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Although there have been critics who place Edmund Burke at the summit of English prose-writers, it is hardly to be gainsaid that he belongs more to the history of politics and to the history of thought, than to that of pure literature. Apart from his personal characteristics, the essential magnanimity of his nature, his kindly and sympathetic disposition towards struggling aspirants like Crabbe, and his utter freedom from self-seeking in an age of almost universal corruption, which make him a conspicuous and memorable figure in the history of eighteenth-century politics, in which he was so thoroughly engrossed, his commanding eminence is due to the fact that he was the first to rebut the conception made dominant by Locke, that every man’s thought was a sufficient authority for himself, that the individual reason is a competent and sufficient guide to truth. Burke argued on the contrary that society is an organic whole in which each mind is a particular growth, conditioned by the rest, and incapable of fully living if it detaches itself from the rest. Hence the great value which he set upon custom and traditional opinion, the consensus of thought as opposed to individual judgment. All through his career he attacked unsparingly the assertion of individual, or, as he called it, critical opinion, as against the permanent convictions of society.

This conception is connected with a widespread movement in European thought and literature during the early nineteenth century, a movement partly reactionary as tending to revive mediæval forms of belief and views of society simply because in the Middle Ages the authority of custom and tradition had been paramount. We see another phase of the movement in the Catholic reaction on the Continent at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in the “Oxford Movement” in England a generation later. Similarly in philosophy comes the change from Locke’s idea of the single mind to that of mankind as the starting point, and so in theology the change from Transcendence or Deism (God conceived as existing apart from and independent of the world) to Immanence (God conceived as a vii
world soul), which, when unqualified, becomes Pantheism. This change is illustrated by Wordsworth. And not only in thought, but in style does Burke serve as a link between the two centuries: he unites the powerful understanding, the clear and luminous construction, the sanity of judgment of the earlier age, with the passionate imagination, the fervid eloquence and the glowing colour which we associate with the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century.

With this clue in our hands we may more easily trace the story of Burke's writings, and especially come to some understanding of the apparent inconsistency between his attitude to the American and the French Revolutions. One may start, indeed, with the Vindication of Natural Society (published, like the Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful, in 1751). This book professed to be a "letter to a lord, by a late noble writer," viz. Bolingbroke, and Bolingbroke's style is so deftly imitated that many accepted the book as from his hand. In truth it was a marvellous piece of satire, which took its rise from the current discussions on "natural" and "revealed" religion. Burke's endeavour was to show that the same arguments which Bolingbroke had used in favour of natural religion could be used with equal success in favour of natural as against "artificial" society. For one absurdity in religion he undertook to produce a hundred in political law and institution. His book is a great plea for the recognition of collective as well as individual reason, and he asserts that all that is regarded as excellent and venerable, nay society itself, would tumble to ruin, if the practice of all moral duties and the constitution of the social order, rested upon their being submitted to the unrestrained criticism of every individual. Thus even at this early date we may trace Burke's love of order, the same ardent zeal for constitutional forms of accepted rule, and the same appeal to the general and traditional sense of national life that we find in the speeches and writings of his mature manhood.

We find the same thread, in spite of the tangles of verbosity, detail, and ephemeral interests, running through the Observations on the Present State of the Nation (1769) and the Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontents (1770). Burke's contribution to the serious problems raised by the triangular disagreement between king, advisers, and people, was as full of political principles as the contribution made in the Letters of Junius was devoid of them. Its main contention is that the
study of political conditions with a view to solving the problems they involve must be accompanied by a study of social conditions. He goes behind the political constitution to the state of society upon which the validity of the constitution depends, examining the elements which constitute national strength and the different classes who contribute towards national prosperity, and showing the futility of a government which ignores these primary conditions and attempts to rule through a parliament half of whose members are simply creatures of the court and out of all relation with the real constituents of a nation.

When the American question came to the front, Burke saw clearly that the question of liberty in America was closely connected with the question of liberty in England, and that the resistance of the colonists to the arbitrary proposals of the English Government was only another phase of the resistance offered by the people of the home country. Burke and those who were with him felt that the New Englanders were fighting their battles and that the suppression of liberty there would have the same consequences at home. We shall see that it was this particular regard for the interests of England that guided Burke twenty years later in his views of the French Revolution. In his speeches on American Taxation, and on Conciliation with America, and in his Letter to the Citizens of Bristol (1774–5) he opposes the arbitrary contention of the English Government—that the king had sovereign right over the colonies and might therefore do as he pleased with them. To this claim Burke did not reply as Rousseau might have done, that if the sovereign had rights the people also had rights. Instead of this he rejected decisively the whole conception of rights as a ground of political action. A right is merely an abstract metaphysical conception which can never be imposed upon society without disaster. Political problems must be solved along other lines than this, by large and wise considerations of expediency. The sovereign may have a "right" to tax the colonists, but it is surely inexpedient to assert the right which abstrusely exists. Laws must grow out of customs, not glaringly contradict and oppose them.

The American Revolution was succeeded on the stage of English politics by the problem of the East India Company, and its impeachment and trial in the person of Warren Hastings. But long before the curtain had rung down upon that episode, the outbreak of the French Revolution had taken place. In its
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beginnings it was an effort to reform extraordinary abuses, social and political, within the limits of the existing monarchy. The abolition of the monarchy, when it came, was mainly the work of the emigrants who had fled from France and, by threatening invasion, drove the Republicans to the final step. Sheridan and Fox, like most English folk, recognized this moderation of the first stages and welcomed the movement, but Burke from the outset took another view. He gave his Reflections to the English people as a warning, and brought about a complete change of English national sentiment. With fiery partisanship he applied the disastrous consequences of the disorderly method in which the French pursued freedom, to his own country, and filled his countrymen with panic. He broke off not only all public co-operation, but even personal relations, with his old friend and colleague, Fox. Abroad the book had a success as great as at home. The Revolutionists themselves read it, the French king translated it, Catherine of Russia congratulated the author; while nearer home the Tories, till now Burke's implacable foes, lavished their favours upon their old-time opponent, and even George III praised the work and recommended everybody to read it.

By his own party Burke was naturally accused of treason to his former position and principles, though even then there were a few observers who saw that in reality there was no inconsistency and that Burke was no renegade. Coleridge, for instance, pointed out that in Burke's attitude to the revolutions in America and France the principles were the same, the deductions from them the same, but the practical influences opposite though equally legitimate. As Lord Morley points out, Burke "changed his front, but not his basis," he is from beginning to end repugnant to the critical spirit, to all inquiry into the origin of opinions. In such inquiry he saw an inevitable risk of a breach of order, and with all his largeness for liberty, i.e. the opportunity of full development of faculty, he would never consent to secure it at the cost of order. "Liberty," said Montesquieu, Burke's political father, "does not consist in doing what one pleases... liberty can only consist in being able to do what one ought to do." Now in the case of America it was plainly the English Government that had attempted a breach of order by trying to enforce an abstract right of sovereignty. In the case of France, on the other hand, he was convinced that it was the people who were responsible for the
breach, by the violent proceedings which had initiated the Revolution. The real charge that we can bring against Burke here is not one of inconsistency, but of inadequate knowledge (he partly admits this, see p. 133). He knew far less of the social state of France than of the conditions of either France or America, and totally ignored the existence in France of the oppressive abuses that constituted the case of the French people against their government. He forgot his own assertion that "revolutions are not created by the people, they spring from irresistible need, they are not fomented, but when they come they are irresistible." The knowledge that Burke lacked was put before the English people in the following year (1791) by Arthur Young, whose Travels in France is an intimate picture of the feudal exactions that prevailed in France down to the Revolution. Though a more momentous contribution to the philosophy of the great upheaval, it came too late to influence a people inflamed by the denunciatory eloquence of Burke.

Hartley Coleridge (Essays, i. 134), writing of Shakespeare, says, that he is one of those "who build the commonweal, not on the shifting shoals of expediency, or the incalculable tides of popular will, but on the sure foundations of the divine purpose, demonstrated by the great and glorious ends of rational being; who deduce the rights and duties of men, not from the animal nature, in which neither right nor duty can inhere, not from a state of nature which never existed, nor from an arbitrary contract which never took place in the memory of men nor angels, but from the complex life of the soul and the body, defined by reason and conscience, expounded and ratified by revelation." The words might have been written of Burke.

It has often been pointed out that Burke's literary style was conditioned by his rhetoric. It began with his selection of Bolingbroke as a model and was maintained by his own unceasing exercise in the oratorical arena. Yet his rhetoric always inclined more to the written than the spoken form, and though this may not have pleased him it has preserved his work better than that of the ordinary orator and debater. Such is the judgment of Professor Saintsbury, who goes on to enumerate certain qualities of Burke's style and method, and in particular what is technically known as Amplification, "the faculty of building up an argument or a picture by a succession of complementary strokes, not added at haphazard, but growing out of and on to one another." The Reflections perhaps displays a less
orderly arrangement than some of the earlier works, but for compensation there is a greater rush of thought and rhetoric. "In his ornaments, whether of idea or of imagery, Burke is better worth studying than almost any other English writer. In simile and trope generally, he is, though often wonderfully brilliant, distinctly uncertain, quite untrustworthy in the direction of humour, and in some of his more forcible images apt even to be positively disgusting. On the other hand, his grandeur seldom falls into the grandiose, and the magical effect of more imaginative passages (of which the famous one about Marie Antoinette is only the stock example) has never been exceeded in political writing. Epigram he can occasionally manage with great effect, but it is not by any means so specially and definitely his weapon as imaginative argument, and the marshalling of vast masses of complicated detail into properly rhetorical battalions or (to alter the image) mosaic pictures of enduring beauty."

Sir Leslie Stephen found in Burke's style a praiseworthy "flexibility"; but Sir Edmund Gosse compares it to "a robe of brocaded damask, splendid, sumptuous, and appropriate to noble public occasions, but scarcely flexible." To be a perfect prose-writer, a man must play sometimes upon thrilling and soul-subduing instruments, but Burke never takes the trumpet from his lips. It has been said that he greatly admired Dryden's prose and tried to imitate it, but the only striking resemblance between the two is the elaborate art with which the parts of the sentences are balanced and adjusted. "In the class of declamatory writers," says Sir Edmund, "Burke stands easily first; his tracts and orations do not speak reflectively, with the still small voice which the cloistered student loves, but in resonant accents, so that even in the study their effect is completed to the imagination by cries of defiance or rounds of applause from an unseen audience."

To return to the Reflections, in which, if the reader seeks a narrative history of the French Revolution, he will seek in vain. Its ostensible raison d'être was an address given by the Rev. Dr. Richard Price, a Nonconformist minister of some note, to a harmless body called the Revolutionary Society, and a sermon by the same gentleman On the Love of our Country. Burke takes far more notice of these productions than they merit, but they are the grit around which he built up his pearl. Price had been lauding the proceedings in France (as far as they
had gone in 1789) as a conspicuous vindication of the "rights" of the governed. Burke sets out to show that the English liberties which Price was so proud of were not first achieved at the Revolution of 1688, but were essentially an English inheritance, and, further, that between the orderly procedure of England in 1688 and the disorderly action of France a century later there was a whole world of difference. He says that Price misrepresents English sentiment, and goes on to sketch a true picture of the English political system, comparing it at different points with the French. He proposes four heads—the Church, the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the democracy; the first gets most attention, the last, none at all. For when, after an interval in which he was otherwise engaged, Burke set to writing the second part of his Reflections, he took up at once the policy of the Revolutionist party, and after denying that the National Assembly had any right at all to legislate, he adversely criticizes what they had done in matters legislative, executive, judicial, military, and financial. Throughout the whole book it is evident that his prime concern is for his own country—"Whenever our neighbour's house is on fire, it cannot be amiss for the engines to play a little on our own."

The rest of Burke's life is a record of his increasingly passionate hostility to the Revolution. His subsequent writings, A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly and An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and especially the Letters on a Regicide Peace, show the old eloquence and imagination, but are sadly lacking in the old sagacity, clear judgment, and power of marshalling facts. The execution of the French king in January 1793, which apparently justified all Burke's antagonism to the Revolution, raised him to the height of his influence, and was followed by an outburst of national passion.

About this time (1794) Burke lost his only son Richard, a blow that fell heavily upon him. He was roused from his despondency by an attack made by the Duke of Bedford upon the pension drawn by Burke from the Government. In his Letter to a Noble Lord his earlier gifts of calm and clear reasoning reappear. The letter in this respect stands in marked contrast to what we can only describe as the frenzy of the Letters on a Regicide Peace, letters whose course was interrupted—after two of them had appeared, though four were written—by the author's death on July 9, 1797.
LEADING DATES IN BURKE'S LIFE

1729, Jan. Birth in Dublin. His father was a Protestant attorney; his first schoolmaster was Abraham Shackleton.

1743–8. At Trinity College, Dublin.

1750. Enters the Middle Temple, London.


1759. Plans the Annual Register.

1761. Private secretary to Gerard Hamilton, Chief Secretary for Ireland.

1765. Private secretary to Lord Rockingham, and M.P. for Wendover.

1769–70. Writings on home politics.

1773. Visit to France.


1774–5. Writings and speeches on the American Revolution.


1786. Leads the impeachment of Warren Hastings.

1790 ff. Writings on the French Revolution.


Burke’s character and temper, conversational ability and other personal qualities are reflected in Boswell’s Johnson, Fanny Burney’s Diary, and other memoirs of the period. Mr. E. J. Payne, in the Clarendon Press edition of Burke’s Select Works (Vol. II), has an admirable essay on the Reflections, and Lord Morley’s monograph in the English Men of Letters Series is, of course, known to every reader as the indispensable handbook to any adequate study of Burke.

A. J. GRIEVE.
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1793; *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, 1791; *Letter to the Empress of Russia*, 1791 (in Collected Works); *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe, M.P.*, 1792; *Speeches on the Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, with Introduction, 1792; *Observations on the Conduct of the Minority* (letter to the Duke of Portland), 1793, published 1797 under the title *Fifty-four Articles of Impeachment against the Right Hon. C. F. Fox; Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, presented to W. Pitt, 1795; *A Letter to a Noble Lord*, etc., 1796; *Letters I and II on a Regicide Peace*, 1796 (two other letters have been published in Collected Works); *Hints for an Essay on the Drama* (Collected Works); *An Essay towards an Abridgement of the English History* (Collected Works). Other Letters, Notes, and fragments are published in the Collected Works.

The *Annual Register* was started by Burke in 1759. His contributions to it continued for thirty years.

**Works:** 3 vols., 1792; complete in 8 vols., 1827; 16 vols. (*Laurence and King*), first 8 vols., 1803, 1808, with a Life, 1823; edition completed with addition of posthumous works, 1827; first 12 vols. of this edition, reissued in 2 vols., with Biographical Notice, 1834; *Works and Correspondence*, 8 vols., 1852; Bohn's *British Classics*, with Prior's Life, and two supplementary vols. of Speeches, 1853; Edition in progress (New Universal Library), 1905, etc.; with Introduction Judge by Willis (World's Classics), 1906, etc.

**Boston Editions of Works:** 7 vols., 1866-27; 9 vols., 1839 (includes *Account of European Settlements in America*, and Correspondence with Dr. Laurence, not in earlier English editions); 12 vols., revised edition, 1865-7.

**Speeches and Letters:** *Collection of Speeches*, 1777; 4 vols., 1816; 1854 with *Memoir*.

**Letters:** edited by Earl Fitzwilliam and Sir R. Bourke, 4 vols., 1844.

**Letters and Speeches on Irish Affairs,** editor M. Arnold, 1881; *Speeches on American Taxation, and Conciliation with America*, etc., editor F. G. Selby, 1895; editor A. D. Innes (Pitt Press Series), 1906.