was about to witness the end of the world; his desire to identify particular enemies and his inclination to find as enemies those whom were once loved and honored. Freud makes the observation, pertinent to Burke as well, that Schreber's "ingenious delusional structure," the "ideas of pathological origin which have formed themselves into a complete system," can exist in a personality that is otherwise, outside the delusional situation, entirely "capable of meeting the demands of everyday life."

Furthermore, paranoia can be (and is, Freud says, in Schreber's case) an attempt at recovery. The paranoid projection undoes the earlier repression and brings the libido back into "a relation, and often a very intense one, to the people and things in the world," although the once affectionate relationship is now hostile. This invites us to wonder, at least, if the break with Fox manifests some inner necessity as well—the accumulated weight of thirty years of being a New Man and an outsider, a good Whig, party whip and ideologue, at the ear of power, but never the locus of power. The paper on Schreber includes the most suggestive remark that "paranoia decomposes just as hysteria condenses. Or rather, paranoia resolves once more into their elements the products of the condensations and identifications which are effected in the unconscious." When Burke was in his twenties, struggling to get started in London, he had written: "To have the Mind a long time tossed in doubts and uncertainties may have the same Effect on our Understanding which fermentation has on Liquors, which tho it disturbs them for the present, makes them both the sounder and the clearer ever after."<sup>56</sup>

The problem, of course, is that the origins of Burke's paranoia seem different from Schreber's repressed homosexual yearnings which developed out of the Oedipal relationship. Burke did tell Shackleton that his father gave way to "a retired and splenetic humour,"<sup>57</sup> and Richard Burke, Sr., as far as we can tell, was quarrelsome, gloomy, and authoritarian. Magnus will not quite say so, but he does believe that Cousin Will Burke was a homosexual.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary libel accused Burke of sodomy, because it accused him of everything and because he objected to the barbarous punishments inflicted on transgressors. There is no evidence for the accusation and, in view of the sustained depth and sweetness of his marriage, it seems most unlikely. It is plausible that Will was a homosexual and that Edmund either elaborately ignored the fact or, reluctantly recognizing it, protected him. In any event, most of Burke's early life and some of the salient details of his middle years do not seem sufficiently recoverable to permit a thoroughly Freudian interpretation. So we are left with the usual question: Can we use Freud as Description without accepting him as System? It is useful and responsible to expropriate and exploit his detailed

56. Freud, III, 434; Burke, *Notebook*, ed. Somerset, p. 101.

57. Samuels, p. 397.

58. See pp. 39, 142, 288.

and illuminating descriptions without at the same time incorporating his particular causes, or at least his general ideas of causality?

A point of departure more descriptive than analytic, and which does not so much depend on particular causality, is the work of Erik H. Erikson. He has defined the eighth, or culminating, stage of the life cycle as one of *integrity*: "It is the ego's accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning—an emotional integration faithful to the image-bearers of the past and ready to take, and eventually to renounce, leadership in the present. . . . It is a sense of comradeship with men and women of different times and different pursuits who have created orders and objects and sayings conveying human dignity and love."<sup>59</sup> Erikson's descriptions have an eerie resemblance to the autobiographical statements in late Burke, who is trying not only to assert, but to act out his own definition of integrity. But it is all askew and profoundly nervous, an indirect and painfully moving confession of frustration, remorse and defeat, rather than an embodiment of identity. A sense of "the spirit of institutions" is central to Burke as well as to Erikson, but it does not sustain the older Burke with a feeling of accomplishment; it preys on his mind as the object of probable destruction. One of his last public acts, a sad parody of generativity, was to create a school for the children of French emigrés at Penn, near Beaconsfield: "The boys wore a blue uniform, with a white cockade in their hats, inscribed *Vive le Roi*. Those boys whose fathers had fallen [fighting the French for the British] had the inscription traced upon a scarlet label; those who had lost other near relations had it traced upon a black label." Burke quarrelled with the refugee Bishop of Laon who was determined that the school should be run "on the principles of a seminary of monks" and who resisted Burke's pleas for "a good dash of English education."<sup>60</sup> Nothing went right.

We do not hear in later Burke what Erikson discovered in William James, "a voice inside which speaks and says: '*This is the real me!*'" What we do notice is what Johnson disliked about Milton's prose: "This surely is the language of a man who thinks that he has been injured."<sup>61</sup> That is why Burke seems so much the stronger writer when he attacks than when he defends. That is why those famous autobiographical departures—the close of *Reflections*, the last three paragraphs of *Thoughts on French Affairs*, scattered passages in *A Letter to a Noble Lord*—are so unsettling. In spite of the usual comparison, what we hear is not so much like Newman's *Apologia* as it is like Othello's farewell:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know 't—

59. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York, 1968), p. 139. Of course Erikson's explorations provide more than a "point of departure." They have changed our thinking about the nature of biography. See Cushing Strout's "Ego Psychology and the Historian," *History and Theory*, VII (1968), 281-297.

60. Magnus, pp. 291-92.

61. Erikson, *Identity*, p. 19. Johnson, *Life of Milton*, Oxford World's Classics (2 vols.; London, 1952), I, 75.

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No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,  
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then you must speak  
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well;  
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,  
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdu'd eyes,  
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
 Their med'cinable gum. Set you down this;  
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,  
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog  
 And smote him—thus.

The Shakespearean resonance is not gratuitous. Burke had declaimed Othello's speech, so many years before, to the Trinity College Historical Association, his first institutional creation, and he concluded his hurt and angry exchange with Shackleton in Othello's accents: "Adieu, my dear Shackleton; forgive one who, if he is quick to offend, is ready to atone." He once wrote that he was "in love" with "Macbeth doth murder sleep," and he likened himself to Lear.<sup>62</sup> His mind was saturated with Shakespeare and he reached out to him in moments of panic as well as pleasure.

In the last three years, though, he came more to resemble the old, mad protagonist of Elizabethan revenge literature, like Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, who finds the image of himself in the corpse of his dead son. That play, according to an astute reader, "presents a man who discovers death as the figure of his experience and who carries that figure through—of course he is obsessed, of course he seems mad—to its realization."<sup>63</sup> Edmund Malone wrote in the summer of 1796 that in company Burke "jokes and *Puns* as usual; but when He sees an old friend after some absence His grief for his son again rises. His grief He seems to cherish as a duty." A few months earlier Burke had written to Henry Grat-tan, concluding with a terrifying pun about the power of property he had fought so hard and with such parental hopes to obtain, and which now had turned to dust: "The landed security I mean is the grave. . . . All these things dispose me to it more and more. My inheritance is anticipated.—My son is gone before me to take possession." He filled his letters with detailed accounts of his terminal illness (cancer of the stomach) and elaborate metaphors for his condition: "I can sail no longer. My vessel cannot be said to be even in port. She is wholly condemned and broken up. To have an idea of that vessel you must call to mind what you have often seen on the Kentish road. Those planks of tough and hardy oak, that

62. Samuels, pp. 100, 289, 401.

63. Scott McMillin, "The Figure of Silence in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *ELH*, XXXIX (1972), 40.



used for years to brave the buffets of the Bay of Biscay, are now turned, with their warped grain, and empty trunnion-holes, into very wretched pales for the enclosure of a wretched farmyard."<sup>64</sup> There is no doubt but that he wanted to die.

We can sense the strain upon Burke, and perhaps understand it better, by attending to his language. "How closely that fellow reasons in metaphor," a correspondent told Hannah More, and most competent observers agreed: Johnson, Goldsmith, Gibbon, Reynolds; hearing Burke in Commons made Boswell most Boswellian: "It was a great feast to me. . . . It was astonishing how all kinds of figures of speech crowded upon him. He was like a man in an Orchard where boughs loaded with fruit hung around him, and he pulled apples as fast as he pleased and pelted the ministry. It seemed to me however that his Oratory rather tended to distinguish himself than to assist his cause. There was amusement instead of persuasion. It was like the exhibition of a favorite Actor. But I would have been exceedingly happy to be him."<sup>65</sup> But his language had always been liable to slip away from him. The famous scene in December, 1792, when he finished a speech by hurling a dagger (supposedly destined for French assassins) across the floor of the house<sup>66</sup> is a self-dramatizing metaphor for a characteristic verbal process. Even at his most confident, as in the *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*, he offended the rural backbenchers by likening America to a "child of your old age" who had "with a true filial piety, with a Roman charity . . . put the full breast of youthful exuberance to the mouth of its exhausted parent."<sup>67</sup> In a debate on economic reform he outraged even that worldly body by telling an unprintable anecdote<sup>68</sup> which compared the vigor his office required with that demanded of an aged lover who had married a young wife.

The strain on his words becomes more acute as time passes, audiences cease to listen, and the tension accumulates. The great prose stylist, under pressure, turns barbarous, lacks measure, grace, and decorum. Gerald Chapman has compiled a useful list of the "savage and strange" words, some making their first appearance in English, that dot his later work: genethliacon, lixiviated, aulnager, exceptional, quadrimanous, psephismata, delation, provacitives of cantharides, stum, dulcify, boulimia, diachylon, compurgation, founderous, turbinating.<sup>69</sup> His expression is frequently wild:

Oppression makes wise men mad; but the distemper is still the madness of the wise, which is better than the sobriety of fools. Their cry is the voice of sacred misery, exalted not into wild raving, but into the sanctified frenzy of prophecy and inspiration.<sup>70</sup>

64. Bryant, p. 241; Magnus, pp. 283, 293-94.

65. *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (London, 1907), I, 174n.; *Boswell Papers*, VI, 82-83.

66. Magnus, p. 239.

67. *Works*, II, 116; Bate, p. 120.

68. At least Sir Philip Magnus would not print it, pp. 121-22.

69. Gerald W. Chapman, *Edmund Burke: The Practical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 236.

70. *Letters on a Regicide Peace, Works*, V, 329; cf. Ecclesiastes 7.7.

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The revolution harpies of France, sprung from night and hell, or from that chaotic anarchy, which generated equivocally 'all monstrous and prodigious things,' cuckoo-like, adulterously lay their eggs, and brood over, and hatch them in the nest of every neighboring state. These obscene harpies, who deck themselves in I know not what divine attributes, but who in reality are foul and ravenous birds of prey, (both mothers and daughters,) flutter over our heads, and souse down upon our tables, and leave nothing unrent, unrifled, unravaged, or unpoluted with the slime of their filthy offal.<sup>71</sup>

and apocalyptic:

I am alone. I have none to meet my enemies in the gate.

I fear I am the only person in France or England, who is aware of the extent of the danger, with which we are threatened.

The world seems to me to reel and stagger.

The abyss of hell itself seems to yawn before me.<sup>72</sup>

and even a more relaxed tone carries the weight of doom:

These [ceremonies of Knighthood] are the pleasant things of the old world, and let us take them whilst the old world continues. A worse is coming.<sup>73</sup>

BURKE PRIDES himself on his practical sense, on his attention to circumstances, which, he says, should count for everything in politics; and he consistently, sometimes violently, attacks "the great Serbonian bog" of abstraction and theory. "The question now," he said about the colonies, "on all this accumulated matter, is,—Whether you will choose to abide by a profitable experience or a mischievous theory? whether you choose to build on imagination or fact? whether you prefer enjoyment or hope? satisfaction in your subjects, or discontent?"<sup>74</sup>

He certainly had an astonishingly capacious mind and remarkable powers of assimilation, second only to Johnson in the eighteenth century. Yet, he is often wrong about the facts, about the actual political situation in Ireland, America, India, and France. As Raymond Williams has said, it has become "a one-finger exercise in politics and history"<sup>75</sup> to demonstrate Burke's errors, and there is not much profit in that. A more interesting point is that it is about the "theoretical" aspects that Burke is most right and appealing: the idea of the national community; history and its uses—the burden and the tragedy of the past; power and its abuses; the

71. *Letter to a Noble Lord*, *Works*, V, 187; Bate, p. 497.

72. *To a Noble Lord*, *Works*, V, 208 (cf. *Psalm* 127.5); Charles Butler, *Reminiscences* (London, 1824), I, 171; *Correspondence of Edmund Burke and William Windham*, ed. J. P. Gilson (London, 1910), p. 157; Magnus, p. 249. The last three are quoted by Copeland, p. 88.

73. Magnus, p. 288.

74. *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*, *Works*, II, 140, 163; Bate, pp. 140, 160.

75. Williams, p. 4. About Burke's powers, Johnson, as usual, said it first and best: "Yes; Burke is an extraordinary man. His stream of mind is perpetual. . . . Now we who know Burke, know that he will be one of the first men in this country." Burke's particular excellence, Johnson said, is "copiousness and fertility of allusion: a power of diversifying his matter, by placing it in various relations," a definition glossed by W. J. Bate when he praises Burke's "unrivalled power to distill creative principles of thought and action from the concrete, practical facts of a situation" (*Boswell's Life*, p. 696; the *Tour to the Hebrides* in the *Life*, ed. G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell (6 vols.; London, 1950), V, 213; Bate, p. 3).

lunacy of a world without order, custom, and tradition. But for Burke these are not theories but facts—and they are facts of a rather special kind: received, felt, understood; not observed, thought-up, analyzed. That is, they are something like intuitions, matters of the political imagination operating from certain assumptions and commitments, not matters of political analysis operating from certain observations. They are most characteristically intuitions achieved under pressure, the pressure of events and his own anxiety about them. The more drastic he perceives a situation to be, the more Burke pushes himself towards generalization. The philosopher in action, his favorite definition of the politician, is the political man under pressure.

This intuitive, imaginative nature of Burke's political philosophy is best suggested, perhaps, by a passage at the center of the *Reflections*. Burke has been defining the social contract and has here moved on to consider the extremity of circumstance which alone would justify breaking that contract:

It is the first and supreme necessity only, a necessity that is not chosen but chooses, a necessity paramount to deliberation, that admits no discussion, and demands no evidence, which alone can justify a resort to anarchy. This necessity is no exception to the rule; because this necessity itself is a part too of that moral and physical disposition of things to which a man must be obedient by consent or force; but if that which is only submission to necessity should be made the object of choice, the law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.<sup>76</sup>

The Miltonic resonance is profoundly intentional. Burke is nowhere more of the eighteenth century than in the way that Milton has permeated his consciousness, perhaps even more fully than Shakespeare. The *Reflections* frequently appeals to *Paradise Lost*, and so does the description of the American fisheries, with its gorgeous, expansive rhetoric. At the close of Sir Joshua Reynolds' last *Discourse*, in the midst of the applause, Burke rose, walked down the aisle, and offered his old friend these lines:

The Angel ended, and in Adam's ear  
So charming left his voice, that he awhile  
Thought him still speaking, still stood fix'd to hear.

The following summer, 1791, Reynolds published his portrait of Burke, and appended the lines from Book V:

So spake the fervent Angel, but his zeal  
None seconded, as out of season judged,  
Or singular and rash . . .

Unmoved

Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified,  
His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal;  
Nor number, nor example with him wrought

76. *Works*, III, 360; O'Brien, p. 195.

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To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind  
 Though single. From amidst them, forth he passed,  
 Long way, through hostile scorn, which he sustained  
 Superior, nor of violence feared aught;  
 And with retorted scorn his track he turned  
 On those proud towers, to swift destruction doomed.

It was too close to the nerves. Burke, who deeply admired and loved Reynolds, still (and understandably) envied “the placid and even tenor of his whole life” and its “innocence, integrity, and usefulness.” In a rehearsal of the episode with Shackleton, he persuaded Sir Joshua to destroy all the undistributed copies and the plate itself, and he tried to buy up those which had been sold. Three years later, almost to the day, Richard Burke died in his father’s arms after having twice, feebly, quoted

His praise, ye Winds, that from four quarters blow  
 Breathe soft, or loud; and wave your tops, ye Pines  
 With every Plant, in sign of worship wave!<sup>77</sup>

If Burke’s intuitions seem appealing and right, his accounts of particulars, his encounters with concrete and contingent political reality, are often insufficient or repellent. The famous account of the assault on Marie Antoinette, with its sexual lift and energy, suspends itself somewhere between soap opera and yellow journalism—high class, to be sure, but yellow and soapy nevertheless: “A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his [a guard’s] blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with a hundred strokes of bayonets and poinards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment.”<sup>78</sup>

The passage about the social contract and “the first and supreme necessity” continues to see the State as a manifestation of the will of God, “a worthy offering on the high altar of universal praise,” and so to justify both public ceremony and the unequal distribution of wealth: “Some part of the wealth of the country is as usefully employed as it can be, in fomenting the luxury of individuals. It is the public ornament. It is the public consolation. It nourishes the public hope. The poorest man finds his own importance and dignity in it. . . . It is for the man in humble life, and to raise his nature, and to put him in mind of a state in which the privileges of opulence will cease, when he will be equal by nature, and may be more than equal by virtue, that this portion of the general wealth of his country is employed and sanctified.”<sup>79</sup> This world is the poor man’s purgatory. That is not an insight or an argument, but an eighteenth-century

77. Bate, p. 39; Magnus, pp. 227, 266; C. R. Leslie and T. Taylor, *The Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (2 vols.; London, 1865), II, 629-630.

78. *Works*, III, 325; O’Brien, p. 164. Burke never deleted the account of the guard’s death even though, after the first edition, he knew it was false (Boulton, p. 129).

79. *Works*, III, 361-62; O’Brien, pp. 196-97.

platitude already discredited by the time Burke wrote it. But he returns to the platitude, obsessively, at the close of *Reflections*:

Good order is the foundation of all good things. To be enabled to acquire, the people, without being servile, must be tractable and obedient. The magistrate must have his reverence, and the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must respect that property of which they cannot partake. They must labor to obtain what by labor can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavour, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice.<sup>80</sup>

"As they commonly do." It is dismissive, arrogant, repulsively comfortable. There is nothing quite so chilling in either Swift or Johnson, though both were as conservative as Burke. Indeed, Johnson's "Review of Soame Jenyns *Free Enquiry* . . ." is a blistering attack on just such smug Tory realism. Passages like this—and there are too many of them in late Burke—form a bitter contrast with the measured though youthful idealism of *The Reformer*, Burke's Trinity College newspaper:

The Riches of a Nation are not to be estimated by the splendid Appearance or luxurious lives of its Gentry; it is the uniform Plenty diffused through a People, of which the meanest as well as greatest partake, that makes them happy, and the Nation powerful. . . . It is the Care of every wise Government to secure the lives and Properties of those who live under it; Why should it be less worth Consideration, to make those lives comfortable, and these Properties worth preserving? . . . That some should live in a more sumptuous manner than others, is very allowable; but sure it is hard, that those who cultivate the Soil, should have so small a Part of its Fruits; and that among Creatures of the same Kind there should be such a disproportion in their manner of living; it is a kind of Blasphemy on Providence.<sup>81</sup>

They also call into question his occasionally florid declarations of common humanity: "When, indeed, the smallest rights of the poorest people in the Kingdom are in question, I would set my face against any act of pride and power countenanced by the highest that are in it; and if it should come to the last extremity, and to a contest of blood—God forbid! God forbid!—my part is taken: I would take my fate with the poor, and low, and feeble."<sup>82</sup>

The central conflict in Burke's political thought is between journalism and imagination, the observed foreground and the intuited background, what Burke does and what he claims to do. It is between his attention to detail and circumstance on the one hand, and his insight, his grasp of essence, his prophetic assurance on the other; in short, between his realism and his vision. That conflict accounts for "the problem of *Reflections*"—the tensions in Burke's thought and in our response.<sup>83</sup> It has shaky control of detail, but it is prophetic. It is wrong-headed, unfair, even pernicious; yet it is profound. It is obsessive, cranky, and deeply

80. *Works*, III, 558; O'Brien, p. 372; this is the passage that so enraged Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), p. 32. In *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795), *Works*, V, 133-169, Burke codifies this perception and this feeling.

81. Samuels, pp. 314-317; N.B. the Irishness.

82. *Debate on the Repeal of the Marriage Act* (1781), *Works*, VII, 134.

83. See Bate, pp. 26-30, for an expression of the problem.

prejudiced; yet it carries with it an immense weight of experience and reflection. It is not a work of history or political analysis; it is a monument of personal experience and a major text in the history of consciousness, our fullest and most complete statement of conservative and counter-revolutionary ideology and sentiment.

The conflict may help us to understand some apparently odd facts about Burke's outlook, temperament, and situation. There is, first of all, the nagging impression that he needed to lose—needed to lose almost as much as he needed the causes themselves. His eloquence about America is after the fact, five years too late and insufficient about the theoretical basis of the Colonists' claims and intentions. The various turns upon himself, if they are turns, constitute an eerie celebration of defeat. He wrote to Philip Francis, his assistant in the Hastings trial: "We know that we bring before a bribed Tribunal a prejudged cause. . . . Speaking for myself, my business is not to consider what will convict Mr. Hastings, (a thing we all know to be impracticable) but what will acquit and justify myself to those few persons, and to those distant times, which may take a concern in these affairs and in the actors in them."<sup>84</sup> Burke stayed with the trial for almost a decade.

There is also the fact that Burke, in the great age of satire and with all the intellectual and imaginative equipment to be one, distrusted satire and satirists. "By hating vices too much," he wrote in *Reflections*, "they come to love men too little."<sup>85</sup> Is it not rather that the satirist explicitly and self-consciously adopts a stance of felt alienation from politics and power? Men who have power are fools and knaves whose exposure is crucial. It is also a public act. If Burke were to embrace the satirist, he would have to recognize, and perhaps cultivate, the alienated and subversive self he struggles to keep under control. It would be to adopt a radically demythological mode of apprehending political reality, and that would be too full a glimpse into the abyss. Similarly, the man who so revered The Law is steadily suspicious of lawyers; for lawyers too demythologize, by overwhelming us with rules and details, and by being so ready for attack.

The tension might help us to understand a little better the anomalous relationship of Burke to the great movements of ideas of his age. His revolt against the eighteenth century is a revolt against the skeptical, demythologizing qualities of rationalism, a revolt against his earlier self and what had happened to it in the snake pit of practical politics, the vulnerable identity of the New Man, and the pain of domestic loss. His movement of mind is an inverse image of the Romantic movement because he is not disillusioned about France; he is prophetically anxious, and he projects a prior disenchantment. W. J. Bate says that his "fear of all that the French Revolution might mean was only his valedictory tribute to the British

84. *Corr.*, V, 241-43.

85. *Works*, III, 458; O'Brien, p. 283. For some interesting thoughts on the political ethos of the satirist, see Thomas R. Edwards, *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes* (London, 1971), esp. ch. 3.

Constitution: a tribute that his personal circumstances would never allow to become closer than a brilliantly descriptive one."<sup>86</sup> The French writings testify as well to the costs of his career, and to the embattled and embittered identity which was, at the end, as precariously balanced, as threatened, as the Constitution he felt called upon to protect.

The conflict between realism and vision suggests something about the nature and power of Burke's imagination. It is possible to appropriate Coleridge's terms and say that with the foreground, Burke is merely exercising his fancy—combining, associating, debating. But with the imaginative apprehension of the background he is in touch with the realities: history, not nature, as the true language of God. With the foreground detail we have what Yeats called the will doing the work of the imagination. Burke is most noticeably *after* something; but with the background, he is *onto* something. Burke is our most compelling example of the imagination's grasp of political reality, and Arnold might better have said that he saturates politics with imagination. He has real power. Burke's intuitions are profound and the principles he draws from them are often noble. But this is still, after all, the eighteenth century, and Dr. Johnson, always imposing himself upon our minds, warns about the dangerous hunger of imagination.<sup>87</sup>

Hunger, not limit. Burke defines the conservative imagination. He meditates upon the past and seeks to recover and shelter it. He places his faith in intuitions about history, in received tradition and felt experience, rather than in theory and abstraction. He celebrates the national community, men in civil society rather than separate individuals or absolute states. He believes in the natural leadership of an aristocracy and in the inevitability and virtue of hierarchy. He has an abiding sense of the mysteries of individual and corporate life.

It is a position of great strength and attractiveness. It contains a sense of harmony and permanence, of deeper communal life and loftier human possibilities, than Lockean or consensus politics can understand. We are certainly ignoring it today—and probably at our peril. But we must also judge it; it is given to cant, to hysteria, narrowness and obsessiveness, to loss of control and sometimes bloodthirstiness. The will doing the work of the imagination. Burke, to repeat, is not, about France, as happy, valiant and assured, as in touch with corporate and communal possibility and reality, as he is in his speech on *Conciliation*. To put it in Eriksonian terms, he has moved from a state of harmony, with its basic sense of trust, to a state of totalism, with its pervasive mistrust. In later writings, like the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, he calls for total war and urges the adoption of Jacobin means, and the imitation of Jacobin energy, to combat the Jacobin threat. In *A Letter to William Elliot*, driven to the contemplation

86. Bate, p. 31.

87. A conflation of two crucial phrases from *Rasselas*: "that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life" (ch. XXXII), and "the dangerous prevalence of imagination" (ch. XLIV).

of unconstitutional and extra-Parliamentary responses to Republicanism, Burke almost calls for a citizens' movement to place in power a few strong men, or "a single man," capable of meeting the crisis. It is a frightening flirtation with the idea of an English Directory or a British Bonaparte.<sup>88</sup>

So Burke defines the conservative imagination in its moments of excess as well as in its moments of insight and harmony. He defines it when it is threatened and out of joint. He is our model of the pathology of that imagination as well as its strengths. Burke's life is not identical with conservatism; but his reactions in the 'nineties, like his accomplishments in the 'seventies, are representative. In complicated ways they are also seminal and archetypal. All temperaments react when threatened; all imaginations, or at least most, at one time or another go out of joint and succumb to extravagant despair, or grotesque irony, or world-weary resignation. Some are simply struck dumb. Burke's reaction is also a general, almost a mythic, one: a compulsive and emotional attachment to the past and the established; a corresponding distrust of theory and innovation; an arbitrary constriction of the limits of individual and social possibility; a feeling of personal isolation; an intelligence in uncertain relationship to reality; a tone obsessive, paranoid or hysterical; a vision usually gloomy and often apocalyptic. Do we not sense very similar qualities when we confront other conservative imaginations under threat, and recoiling: Swift in "The Day of Judgement" or Book IV of *Gulliver*; Pope at the end of *The Dunciad*; Henry Adams at the close of the *Education*; W. B. Yeats towards the end of his life? We all have our own candidates from recent American history.

*Colby College*

88. *Works*, V, 107-129; Erikson, *Identity*, pp. 74-90.