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BURKE

By

G. M. YOUNG

ANNUAL LECTURE ON A MASTER MIND

HENRIETTE HERTZ TRUST

of the

BRITISH ACADEMY

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Read 17 February 1943

When I received the honour of your invitation to speak on Burke, my first feeling, as you will well believe, was one of doubt—doubt whether indeed I had anything that should to say not be a tedious repetition of things adequately said before, unless, avoiding that, I fell into the ungainly and affected originality of a new interpretation. I put that by way of preface and disclaimer, because I shall have to say one or two things about Burke that I should not have said forty years ago; and the difference does mark a change of method and attitude, of which I suppose we are all aware, and which has undoubtedly been brought about by the explorations of modern psychology. We should do wrong not to avail ourselves of anything they may contribute to our understanding of past times and famous men, while never forgetting Sir Walter Scott's injunction to the doctors, to heal all their contemporaries before they begin to practise on the illustrious dead. I say past times, because it is undeniable that just as every age has its own characteristic temperament, which we can read in its pictures and hear in its prose, so it has its characteristic departures and outbreaks, typical lesions and recognizable insanities. Enter that Eighteenth Century, that age of prose and reason, of balance and system, landscape gardening, heroic couplets and senatorial eloquence. Gracefully escorted over the threshold by Addison, we find ourselves in such strange company as to make us wonder how many inhabitants of this elegant establishment, so rationally designed and furnished, are quite sane. There is no doubt of Walpole or Pelham, of Chesterfield or Mansfield, of Hastings or the younger Pitt, Coke of Norfolk or Cook of the South Pacific. But there is something very strange and disconcerting at times in the atmosphere which surrounds them. In no age would Blake or Johnson, Beckford or Wesley, Clive or Chatham, rank as what the world agrees to call a normal man. Yet whether we have in mind the art, the literature, the taste, the religion, or the politics of the century, no names are more significant than these. 'Sir,' said Boswell once, 'I am

really uneasy about Burke. They represent him as actually mad.’ ‘Sir,’ said Johnson, ‘if a man will appear extravagant, as he does, can he wonder that he is represented as mad?’ Extravagant, that is the word, and Johnson has given us a good choice of meanings, ‘roving beyond just limits or prescribed methods, outrageous vehemence, unnatural tumour’. What terms more apt for Burke in the Regency Crisis, Burke of the Impeachment, Burke on the French Revolution? But is there one of them which would not equally well fit Chatham?

The Eighteenth Century, as we all know, never succeeded in fixing any philosophic sense to the words Nature or Natural; and the whole of that ferment which we call the Romantic or the Revolutionary Movement might be said to spring from a desire to give them a new interpretation, so as to legitimate, as it were, moods and feelings which the current regulations had kept outside the pale. Into all that I need not, and cannot, enter now. But the opposition of Natural and Revealed Religion, say, if you like, of Faith and Reason, or best of all perhaps, Custom and Philosophy, is in truth a fundamental issue of the century, and one, I think, which throws a great deal of necessary light on the development of Burke’s mind. ‘I call that Natural Religion’, so wrote Bishop Wilkins in the book which introduced the name and idea into English philosophy, ‘which men might know, and be obliged unto, by the mere principles of reason, improved by consideration and experience, without the help of revelation.’ To that well-drawn definition you have only to add: ‘by the principles of reason operating on observation, actual or historic’, and you have a complete view of Burke’s political philosophy. There is, we may say, a Natural Politic just as there is a Natural Religion. But this Politic is not to be deduced from the principles of Reason immediately. It must be built up, it must be sustained by an unrelenting attention to all those phenomena which in real life present themselves daily to our notice, psychological phenomena, we may say, out of which we construct our conception of man as a political animal. Here, Burke is in the line of the great political thinkers of England: here, in what I once called the academic realism of their outlook, their constant rise and fall between the contemplation of social man as he might be, and the actual doings and motives of men at the polling booth or in the counting house. Of this art or discipline Burke is confessedly our great master and our great exemplar, the finest of political observers, the most comprehensive of political reasoners. True; and if this were all, we might, I think, have placed him in a yet more illustrious line; and that ‘almost divine man’ as Gladstone called him, the greatest man since Milton, Macaulay said, could also have taken rank as the greatest political philosopher since Aristotle. What bars him from that seat? The answer perhaps is that Aristotle was not, and Burke was, under the necessity of justifying the Revolution Settlement of 1689: or to put it another way, that Aristotle was not much interested in the counting house and had never heard of a polling booth.

But let us follow a little further that analogy I have suggested between Natural Religion and Natural Politics. They have or ought to have this in common, that neither of them can appeal to a sacred book, to any recorded and authentic revelation. But suppose that one or other of them has embodied itself in an institution of great splendour and antiquity, an institution served and governed by the noblest figures in the land, and drawing wealth and power from the unaffected homage of the multitude: its very antiquity ensuring that there will remain embedded in its structure tokens of its own history, sacred in themselves, and necessary—so we may persuade ourselves—to the stability of the edifice, and the security of the worshippers.

Now it is a commonplace, and therefore not a thing to dwell upon, that under some such figure as this, and in an attitude of corresponding veneration, Burke regarded the Revolution Settlement, the Constitution of the mid-Eighteenth Century, the Whig party and the ancient aristocracy. Under the same figure he seems to have contemplated the old régime in France, and in India, the Empire of the Great Mogul—the descendant of Tamerlane: ‘as high as human veneration can look, amiable in his manners, respectable for his piety, accomplished in all the Oriental literature’—

Could it be believed that when I entered into existence, or you Sir, a younger man, were born, that on this day, in this House, we should be employed in discussing the conduct of those British subjects who had disposed of the power and person of the Grand Mogul?

Was this pattern created in Burke’s mind by the dominance in his intellectual constitution of the historic interest? This also is a commonplace, but one to which, with all submission to authority, I must demur. I can see no evidence that Burke was more familiar, or more concerned, with the history of France or India, or indeed of England, than any other educated man of his day; less I should judge than Bolingbroke, far less than Gladstone or Disraeli, though Disraeli was, I grant you, inclined to make up his history as he went along. There is, I know, printed among Burke’s writings, a lengthy essay entitled ‘An Abridgement of the English History’, which is sometimes quoted to show his knowledge of, and his reverence for, our Middle Ages. Of this work I need only observe: first, that it is very dull; second, that it is written in

very bad English; third, that it is demonstrably a translation from the French. When I remark that the author places Lindisfarne in the mouth of the Tees and spells it Landisforn; that, in consequence of the Danish invasion, he removes its celebrated monastery to the adjacent part of the Continent; and proceeds to hold forth upon King Alfred in form and manner following, that is to say,

With great promises attending a little money he engaged in his service a number of Frisian seamen, neighbours to the Dane, and pirates as they were. He was himself present to everything and having performed the part of a King in drawing together supplies of everything, he descended with no less dignity into the artist: improving the construction: inventing new machines: and supplying by the greatness of his genius the defects and imperfections of the arts in that rude period,

you will perhaps share my doubt whether Burke had so much as a finger in this production.

But if this lucubration is struck out of the canon of Burke's writings, very little will be found to show that his interest in history went much behind the Revolution Settlement or farther afield than the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland. It is, I think, plain that he had no clear conception of the state of India following the collapse of the Mogul monarchy; the materials for the historical introduction to the great speeches on the India Bill and the Impeachment were, it is now known, supplied by Philip Francis. Burke certainly had studied the history and the condition of our American settlements, but either he never saw, or else he closed his eyes to, the movement for independence which was in strong growth long before the Stamp Act was passed; and where or when he discovered that excellent constitution which France had once had and ought to have proceeded upon, instead of engaging in an unnecessary and superfluous revolution, contemporaries and later readers have asked and asked in vain. No, it is not from any historic sensibility that Burke drew his passion for the historic order, for prescription, for things as they have come to be. That passion wells up from a deeper source, and the vehemence with which he gives it utterance, a vehemence sometimes verging on frenzy, is by itself a proof that prescription, order, and stability were things necessary to his mind: change, and the fear of change, started somewhere in the depths of his being a horror, a blind horror, which set that mind rocking on its foundations.

There is I believe no better way of focusing our ideas of some famous man than to consider what picture or description comes first into our mind. With Burke it is for me those lines in the *Prelude*, in which Wordsworth recalls his early visits to the House of Commons, where he saw the great orator,

Old, but vigorous in age,
Stand like an oak whose staghorn 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.

To which men are born. But men are born in families, the first, the most primitive and persistent of all societies: the seed plot of the social virtues, and the radiating point of all social energies. Aristotle would have agreed. His language glows with an unusual warmth when he speaks of that one society which goes on and on for ever, and is by nature the home: words to which Burke, I am sure, would gladly have appealed and gladly made his own. There is one thing never to be forgotten about Burke; the strength, the sweetness, and the exclusiveness of his domestic relationships. What follows therefrom is perhaps a matter for a professional psychologist: I can only speak of what I have myself observed, and it is that the primitive sense of security and settlement within the home, the equally primitive fear of insecurity and unsettlement if for any reason the home is broken up, is one of the most potent strains in the formation of human character. In no man was this strain more imaginatively or more generously diffused than in Burke. And this passion is the ground tone on which he lays, in hues of earthquake and eclipse, his picture of the constitution of India before and after the coming of the invaders; of France before and after the cataclysm of 1789; the outrage done to an ancient priesthood; the violation of sacred and family ties. Macaulay said that Burke felt about the French Revolution like a

connoisseur whose shield had been scrubbed. Nearer the truth, I think, it would be to say that he felt like a child whose home has been desolated and whose playthings have been trodden on by wicked strangers who do not understand. Can you recall that hour of hopeless and helpless fury? Then suppose to yourself this passion and this fury, this tenderness and this terror, animating, and sometimes dominating, an intellect of astonishing power, intensely logical, geometrically exact, and above all things masculine. Hazlitt, I think it was, once remarked that no woman could read Burke. Maybe; but it was once said to me that the chief difference between men and women is that they both begin as babies, but the girls grow up and the boys never do. Nothing could be more true. Never have I known a man of outstanding gifts or character but had his lapses into babyhood, his days when he must be petted and played with, his hours of irresponsible mischief and unbridled display, and his moments black and crimson with the child's rage over justice denied, a fancy slighted, or a friend traduced. And that is Burke.

He was born, you will remember, in 1729. But a man's birth-year is only of importance because it directs us to look for what was happening in the world when he was twenty, and at that age by 'what was happening' we ordinarily mean what books were in the air. There were two from which a young man, even if he had not read them, could not protect himself: Hume's *Essays*, with that Essay on Miracles which was a thrust at the heart of revealed religion, and Bolingbroke's *Patriot King*, a challenge not to the Revolution Settlement so much as to the political philosophy by which the Settlement was legitimated, and the political practice by which it was applied. And Bolingbroke—a man of whom his contemporaries all seem to have been a little afraid and later historians all a little ashamed—is none the less a man to be reckoned with. It is plain, I think, that for a while he fascinated Burke: the *Vindication of Natural Society* is Burke's effort to break the enchantment by stealing the spell of the enchanter. Regarded as a parody or pastiche, it is as remarkable a feat of stylistic ingenuity as any in the language, and it might amuse some minute philosopher of literature to compare the *Vindication* and its Preface, phrase by phrase and cadence by cadence, and observe Burke trying to recover his native speech after a prolonged mimicry of Bolingbroke. But the charm lay not in words only. Remember we are in 1749: seven years after the fall of Sir Robert Walpole. The Pelhams are in power, and, as far as human eyes can see, in power they always will be. Is there not something to be said for the Patriot King who would break the chains laid on his family by the triumphant Whigs, exalt the Land, keep the City in its place, and, reigning like Elizabeth, say to the world once more, We and Our People?

Concord will appear, brooding peace and prosperity on the happy land: joy sitting in every face, content in every heart: a people unoppressed, undisturbed, unalarmed: busy to improve their private prosperity and the public stock: fleets covering the ocean, bringing home wealth by the return of industry, carrying assistance or terror abroad by the direction of wisdom, and asserting triumphantly the right and the honour of Great Britain as far as waters roll and as winds can waft them.

You may have anticipated the objection that Frederick Prince of Wales was not in the least like Elizabeth. But since we are in fairyland—Burke says so in his preface—let us make one flight more. Imagine that the same queer fortune which took Swift to Moor Park and the library of Sir William Temple, had brought this other Irishman to Battersea, there to learn the craft and mystery of politics from the most eloquent, the most experienced, and when all is said and done, not the worst of English statesmen, Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke.

Instead, after some mysterious and not happy years in London, fate, in the person of William Burke, introduced him to Rockingham and the Whig Party. Of William Burke the best that can be averred is that he was a man with a very powerful financial imagination, while of Edmund Burke it is not enough to say that all his geese were swans: the dirtiest little house-sparrow that bore the name of Burke was a very bird of Paradise: and William in particular rose in Edmund's eyes as far above the common level of humanity as Warren Hastings fell below it. But what, I think, is of most concern to us to remember is that the cousinhood on the one side, the common purse, the common table at Beaconsfield; and on the other, the close and loyal group that surrounded Rockingham, gave Burke that home, and that security within the home, which was necessary to the balance of his reason. No one I suppose has ever thought of Burke or read in Burke for long, without recalling Goldsmith's line,

To party gave up what was meant for mankind.

But the limitations of great minds—and of small minds too, perhaps—are in truth the frame within which they must work if they are to work at all. If Burke had not given himself up to party, he might be known to the curious as the author of an essay on aesthetics which had some influence in Germany, and to be remembered so is, in effect, to be forgotten.

The world, moreover, on which Burke opened, so to speak, his political eyes was one in which the old stability of our parliamentary constitution was certainly threatened, perhaps endangered. I say perhaps, because I find it very difficult in my own mind to determine what real prospect there was in 1760 of Personal Government being effectively established in England. The latter part of the century was, let us not forget, an age of enlightened despotism, the age of Joseph II, of Charles III in Spain and Gustavus III in Sweden; and on that name I should like for a moment to dwell. George III and Gustavus were near of an age, and came early to the throne: and when I consider certain elements in the character of the Briton, his untiring industry, his unscrupulous resolution, the prompt courage which never failed him; the plain dignity and simple piety with which he won and kept the hearts of plain and simple people for sixty years, I do not think it altogether impossible that, with favouring circumstances, George might have carried through such a revolution as Gustavus effected in Sweden when he broke the power of the nobility, Hats and Caps alike, and, with the faithful peasantry of Dalecarlia at his back, imposed on the States his Act of Union and Security. The ground had been well surveyed: the lines had been clearly drawn,

To espouse no party, but to govern like the common father of his people, is so essential to the character of a Patriot King, that he who does otherwise forfeits the title.

Forget that this is Bolingbroke speaking to Frederick and the circle of Leicester House. Forget Bute and the King's Friends. Think of the proposition: Party is a political evil: and its corollary: Measures not Men: as a theorem of political science. How do you propose to refute the proposition? How will you answer the cry?

The cant of not men but measures is a sort of charm by which many people get loose from every honourable engagement.

Fine, and scornful, eloquence. But is it an answer?

Consider Burke's own political career, not forgetting one thing to which I think sufficient importance has never been attached. He was not only an outsider, he was an elderly outsider. He entered Parliament at 37, an age at which in his century a man was certainly not young, not young enough to pick up the tone of his surroundings easily—Burke was never a good Parliamentarian—and yet not old enough to figure as the elder statesman, the experienced sage. In fighting for the Rockingham group, therefore, Burke was in the most literal sense of the word fighting *pro domo sua*, fighting to keep a place and standing for himself: a party man as we commonly use the term, though a party man of no common calibre. It was the good party man who, when Rockingham died, refused to follow Shelburne, and who did follow Fox into the coalition with North. And this was the Burke whose principles made Johnson uneasy. 'I was present,' he said, 'when he maintained that a member of Parliament should go along with his party right or wrong. Now, Sir, this is so remote from native virtue, scholastick virtue, that a good man must have undergone a great change before he can reconcile himself to such a doctrine. It is maintaining that you may lie to the public, for you lie when you call that right which you think wrong.' Again, what is your answer?

The reason why Burke has been canonized by both parties in the State is that, rightly or not, he is supposed to have found the answer, to have justified party, not as a convenience, even though an indispensable convenience, of political practice, but as a necessary mode of political thought, and because necessary, therefore right. Here we reach the foundation of Burke's political belief, his doctrine of the higher expediency, in which the Divine will reveals itself to political man.

Political problems do not primarily concern truth or falsehood. They relate to good or evil. What in the result is likely to produce evil is politically false: that what is productive of good, politically true.

No wonder that native virtue, scholastic virtue, grew uneasy when it heard Burke talking like this. And the argument, considered as an argument, is travelling in manifest circle. What gives it weight is the not less manifest conviction behind it. Why is it then that starting from the same point and pursuing for some way the same path, Burke and Bolingbroke suddenly divide?

Faction [wrote Bolingbroke] is to party what the superlative is to the positive: party is a political evil and faction is the worst of all parties, and Burke answers

Party divisions, whether on the whole operating for good or evil, are things inseparable from free government.

But this was in 1769, when Burke was a Rockingham Whig and a figure in the House. For the point of departure we must

go farther back.

In the *Annual Register* for 1763, Burke—there can I think be no question of the authorship—sets out, with admirable judgement and restraint, the contending views of the day as to the relations between the King and the Administration. No Whig would have denied the full right of the Crown to appoint its own servants. No Tory would have denied that

Great talents, great and eminent services to the country, confidence among the nobility and influence among the landed and mercantile interests, were the directions which the crown ought to observe in exercising

that right. But it is impossible to carry the Whig hypothesis into practice without inviting the question which Burke asks—and does not answer—

Are these ideas consistent with any degree of monarchical authority in the Commonwealth?

What Burke is arguing for here is not so much Party as, to use a favourite word of the time, for a Parliamentary Connexion (which Tories would call a Cabal) against a Palace Connexion (which Whigs would call a Faction), as the basis of administration. And if, as Tories again might say—it was indeed the groundwork of the Tory creed—that Cabal was incompatible with the authority of the King, it was certainly open to Whigs to rejoin that Faction was incompatible with the existence of Parliament. And, if there were two men whom Burke thoroughly detested, one was Chatham and the other was George III, George, the great master of faction, and Chatham, who had broken the Parliamentary connexion of the Whigs.

Nothing is so dead as dead politics. Can we give these ghosts their draught of blood, compel them to speak to us, and so ground Burke's conviction on something larger, more general, and more permanent, than the state of England in 1762, '65, or '69? I think we can, if we reflect that when the counties and boroughs rose in 1784 and ground the Coalition into the dust, they did something more than place the younger Pitt in office. They transferred 'the real permanent monarchical power' from the King to the Cabinet, and so fixed the seat of that sovereignty which had hitherto floated vaguely between the two. Indeed, I have sometimes thought that the reason why American notions of our constitution in general, and of the monarchy in particular, strike us so often as antediluvian is, that they are antediluvian, derived from the lost landscape and submerged configuration of the world before that flood. There cannot, in a well-ordered state, be two centres of ultimate authority, and where was the centre to be fixed? That was the problem; it is one which must constantly recur in a moving and developing state, because in such a state there will always be acknowledged powers which time is antiquating, and latent powers which time is calling into action. It was so in England between King and Cabinet (some day it might be between Cabinet and Parliament); it was so in India between Company and Crown: and the inter-reflections between these two, the unending criss-cross of relationships between Calcutta and Westminster, Leadenhall Street and Downing Street, the Directors and the Whips, involved the politics of England in a further complication which is to-day almost indecipherable. That also is part of the lost landscape. From our distance, seeing only the broad lines of the issue, we may regard as inevitable the solution imposed by Pitt, whose victory stabilized the constitution of England for nearly fifty years, and the government of India for seventy, under the rule of the great patrician Viceroys from Cornwallis to Canning. But was it inevitable? In history, as we cannot make experiments, cannot replace the pieces on the board and play them another way, the might-have-been, I have always thought, is a perfectly legitimate instrument of speculation. And I have often wondered what might have been, if George III had assumed his constitutional right to preside in his own Cabinet. The tradition which excluded him was not so old that it might not have been reversed; in practical intelligence he was quite up to the Cabinet average; and constitutional respect for the Crown, allowing free scope to his excellent talents for business, would, I think, have given him a real ascendancy in Council. Let us imagine that to one such council Rockingham had been summoned, Rockingham briefed by Burke, Rockingham with humble duty laying at the foot of the throne a minute drawn by Burke, Burke admitted to the very sanctuary of power, and his own place fixed and acknowledged in the august hierarchy of the British State. Might we not have seen the Patriot King on the throne? If we had not seen him, we should certainly have heard a great deal about him.

Fixed and acknowledged—that was Burke's trouble. Outside those two circles, the Burkes and the Rockinghams, he had no place of his own; he was a new-comer, an adventurer, a mystery. I forget if he ever cites Quintus Cicero's warning to his brother, but he knew his Cicero so well that it must often have been in his ears, 'Consulatum petis: Roma est: novus homo es.' An adventurer, and a mystery: he was a Jacobite, he was a Jesuit: fouler things than that were muttered of the Weird Sibyl of Beaconsfield. It is therefore nothing to be wondered at if he made haste to establish himself in the only

way a man could establish himself—by office, by wealth, by an estate, a connexion of his own, a family. Burke, nearing forty, had no time to lose. The Parliament which he entered in January 1767 was dominated by the brilliant irresponsibility of Charles Townshend; and Townshend, at least Burke's match in debate, had been in office of one kind or another since he was twenty-nine. Such calculations do force themselves into the mind of an aspiring man: and in the summer of that year, when the Duke of Grafton resigned, Burke for some hours or days nursed the fancy of succeeding him as Secretary of State, not as he afterwards explained with any intention of retaining the office but—shall we say—to show himself that he was the sort of man who might be Secretary of State. Of one thing only do I feel certain: that he would have held it long enough to bestow a handsome official appointment on everybody who bore the name of Burke.

Because the cousinhood was as absorbent as it was adhesive and unsavoury. 'Burke', said Mrs. Thrale, 'was the first man I ever saw drunk, and the first man I ever heard talk obscenity'. This lightning draft was elaborated in verse to match Goldsmith's *Retaliation*,

See Burke's bright intelligence beams from his face,
To his language gives splendour, 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 we the patriot pursue,
Where scenes of another sort rise to the view:
Where Avarice usurps sage Economy's [look](#),
And Humour cracks jokes out of Ribaldry's book:
Till no longer in silence suspicion can lurk
That from chaos and cobwebs could spring even Burke.

If anyone cares to undertake the task, more congenial perhaps to our age than the last, of exploring chaos in search of cobwebs, the investigations of Wentworth Dilke 100 years ago, and more recently, of Mr. Dixon Wecter, have already furnished him with abundant provision for the journey, and much more I have no doubt is to be found on the way. Fifteen years ago Mr. Namier showed us, or reminded us, how little we really knew of the minute anatomy of political England in the days when the Burkes were speculating in East India Stock. What is still lacking is an equally exact analysis of that unknown world east of Temple Bar. As we go from Westminster to the City, the air grows thicker and murkier. What are the names we faintly read above the counting houses, and what dark gigantic transactions are conducted within them? They are the names of the rulers of India: the Dewans of Bengal, Orissa, and Behar: Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Sykes, Mr. De Vaynes, Mr. Reitlinger, Sir George Wombwell. But they are names only, unless the bearers wriggle an hour or so on the table of a Parliamentary Committee, and then withdraw, ruffled, but not, except in reputation, damaged, to the suburban magnificence of Charlton or Mitcham, Westcombe of the Angersteins, Bexley of the Vansittarts. An aged matron, as Burke might have called her, whom I knew, to the end of her life spoke of Blackheath Park as Gregory Page's, though the palace, rivalling Walpole's Houghton, which sheltered and displayed the wealth of that great Indian dynasty, had been pulled down in the year when Warren Hastings was brought to the bar of the Lords. There is much to be unravelled there. And in the unravelling we may discover the secret of Burke's maniacal hatred of the Governor-General. Miss Weitzmann's researches have indeed, I think, established her conclusion that of the Impeachment Francis was at once the instigator, the author, the prompter, and the producer. 'Burke, Fox, Dundas, Sheridan, all the host arrayed against Hastings were actors in a stupendous drama conceived by the tortured brain of Philip Francis.' But how, and by what agencies, what allurements, what seductions, Francis was able to infuse his venom into the mind of Burke, remains, to me at least, a mystery.

But, as Hobbes had said, to stumble from overhaste is shame: like the day-dream of office, those speculations in East India Stock went wrong; from the age of forty onwards Burke was a tormented, impoverished, and suspected man, and, in that strange verbose apologia which he wrote in 1771, it is impossible, I think, not to hear at times the accent of a mind unbalanced. Yet from its explanations and avowals we can construct a picture not out of keeping with the Burke whom we might divine if we had nothing but the reports of his enemies to instruct us. His intolerance of censure: his arrogance: his extravagant ambition: his insolence towards the great, including the greatest of all: his verging on courses both desperate and dangerous: his unhappy facetiousness: his loss of temper. Whoever the faithful friend may have been—Bishop Markham or another—who provoked this anger, he had very fairly drawn the portrait of Burke in his furies,

Burke in his exaltation, Burke on the Regency, Burke on Hastings. But it is observable that this strain, though undoubtedly present from the beginning, only becomes dominant after Rockingham was gone. While Rockingham was there, Burke had his place, his footing. He was the brain of a party, the framer of policies, the orator of a great cause. All that in Burke is truly and unquestionably great came to birth, I think, in those years which begin with *The Present Discontents* of 1770 and close with the death of Rockingham twelve years later. But not even Rockingham could make him fit for Cabinet office, and, when Rockingham died, Burke was more than ever the outsider. He would not serve under Shelburne. So he had to serve under Fox and North: he had to share in their discredit and their defeat: to see himself displaced in party standing by Sheridan: to be received with open mockery in a House where he had always been heard, if not with patience, at least with respect.

What then *is* this Burke, Burke of that splendid early afternoon, Burke on America, on Ireland, on Economic Reform, whose maxims are proverbs, whose speeches and writings did go far to furnish politics with a sacred book and an authentic revelation? Suppose we take what by the consent of the world is acknowledged to be the finest and fullest exposition of his political beliefs, the speech of 1775 on Conciliation with America, and see what it all amounts to. 'Things there are in a bad way. I have been challenged to say what I think should be done. I accept the challenge. I propose to remove the ground of difference between the Mother Country and the Colonies. But first we must consider the true nature and peculiar circumstances of the object before us.' So much by way of preface: and what follows, one may say, is an attempt to make the right conclusion emerge by an exact and exhaustive analysis of the situation. In form, the speech is marred towards the end by the introduction of matter necessary to the debate though surplus to the argument. But if the three or four pages in which Burke disposes of Lord North's latest device for taxation without tears be left out, what strikes a reader first is the scientific urgency and comprehensiveness of the argument, the superb fertility of imagination with which it is illustrated and enforced, and the magisterial asseveration with which the links are closed in phrases which are part of our political heritage. Here, indeed, in Macaulay's phrase, is reason made white-hot with passion. But all the same I feel a formidable doubt whether if I had been listening I should have been convinced. The House was not convinced. And why? Because, as Thurlow said, 'Fox speaks to the House of Commons, Burke speaks to himself'. There was one aspect of the situation which Burke leaves entirely out of view, and that aspect was the House of Commons itself. There is only one way to appreciate the oratory of the eighteenth century, and that is to imagine yourself on the back benches. And, really, Burke, in the impenetrable egoism of his impracticable wisdom, has so constructed his speech that, by the end, no small number of country gentlemen must have felt that they had never realized before how much they hated the Americans, or how right they were to hate them. Think of that famous picture of the American character. What does it prove? That the Americans are by nature democrats, lawyers, and dissenters, the three things that country gentlemen most detest, and if by chance some of them, in Virginia and Carolina, are gentlemen and members of the Church of England, they make up for it by being slave-owners as well. And finally, if there was one thing Burke ought not to have said—which no man of any Parliamentary intelligence would have said—it was this,

For some time past the Old World has been fed from the New. The scarcity which you have felt would have been a desolating famine if this child of your old age, with a true filial piety, with a Roman charity, had not put the full breast of its youthful exuberance to the mouth of its exhausted parent.

The dullest baronet sent by the Cider Counties to Westminster had wit enough to wrinkle an anxious brow at that forecast: to see what that youthful exuberance might mean to his rent roll, and to the profits, perhaps, of those Bristol shippers who two months before had shown such singular zeal to have Mr. Burke as their member—Mr. Burke, who, after all, was making a very comfortable income as agent for the Colony of New York.

Pass to another theme. Let us imagine that Burke had been challenged to apply his analysis to a topic nearer home, to the composition of that House of Commons in which Cornwall had forty-four members and Manchester none. How would he have responded? We know the answer because we have his speech and to call it sophistry would be to insult a sufficiently maligned race of men. In the first five minutes he lays down his proposition,

Neither *now* nor at *any* time is it prudent or safe to be meddling with the ancient tried usage of our constitution. Our representation is as nearly perfect as the necessary imperfection of human affairs and of human creatures will suffer it to be; it is a subject of prudent and honest use and thankful enjoyment, and not of captious criticism and rash experiment.

This, remember, was seven years before the French Revolution. But is there no such thing as honest criticism and prudent experiment? And if anything could show how lacking Burke was in any real historic sense, how unhistoric his famous doctrine of prescription is, it would be one sentence where he is arguing that the House of Commons having by

prescription come to be what it was, could therefore by prescription never be anything else.

To ask whether a thing which has always been the same stands to its original principle seems to me to be perfectly absurd, for how do you know the principles but from the construction, and if that remains the same the principles remain the same.

Half the arguments in support of the Reform Bill in 1831 were in substance a reply to that one sentence of Burke: half the arguments against it the expansion of another.

I do not vilify theory and speculation: no, because that would be to vilify reason itself. *Neque decipitur ratio, nec decipit unquam*. No: whenever I speak against theory, I mean always a weak, erroneous, fallacious, unfounded or imperfect theory; and one of the ways of discovering that it is a false theory is by comparing it with practice. This is the true touchstone of all theories which regard man and the affairs of man—does it suit his nature in general—does it suit his nature as modified by his habits?

In short, does it work? But are we never to ask whether by prudent experiment it might not be made to work even better? The truth is that the discord between Burke on Conciliation and Burke on Parliamentary Reform is not to be resolved on any rational plane. But though there is a discord, there is at bottom no emotional inconsistency. In one he is struggling to preserve an ancient fabric from disunion and collapse, and in the other to save a fabric so familiar, up to its last finial and crocket so dear, that the thought of change and innovation came over him like a desolating wind, and one, we know, which was the forerunner of a tempest. Like his Americans, Burke had snuffed the tainted gale: he had felt the hot breath of Rousseau. I have often thought that if there was one man in Europe who really understood the Genevan, it was the Irishman, and the understanding reveals itself as much in their conflicts and recoils as in their approximations and intersections. ‘The wild beast of the desert shall also meet with the wild beast of the island: and the satyr shall cry to his fellow.’

Prescription and party, prescription to ground the stability of the state, party to ensure its freedom: about these two ideas, magnified and glorified till they had come in Burke’s imagination to have the sacredness of nature, his mind continued to revolve as it were in a closed ellipse. And where, a man of sixty, had they brought him? In political practice to a furious and desperate championship of Fox and the Prince of Wales against Pitt and the Constitution. In political thinking? Thirty years after his death, one night a member in a debate on the Silk Trade, called Huskisson, of all men, a philosopher. Canning came to his colleague’s support in a speech which must have made the unhappy man wish himself back in his native wolds.

Why is it to be supposed that the application of philosophy—for I will use that odious word—to the affairs of common life, indicates obduracy of feeling or obtuseness of sensibility? We must deal with the affairs of men on abstract principles, modified of course according to times and circumstances. Is not the doctrine and the spirit which now animates those who persecute my Right Honourable Friend the same which in former times stirred up persecutors against the best benefaction of mankind? It embittered the life of Turgot. It consigned Galileo to the dungeon. It is a doctrine and a spirit which at all times have been at work to stay public advancement and to roll back the tide of civilization.

Canning was not only answering Mr. Williams of Lincoln. He was replying to the spirit of Burke, to that blind and infantile conservatism which Burke for nearly two generations imposed on the mind of the party that governed England—and broke Napoleon.

Could we have anticipated it? Could we have deduced Burke on the French Revolution from Burke on Ireland, on the Catholics, on the Dissenters, on the wrongs of Benares and the Rohillas? I think we could, if we had rightly plotted the curve of his development. The Revolution—or say plainly Rousseau—was a challenge not to prescription only, but to the whole body of experience, consideration, and observation on which Burke’s natural Politic was built. To this new philosophy, his limitations were meaningless, his co-ordinates were irrelevant: and man, as Burke saw him, conditioned by the Revolution Settlement and the processes of Party Government, the 400,000 whom he considered to be by leisure and instruction worth calling the people, were no more than a figment of aristocratic self-interest. The intensity and exclusiveness of his affections had generated, had, shall we say, rationalized themselves in, an equal intensity and exclusiveness of the intelligence. And now, Chaos was advancing, Chaos and a host of monstrous forms,

Orcus and Ades and the dreaded name
Of Demogorgon: Rumour next and Chance
And Tumult and Confusion all embroiled:

things unintelligible, inexplicable, except as embodiments of primeval disorder, and wickedness unchained. It has, I think, been more than once observed that Burke’s imagination most naturally runs into Miltonic imagery: less often,

perhaps, that there was another poet, then alive and going about the streets of London, with a red cap of liberty above an aureole of flaming hair, who saw exactly what Burke saw, who exactly understood his wrath and his terror, and who knew precisely the bounds of his experience and therefore the limitations of his thought.

The bars of Chaos are burst: her millions prepare their fiery way
Through the orb'd abode of the holy dead, to root up and pull down and
remove:
And Nobles and Clergy shall fail from before me, and my cloud and vision be
no more:
The mitre become black, the crown vanish, and the sceptre and ivory staff.

It is the voice of Orleans. But it might be the voice of Burke. And another answers:

Go, merciless man, enter the infinite labyrinth of another's brain
Ere thou measure the circle that he shall run. Go into the fires
Of another's high flaming rich bosom, and return unconsumed and write laws.
If thou canst not do this, doubt thy theories.

A conservatism infantile and blind? Let us say, rather, of a contracted horizon, with limits drawn more by the affections than by the reason: not childish perhaps so much as child-like, with the ultimate invincible confidence of childhood behind the terror; because, if the men who went on year by year fighting the Revolution and fighting Napoleon, year by year of disaster, of broken treaties, false friends and insatiable allies, if those men were children, at least they were the children of the gods.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

Minor variations in spelling and punctuation in this text have been preserved.

The following change was made to the original text:

Page 20: The line "Where Avarice usurps sage Economy's [book](#)," has been changed to "Where Avarice usurps sage Economy's look,".

[End of *Burke*, by G. M. Young]